CONSCIOUSNESS RISING ACTIVITIES IN AN ELT COURSEBOOK

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Abstract

This study examines a pre-intermediate ELT coursebook with regard to the use of consciousness raising (C-R) activities. The analysis of the coursebook deals with how the language structures are presented to students. The focus is on whether C-R activities are used in the lessons of the course, and if so, to what extent C-R activities are applied in the coursebook. The finding of the research indicates that the coursebook analysed has generally given attention to the current trend in grammar pedagogy by incorporating C-R activities. It was found that New Headway Pre-Intermediate has attempted to consistently incorporate C-R activities in the presentation section. Based on the finding of the analysis, the tasks provided appear to be quite effective to assist students to notice the targeted language in order for them to be able to understand how it works. This coursebook also follows the Presentation-Practice teaching approach, but the finding indicates that the practice does not immediately follow the grammar presentation.

Keywords: Consciousness raising activities, explicit knowledge, inductive approach, noticing.

INTRODUCTION

Consciousness raising (C-R) activities as one of the views in grammar teaching have recently received attention from researchers. According to Willis & Willis (1996), consciousness rising is not a new concept to the teaching of grammar since it has been a part of language teaching for many years and was practiced in the grammar-translation method. Yet, the traditional grammar-translation made use of a very limited range of C-R techniques and restricted exposure to the target language.

Ellis (1997) defines C-R as an instructional activity where learners are supplied with the target language structure, and they are required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is for the learners to acquire an explicit understanding of some linguistic features of the target language. In relation to the definition, Willis & Willis (1996) argue that C-R encourages learners to notice the targeted grammatical features, to come to conclusions from their noticing, and to organize their view of language based on their conclusion. Learners are not thus required to spontaneously produce sentences following the grammar structures they have learned. The underlying principle as suggested by Ellis (1992) is that C-R activities aim to help learners to understand the targeted structure not to involve them in repeated production of the grammatical features.

According to Ellis (1992), learner’s explicit knowledge of grammar is what consciousness raising aims to develop. Explicit knowledge is knowledge about language and the uses to which language can be put (Ellis, 2004). Ellis further argues that such knowledge is different from an ability to use and recognize metalanguage. That is, explicit knowledge of grammatical structures can be developed with minimal use of grammatical terminology. On the other hand, the development of explicit knowledge may be made easier by the use of some metalinguistic terminology.

Noticing is a notion worth mentioning in terms of its relationship to consciousness-raising. Noticing basically requires efforts on the part of learners to consciously pay attention to the form and meaning of the targeted grammatical feature in the data in order for them to be able internalize the rule (Batstone, 1996). In line with Batstone’s idea, Thornbury (2001) sets out two conditions for language learning to happen – i.e. (a) learners must pay attention to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to; and (b) learners must notice the gap, i.e. they must make comparisons between the current state of their knowledge, as realized in their output, and the target language system, available as input.

92
The role of C-R activities is then to make learners notice the targeted language feature available in the data. This noticing can thus raise learners’ consciousness and enables them to compare between the language feature in input with their current knowledge (Ellis, 1992). The learner’s noticing the input is expected to enable the input to become intake, which, when the time is right, will have the effect of triggering the restructuring of the learner’s mental grammar. Based on C-R view, the process of language learning can be illustrated as follows: ‘input → noticing → intake → output’ (Thornbury, 2001, p.38).

One factor needs considering related to noticing is that the language feature has to be noticeable for the learner. In order for the language feature to be noticeable, Hedge (2000) suggests the following criteria: it occurs frequently; it relates to the learner’s common sense about basic functions of language; and its functions are those to which a learner would be likely to pay attention.

Another notion closely related to C-R activities is the inductive teaching approach. This approach provides details and or examples from which their principle and/or concept is induced. In other words, the learner is not presented with the grammatical feature directly, but their task is to discover or induce it based on the provided data (Richards et al. 1992). In inductive approach, two options can be used in terms of how to provide the data which is accessible for the learner to develop explicit knowledge (Ellis, 1997). For some learners with implicit knowledge of the language feature they are dealing with, the task assigned should be directed to enable them to analyse that knowledge. Another way is to make any necessary changes to the data in order to facilitate learners to discover the targeted feature of grammar (Ellis, 1997).

Some features of C-R activities are found in the inductive approach such as the provision of language data, focusing on a particular language feature from the text, and requiring learners to analyse the grammatical feature available in the text in order for them to draw a conclusion. It could therefore be argued that the inductive approach is applicable and of use to C-R activities.

In the light of the above discussion, we have picked out what appears to be important features of consciousness raising activities, as follows: inductive learning, data illustrating the targeted grammatical feature, isolation of a specific grammatical feature for focused attention, and explicit knowledge oriented. We will therefore use them as the basic criteria in analysing our selection of the ELT coursebook.

METHODS

This present study uses qualitative research design, and the research method employed is content analysis. Wahyu (2011, p. 122) states that content analysis is one of the numerous research methods used to analyse text data. She also adds that content analysis is a research methodology that employs a set of procedures to determine the quality and the themes of documents, discourses or books. As this study analysed a coursebook as the main source of data, this research is categorised as content analysis research.

For this study, we selected one ELT coursebook at pre-intermediate level - that is, New Headway Pre-Intermediate written by John Soars and Liz Soars, published by Oxford University Press. New Headway Pre-Intermediate is one of six level New Headway series ranging from beginner up to advanced. The writers claim that the series have been written in order to make learning of English stimulating and motivating for both adult and young adult learners. It is also declared that the coursebook integrates the best of traditional methods claimed to have been highly successful in its previous edition with more recent teaching approaches having the purpose of helping learners to use English accurately and fluently. The course is an integrated one where the four language skills are developed in context. It consists of twelve units, each of which can be broadly divided into two sections: language input and skills development. Under language input, the focus is on grammar, vocabulary, and everyday English, and skills development involves the four skills: reading, speaking, listening, and writing.

In this book, grammar has an essential position as it can be seen from some types of grammar based activities that regularly appear in all the units. Some important features of grammar treatment that can be found in the book are Grammar reference, Starter, Grammar Spot. Grammar reference is found at the back of the student’s book containing a summary of all language structures treated in the book. In this section, students are provided with detailed information about the target language including comparisons and contrasts of grammatical structures. Starter is intended to be a warming-up activity for each lesson to be dealt with. This activity is always relevant to the language to be introduced in the unit and aims to focus students on the key language point of the unit. Grammar spot is intended to emphasize the grammar being learned through a mix of explanation, questions, and self-check tasks. To conclude, the role of grammar is therefore of great importance in this book.
In this present study, the analysis conducted dealt with how the language structures are presented to students. The focus was on whether C-R activities are used in the lessons of the course, and if so, to what extent C-R activities are applied based on the criteria above. Considering the characteristics of C-R activities, the analysis only dealt with the presentation section, thereby excluding the practice section and the summary section except for practice tasks which belong to the presentation section.

The grammatical structure analysed in the coursebook was the present perfect which non-native students such as those from Indonesia often find it difficult due to no such a concept of this tense in Indonesian. In this coursebook, the present perfect is presented in relation to the present continuous. The information in the teacher’s book says that it is the first time this tense is treated in the New Headway series, and the analysis therefore dealt with how this grammatical item is introduced to students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For a detailed analysis concerning the place of C-R activities in the course, one representative lesson of unit seven will be taken as the sample. The title of unit seven is ‘Famous Couples’ and the language structure in the unit focuses on one of the main uses of present perfect, namely, talking about past experiences which are related to the present time.

The lesson starts with Starter which is intended to be a quick check whether students are familiar with past simple and past participle forms of some common irregular verbs. In this warming up activity, students are encouraged to do the task in pairs so that they can share what they know to one another. To check the correct answers, they can refer to the list of irregular verbs available at the back of the student’s book. In this Starter activity, students seem to be exposed with the task which assigns them to simply recall the words they might have already learned or to find out the forms of new verbs through sharing information with their partner. While this warm-up activity introduces students to the past participle and is in some way student-centred, it can be seen that such a task is less likely to raise their awareness to the structure to be dealt with, thus generally not a C-R activity.

Task one is the first step in which the target structure is presented to students. In this task, students are provided with two pictures of famous writers and they are required to find out how the two writers could be related to one another based on what the pictures show. Following this, students are then asked to fill in the missing part in the sentences with the pronoun he or she. Instead of involving students in directly producing the target grammar, this activity exposes students to the new language illustrated in the data while they are working on it, thus enabling them to be aware of the target grammar.

In the next activity, students are supplied with Grammar Spot, where some metalinguistic terms are noticeably used. Students, however, are not provided with a direct explanation of the grammar. Instead, they are exposed to the target grammar by completing three sub-tasks related to the data provided. It can be seen that in this activity the target structure – i.e. present perfect is isolated for focused attention. In addition, the activity is aimed at making them notice the new grammar in terms of how it is formed and differs from past simple in order for them to gain an explicit understanding. Given the way the activities are employed in this task, it can be argued that they apply C-R features.

The following tasks 2 and 3 require students to do some operations on the target grammar. In task 2, students have to complete some sentences about the famous couples by supplying the appropriate form of the verbs in brackets based on the two compared tenses as mentioned above. Students in pairs or groups are encouraged to look back at previous sentences in task one while working on them. This task may thus stimulate students to think about the new structure for its meaning compared with the past simple’s as well as notice prepositions of time commonly used in the present perfect. Task 3 asks students to form interrogative sentences based on the phrases provided. Although this task is a drill-based activity as stated in the teacher’s book, students are not simply asked to form questions using the target structure since they are required to notice the phrases in order for them to decide which tense to be used, so the task is similar to task 2 in that it also focuses on both form and meaning. While these tasks basically are typical practice activities whose focus is on accuracy, they can encourage students to consolidate what have already been known with the new grammar item, thus reinforcing their previously learned structure as well as, to some degree, helping them to acquire explicit knowledge of how the target grammar works.

To sum up then, New Headway Pre-Intermediate has attempted to consistently incorporate C-R activities in the presentation section. Despite the finding from the analysis in this unit that Starter does not seem to apply C-R activities, on the whole it can be identified that they are given a place in some other units in the coursebook. Based on the analysis, the tasks used seem to be quite effective to help
students notice the targeted language in order for them to be able to understand how it works. Yet, some tasks do not seem to fully provide opportunities for students to actively use the language for communicative purposes. This coursebook also follows the Presentation-Practice teaching approach, but the analysis indicates that the practice does not immediately follow the grammar presentation.

CONCLUSION

This paper is aimed to explore the occurrence of C-R activities in a Pre-Intermediate ELT coursebook for young adults and adults. Since this study only analysed for one coursebook, no definitive generalisations about the place of C-R activities in ELT coursebooks could be made from it. However, this random selection is expected to represent whether C-R activities, one of the current views in grammar teaching, have now been integrated in the course.

Based on the content analysis regarding the use of C-R activities, the coursebook New Headway Pre-Intermediate analysed has in general given attention to the current trend in grammar pedagogy by incorporating C-R activities, in which the coursebook focuses mostly on C-R activities in the grammar presentation. The general observation in the structures of grammar section also indicates that the coursebook follows Presentation-Practice teaching approach.

REFERENCES