Chapter V
Application of Online Questionnaires in Grammar Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The consciousness-raising approach to grammar teaching aims to provide opportunities for students to identify some grammatical components through noticing activities and then make their own hypotheses about those components. This chapter proposes the application of the WebCT questionnaire to develop outside-class activities through which students are able to test and refine their hypotheses in order to internalize the grammar rules. It was found that students were more motivated and participated in the activities of testing and refining their hypotheses than in the past. Besides, students were exposed to more interlanguage samples that might have helped them refine their hypotheses. It is hoped that this chapter gives teachers better understanding of the needs of Chinese university students in grammar learning and offers them some innovative and effective teaching ideas in grammar teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Hedge (2002) states that grammar teaching is “substantially influenced by the input hypothesis and the notion of intake” (p. 146). There are several steps which constitute successful acquisition of grammar: (a) noticing, (b) reasoning and hypothesizing, (c) structuring and restructuring, and (d) automatizing. One simple way for teachers to ascertain if students have mastered a specific grammatical constituent is to ask students to use the target language to achieve some communicative purposes, for example, asking for direction. It is not uncommon to find that what students actually master is not what teachers expect them to. Furthermore, it is sometimes hard to motivate
students to take part in both stages of reasoning and hypothesizing, structuring and restructuring, especially in the second language classroom of Chinese learners due to the “face” system in Chinese culture. Students perceive making mistakes in front of the class as losing face. Yet making mistakes at these stages is unavoidable. So, they prefer to remain silent.

The objectives of this chapter are to:

a. Report the advantages of introducing the WebCT questionnaire tool to support grammar teaching in an undergraduate English proficiency course, with particular emphasis on how to motivate Chinese university students to be engaged in both stages of reasoning and hypothesizing, and structuring and restructuring in grammar learning, and

b. Examine the potential benefits of the WebCT questionnaire tool for university teachers in grammar teaching.

There are three parts in this chapter. In the first part, both the product and the process approaches to grammar teaching are discussed. Towards the end of part one, the author has attempted to categorize the steps found in each of these approaches into three main domains: Exploring, Learning and Acquiring Cycle, and Internalizing. Furthermore, the role that the questionnaire tool played in the three domains in the study will be discussed. In the second part, eight design principles are proposed, followed by the rationale for the design of the lesson plan in the study to demonstrate the interplay between the use of the online questionnaires and the noticing activities conducted in the class. Implications for both students and teachers discussed in part three conclude this chapter.

BACKGROUND

The first part of this section discusses the integration of the product and the process perspectives of grammar teaching while the second part introduces the three main domains in grammar teaching, as proposed by the author.

Integration of Product and Process Perspectives

The product perspective of grammar teaching separates the target language into isolated items and the emphasis is put on the correct production of language forms and structures of the target language by students. The Presentation, Practice and Production (or the PPP) model, being a member of this perspective of grammar teaching, has been criticized because of its assumptions of language and language learning (e.g., Lewis, 1993; Scrivener, 1996; Woodward, 1993). The PPP model divides the language into segments to be taught in a sequential order (Ellis, 1988). However, Lewis (1993) argues that language learning is not a linear process, and students do not learn in a linear way (Willis, 1990). Willis (1990) points out that it is not easy to anticipate what students have already mastered and what is still absent in their memory. So, if students are at different stages in the learning process, they will be focusing on different forms and meanings at any one time (Prabhu, 1987). The process perspective, however, focuses on the learner and the learning process, instead of the language. It encourages students to recognize language patterns on their own, and then to experiment with the language through some learning tasks, which are purely communicative with a focus on meaning but not, forms. This perspective also has been questioned because the accuracy issue is not well addressed. Hadley (2002) agrees that “too much of a focus