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CHAPTER 7

Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks

WHAT ARE GRAMMAR CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING TASKS?

The term "consciousness-raising" generally means to heighten someone's awareness about something. In the field of SLA, consciousness-raising was a term first introduced by Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985) to refer to external attempts to draw L2 learners' attention to formal properties of a target language. As you may recall, Sharwood Smith later changed this term to "input enhancement" to emphasize the point that external efforts to get learners to pay attention to form does not guarantee that they actually will pay attention.

Grammar consciousness-raising (GCR) tasks as an input enhancement technique, may be attributed to the work of Ellis and Fotos. The goal of **grammar consciousness-raising tasks** is to make learners aware (or conscious) of the rules that govern the use of particular language forms while providing them with opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction. In other words, these tasks seek to help learners develop explicit knowledge about how the target language works and to push them to negotiate meaning. These tasks are based on the theoretical premise that explicit knowledge about how a particular grammar structure works will help learners notice that form in subsequent communicative input (e.g., Ellis, 1990; Fotos, 2002) and that interaction is essential to language acquisition (e.g., Ellis, 1992, 1997; Nunan, 1993). As noted by Long and Porter (1985) and Pica (1987), the use of tasks and group work that require the negotiation of meaning can expose learners to greater quantities of comprehensible input. Additionally, the interaction that takes place in tasks tend to push learners to make more adjustments in their own output.

It is important to point out that in GCR tasks, students are not given explicit information about the L2. Instead, they are encouraged to discover the rules on their own by performing an interactive task with input. Ellis (1997) defines consciousness-raising tasks as the following: "A [GCR] task is a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to

arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property or properties of the target language" (p. 160).

How Are Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks Carried Out?

Before describing how to create a GCR task, it would be helpful to first make a distinction between this type of task and other task types. There are tasks that require learners to use the target structure in order to complete the task content, such as those advocated by Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1990). For example, the following task might be designed to induce learners to use the past tense—learners must guess what their teacher did last night after class and then compare their guesses with another student to see if they share the same perceptions about their teacher. As you can see, the content of the task (i.e., students' perceptions of their teacher based on what they think the teacher did last night) requires that learners use the past tense to complete the task, even if they may not use past tense forms correctly 100% of the time. Other tasks, such as the ones proposed by Ur (1988), actually require accurate production of the target form.

What makes GCR tasks different from these other task types is that first, the content of the task is the grammar itself. In GCR tasks, the topic of discussion is always grammar. Second, learners are not ever required to actually produce the target structure. Learners certainly could produce the structure while they are engaged in the interaction but the task itself does not require them to do so. Like all the input enhancement techniques treated in this book, the goal of GCR is to get learners to pay attention to the form, not make them able to immediately use the form:

... the grammar consciousness-raising task is not aimed at developing immediate ability to use the target structure but rather attempts to call learner attention to grammatical features, raising their consciousness of them, and thereby facilitating subsequent learners [sic] noticing of the features in communicative input.

—Fotos, 1994, p. 326

The rationale is that once consciousness about a particular grammatical form has been raised, then learners may be more likely to notice it in subsequent communicative input which could perhaps lead to the eventual acquisition of that feature (Ellis, 1990; Fotos, 2002).

In a GCR task, the grammar problem is typically in the form of a series of correct and incorrect sentences designed to help learners see the underlying rule behind the correct use of the particular grammatical structure. Here is an example of a GCR task taken from Simard and Wong (2004b), developed based on the original activities of Fotos and Ellis, focusing on the use of the indefinite articles *a/an*:

Instructions to students: In teams you are to study correct and incorrect sentences using the indefinite article *a/an*. You all have different sentences. You must read your sentences to your partner. Do not show your sentences to your partner. Only read the sentences as many times as necessary. Work

together and decide on the basis of correct and incorrect sentences what form of the indefinite article should be used. Write the rule governing the form of the indefinite article. Choose one member from your pair to report the results to the rest of the class.

Student 1

1. Correct: There is an apple on the table.
1. Incorrect: There is a apple on the table.
2. Correct: An elephant is crossing the street.
2. Incorrect: A elephant is crossing the street.
3. Correct: A boy is playing baseball.
3. Incorrect: An boy is playing baseball.

Student 2

4. Correct: There is a tree in our yard.
4. Incorrect: There is an tree in our yard.
5. Correct: An ostrich escaped from the zoo.
5. Incorrect: A ostrich escaped from the zoo.
6. Correct: My sister made a birthday cake.
6. Incorrect: My sister made an birthday cake.

As you can see, learners are required to work in pairs. Each person in the pair is given a portion of the sentences to read aloud to the other without showing the written sentences. As a pair, they need to decide on the basis of the correct and incorrect sentences they hear why the sentences are correct and incorrect and then write down the rule(s) that underlie the use of the target form. The need to come to a consensus about the rule(s) pushes learners to interact with one another. One person from each pair then reports the results to the rest of the class.

In this particular activity, learners are to work in pairs but it could easily be adapted for a small group by adding sentences and distributing the sentences differently. What is crucial here is that the sentences must be constructed in such a way so that learners are able to identify why a sentence is correct and incorrect. Thus, forms that can be directly contrasted and which have a clear rule appear to work best for such a task (such as with the indefinite articles *a/an*).

Pause to consider . . .

different target structures. Which target structures in the language that you teach may be good candidates for GCR tasks? Can you think of target structures that may not be ideal for this type of input enhancement?

Because the topic of discussion in GCR tasks is grammar, Fotos and Ellis (1991) advocate providing students with metalinguistic terminology if necessary. The following is an activity developed by Fotos and Ellis (1991) that focuses on the correct order of direct and indirect object pronouns in English. In addition

to the metalinguistic terminology, they also developed a worksheet to help students discern which verbs allow certain orders of direct object pronouns.

Task Cards

Students in groups of 4—one different card to each member
Students in pairs—two different cards to each member

1. Correct: I asked my friend a question.
1. Incorrect: She asked a question to her mother.
2. Correct: Kimiko reviewed the lesson for John.
2. Incorrect: Kimiko reviewed John the lesson.
3. Correct: The teacher calculated the answers for the students.
3. Incorrect: The teacher calculated the students the answers.
4. Correct: The secretary reported the problem to her boss.
4. Incorrect: The student reported the teacher the matter.
5. Correct: I offered her a cup of tea.
5. Correct: I offered a cup of tea to the president.
6. Correct: The teacher pronounced the difficult word for the class.
6. Incorrect: The teacher pronounced the class the difficult word.
7. Correct: I bought many presents for my family.
7. Correct: I bought my family several presents.
8. Correct: She cooked a delicious dinner for us.
8. Correct: She cooked us a wonderful meal.
9. Correct: She suggested a plan to me.
9. Incorrect: She suggested me a good restaurant.
10. Correct: The teacher repeated the question for the student.
10. Incorrect: The teacher repeated the student the question.

Metalinguistic Information Sheet

There are some verbs in English which can have two objects. One of the objects is called the *direct object*. The other is called the *indirect object*. An indirect object names the person for whom the action of the verb is performed.

	(indirect object)		(direct object)
She	wrote	Susan	a letter.

Different verbs may have the objects in different order, and this is often a problem for students of English. The following exercises will help you understand some confusing verbs.

Directions: In groups, you are to study correct and incorrect sentences using different verbs. You all have different sentences. You must read your sentences to the rest of the group. Do not show your sentences to the other members! Only read the sentences as many times as necessary! Work together as a group

and decide on the basis of the correct and incorrect sentences where the direct and indirect objects should be located. Fill out the rest of this page. Choose one student to report your results to the rest of the class. Please speak only in English during this exercise!

Verbs Possible correct order of direct and indirect object

1. asked: _____
2. reviewed: _____
3. calculated: _____
4. reported: _____
5. offered: _____
6. pronounced: _____
7. bought: _____
8. cooked: _____
9. suggested: _____
10. repeated: _____

Conclusion: Write 3 rules concerning the possible order of objects

- Rule 1: _____
Verbs which follow this rule: _____
- Rule 2: _____
Verbs which follow this rule: _____
- Rule 3: _____
Verbs which follow this rule: _____

As you can see from this task, metalinguistic terminology is provided as well as an exercise to help learners identify the rule but it is the learners themselves who must articulate the rule through studying the sentences and interacting with their partners or other members of their group.

Do Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks Work?

In addition to creating GCR tasks, Fotos and Ellis also tested these tasks in carefully designed empirical studies. In their research, they wanted to investigate whether GCR tasks were successful in helping learners notice target forms, whether these tasks promoted interaction in the L2, and whether these tasks were as effective as teacher-fronted grammar instruction, that is to say, instruction where the teacher gives the rule to the students. Fotos (1993, 1994) conducted a study with first-year Japanese university students learning English in order to try to answer these questions. Three intact classes were used each representing a different experimental group: a GCR task group, a teacher-fronted grammar lesson group, and a communicative task group that served as a control group. Fotos used three target structures in her study: adverb placement, indirect object pronoun placement, and relative clause use. Participants in the GCR task group and grammar lesson group were first given a pretest of the structures in the form of grammaticality judgment (i.e., they had to judge the correctness of sentences) and sentence-writing tests. Participants in the control group did not do these tests. During treatment, participants in the GCR

task group were put into groups of four and worked on GCR tasks similar to the examples presented in the previous section of this chapter. They were never given any explicit information about the structures. They studied correct and incorrect sentences together and then articulated the rules. In the teacher-fronted grammar lesson group, the teacher wrote the correct and incorrect sentences on the board, asked the students if they thought each sentence was correct or incorrect and then gave learners the rule for each structure. The control group did communicative tasks that did not focus on grammar (consequently, there was no focus on the target structures). In order to see whether the activities in the two treatment groups were effective, participants in the GCR task group and the teacher-fronted grammar lesson group were given the same grammaticality judgment and sentence-writing tests again. These tests served as post-tests. Fotos compared the pretest and posttest scores of the GCR group and the grammar lesson group and found that both groups made similar gains in accuracy. This means that GCR tasks were effective and that these tasks are as good as teacher-fronted grammar lessons.

In order to address the question of whether GCR tasks help learners notice the target structures in subsequent communicative input, all participants were given noticing activities to do one and two weeks after the treatment. These noticing activities were in the form of reading passages and dictation exercises that contained the target structures. Participants were asked to underline any 'special use of English' that they noticed in these exercises (Fotos, 1993, p. 390). Noticing was thus defined here as underlining any of the target structures embedded in the exercises. Fotos found that about 50% of participants in the GCR task group underlined the target structures in the passages. However, none of the participants in either the grammar lesson group or the communicative task group underlined the targets. Based on these results, Fotos concluded that once consciousness of a form is raised via GCR tasks, learners may continue to notice them later when they encounter these forms in input.

In order to determine whether the interaction that takes place during GCR tasks is comparable to the amount of interaction that takes place in communicative tasks where the content is not grammar, Fotos (1993, 1994) and Fotos and Ellis (1991) compared the amount of talk produced via these two task types. Their results revealed that participants in both the GCR task and the non-grammar-based communicative task produced the same amount of talk. Thus, based on these positive research results, Fotos and Ellis conclude that GCR tasks may be viewed as good communicative activities because these tasks promote noticing, proficiency gains, and meaningful interaction (see Fotos 1993, 1994, and Fotos & Ellis 1991, for complete details of these studies).

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks in the L2 Classroom?

The advantages of GCR tasks should be clear. GCR tasks help learners pay attention to grammatical forms that they may otherwise miss on their own and at the same time, provide opportunities for meaningful interaction. As we discussed in Chapter 3, in addition to input, attention and interaction are also

important to SLA. Research by Fotos and Ellis also shows that once learners' consciousness is raised via these activities, they may continue to notice target forms later in input on their own.

This technique appears to be especially advantageous in situations where explicit knowledge about a grammatical form may be desired. Recall that in the study conducted by Trahey and White (1993) in Chapter 4 on input flood, the researchers found that while flooding the input with the target forms helped learners know what the correct possible positions for adverbs were, this technique was not successful in helping them know which positions were not possible. The researchers concluded that in order to know what is not possible in input, learners may need to be explicitly given this information. GCR tasks may be used as an option to provide learners with this information. In a GCR task, learners are given information about what is possible (i.e., the correct sentences), also known as **positive evidence**, as well as what is not possible (i.e., the incorrect sentences), also known as **negative evidence**. However, unlike teacher-fronted grammar explanations, it is the learners themselves who must explain why. Therefore, in situations where learners may benefit from explicit knowledge about a grammatical form, GCR tasks may be a good option. This technique helps learners develop explicit knowledge about a form while engaging them in interaction and negotiation of meaning at the same time.

Pause to consider . . .

the nature of different grammatical forms. Besides adverb placement, what other grammatical forms might benefit from negative evidence or explicit knowledge?

It is important to point out, however, that the "input" learners receive in this technique is qualitatively different from those of other input enhancement techniques that we have seen so far in this book. Because correct and incorrect input sentences are directly contrasted, the input in GCR tasks tends to be always teacher-generated and generally limited to sentence-level input. Furthermore, we may not be able to really say that the input in these sentences is meaning-bearing because these sentences do not typically communicate any kind of message. Their purpose is to contrast correct forms with incorrect forms. When the L2 is used to illustrate a grammatical form rather than to communicate a message, we call this **language for display purposes**. A sentence such as *An elephant is crossing the street* and its incorrect counterpart *A elephant is crossing the street* does not communicate any kind of message to which learners are supposed to attend. The fact that the target language is being used for display purposes, however, is counterbalanced by the fact that learners are also required to negotiate meaning in this technique. In so doing, they may generate rich comprehensible input for others as well as for themselves. As noted by researchers such as Sharwood Smith (1991) and Farley (2000), output produced by a learner can become input for someone else. Thus, we may say that in GCR tasks,

learners get meaning-bearing input via interaction with classmates while performing the grammar task. Furthermore, additional written or oral input that is communicative in nature may be supplemented along with the series of correct and incorrect sentences (see for example the activities in the Appendix) to ensure that learners are getting ample amounts of meaning-bearing input.

Pause to consider . . .

the input sentences in GCR tasks. Because the purpose of these sentences is to contrast correct and incorrect uses of a particular grammatical form, they do not typically communicate any kind of message to which learners are supposed to attend. Do you think these tasks could be modified so that the input that learners have to work with is meaning-bearing (i.e., communicative)?

A disadvantage that Fotos and Ellis point out is that this technique may not always be appropriate for beginning learners because these learners often lack the ability to discuss grammar in metalinguistic terms (1991, p. 623). When this is the case, learners have a tendency to rely on their L1 to complete the task. Another potential disadvantage is that some learners may find grammar as a topic dry. Because these tasks are grammar tasks, the content of discussion will always be grammar and some learners may find this monotonous. A follow-up activity that is not a grammar solving problem, perhaps, could help remedy this potential drawback.

Pause to consider . . .

the discussion of grammar. Do you think it is possible for learners to arrive at an understanding of the grammar rules that underlie a particular structure without using a lot of metalinguistic terminology? How might you design a grammar consciousness-raising task for beginning learners?

How Do We Implement Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks in the L2 Classroom?

Because GCR tasks are designed to help learners develop explicit knowledge about a particular grammatical structure, these tasks are ideal for language classes that use a **structural syllabus**, that is to say, a syllabus that is organized around specific grammar topics. Let's say that the grammar topic for Monday's class is adverbs. Learners could be asked to engage in a GCR task as a means of introducing this grammar topic. After consciousness has been raised for this grammar topic, the instructor may choose to follow up with a formal lesson on the

topic if so desired and/or with additional communicative activities containing the form to encourage continued awareness of that grammatical form. You will see some examples of follow-up activities in the Appendix at the end of this book.

GCR tasks appear to be most ideal for a structural syllabus but there is no reason why they cannot also be integrated into classes that are not organized around grammatical topics, such as classes that use a functional syllabus. In a **functional syllabus**, classroom instruction is organized around different linguistic functions such as giving compliments or making a complaint. If, for example, the instructor notices that learners are having difficulty understanding a particular grammar point that is needed to fulfill a desired function, a GCR task for that grammatical form may be dropped in to raise learners' consciousness of that form. Once consciousness has been raised, the instructor may move on and continue with activities related to the functional topic of the day.

Pause to consider . . .

GCR tasks and classrooms that do not use a structural syllabus. Do you think it is possible to incorporate GCR tasks into a content-based classroom? How might this be done?

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I presented an input enhancement technique developed by Fotos and Ellis that aims at helping learners develop explicit knowledge about a particular grammatical form while providing learners at the same time with opportunities to engage in interaction and negotiation of meaning. This technique appears to be especially beneficial in situations where explicit knowledge about a particular form is desired or where negative evidence may be needed (as in the case with adverb placement in English) so that learners are aware of what is not possible in the target language. For instructors who are looking for acceptable ways to integrate explicit grammar instruction into communicative classrooms, this technique appears to be a good option. Because it is the learners themselves who must articulate the rules as they engage in these grammar problem-solving tasks, the classroom remains student-centered and conducive to meaningful interaction. As you may recall from Chapter 1, these characteristics are important tenets of communicative language teaching.

ENHANCE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks

Fotos, S. (1993). Consciousness raising and noticing through focus on form: Grammar task performance vs. formal instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 14, 385-407.