

USING A CHECKLIST TO RAISE LANGUAGE AWARENESS : A CASE STUDY

การใช้รายการตรวจสอบงานเพื่อเพิ่มความตระหนักในการใช้ภาษา : กรณีศึกษา

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study that investigates whether a student's language awareness (LA) of tense use can be raised by engaging in a designed LA raising activity in which a checklist is used as a tool in writing tasks. The instruments used in this study were the subject's essays, a checklist and the researcher's diary. The findings demonstrated that the subject's scores on the writing tasks showed that the subject's writing accuracy is likely to have improved. Moreover, working through four sub-activities of comparing, problem identification, evaluating and changing helped the subject develop LA after only one use of the checklist. The student was aware of the usage of four tenses during and after doing the writing task. The research findings suggested teachers to provide learners with activities that raise the learners' awareness of language usage.

KEYWORDS : Language awareness, Checklist, Learner training, Individual differences

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้จัดทำขึ้นโดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาว่านักศึกษาสามารถพัฒนาความตระหนักในการใช้กาลในงานเขียนหรือไม่เมื่อทำกิจกรรมพัฒนาความตระหนักในการใช้ภาษาที่ออกแบบขึ้นโดยใช้รายการตรวจสอบงานเขียน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยครั้งนี้ได้แก่งานเขียนของนักศึกษาที่เป็นตัวอย่างสำรวจ รายการตรวจสอบงานและบันทึกของครู ผลการวิจัยพบว่าคะแนนความถูกต้องในงานเขียนมีการพัฒนาขึ้น และการทำกิจกรรมย่อย 4 กิจกรรม คือ การเปรียบเทียบ การระบุปัญหา การประเมิน และการแก้ไข ช่วยพัฒนาความตระหนักในการใช้ภาษาหลังจากการใช้รายการตรวจสอบงานเพียงครั้งเดียว กล่าวคือ นักศึกษาพัฒนาการคิดและมีความตระหนักเกี่ยวกับการเลือกใช้กาลในภาษาอังกฤษทั้ง 4 กาลทั้งระหว่างและหลังจากทำกิจกรรมการเขียน ผลจากงานวิจัยได้เสนอแนวทางแก่ครูในการใช้กิจกรรมที่จะส่งเสริมให้นักศึกษาพัฒนาการคิดและมีความตระหนักในการใช้ภาษามากยิ่งขึ้น

คำสำคัญ : ความตระหนักในการใช้ภาษา รายการตรวจสอบงาน การฝึกหัดผู้เรียน ความแตกต่างระหว่างบุคคล

Language Awareness (LA) is an area that highlights an explicit knowledge about language in use and influences the learning process. Wong & Storey (2006) successfully developed the awareness of Chinese learners by using a checklist in editing tasks to check and edit their written work. This method seemed to be applicable to Thai learners who use English as a foreign language and who appeared to have problems in writing, particularly in grammatical aspects.

This study implemented a simple LA raising activity by using a checklist as a tool during writing tasks to raise a learner's language awareness of language use and to improve learning outcomes. This case study could also provide a guideline for teachers to raise their students' awareness of language use.

Language Awareness (LA)

Language Awareness (LA) has been conceptualized in several different ways and from different points of view. Following its implementations in language learning and teaching, its definitions are varied and flexible. James & Garrett (1992) summarised the definitions by saying that all of them are concerned with thinking, understanding and being conscious of language use. In language teaching and learning, LA helps learners understand language forms and uses, and provides them with clearer expectations about what and how they are using the language (Hawkins, 1987). James & Garrett (1992) support Hawkins' idea saying that LA enables learners to develop consciousness of and sensitivity to thinking, understanding and using the language, e.g. awareness of correct patterns in a language. As a consequence of this raised consciousness, learners can improve their language skills and use the language better.

A number of research studies have been conducted in the area of LA; for example, using Natural Language Processing (NLP) as an instrument of raising the LA (Dodigovic, 2003), attitudes towards awareness-raising tasks in grammar learning (Mohamed, 2004), employing awareness-raising activities to grammar teaching (Svalberg, A. M -L., 2005), identifying awareness-raising task types in ELT coursebooks (Nitta & Gardner, 2005), the effectiveness of focus on form in language learning (Radwan, 2005), and learners' awareness and ability of effective writing (Wong & Storey, 2006). These studies reflect on the importance of LA and the need to improve it. They show that there are many teaching methodologies and language activities that can be used to raise LA in different learning situations. Moreover, activities in several LA programs have a variety of objectives, such as making intuitive knowledge explicit, strengthening language skills and increasing the effectiveness of communication in the language, introducing the concepts and language learning strategies to learners and conveying an understanding of the language for communication (James & Garrett, 1992).

Awareness Raising Activities

As mentioned above, teachers may use a variety of activities to help learners be aware of the language they use. Watson Todd (1994: 56-57) adapted different kinds of tasks from Ellis's work (1990: 30) on awareness raising for teacher preparation on raising learners' LA in the classroom. The activities are *comparing* (to compare two utterances and to answer questions), *preparing* (to prepare the guidelines or the rules of a language), *evaluating* (to evaluate the effectiveness of the choice of verb tenses), *improving* (to make a decision about how to improve performance), *adapting* (to change or use other choices in the language), *listing* (to list and

conclude ways of using the language), *selecting* (to select appropriate ways of using the language), *ranking* (to rank the degree of effects of each error on communication), *adding/completing* (to add the missing words to complete the sentences), *rearranging* (to change and rearrange the order of the contents they have learnt), *classifying* (to classify and categorize the language points), and *matching* (to match the utterances in two columns in the correct ways). All of these examples are ways of engaging in LA raising activities to provide learners with more opportunities to think in depth about the language which helps them increase their awareness.

In this study, a self-correction activity was designed to raise the subject's LA through working processes consisting of 4 sub-activities: *comparing*, *problem identification*, *evaluating*, and *changing activity*. It was hoped that the activity may prompt the subject to *compare* (to compare his tense use with the structures and the conditions of the tenses used in a provided instrument), to *identify problems* (to identify any problems and their causes), *evaluate* (to evaluate the effectiveness of the choice of the verb tenses in writing), and *change* (to change or use other choices in language to correct those errors and mistakes).

In LA raising activities, instruments play important roles in encouraging learners to reflect on the language they use (Plata, 2003). Possible tools are exercises, questionnaires, rating scales and checklists. In this study, a checklist was chosen because it was a simple tool that could be easily used as a starting point for the subject to do self-correction.

Checklists in Language Learning

A checklist is used to collect information about particular aspects of individual learners (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). It consists of a list of questions or statements that

describe specific aspects of a particular task which learners can use for checking their own performance. A checklist is relatively structured, closed-ended and requires little time and effort to complete.

Since a checklist is generally designed for particular purposes, Genesee & Upshur (1996) briefly suggest ways for preparing the checklist as follows. Firstly, identify the purposes of using the checklist. Secondly, identify the contents of each item that will be useful for those purposes, such as the student's language use, learning strategies and work habits. Finally, consider the ways that will be used to interpret the collected data.

In this study, a checklist was designed for use in a self-correction task focusing on the use of tenses. Based on Plata (2003), a checklist can guide learners in analyzing the tenses, creating more awareness of errors and mistakes, correcting mistakes that the learners are unaware of, think about why they make those kinds of mistakes, and be able to judge how their errors and mistakes affect communication. All of these are processes that can help learners raise their LA. As a result, they may be able to produce more accurate language later on.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate the influence of a checklist as a learning tool for raising LA and to answer the question, "Can language awareness of tense use be raised through the use of a checklist?" The goal of this study is to raise the subject's awareness of tense use so that he can write, understand and describe the use of different tenses correctly, and be able to use the correct language structures in writing. Eventually, the researchers hope that the findings gained from this case study will provide useful information for teachers when preparing

their learners to be able to think in depth about language. This will consequently raise their LA.

Research Methodology

A case study was chosen as an investigative technique to allow the researchers to develop their understanding of the subject's thoughts in depth. Although generalisability is one limitation of this case study, its use of tasks to raise learners' LA and its findings may be useful for teachers to apply in their own particular contexts.

Background of the Participants

As this study is a small-scale research study, it was done with only one subject who was a 2nd year graduate student of the School of Energy and Materials at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). The subject was expected to have some background knowledge of essay writing because he had passed an In-session English Course for Post Graduate Students in the first semester of his study for his Master's Degree. He was interested in practicing writing in order to improve his writing skills by focusing on language accuracy. Thus, he was willing to participate in this study.

There were two researchers who participated in this study. The first researcher's roles were to train the subject to use a checklist, work with him while doing self-correction, and discuss his work with him after the activity was completed, the subject's reports of his thinking process through his process of self-editing. The second researcher scored the essays, analyzed the diary entries, and discussed her analysis with the first researcher.

Research Instruments

Subject's Essays

The first instrument used in this study was the subject's essays. They were used for a self-correction activity. The subject was totally responsible for the decision on what to write and how many essays to write. He decided to write an essay each week for three weeks about his university life. Each of the essays was about 1 A4 page in length. For each essay, the subject spent less than an hour for both generating ideas and writing the essay.

A Checklist

The checklist in this research was designed to study whether it could help raise the subject's LA of tense use or not (see Appendix 1). It contained the conditions for using four tenses: present simple, past simple, future simple and present perfect tense. There were two columns, one each for the student's and the first researcher's corrections. The four tenses were selected by the subject himself who initially attempted to use these common tenses accurately and practiced other tenses later on. The subject was assigned a self-correction activity using the checklist after every essay. First, he numbered each sentence in his finished essay. Then, looking at each sentence, he identified what tense he had used. Having decided what tense was used, he looked at the checklist to check whether that tense had been used correctly by comparing his sentences with the tense structures and the conditions of their use. He then listed each sentence in the correct or incorrect column of the checklist. Working on each essay, the subject was expected to do 4 sub-activities i.e. *comparing*, *problem identification*, *evaluating* and *changing*. To correct the subject's work, the first researcher rechecked

each essay and marked her column the same way that the subject had edited his essay.

Researcher's Diary

The first researcher's diary was another instrument used to collect more information about the subject's process of thinking, which can reflect on his LA. Each entry was written after discussing with the subject each time he finished an essay. The information gained was recorded to see what the subject was thinking while using the checklist. Moreover, his essay scores were recorded in order to measure the subject's writing ability which would help the researchers to interpret the data.

Research Procedures

The subject was trained in how to use the checklist. Firstly, he reviewed the checklist. Then, the first researcher explained how to work with the checklist while doing self-correction. After that, the researcher assigned him to write the first essay. After finishing the first essay, the subject self-corrected it by using the checklist as a guideline or model. Afterwards, the researcher and the subject discussed the subject's ideas and his procedures while using the checklist. The researcher rechecked the tenses in the same way that the subject had edited his essay, then, the researcher scored his revision. Later, the researcher wrote a diary entry to record the subject's self-editing process with the checklist. The subject followed the same procedures for his second and third essays.

Data Analysis

All of the data collected from diary and the subject's responses during the discussions illustrated the subject's self-editing and thinking processes while using the checklist. All data were reviewed and grouped under the same themes, then analyzed and interpreted.

For analysis and interpretation, the diary data were presented and grouped under the four sub-activities.

Based on the sentences using the four tenses, the subject's essays were scored by both researchers. A percentage of the correct tense-used in each essay was calculated, transferred to a score out of ten, and used to check whether the subject had improved his accuracy in the use of those tenses. Increasing scores were assumed to show that the subject's writing ability had improved.

Findings

The scores from essays 1 to 3 gradually increased: 7.3, 8.2, and 8.6. This finding implies that the subject's accuracy in writing was likely to have improved.

Another part of the data, the researcher's diary, illustrates the subject's self-editing process through four sub-activities: *comparing*, *problem identification*, *evaluating*, and *changing*. From the three researcher's diary entries recorded about the subject's thoughts, it was found that he had done all the sub-activities while or after doing the self-correction task.

In diary 1, the subject did the four sub-activities after writing to help him correct his work. However, in diaries 2 and 3, he did them while and after writing the essays. This will be clarified in the following sections.

Comparing

As recorded in the researcher's diary written after the discussion between the subject and the researcher, the subject used the checklist as a model to compare the structures and the conditions of four tenses with his writing.

"He considered each sentence, analyzed the tenses he used, compared these with the structures in the checklist and then read the conditions of the tenses used and decided whether his meanings fit with those or not."

(Diary 1)

He followed the steps for using the checklist carefully. The checklist was found to help him identify errors and their causes as well as evaluate and change tenses in order to correct errors. This shows that the subject was aware of his tense use and also thought about the conditions of the tenses used in the checklist for his first essay. However, he did not follow the steps for using the checklist in his second essay. He just reviewed it and continued working on self-correction without looking at the checklist. In other words, he compared his work with the checklist from memory while writing and also compared it again after finishing it for self-correction.

"He just reviewed the checklist for both the structures and the tense conditions before using it. After that, he read each sentence in his essay, analyzed the tense he used and thought about the conditions of these tenses."

(Diary 2)

"In the third essay, the subject received the checklist from the researcher and started to self-correct without reviewing it. He did not ask any questions about how to use the checklist."

(Diary 3)

In essays 2 and 3, the numbers of his errors decreased from four to two points and one to zero respectively. He explained that he was able to remember

the structures and the conditions of all four tenses in the checklist, and thus, he felt that he did not need to use it while self-correcting the second and third essays. Moreover, he was bored with comparing every sentence to the checklist since he had already done it the first time. It is possible that he used the checklist the first time very carefully and spent quite a long time thinking and comparing every sentence in his essay with the checklist. Therefore, this made him familiar with the pattern and the format of the checklist containing simple language points.

Problem Identification

The researcher's diary shows that the subject was able to identify errors and explain their causes.

"He knew that he had used the wrong verb tenses because he did not look at the tenses he had used in a previous sentence, which might confuse the reader about their meanings."

(Diary 1)

It is possible to interpret this extract as showing that the checklist had helped him identify problems in his writing. For example, "KMUTT is a place which gave me wonderful things in my life". He knew that gave was incorrectly used after he considered the conditions of past tense in the checklist. He realized that since he was still studying in KMUTT, he had made a mistake.

"In the second essay, he found two errors. One of them was on the past simple tense and another on the present perfect tense. He was able to correct both errors. He told me that those were just simple mistakes because of his carelessness."

(Diary 2)

For the second time he had used the checklist, the diary showed that he had identified the causes of his errors, and also showed that he was aware of the causes of those errors. It seems that he was able to use the four tenses better than he did in the first essay.

There were no real errors, but rather, only mistakes which had occurred because the subject failed to recognize them while writing even though he actually knew how correct sentences should be written. He noted that he made mistakes because he had not been careful enough. In addition, the score of his second essay was higher than that of his first one.

"When he had finished his writing, he had found only one error, which was about the use of the present perfect tense; however, he was able to correct it. For this time, it was not necessary for him to look at the checklist before he changed any incorrect verb tenses. He was able to correct that mistake by thinking about the four tense structures and the conditions of using them. He thought he had made this mistake because of carelessness."

(Diary 3)

We found that the subject had thought about the cause of the errors or the mistakes he had made in the third essay. He said that the mistake was caused by his carelessness because he had spent less time writing the second and third essays. However, this might show that his fluency had improved.

Evaluating

According to the diary, the subject was able to evaluate the effectiveness of the choice of the verb tenses that he had used in his work.

"During the self-correction period, he sometimes asked questions to make sure that he had used the appropriate verb for each particular situation in the essay."

(Diary 1)

"However, sometimes he was not confident enough to make a decision about verb choice, on whether he had used the appropriate or correct verbs in his writing. He still asked me to guide him or give him some clues before making a decision."

(Diary 1)

Even though he had been able to evaluate his performance in using verb tenses or correcting them, sometimes he had low self-confidence about his decisions and needed some explanation or advice from the researcher. He would have more self-confidence when the researcher had confirmed or had approved those corrections. As seen in his second essay, he still had asked the researcher for confirmation before making a decision.

"He still asked me for some clues about verb tenses to help him feel more confident about whether he had used the appropriate ones in his essay during the self-correction."

(Diary 2)

In the third self-correction, the subject was much more familiar with the checklist. This could have made him decide more effectively the choice of verb tense to use. Therefore, he was able to make a decision in order to correct the verb tenses more quickly than the first and the second self-corrections.

"...he told me that he was able to decide which tense should be used in a short time because he had gotten used to the usage of all four tenses and also had remembered all of them from the checklist."

(Diary 3)

Changing

Another sub-activity was "changing". The checklist provided the choices of the verb tenses for him to evaluate and use the appropriate ones in his writing.

"...he put a sentence number in the column that was prepared for the sentences he had written incorrectly and also looked through the checklist again to find out the conditions he wanted to explain and then changed his verb tenses by following the structure in the checklist."

(Diary 1)

Even though the subject did not use the checklist for the second and third essays, he still was able to change the incorrect verb forms to appropriate ones.

"...he found two errors. One of them was on the past simple tense and another on the present perfect tense. He was able to correct both errors."

(Diary 2)

"When he found mistakes, he looked at the previous sentences or thought about the period of time of the situations, and then changed the verb tenses."

(Diary 2)

"It was not necessary for him to look at the checklist before changing the verb tenses. He was able to correct his mistakes by thinking about the structures of the four tenses and their conditions."

(Diary 3)

Concluding from the diary data, the four sub-activities had helped the subject to think more about the language and to improve his writing skills as could be seen from his scores.

Discussion and Implications of the Findings

This case study presents a simple way in which a checklist was used as a tool in a self-correction activity in order to develop awareness of language usage. The checklist summarized how the four tenses should be used so that the student could check them against the tenses used in his written work, and thus he had successfully done the self-correction activity.

The research findings can guide teachers to provide some awareness-raising activities in the classroom with some supplementary tools, which are simple to design, in order to help their learners think more about their language usage. The findings suggest three points that are discussed in the following sections.

Thinking Process

By working through the four sub-activities, the subject had to think more about the language he was using. The most interesting finding was that the subject did not use the checklist for the second and third essays. This could mean that either the subject had already gained sufficient LA from one use or he had not gained LA from essays 2 and/or 3.

To find out, the fact that he had made only a few errors in essays 2 and 3 suggested that he might have been highly aware of tense usage while writing essays 2 and 3, rather than only evaluating it after completion of work as he had done with the first essay. Moreover, in the discussions between the first researcher and the subject after the completion of each essay, the subject mentioned that he had reminded himself about

the four tenses and the conditions for using them both while writing and after finishing his work, even though he had not used the checklist. When he found mistakes or errors, he identified their causes, mentally evaluated the choices of verbs and then changed the tenses if appropriate. This might reveal that the subject had gained sufficient LA from the first use of the checklist, and this had helped him think more about the four tenses while writing essays 2 and 3.

In this study, the subject reminded himself about the four tenses with only the first use of the checklist. Therefore, writing and self-correcting essays 2 and 3 might have resulted in reinforcement of learning. However, teachers should ask learners whether they need more time to do the same activity in order to reinforce their learning or whether they need to focus on other language points via checklist. If learners can do well with their work, then, teachers may consider adding other tenses to the checklist after the initial four tenses have been reinforced or consider changing to other types of activities in order to extend learners' thinking about the language they use.

Independent Study

According to Dickinson (1987: 122), psychological and methodological preparations are necessary for learners before implementing new tasks in order to provide the experience of taking more responsibility for learning and being more independent.

However, the researchers did not provide the subject with a training session. As he was an adult learner, we believed that he would be able to work by himself after he was instructed on how to use the checklist.

The findings of this study show that the subject had used the checklist effectively to help him be more

conscious of four tenses and help him correct his work. It can be seen that the subject had worked well without the preparation. This might mean that learner preparation was not really important for the subject. This suggests that teachers should consider case by case whether their learners need preparation or not.

The evaluating section shows that the subject had sometimes asked for confirmation of his work on self-correction. It seemed to the researchers that he had had quite low confidence in his writing. However, it was found that his questions had showed a right understanding of using the tenses because of working with the checklist. For this reason, the researchers believe that even if the researcher had not been there to answer the subject's questions, the subject could have worked independently. This could imply that it was not necessary for the researcher to be with the subject while he was working. His writing scores after the researcher's corrections and having more opportunities of working independently would help increase his confidence later on.

Varieties of Activities

As previously mentioned, the subject had used the checklist only for the first essay. He complained that he had become bored with using the same checklist for all three essays. His motivation had been quite high at the beginning; however, it had gradually decreased. Rather than using the same checklist three times, it is would be more motivating if different tools or tasks are used, all of which can focus on tense usage.

In addition to the self-correction activity using a checklist, there are varieties of awareness-raising activities suggested by different authors, such as guessing and analyzing tasks to raise LA for trainee teachers in teacher education (Wright & Bolitho, 1993); peer correction tasks, concordancing, translation and interpretation tasks, and

language projects (Darasawang, 2005) as well as large collection of sample LA-raising activities in Willis (1996), Thornbury (1997), Scharle & Szabo (2000), and Paltridge (2001). Teachers can use all of these activities with different tools, such as exercises, questionnaires, diaries and checklists, depending on the purposes of those activities.

Conclusion

For this case study, the subject had to work with a checklist through four sub-activities: comparing, problem identification, evaluating, and changing. In doing so, the learner had to think and be more conscious about his language usage during and after his writing tasks. A consequence of doing this appears to be increased language awareness. In order to maintain learner motivation and help them achieve learning objectives, teachers should be aware of varieties of activities via different tools. The researchers hope that English teachers gain some useful ideas about using a checklist to raise their learners' LA in their classroom situations.

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Appendix: Tense Checklist

Tense Checklist

Date _____

Tense usage	Student correction		Teacher correction	
	✓	x	✓	x
Present Simple tense S+V1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● customs and habits ● routine activities ● a personal characteristic ● the general truth 				
Past Simple tense S+V2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● a past action or event that is finished 				
Future Simple tense S+ will/shall + V1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● things you predict ● decisions you make at the moment of speaking ● things you are not sure will happen ● things you offer to do 				
Present Perfect tense S + has/have + V3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● a past action which has a result in the present. ● an action that began in the past and continues to the present. 				



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