



Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

Should grammar be taught? Does explicit knowledge resulting from grammar instruction really make a difference in second or foreign language learning? It is not easy to answer these questions. In fact, there have been considerable numbers of studies on the role of formal instruction in second language acquisition. Whether explicit instruction contributes to L2 learning has been the subject of debate among the researchers of SLA.

Some researchers have claimed that there is distinction between conscious learning and unconscious acquisition (Bialystock 1981, Krashen 1981). They hold the view that L2 learners acquire their L2 in a similar way as children acquire their first language, and explicit knowledge developed through grammar instruction has no interface with language acquisition. In other words, explicit knowledge can never change into implicit knowledge. Accordingly, some language teaching approaches adopt this position and advocate classroom instruction should allow learners to be exposed to meaningful, natural input and provide opportunities for them to use language in spontaneous, meaningful interaction. A focus on form, grammar explanations and error corrections are thus proscribed and considered redundant. With the prevalence of the Communicative Approach and the Natural Approach, which focus on the attainment of immediate communicative competence

rather than on grammatical perfection (Terrell 1977), formal instruction seemed to have lost its role in SLA and language teaching at one time.

Nevertheless, the effect of formal instruction in SLA is still being investigated as attention has been given to the role of input in second language acquisition. An increasing number of research and discussion begin to suggest that explicit instruction is beneficial to second language acquisition. Contrary to the researchers who hold the non-interface position, those who favor formal instruction argue that form-focused instruction, serving as "consciousness raising" or "input enhancement" can improve rate of learning and lead to enhanced accuracy, (Shardwood Smith 1991, Schmidt 1986, Ellis 1991, White & Spada 1991). This kind of "consciousness" or "noticing" is necessary for successful SLA, because it is possible that learners will fail to perceive certain structures in naturalistic input. By drawing the learner's attention to the properties of the L2, form-focused instruction provides a more salient kind of positive evidence which may help learners become more aware of the patterns of the target language which would otherwise pass unnoticed. Besides, it also provides negative evidence to help learners "unlearn" the incorrect forms. Experimental study findings also have provided evidence that input enhancement can bring about genuine changes in learners' interlanguage systems (White & Spada 1991). Generally speaking, it is agreed by most of the SLA researchers now that formal instruction can lead to enhanced accuracy, helping learners make progress through developmental stages more rapidly, and also destabilizing fossilized interlanguage grammars. These findings, on the other hand, do motivate the use of pedagogic tasks and other methodological options which draw learners' attention to the forms of the target

language. For example, the Task-based Language Teaching Approach (TBLT) tries to incorporate formal instruction into the task-based syllabus.

Since the positive effect of formal instruction on the acquisition of L2 has been proved, in recent years, researchers in SLA have turned their attention to another question—What kind of form-focused instruction works best? That is, what kind of formal instruction can effectively turn the “input” into “intake”? This is also the issue that language teachers are more concerned about.

Traditional grammar instruction has normally involved presenting a structure with explanation of the grammatical concept and then providing practice or exercises for learners to produce the target structures or forms. This kind of instruction is output-based. Other than this kind of traditional output-based grammar instruction, Bill Vanpatten begins to propose processing instruction and claim that this kind of input-based instruction may be as effective as output-based instruction and perhaps, even more. According to Vanpatten, processing instruction involves grammar explanation and input-based practice aimed at redirecting learners' strategies in processing input data—forming associations between the target form and its meaning. In contrast to traditional instruction, processing instruction provides students with activities focusing the learners on interpreting and comprehending the target items in oral and written form and not on producing them. The psycholinguistic rationale for processing instruction is that “acquisition occurs when learners attend to the new structure in input rather than when they try to produce it” (Ellis 1998).

The result of the experiments conducted by Vanpatten and Cadierno (1993a,

1993b, 1995) on comparing the effect of traditional output-based instruction with processing instruction revealed significant gains in both comprehension and production for subjects in processing instruction, while subjects in traditional instruction had significant gains only in production. These studies suggested that instruction seems to be more beneficial when it is directed at altering how learners process input rather than when it is directed at altering how learners produce output.

1.2 Motivation

In Taiwan, grammar instruction still plays an important role in English teaching. According to a questionnaire survey on senior high school EFL teachers' concepts on and attitudes toward grammar instruction (Chen 2000), most of the teachers (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that English grammar rules appearing in the reading passage should be presented and illustrated to students, and 60% of them agreed that performing sentence pattern drill helps to minimize the chances of producing mistakes. The result of the study has shown that in spite of the prevalence of the Communicative Approach, EFL teachers in Taiwan still consider that grammar instruction is an important aspect of learning English. On the other hand, we can see in most of the current commercial textbooks for junior and senior high schools, which may be function-based and focus on language use for communication, sentence patterns or grammar focuses with output-based practice are obviously indispensable parts in each lesson.

According to the well-known Canale and Swain model (1980), communicative

competence consists of four major components: (1) grammatical competence, (2) sociolinguistic competence, (3) discourse competence, and (4) strategic competence. The model shows that grammatical competence is one of the components of language proficiency. The ability to understand and use word formation and sentence structure is essential to the eventual attainment of ultimate proficiency. Since grammar instruction still plays an important role in EFL classrooms, what kind of instruction works best for students might be the question that we teachers are interested in.

The advocacy of input-based instruction has aroused certain amount of attention in the SLA field. In recent years, some experiments on the comparative effect of traditional output-based grammar instruction and input-based processing instruction have been conducted. Most of these studies obtain positive effects for the processing instruction, but there are still some researchers questioning that the effect might have a lot to do with the difficulty and complexity of the target structure. So far, the target languages and structures investigated in these studies are limited. Thus, it would be premature to conclude what type of instruction works better. More researches still need to be done to find out the result of the comparative effect of these two grammar instruction approaches on L2 learners' acquisition of different target languages and structures.

The present study aims to compare the effect of these two kinds of instruction with an investigation into the English subjunctive mood, which is often considered to be very difficult to Chinese students since it is foreign to Chinese speakers. For students in Taiwan, the structure used for denoting the subjunctive mood in English

is both difficult to comprehend and difficult to produce. When the target structure is complex and difficult in comprehension and production, will input processing instruction still work better than the traditional instruction as claimed by its proponents?

1.3 Research Questions

The present study aims to find out the answers to the following questions:

- (1) Do Chinese students receiving input-based instruction outperform those receiving output-based instruction in comprehending the English subjunctive mood?
- (2) Do Chinese students receiving input-based instruction outperform those receiving output-based instruction in producing the English subjunctive mood?

1.4 Organization of the thesis

This thesis is organized as follows:

In Chapter Two, I will discuss the differences between the nature of the output-based grammar instruction and that of input-based processing instruction, and I will review a few important second language acquisition theories concerning these two teaching approaches. Besides, I will also review some previous studies, which aimed to investigate the comparative effect between them. In Chapter 3, I will describe the whole design of the study, including subjects, materials, and procedures. In Chapter 4, I will present the results of the statistical analyses, discuss the outcome of the experiment and offer possible explanations for the findings. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will summarize the major findings of the study, discuss the pedagogical implications and give suggestions for future research.