Incidental Grammar Acquisition in Focusing on Meaning Instruction for Beginners

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Incidental Grammar Acquisition in Focusing on Meaning Instruction at English for Beginners

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ABSTRACT: Incidental grammar acquisition refers to the learner’s acquisition on certain grammatical features during the instruction focusing on other aspect of language. The research examined incidental grammar acquisition on plural –s and copula be during the instruction focusing on meaning. The features are not taught directly but the features are available in the instruction purposively to investigate how the features are acquired incidentally as the learners follow the instruction focusing on meaning. The plural –s and copula be are special because they are not easily mastered by the Indonesian learners due to difference between Indonesian and English rules presenting plural. Nevertheless, teaching the grammatical features directly is not allowed and unbeneficial in the process of acquiring English as second language. Furthermore, intentional teaching of grammatical features has been proven ineffective. This article is intended to give a perspective on how focusing on meaning instruction can facilitate the beginners to acquire plural form –s and copula be. The two features can be a good starting point for advanced investigation on more complex grammar features.

Keywords: incidental grammar acquisition, meaning instruction, English for beginners

INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication without which human beings are unable to interact. In recent years the teaching of English has moved toward a communicative language teaching; meaning that the teaching of English is aimed at facilitating the students to be able to use English for meaningful communication (Richards, 2006). It raises questions on should the students be taught grammar? Is the teaching of grammar still relevant to achieve the target of the teaching language for communication? Or can we ignore grammar rules in our teaching as grammar oriented learning is proven to hinder the learners’ fluency or automaticity in producing the target language in speaking and at the same time writing?

The position of grammar in language learning is really in unending debate across time. In the behaviorists’ period, grammar was put aside. The teaching centered on how to practice the language through practice and drilling since for them language was a matter of imitation and habit formation so the use of grammar was ignored (Lightbown & Spada, 1995). Then came the Chomsky’s era, in which grammar had prior place since they believed that every child was born with special ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of language system known as Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Human brain was believed as the sentence making machine provided with rules of grammar (Haynes, 2007) Next, the
interactionists raised the issue that language develops a result of the complex interplay between the uniquely human characteristics of the child and the environment in which the child develops. The children will be able to develop their competence in language as they interact with the environment around them. Mastering grammar itself was not enough (Lightbown & Spada, 1995).

EFL teachers themselves as children’ partners to learn English have various stands toward the teaching of grammar since the teaching and learning at present is aimed at developing the language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) other that the language components (i.e. vocabulary, spelling system, pronunciation, and grammar). Certain teacher will hold the belief that grammar is important without which learners will not be able to utter what s/he want to say though s/he has abundant words in her or his vocabulary. Some other teachers will take stand on ignoring grammar as being not communicative. Some other teachers will try to integrate the teaching of grammar, insert it in her or his teaching as a tool for the students to speak and write well in English.

After all through hundreds of researches, across writers and researchers, still the goal of language teaching has not change. The goal is still centered on how to make the language learners able to use the target language for daily communication. The question has shifted from Do we really need to teach grammar to how we can teach grammar so that it facilitates acquisition

The study done by Shintani (2015) was one of the research studies done to seek answers to whether learners can learn a grammatical feature incidentally meaning that the teaching of grammar does not become the focus of the teaching, and in what kind of interactional condition the incidental acquisition will happen. Shintani focused on two language features, they were plural marker –s and copula be. The choice of the two grammatical features was relevant with the natural order of L1 acquisition proposed by Krashen in 1977 (Alexopoulou & Murakami, 2015). The order of L2 Acquisition is believed to follow the same order as L1. Shintani’s consideration in taking the sample was also based on her intention to seek the answer precisely, taking the 6 year old children who have never had contact with English before is believe to make the study relevant to this order.
Incidental Acquisition

Incidental acquisition is defined as the learning of second language (L2) feature without intention (Hulstijn, cited in Shintani, 2015). It distinguishes the incidental learning to intentional learning in which the learners are considered as being unaware or lacking of attempt to learn a specific L2 feature(s). There were indeed some previous researches done investigating the incidental acquisition in English instruction. One of them was a study done Ellis (2002) who investigated the incidental grammar acquisition engaging the learners in meaning – focus activity. It, then, measured whether the learners have learned specific grammar forms targeted by the task. The students participated actively in communicative activities or content based learning providing opportunities for them to undergo incidental learning without being told what features of target language they should learn (Shintani, 2015) Other research took different approach in a way that the researcher provide instruction designed to teach specific features (grammatical or lexical) and then measured whether the learners have learnt other grammatical features occurred in the input but was not the focus of instruction. Shintani tried to conduct a research to compare the incidental acquisition which happens in these two approaches.

In her study, Shintani set up her own definition of incidental learning. It is defined as the learning that results when the learners were incidentally exposed to the two target structures of the study, plural –s and copula be. There we two groups namely Focus on Form (FonF) and Focus on Forms (FonFs). The two group the following characteristics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on Form (FonF)</th>
<th>Focus on Forms (FonFs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Meaning Centered,</td>
<td>1. Form Centered,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The learners completed focused task</td>
<td>2. The words were directly taught while exposure to the target structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>designed to teach a set of words and expose</td>
<td>occur incidentally,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them to the target structure,</td>
<td>3. The language is broken down into discrete elements (words, grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rules, notions, and functions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The target features were underlined, bold</td>
<td>4. It aimed at conscious development of grammatical knowledge (intentional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>typed, or italicized and occur repeatedly in</td>
<td>learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the text,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. It is aimed at incidental development of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammatical knowledge as a by-product of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Shintani tried to find the gap here, whether differences in the kinds of interaction arose in these two types of instruction resulted differences in the incidental acquisition of the two structures. Though Krashen (1982, cited in Shintani, 2015) stated that it is impossible for the learners to acquire full competence in a language through intentional learning because language is far too complex to be “learnt”, meaning that as language teachers we need to set up certain condition and situation enable the students to get opportunities to acquire the language incidentally.

**Incidental Acquisition in Focus on Form and Focus on Forms Instruction**

Long (1991) and Long and Crookes (1992, in Shintani, 2015) defined Focus on Form as a type of instruction in which the primary focus is meaning (i.e. on message processing) rather than form. It involves an occasional shift of the learners’ attention from meaning to a linguistics form while the focus stays on the message. The shift happens a by-product as the teacher or students try to solve a comprehension or production problem in communication. The key feature of FonF is emphasis on form-function mapping. There are two kinds of FonF instruction as suggested by (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, cited in Shintani, 2015) though they have the same aim that is developing incidental grammatical knowledge as a by-product of communicating (neither of them caters to intentional learning).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planned Focus on Form (FonF)</th>
<th>Unplanned Focus on Form (FonF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The focus on a specific language feature is predetermined,</td>
<td>1. The focus are not predetermined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The focused task is designed to provide a context for its use,</td>
<td>2. The focus on the form occurs naturally rather than as a part of preplanned instructional act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Attention to the selected linguistic feature is intensive or attention is directed continuously at the same feature.</td>
<td>3. The learners’ attention is occasionally and spontaneously directed onto specific language linguistics forms while they are performing unfocused task ( primarily focused on meaning)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study was designed taking the planned FonF and FonFs instruction in which new vocabulary items were planned to be taught. In FonF instruction the new vocabulary were designed provided with contexts and embedded in meaning focused task so they were taught indirectly, while the FonFs instruction included the explicit teaching of the same set of words using 3Ps methodology. Both instruction aim at the development of incidental acquisition of
plural –s and copula be. Shintani perceived at the interactionists’ theories claimed that L2 acquisition occur through interaction while the learners’ primary attention is focused on the message content but also acknowledged that attention to form is needed. There many other writers suggest ideas on what and when the interaction facilitate acquisition such as Gass (1997), Long (1996), and Swain (1995). They stated that there are some factors influence incidental acquisition, they were noticing and gap between their own inter language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planned language feature</th>
<th>FonF (Planned)</th>
<th>FonFs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target for incidental acquisition</td>
<td>New vocabulary items (they were introduced through the performance of focused task)</td>
<td>New vocabulary items (they were taught by means of 3Ps)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural –s and copula be, both of which appeared incidentally in the two types of instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Research Methodology**

The main feature of the current study:

As stated before, the participants of her study were 30 six year old Japanese learners who have never learned English before to get valid data avoiding the effect of prior knowledge. They were divided into two groups, they were FonF and FonFs. Each of them received different treatment. The research focused on two grammatical features, plural form –s chosen because it bears meaning is considered difficult by Japanese learners and copula – be since it is frequently used in nominal sentences but it has no meaning. Furthermore the two grammatical features are the first stage to be acquired in L1 and at the same by L2 learners. Shintani was interested to investigate the incidental acquisition based on the results of previous studies and her own belief that grammar would never be acquired through direct teaching. She perceived that the acquisition will occur when the learners are not totally aware at the rules being exposed to them.

The study was done in 5 weeks comprising 9 sessions of 30 minute lesson. The learners in FonF classroom was given 18 new words in singular only and 6 in singular- plural forms
which were considerably logical to be taught to young learners in 5 weeks. The learners in the FonF classroom were only told the outcome targeted at the beginning of each lesson in L1. On the other hand, the learners in FonFs classroom were informed about the goal of the activities before the lesson started. They were also given corrective feedback whenever they chose the wrong pictures opposed to them as they were given the new words.

The results of the study were, 1) the learners in FonF classroom only acquired plural form –s but not copula be. While the learners in FonFs classroom acquired neither plural form –s and copula be. It shows that incidental grammar acquisition occurred whenever the learners were not exposed to the rules. It gives the English teachers insight that they can design the lesson facilitating the students to acquire grammar features incidentally. The teachers can manage the lesson so as to create interaction enabling the learners to acquire the rules which can boost the learners to have better skill in English.

Applying Focus on meaning Instruction in Teaching Learning Process to Facilitate Incidental Grammar Acquisition for Beginners in Indonesia Context

Celce Murcia, 2007 proposed a revised model of communicative competence which comprises Linguistics Competence, Actional Competence, Socio Cultural Competence, Discourse Competence, and Strategic Competence. The five communicative competences need to be mastered by language learners to communicate using the target language well. Though the teaching of L2 has shifted toward communicative Approach there is still a need to make the language learners master the linguistics competence in which grammar becomes a part of.

![Picture 1. Celce – Murcia’s Communicative Competence Model](Image)
The teaching of English in Indonesia is aimed at developing the students’ mastery of four skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Nevertheless, the mastery of language components such as vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and grammar cannot be avoided. The teaching of grammar itself has received dynamic attention. From the historical perspective of language teaching methodology, the role of grammar has once been over-emphasized, likely neglected, or treated equally important with fluency in communication (Wahid, 2013). Teachers are in dilemma on how to teach grammar enabling them to acquire it not merely to learn it without they are able to communicate using English as the target language.

Based on K13 Curriculum, English is taught formally at the seventh grade to the students aged between 11-12 years old. They are considered as beginner learners meaning that we assume that they have never been taught English in formal situation. The literacy level which has to be achieved by the students is at the level of functional meaning that the students have to be able to 1) use English to get things done and 2) use English for survival purpose (buying and selling, asking and giving permission, making and cancelling appointment, read and write simple texts, read popular science text, etc. As the competence targeted, grammar cannot be taught discretely or separately from the context of communication. That is why the teaching of grammar should be made focused on meaning integratedly in the teaching of language skills.

Starting from 2006 curriculum the teaching of English is done through Genre Based Approach which is actually a way to teach all aspects of language such as linguistics skills, vocabulary, language skills through texts. The approach requires the teachers actually to introduce linguistics features where grammar becomes a part of it and the text structures. In practice, there are two phenomena happen. In one side grammar is neglected or in another side grammar becomes the center of teaching. Instead of teaching it deductively the teachers expose the students to rules of grammar. These two phenomena show that the English teaching itself has hindered the learners to acquire English grammar.

As suggested by Ellis 2003 in Shintani 2012, learners are supposed to be exposed to input based task which meet the following criteria to give the learners opportunity to acquire grammatical features:

1. Meaning is primary
2. There is some type of gap (e.g information gap)
3. Learners are required to use their own linguistics and non linguistics resources to communicate; and
4. There is some outcome other than simply the display of correct language.

Shintani (2012, 2015) proposed a kind of task that is called listen and do task for beginners. It is suitable for beginners since at early stage the learners are not bexpected to
produce the language. They are still at the stage of receptive. One thing to give attention to is that the input the learners supposed to get is comprehensible input as stated by Krashen in Lightbown and Spada1995. Such comprehensible input will give opportunity for the learners to acquire the grammar features.

It is important for the teachers to design a teaching learning process which enable the students to acquire grammar rules and at the same time use English for communication. Through focusing on meaning instruction, teachers are expected to be able to facilitate the incidental acquisition of grammar rules. The interaction happen in focusing on meaning instruction will give the students comprehensible input accessible for acquisition.

Murcia 2007 stated that by emphasizing focus on meaning grammar instruction is much more effective when it is situated in a meaningful context, embedded in authentic (or semi-authentic) discourse, and motivated by getting learners to achieve a goal or complete an interesting task. Hopefully, in practice teachers will see more materials for grammar instruction that satisfy these criteria with a concomitant decrease in the quantity of materials consisting primarily of manipulative sentence-level grammar drills. All the efforts above are done to boost the learners’ acquisition to grammar features.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous research studies that have been done on meaning grammar instruction as proposed by Shintani and others, this kind of instruction can be applied and prospective in the teaching of L2 in Indonesian context. Some improvement and adjustment in list of vocabulary and task design related to 2013 Curriculum and Genre Based Approach will be needed to get optimum results.
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