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MINI GRAMMAR LESSONS: THE PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATION OF GOVERNMENT AND BINDING THEORY TO L2 COMPOSITION

NATHAN WOUDEBERG AND KATHLEEN LAFFERTY

ABSTRACT

In the process of building academic-level written literacy in English language learners (ELLs), teachers face numerous trials, such as how to identify the most pressing problem areas, how to provide effective feedback in absorbable amounts, and how much explanation or theory to integrate into lessons. While answers to this vary widely by culture, time limits, systemic restraints, instructor style, and student personality, this paper makes a case for using explicit grammar instruction with a focus on form (FonF). In the following analysis of one learner's writing sample, persistent pronoun errors indicate a gap in the learner's knowledge, which can be effectively dealt with through introducing the basic tenets of Government and Binding Theory (GBT) in order to aid memory and assist rule formation. This approach is presented, not to be the final word in syntax instruction, but in the hope that the approach and process might confirm and inspire instructors as they navigate these shoals within their own classrooms.

1.0 Targeted Corrective Feedback

Our instructional goal in this hypothetical course is to provide students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which refers to the level of English competence needed for academic success (Koffi, 2010). Even those ELLs possessing a high degree of fluency and accuracy in basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) may have trouble translating that performance into academic literacy, especially since learning from texts relies heavily on the use of decontextualized language—language usage outside of a shared social and physical context (Cummins, 2000, as cited by Aukerman, 2007).

A naive assumption exists that process writing, the procedure used to train native speakers in CALP, will work equally well with non-native learners (Zhou, 2009; Shin, 2008). In fact, though learners differ in their needs for and tolerances of formal grammar instruction, explicit, formal, and directive corrective feedback (Nurmukhamedov & Kim 2009; Shin 2008) with a focus on form (FonF) can be highly beneficial in the development of metacognitive awareness in learners (Ha & Storey, 2006). This in turn can enlist rule formation, autonomous error recognition, and self or peer correction (Vickers & Ene, 2006).

Fitch (2001) affirms the justification for teaching grammar rules. The teaching of rules does pay off with adult learners. Vickers and Ene (2006) found value in structured learning activities wherein ESL composition students compared their writing output to the output of a native speaker. Shin (2008) confirmed that students want higher levels of support and assistance from instructors regarding the correct use of grammar. Older learners are better suited to study form and to use what they have learned to monitor and self-edit their work (Krashen, 1981, as cited in Fitch, 2001). McClaughlin, Rossman and McLeod (1983, as cited in Fitch, 2001) note that repeated performance of carefully

constructed drills can lead to an automatic routine where grammar rules have become internalized.

This paper attempts to apply these theories on corrective feedback by analyzing a piece of student writing for formal errors, identifying the major error category that affects intelligibility, and targeting that category through an FonF pedagogical approach to assist the student in improving his or her writing skill. This approach to CALP through FonF should be integrated within a larger framework of writing instruction that also includes structure, stylistics, and lexis (Koffi, 2010).

2.0 Learner Profile

The learner is identified as a college ESL student who composed this sample as a placement test for a writing class. The learner studies in an intensive English program in preparation for mainstream university courses. The learner appears to be intermediate level.

More specific information, such as the learner's L1 background, favored styles and strategies, affective factors, available resources, time frame, and short and long-term instructional goals are unknown, making a highly personalized program impossible. Since this example is a general model of analysis and activity construction, instructors who choose to follow these recommendations should customize them to their particular context.

3.0 Writing Sample

The writing sample (see Appendix) responds to a prompt regarding mandatory health classes at the university, and consists of 236 words across 17 sentences. These comprise 5 simple sentences, 5 compound sentences and 7 complex sentences. We identified 68 errors in the text, of which 16 were pronoun errors, comprising 24% of total errors. Errors of lower frequency should be noted, and returned to for future curriculum developments once the learner has progressed.

Therefore, following the suggestions for focused error-correction above, this analysis revealed pronoun usage as the targeted language element, and the rest of our discussion will deal with explicating and correcting these difficulties. These errors have been assigned index numbers 1-16 (see Appendix). Discussion below will indicate the index number from the student text.

4.0 Pronouns

Pronouns are closed class words and typically are used in place of a noun or noun phrase. Pronouns replace nouns and come in nine distinct varieties (Table 1). Within these, pronouns can usually also be categorized as male, female, or neuter, as well as singular or plural (Table 2). From tables one and two, we can see that this student's errors are focused upon a specific subset of each of these—specifically, personal pronouns in the third-person neuter and third-person plural cases.

Type of Pronoun	Count of Errors	Index Numbers
Personal	13	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
Possessive	1	6

Demonstrative	1	15
Interrogative	0	
Indefinite	0	
Reflexive	1	16
Reciprocal	0	
Emphatic	0	
Relative	0	

Table 1: Errors by Pronoun Type

Type of Pronoun	Count of Errors	Index Numbers
First Person Singular	0	
First Person Plural	0	
Second Person Singular	0	
Second Person Plural	0	
Third Person Singular Female	0	
Third Person Singular Male	0	
Third Person Singular Neuter	6	4, 5, 7, 8, 13, 15
Third Person Plural	10	1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16

Table 2: Errors by Gender and Number

The definition of pronouns as “replacement nouns” is incomplete (Teschner & Evans 2007), as many pronouns never replace a noun. A pronoun that is clearly linked to a noun phrase that precedes or succeeds it is called ‘bound,’ and one that is not is ‘free’ (Koffi, 2010). These linked noun phrases are called antecedents, and their correct relationships to pronouns can be defined by a theory of syntax known as the Government-Binding theory (GBT), introduced by Noam Chomsky in the 1980s (Chomsky 1993).

The binding conditions include: The Binding Conditions (X is bound if X has an antecedent to which it is co-indexed); The Indexing Rule (Assign every NP in a sentence a random integer index); The Matching Condition (if two NPs are assigned the same index, they must match in features); and the Government Condition (X is the governing category for Y if X and Y are in the same clause) (Koffi, 2010).

If a bound pronoun fails the Matching Condition, it is an agreement error. If a free pronoun does not have a clear antecedent in a previous sentence, and the reference is not clear from context, it is an ambiguity error. Table 3 details the occurrences of each type of error from the sample. We see that this learner has a much greater problem with ambiguity errors than with agreement. Next we deal with each of these errors in turn.

Error Type	Count of Errors	Index Numbers
✓ Agreement	4	1, 6, 9, 12
✓ Ambiguity	12	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16

Table 3: Errors by Type

4.1 Agreement

Based on the sample, the learner struggles with agreement when using a pronoun to replace or refer to an antecedent that is semantically plural and grammatically singular, such as “the university” which is singular, but made up of many people, “student” when referring to the student body, or “sickness” which refers to many different kinds of illness. In the first paragraph <their>, as a third person possessive pronoun does not agree with the third person singular antecedent <student>.¹

(6) *Keeping student in a good shaep is **their** responsibility;*

In the second paragraph, the learner again uses the third-person plural <they/them> bound to the singular noun <university> in the second paragraph.

(8) *...However, the university have to make it requirement. Why? By doing that **they** will....*

This violation of the Matching Condition leads to confusion since the third-person plural forms are also used for <students>. Furthermore,

(12)....*They should be in good health to protact **them** and ...*

should be a reflexive pronoun, or it is unclear if the student is helping the university.

4.2 Ambiguity

When X and Y are not in the same clause, the Government Condition does not apply, making the pronoun a free pronoun. Free pronouns often cause problems for novice writers, as the antecedent is obvious and clear in their head, when it may not be so to the reader. This is certainly the case for this learner, who uses the pronouns <they> and <them> interchangeably for the antecedents <students> and <university>, and <it> for <health>. In our sample, the student has incorrectly used personal pronouns/antecedents on 13 occasions (see Table 3). For example:

(9, 10) *By doing **that they** will helping **them** to be in health life style with out having any diversity of sickness.*

In this sentence, it is difficult to trace the antecedents back even in context. This is a repetitive error, as noted in Table 3. In another example, the learner does not affiliate the pronouns with antecedents in the text, even though the student clearly knows what she or he is trying to say; these pronouns are not ambiguous in his/her own mind.

(1, 2, 3, 4) *Some universities don't by attention to **it**, because they **they** think **it** the student responsability and **they** just want **them** to do **it** for one time.*

¹ Of course, it is also clear that the learner could have made the error of failing to add the plural morpheme to “student.”

Some instances, like the first use of <it>, are clear, but the second use becomes ambiguous, not only because of distance from the antecedent, but also the due to the selectional criteria of the verb, since ‘student health’ is not something you ‘do.’ The student does not demonstrate understanding of the need to give free and bound pronouns both clear antecedents in the text.

4.3 Prescription for Pronouns

To help this student with this issue, we would recommend a three step process following the PPP model (Scrivener, 2005), which breaks the pronoun GBT into three discreet but cumulative blocks, a noticing stage (present), a reinforcing stage (practice) and an implementation stage (presentation).

The first step is to present GBT to the student in a simplified form, explaining the concepts of the head that governs the pronoun, and free versus bound pronouns. Teaching the matching condition guides the learner to analyze the case features of nouns and pronouns as they write.

Next, the learner applies this by analyzing sample texts where she or he can read and underline and label bound and free pronouns, as well as their antecedents. S/he will read good and bad examples and have to identify which are well formed, or ill-formed, and why. This step sets noticing of the issue and the conditions under which it occurs.

After that, the learner begins to practice applying this knowledge through restricted-output drills that grow progressively more complex. First, s/he is asked to fill in the blanks with an appropriate pronoun (Savage, 2010). S/he then begins to replace redundant nouns in a sample with their feature-matching pronoun equivalents. This clarifies the indexing rule and matching condition and puts them into practice. Next, the student is given a sample with ambiguous free pronouns, and asked to cross out and replace pronouns with feature-matching, semantically appropriate nouns until the meaning is clear.

Finally comes the performance stage, during which the learner goes back and edits this essay by checking each pronoun to make sure it does not violate GBT and moreover, that the antecedents are periodically restated to ensure clarity. When this is done successfully, they can produce an entirely original composition with emphasis on using pronouns appropriately.

5.0 Conclusion

GBT considers word order an important part of the syntax and puts constraints on the structure of word order in a sentence (Black, 1998). The Principles of Binding Theory determine whether a pronoun is correct in a particular position. Students who are learning how to write in English violate GBT by not aligning the pronoun with its antecedent. Explicit instruction in basic GBT features prepares students to look at pronouns with a wary eye—checking the case features of bound pronouns and the contextual clarity or proximity of free pronouns, until a natural habit has been built.

With the recommendations given here, FonF instruction is not the grammar-translation drills and agreement exercises of the past. It is a dynamic, interactive, iterative process between the learner, the instructor, and the text. Copious amounts of reading materials in the target language, specialty, and register is necessary to model learners’ goal of competent pronoun use for CALP. These activities can also reinforce writing

behaviors that do not violate GBT. The instructor's job is to direct learners' attention to the salient features of model texts, elicit comparisons to similar features in their own texts, thereby equipping them with the metacognitive tools needed to enable autonomous, rule-governed, and confident self and peer corrections.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Appendix: Writing Sample with Indexed Errors

Mini Grammar

A College ESL Composition Placement Test

By Student D

Prompt: Write an essay about the following topic:

SCSU offers a variety of programs to help students stay physically active and healthy. Do you agree or disagree that SCSU should require that each student participate in at least one of these programs every semester until they graduate. State your opinion clearly, and explain it in detail.

Student D wrote:

Student health is an important thing. Some universities don't by attention to it, because they they¹ think it the student responsibility and they² just want them³ to do it⁴ for one time. On the other hand, other universities make it⁵ requirement every session. They think if they do that, students will became more smart than before. Keeping student in a good shaep is their⁶ responsibility; however, keeping students away from having any sickness is university responsibility.

The university shouldn't make the students be in good health more than once. The students are free to do it⁷ or not, its their choise. However, the university have to make it⁸ requirement. Why? By doing that they⁹ will helping them¹⁰ to be in health life style with out having any diversity of sickness. They¹¹ should be in good health to protact them¹² and the rest of the world away from being ill.

What are the students thinking about being healthy? Some students think that they have the freedom to do it¹³. However others believe that being healthy is very important and they must be in good shaep. This program will them them¹⁴ to be frear from being sick.

In conclusion, being sick isn't a good idea, and we should be away from any sickness. I think that that¹⁵ must make the student do whatever it takes to make them¹⁶ health and away from getting any kind of sickness.