

The Effect of Textual Enhancement Embedded in a Consciousness-Raising Task on
English Subject-Verb Agreement

Min Fan
English Department
Northern Arizona University

Abstract

The study is motivated by using textual enhancement (TE) embedded in a deductive consciousness-raising (CR) task to improve ESL learners' grammar learning. Eight level-5 ESL learners at PIE in the treatment group received typographically cued or textually enhanced input while they were completing a CR task after they were lectured on the rule of the subject-verb agreement. However, the same-level comparison group of nine ESL learners received no enhanced input over the same CR task. The findings revealed that the TE-embedded CR task had a more positive influence over accurate use of the subject-verb agreement in a writing task of high communicative value, but negatively affected the ability to identify and correct errors in a decontextualized or discrete-item task. The differential accuracy in the subsequent writing performance between the two groups was partly due to the noticing function of TE which assisted the treatment group in further processing of the subject-verb agreement rule into subsequent learning behaviors. In addition, the trade-off effect between fluency and accuracy was evidenced in the subsequent writing performance, and the complexity of the deductive CR task also affected the benefit of TE for the subsequent learning of the subject-verb agreement.

Background

As a relatively implicit or less explicit method of focus on form (Radwan, 2005; Robinson, 1997), TE is supposed to work more effectively on the targeted features of low communicative value (e.g., the English subject-verb agreement) and learners tend to acquire these features in a relatively later stage of their L2 development, in that these features do not necessarily interfere with meaning comprehension and production, and can easily escape

learners' attention for further processing (Lee & Huang, 2008). The research findings also suggested that the benefits of TE can be maximized if other instructional elements, such as pushed output, corrective feedback and explicit rule presentation can intervene simultaneously (Lee, 2007).

A very limited research has been conducted to testify the effect of TE on the use of target grammar features in L2 learners' subsequent learning, showing mixed findings with respect to use frequency and accuracy of target linguistic forms in L2 production tasks (Leow, 2001; Overstreet, 1998; Shook, 1994; White, 1996). Fewer studies used a written task of high communicative value to measure the effect of TE on the learners' knowledge and use of the target linguistic forms except for White's (1998) study (i.e., using a picture-cued narration task) and Overstreet's (1998) study (i.e., using a written narration task). However, only White (1998) employed the delayed posttest as a follow-up outcome measure to assess the effect of TE on subsequent L2 writing performance in a high communicative-value task.

To address the research gap, the present study attempted to investigate the effect of TE embedded in a deductive CR task on ESL learners' subsequent learning of the English subject-verb agreement regarding their ability to apply and use the rule in a high and low communicative-value tasks.

Research Questions

1. Does TE embedded in a deductive CR task have a more positive effect on learners' noticing of the subject-verb agreement?

2. Does TE embedded in a deductive CR task have a more positive influence on subsequent learning of the English subject-verb agreement as determined by learners' ability to identify and correct errors in a decontextualized task?
3. Does TE embedded in a deductive consciousness-raising task have a more positive influence on the subsequent learning in terms of learners' use of the English subject-verb agreement in a high communicative-value writing task?
4. Is there any interaction between the complexity of the TE-embedded deductive CR task and the subsequent learning of English subject-verb agreement in terms of ESL writing accuracy?

Methods

The study is a pre-and-delayed-post test design. In this study, TE was the independent variable while learner's noticing and subsequent learning of English subject-verb agreement were the dependent variables. Eight level-5 PIE students in the treatment group were asked to read an enhanced short passage in order to complete a CR task (i.e., subject identification and labeling according to four noun phrase patterns, and main verb circling) after they were lectured on the rule of the subject-verb concord by the researcher. One week before and after the treatment, students were asked to complete an error identification and correction task, and a prompted writing tasks in both pretest and delayed posttest. On the other hand, nine level-5 students in the comparison group participated in the same pretest and delayed posttest and were asked to complete the same CR task after being presented with the same rule of the English subject-verb agreement by the same researcher. The only difference between the two

groups was the comparison group did not receive the enhanced reading passage in the CR task.

Results

The deductive CR task interacted with the learners' noticing of the targeted four concord patterns since the learners in both groups had more difficulty in identifying the main verb following the subject of a sentence. Even though the treatment group scored higher in identifying and labeling the subject but it did not significantly help them locate the lexical verb in a precise manner. Unsurprisingly, the act of "resource-dispersing" (Robinson, 2005) imposed by the complexity of the deductive CR task negatively affected the learners' performance in one of the task elements that required noticing of the main verb following the subject of a sentence in compliance with any of the four concord patterns.

The results then showed that there was no clear positive effect of TE embedded in a deductive CR task on its subsequent learning of the four subject-verb concord patterns measured by error identification and correction tasks. However, TE embedded in a deductive CR task seemed to have a more positive effect on the accurate use of other simpler subject-verb agreement patterns in a high communicative-value writing task, since the TE-embedded CR task did help the treatment group supply more grammatical sentences of other simpler subject-verb agreement patterns in obligatory contexts than in the comparison group. It could be reasoned that the TE embedded in a CR task could stimulate more instances of application of the subject-verb agreement rule to the highly communicative learning behaviors in a writing task than the low communicative learning behaviors in a discrete-item task. However, the trade-off effect between accuracy and fluency was

evidenced since both groups' suppliance of finite clauses in the posttest's writing task decreased accordingly. The complexity of the CR task also contributed to more heightened attention to other simpler subject-verb concord patterns than the targeted ones in a high communicative-value writing task.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

As shown in the study, TE embedded in a deductive CR task tended to have a positive influence more on the use of the English subject-verb agreement in a high communicative-value task. PIE teachers can incorporate TE into both deductive and inductive CR tasks to raise learners' awareness of target linguistic features and expose learners to multiple times of enhanced texts for the same features, and then use high communicative-value production tasks to promote their subsequent learning of target linguistic features.

In the meantime, selecting appropriate features interacts with the effect of TE (Shook, 1994; Leow et al., 2003), and teachers are encouraged to apply TE embedded in a CR task to new grammar points or the features learners constantly have issue with by analyzing learners' writing samples. Conducting needs analysis and identifying learner errors in written production can motivate pedagogical decision to include appropriate grammar features worth instruction attention as demonstrated by the present study. In addition, the deductive CR task in the study included metalinguistic instruction, which also influenced both groups of understanding of the rule and attention to the targeted four concord patterns. Thus, teaching metalinguistic knowledge remains a useful instructional element to incorporate it into a CR task to optimize the task benefit.