

Learning Task 5: Rationale

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Introduction

Based on a theoretical framework developed from Garcia's (2008) and Svalberg's (2007) views of language awareness and Ferris' (2004, 2011) and Panova and Lyster's (2002) theories of corrective feedback, this lesson provides students with authentic learning tasks that include role playing, collaborative writing, internet research, presentations, and peer feedback. When planning this grammar lesson, I drew on Lyster's (2007) noticing, awareness, and practice model and Gibbons' (2003) teaching-learning cycle. As a result, the lesson stages included *noticing*, *awareness*, *practice*, *review*, and *assessment*. The intent of this unit was to incorporate the grammar point (i.e., definite and indefinite articles) through deductive and inductive instruction to support and enhance students' L2 learning outcomes based on frequent patterns of errors that were previously identified in writing and speaking instances.

Learning Context

The students (aged between 19 and 30 years) are enrolled in a pre-intermediate English as a Second Language (ESL) course, which is a pre-requisite for the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at the international college in Vancouver, British Columbia where I am currently working. The program runs for 12 to 14 weeks, with 30 hours per week. The students, who come predominantly from China and Korea, have completed high school and/or are completing a university degree in their home countries; most are considering furthering their studies in Canada. All of them have taken English classes prior to coming to Canada, hence they have basic knowledge of *metalanguage*, which will be used when teaching the target language.

Theoretical Framework

Language Awareness (LA)

Knowledge about language, its teaching, and its learning. My readings about language awareness brought a fresh perspective to the way I approach language teaching. While there is not a clear-cut definition, the different kinds of language awareness presented by Garcia (2008), that is, knowledge of language (proficiency), knowledge about language (subject-matter knowledge), and pedagogical practice paints a clear picture of what a good teacher needs to know. In a multicultural country like Canada, ESL teachers need to understand "the important role that the first language has on the development of the second, and of the interdependence of both languages (Cummins, 1979, as cited in Garcia, 2008, p. 389). An L2 learner and teacher

myself, I have always believed in the benefits of code-switching and translanguaging, however, I was reluctant to openly address them in my teaching context, given the emphasis on the English only policy. Having learned about LA, I have become more cognizant that allowing students' L1 and L2 in the ESL classroom has more advantages than disadvantages. Given that my students are mostly Chinese and Korean, it is important that they are able to use their L1 as a reference in building up their L2 knowledge.

L1 and L2 cultural values and biases. As teachers, we cannot expect our students to acquire knowledge of Canadian values overnight, which is why we need to teach them Canadian culture. As such, the reason behind the song by Leonard Cohen that I chose as a way to introduce the topic of my grammar lesson was twofold: (1) to familiarize students with a Canadian songwriter and (2) to pay a tribute to the late artist. Ultimately, it is not just L2 students who need to learn about Canadian values, it is also ESL teachers who need to learn about their students' L1 cultures. The overriding principle is to be thoughtful and sensitive, whether you are the teacher or a student, which contradicts Nisbett and Ross' (1980) claim that teachers are unlikely to change those beliefs they formulate early on in life despite changes and contradictory evidence. On the contrary, a teacher who is aware of their own language and culture as well as their students' is, by definition, open to change.

Becoming more aware of my own beliefs and practices as an ESL teacher and learner helped me to become more cognizant of the ways my students engage in communicative practices in and out of the classroom. It was through language awareness that I learned to acknowledge that both teachers and students bring their own cultural values and biases to the ESL classroom and that "cultural awareness does not necessarily lead to a willingness to modify one's behavior patterns" (Svalberg, 2007, p. 299). The fact that "learners and teacher function each according to their own cultural script" (p. 299) influences the classroom dynamics and the learning process. In turn, this made me more attuned to my students' individual personalities as L2 learners with their own needs and interests.

Metalanguage. Referred to as language used to talk about language (Widdowson, 1997), metalanguage goes hand in hand with language awareness. Being able to identify, for instance, parts of speech and deconstruct the rules that govern the L2 use contribute to students' language acquisition and proficiency. As Harmer (1991) posits, learning the "finite number of rules [makes it possible] to create an infinite number of sentences" (p. 13). While I am not a fervent

advocate of one technique at the expense of another, I believe that students can benefit from both opportunities to discover the L2 and its grammar deductively as well as inductively. Once the students learn the grammar rules, they can apply them creatively making sentences of their own, which helps them to *notice* and *understand* new L2 uses. Thus, students become aware that, while they create new sentences, the rule stays the same. In my current lesson plan, I have incorporated teaching grammar both deductively (e.g., students identify definite and indefinite articles in a song, then fill in the blank love definitions and formulate their own grammar rules) and inductively (e.g., after students discover ways in which L2 is used, I present the main rules of definite, indefinite and zero article uses and exceptions).

Corrective Feedback (CF)

What is CF? In order to provide effective feedback, first I had to understand the concept. The following two definitions informed my current lesson plan: (1) feedback is “*information* with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies” (Winnie & Butler, 1994, p. 574) and (2) feedback is a *consequence* and it is most effective when it addresses “faulty interpretations, not a total lack of understanding” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). Other scholars argue that feedback is most effective when it closes the gap between where students are and where they are aiming to be (Sadler, 1989), which speaks to the importance of providing less complex feedback to students’ correct rather than incorrect answers, which leads to better task performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The aim of this lesson was to tap into the students’ existent L2 knowledge and *repertoire* (Lam, 2009) and use them as a springboard for learning.

My readings about corrective feedback (CF) led me to “ascertain what [my] students know about formal grammar before adopting or utilizing any sort of error-correction system ... [and] develop a system of giving feedback that is responsive to students’ knowledge, experience, and needs” (Ferris, 2011, p. 55). As a result, instead of teaching a grammar point that I thought was appropriate for the pre-intermediate level (e.g., past simple, sequence of tenses, paragraph structure, or organization of ideas), I focused on just ONE problem area. This ties into Ferris’ (2011) argument that “error feedback may be most effective when it focuses on *patterns of error*, allowing teachers and students to attend to, say, two or three major error types at a time, rather than dozens of disparate errors” (p. 50). The misuse of definite and indefinite articles was one of

the recurrent patterns of errors that I had identified in my students' previous writing and speaking instances. Given that languages such as Chinese and Korean, my students' L1, have no articles, students' L2 errors include omission, overuse, or incorrect use of "a," "an," and "the."

Aspects of CF. Learning about the many layers that CF consists of contributed to a more comprehensive perspective on HOW, WHEN, and WHY feedback is necessary. As a response to teacher's CF, students are required to make changes and/or clarifications, which taps into the *cognitive* aspect of CF: Students think, compare, contrast, analyze, etc. aspects of L2 use. The *psychological* aspect of CF refers to the way students react to and internalize teacher's feedback. Positive feedback makes them feel good, whereas constructive criticism should be viewed as a way to promote improvement rather than be taken personally. According to Talmage and Eash (1979), students' attitude to learning greatly influences their progress, which is why negative feelings slow down their L2 acquisition. CF is *social* in that it involves both teacher and students in exchanges of opinions, comments, arguments, etc. Informed by these theories, I incorporated both teacher and peer feedback, I tried to make CF a positive learning experience and help my students process and utilize CF effectively.

Types of CF. The type of feedback that the teacher provides, *oral* versus *written*, points to advantages that *explicit* CF has over *implicit* CF:

"Students failed to notice the corrective force of the oral recasts, whereas they recognized that the written direct feedback was corrective... Oral recasts are implicit because there is no overt linguistic signal that indicates that an error has been committed. ... Written direct CF is explicit in nature; that is, its corrective function is clear to learners. ... The crucial factor that influences the CF is the explicitness of the feedback" (Sheen, 2010, p. 224-225).

This has prompted me to provide more comprehensive explicit/written CF and decrease the implicit/oral CF during class time. On the other hand, I made sure that I provided both types of CF as they address two different types of learners: *ear* (i.e., oral) and *eye* (i.e., visual) learners. Some of my current students are ear learners, that is, their L2 tends to be more informal because they have learned it more like native speakers and have a good grasp of idiomatic expressions but little knowledge of grammar rules; whereas other students are eye learners who have acquired their L2 in a traditional way, using textbooks, which explains why they know grammar rules but lack knowledge of spoken L2. Having this newly acquired knowledge shed light on the

fact that despite coming from (almost) the same L1 pool (i.e., Chinese and Korean), “not all students will make the same type of errors” (Ferris, 2011, p. 55), which was an essential factor that that informed the design of my current lesson.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- identify and use definite and indefinite articles;
- increase love-related vocabulary through in and out of class tasks;
- generate and organize ideas in writing and speaking;
- initiate and maintain conversation on a given topic;
- write individually and collaboratively;
- create and present surveys and infographics;
- provide peer feedback.

Learning Tasks

Students will:

- identify the grammar topic (i.e., definite and indefinite articles), listen and fill in the blanks, and discuss favorite love songs;
- talk about things that they love, then change partners and report back;
- discover grammar deductively and write short definitions of love;
- build up on their grammar knowledge inductively;
- study the grammar point and learn new vocabulary through content-based instruction (CBI);
- write creatively (love poems, letters, emails, online dating ads);
- discuss questions around “a perfect date;”
- roleplay speed dating and consulting a matchmaker;
- debate the pros and cons of online dating;
- individually conduct a dating survey and present findings to the class;
- in pairs/groups conduct Internet research and make a love collage/infographic from a chosen CBI approach (e.g., science, literature, poetry, history, current affairs, etc.);
- provide peer feedback and revise assignments based on assessment criteria rubrics.

Assessment

Students will be assessed using formative and summative evaluation formats: instructor observations, verbal and written feedback, peer feedback, and rubrics outlining assessment criteria. As part of the assessment process, students will write homework: a cloze exercise that checks the grammar point studied and a crossword that revises love-related vocabulary which was presented in class.

Implementation

See Lesson Plan and Activities.

Conclusion

When designing this grammar lesson, I drew from my readings on language awareness and my current students' perceptions regarding teacher and peer feedback, keeping in mind that the cultural aspect greatly influences the way they react to errors being corrected. Informed by Gibbons' (2003) "teaching-learning cycle" and Lyster's (2007) *noticing, awareness, and practice* model, I designed activities that gradually became more complex, thus scaffolding the learning tasks. In this lesson, I: (1) introduced the students to Canadian culture (e.g., the song by Leonard Cohen); (2) allowed them to share their L1 cultures (e.g., the discussion about favorite love songs); (3) scaffolded the learning tasks, gradually increasing the level of difficulty from short love definitions that presented new love-related vocabulary and the grammar point deductively (e.g., definite and indefinite articles), followed by teaching grammar inductively, to more complex tasks such as content-based instruction that utilized short texts from different subject matters (e.g., science, psychology, literature, religion), which allowed for home and expert groups to be formed; (4) provided extensive writing (e.g., reading followed by writing of love letters, poems, online dating ads, and emails seeking for counselling on love-related issues) and speaking activities (e.g., answering questions and providing arguments, role-plays, and debates) done in various formats (e.g., individually, pair and group work); (5) incorporated a review element in the form of homework (e.g., a definite, indefinite, zero article fill-in-the-blanks multiple choice cloze and a vocabulary crossword) and an assessment element (e.g., Internet research on famous love stories, out of class survey on dating in different countries, and a love collage/infographic) which required students to use assessment criteria rubrics in order to provide peer feedback.

I made a conscious effort to: (a) teach integrated skills using the CBI approach; (b) teach the grammar point both deductively and inductively; (c) reduce the TTT (i.e., teacher talking time) and increase the STT (i.e., student talking time) in class; (d) reach a balance between instrumental help (i.e., hints rather than the correct answers) and executive help (i.e., correct answers); and (e) encourage students to continue learning their L2 outside the classroom and become more effective L2 learners able to turn corrective feedback into an internal catalyst that pushes them to improve their SLA. The ultimate goal of this lesson was to assist my students to become more autonomous L2 learners who assume language risks and create their own L2 cognitive routines.

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