

Chapter Five

Conclusion and Teaching Implications

5.1 Conclusion

The present study has attempted to compare the effect of traditional output instruction and input-based processing instruction on the acquisition of the English Subjunctive mood. The result shows that learners receiving processing instruction, which is directed at altering how they process input, would have better ability to comprehend and interpret the input. By contrast, traditional instruction, which is directed at altering how learners produce output, might not succeed in helping learners building form and meaning connection. As for production, the knowledge obtained from processing instruction is also accessible for production. But when the task is more difficult, input-based practice alone can't help learners produce more complex output. To develop accurate and fluent production, output practice is still necessary.

The findings of this case study partly support Vanpatten and Cardieno's claim that input-based processing instruction works better than traditional production instruction since it leads to more successful comprehension and almost equal effect on production when the task is not too difficult. The findings also suggest that processing instruction results in more durable impact than traditional instruction does. However, the findings partly agree with other previous studies which didn't favor processing instruction, too. The effect might be affected by the complexity of the target structure or the nature of the tasks. When the target structure is difficult in production and the production task is not easy, the effect of processing

instruction is not satisfactory any more.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

In spite of the fact that processing instruction may not necessarily lead to successful production, it has provided an alternative for grammar instruction. Traditional grammar instruction might work when the structure is simple and easy to comprehend, but it might not succeed when the target form is difficult. As a matter of fact, many high school teachers often complain why students fail to learn what they have been taught. The main reason is that to students, the input they get from the teachers may not turn into intake. While this might be due to insufficient practice, another reason is that the instruction doesn't have impact on their developing system. Take teaching the English subjunctive for example. Most teachers will adopt traditional instruction, presenting the rule or form and then providing mechanical or meaningful production practice for the students. But the effect of instruction is doubtful. Most students still fail either to use the correct form when they are supposed to use the subjunctive mood or to successfully interpret the input containing the subjunctive mood.

As mentioned, the purpose of form-focused instruction is to help learners "notice" the linguistic features. That is, the goal of grammar instruction is to make learners aware of specific properties of the L2. "Noticing the form" not only involves drawing attention to how a grammar form is formed, but also involves developing an understanding how the form signifies specific meanings and helping learners realize when and why the form is used in the context. Processing instruction, which asks learners to process input that has been specially contrived

to induce comprehension of the target structure, is based on the three dimensions of grammar instruction. On the other hand, as the result of the present study shows, traditional production instruction is not always successful, nor are its effects always durable because of some developmental constraints in L2 acquisition. Thus, input-based instruction may be more effective than output-based instruction because it induces conscious noticing in learners. Instruction seems to be more beneficial when it attempts to alter how L2 learners perceive and process input than when it tries to manipulate learners' output production. Learners who receive processing instruction not only obtain better processing of input but also the knowledge available for production. This innovative grammar teaching approach is worth trying when traditional grammar instruction doesn't work, especially when the structure is difficult in comprehension, such as the distinction between present participle and past participle used as adjectives (e.g. interesting and interested.)

One argument may be raised about the insufficiency of processing instruction for production. The present study has shown that when the production task is more complicated, students receiving processing instruction may have difficulty in producing correct responses. In fact, the advocacy of processing instruction does not mean to abandon any output practice in classroom instruction. L2 teaching is supposed to provide many different kinds of activities for the learners. An experienced teacher will not adopt only one approach in his or her teaching. The pedagogical implication of the present study is that in dealing with grammar instruction, especially when the target structure is difficult to comprehend, working on how the students process input first might work better than solely having them engage in output practice. However, output practice is still necessary

for developing more accurate and fluent production. That is to say, processing instruction followed by output practice may work the best in grammar teaching.

Another argument for the effect of input-based instruction is: If the effect of input-based instruction for production is limited in controlled condition, can it work in more spontaneous condition? Since this study didn't include any measure of spontaneous production, whether processing instruction can result in better communicative competence still needs further investigation. Generally speaking, grammar teaching usually consists of three phases: presentation, practice and communication. What is investigated and discussed in the present study is focused on the first and second phases.

How foreign language classroom teaching can be more effective in helping learners' second language development is an important question for every foreign language teacher in Taiwan. It is also a mission that every EFL teacher should be devoted to. For grammar instruction, although there are many grammar books or commercial textbooks available now, teachers, in fact, still can work on their own to make their instruction more effective. Instead of completely depending on these teaching materials which are almost output-based, teachers can try adopting different approaches by designing their own instructional packets, giving more thoughts to such questions as how to present the structure, how to design the activities for practice, etc.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Currently, input-based processing instruction is not well-known among EFL teachers in Taiwan. Studies concerned with this input-based teaching approach

are also limited. More research still needs to be done to know about what type of formal instruction works best for students in Taiwan. Future research on the impact of processing instruction can aim at finding out the interactions between the complexity of forms and types of tasks, or with the focus on its effect on communicative competence.