ASSESSMENT OF APPLICABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING TASKS IN GRAMMAR LESSONS OF ESL LEARNERS

Sirhajwan Idek
Keningau Vocational College, Sabah
(email: sirhaj87@gmail.com)

Lee Lai Fong
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam
(email: Leela679@salam.uitm.edu.my)

Gurnam Kaur Sidhu
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam
(email: gurnamsidhu@salam.uitm.edu.my)

ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the applicability of three consciousness-raising (CR) tasks involving three techniques of CR: identifying, classifying, and hypothesis-building/checking. The study was conducted on an intact class of 24 students of three groups. Each group was assigned to a different set of task cards and task sheets of different techniques, design and themes. The target form was the verb "be". The assessment of the CR tasks was carried out using a rubric with rating scales and a tally sheet in order to identify the quality of students' responses and the quantity of the responses they provided. The findings indicate that ESL learners are able to perform all of the CR tasks accordingly, which implies the applicability of the tasks in ESL lessons.

Keywords: Consciousness-raising, Presentation-Practice-Production, identifying, classifying, hypothesis-building/checking

Introduction

In the conventional language lessons, the PPP model (Presentation-Practice-Production) focuses more on meaningful practice of language for communication over grammar (Richard, 2006). However, learners often perform activities without gaining a clear understanding of the form-meaning relationship (Crivos & Luchini, 2012). This can result in students' lack of competence in applying grammar correctly in their language.

It is proposed by Batstone (1994) that consciousness-raising (CR) can address this problem by developing learners' awareness of the target form. Ellis and Gaies (1998, p. 56) describes that consciousness-raising does not demand learners "to verbalize the rules he has learnt" but instead make them aware of a particular linguistic feature. Rutherford (1987, p. 104) asserts that the defining feature of CR is "the drawing of the learner's attention to features of the target language". Richard and Schmidt (2002, p. 109) sum up the description of CR as "an approach to the teaching of grammar in which instruction in grammar (through drills, grammar explanation and other form-focused activities) is viewed as a way of raising the learner's awareness of grammatical features of the language.

The applicability of CR tasks should be evaluated to identify whether the students can perform the tasks well. Walsh (2005) evaluated the applicability of two CR activities that he had developed. The first CR activity, a fill-in-the-blank exercise, was evaluated through the analysis of students' scores. The second CR activity, a sentence order exercise, was assessed through observation on the students' behaviour during their completion of the activity. The results implied that the students were able to perform the tasks and were significantly involved in completing them. Therefore, this study aims to do the same on CR tasks that involve the use of three different techniques of CR in order to evaluate their applicability and feasibility.

Consciousness-raising

In Malaysia alone, the introduction of the communicative syllabus and PPP has resulted in producing students with poor mastery of grammar since the focus is on fluency at the expense of accuracy (Wee, 2009; Abdul Rashid, Goh & Wan, 2004; Subramanian & Khan, 2013). Fawzi Al Ghazali (2006) points out that PPP overemphasizes the mastery of correct production of a target form to the detriment of actual learning.

Therefore, there is a need to explore CR as a method of grammar teaching which includes evaluating the feasibility of CR tasks for students to solve for several reasons. First, it is crucial to find out how well learners can execute the tasks accordingly. If they cannot perform the CR tasks, this will mean that their

expectation is not fulfilled. As a result, they will likely feel frustrated and disinclined to learn (Thornbury, 2009). Second, there is a need to evaluate the achievability of the tasks. Widodo (2006) argues that teachers should redesign, develop and continuously evaluate materials from books instead of fully relying on activities presented in grammar books. Thus, existing materials and activities can be further improved in order to enhance grammar learning. Third, it is significant to evaluate the learners' level of readiness to learn a particular target form by assessing their abilities to complete the tasks. Pienemann (1984) argues in his teachability hypothesis that students will never be able to learn something successfully if they are not yet ready to acquire it. Clampitt (2001) supports this theory by stating that teachers have to assess individual students' stage of development in terms of each aspect of grammar in order to determine whether they are ready to learn it. Overall, the assessment of the practicality and applicability of the CR tasks is crucial in order to determine whether the learners are able to perform the tasks and subsequently, learn the target form.

Ellis (2002, p. 169) describes "the aim of consciousness-raising is not to enable the learner to perform a structure correctly but simply to help him/her to know about it." Therefore, several prominent characteristics of CR should be highlighted in designing and implementing CR in order to ensure that this goal is fulfilled. Among them are

1. There should be an effort to isolate a specific linguistic feature for focused attention.
2. The learners are provided with data which illustrate the targeted feature and an explicit rule description or explanation.
3. The learners are expected to utilize intellectual effort to understand the targeted feature.
4. Misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of the grammatical structure by the learners leads to clarification in the form of further data and description or explanation.
5. Learners are required to articulate the rule describing the grammatical feature.

(Ellis, 2003, p. 163)

In order to incorporate the elements of CR in tasks, several techniques can be incorporated as proposed by Willis and Willis (2007): the first one is "Identify" which requires learners to search a set of data to discover a pattern or usage. The second technique is "classify" in which learners categorize a set of data according to similarities and differences. Next, it is the technique of "hypothesis building/checking" where learners form a generalization about a target form or

check a generalization against more language data. Then, it is "cross-language exploration" technique that requires learners to look for similarities and differences between patterns in their language and English. The fifth technique is "recall" where learners are expected to remember and reconstruct elements of a text to highlight significant features of the text. Finally, it is "reference training" technique in which learners are encouraged to use reference resources during discovery activities such as dictionaries, grammar references, and study guides.

Suter (2001) carried out three CR activities in his class which consisted of teenagers whose native language was German and had spent four years learning French. They were in their first year of learning English. The tasks involved comparing three texts in three languages: French, German and English in order for learners to notice the word order of the three different languages and propose rules that describe the word order in each of the languages. The results indicated that they were able to accomplish the tasks. The CR technique used in this task was known as cross-language exploration. Hendricks (2010) conducted CR activities on a group of student-teachers. She presented a list of 14 sentences with correct and incorrect prepositions where the subjects had to identify the errors and correct them. The findings implied that the subjects managed to complete the task and developed understanding of the rules. The technique that was used was hypothesis-building/checking.

Based on the previous research, CR tasks appeared to be achievable and effective. Thus, in this study, two research questions were constructed in order to identify the feasibility of CR tasks. The research questions are:

1. To what extent are the students able to perform the expected skills in three CR tasks involving three different techniques of CR: identifying, classifying, and hypothesis-building?
2. How feasible are the CR tasks in promoting the learning of the verb "be" in ESL grammar lessons?

Methodology

The subjects comprised an intact class of 24 ESL learners whose age was 16 years old from Keningau Vocational College. They were the first year students of the construction technology course. Their English level was intermediate as the results of their English paper in the previous standardized examination in their former schools ranged from grade B to grade D with most of them obtaining grade C. They came from various areas in the interior region of Sabah, Malaysia in which exposure to English was very minimal. The tools of the study were the use of a rubric with a

rating scale and a tally sheet in order to obtain the quality and quantity of students' responses to the CR tasks.

In "Assessment in Mathematics" (2008), it is stated that rubrics are used to assess the quality of a product or performance. Therefore, a rubric with a rating scale was designed to assess students' performance through their written responses on the task sheets (See Appendix A). If rating scales and rubrics emphasize quality over quantity, tally sheets evaluate the quantity of performance through the listing of relevant categories of behaviours (Fraenkel , Warren, & Hyun, 2012). Hence, a tally sheet was designed to record the quantity of students' written responses on the task sheets (See Appendix B).

The learners are assigned into three groups of eight members. Each group was assigned to CR tasks that involved a specific technique of CR. There are three different techniques involved in each task: identifying, classifying and hypothesis-building/checking. Every task required students to perform three skills of identifying the target form, describing grammatical rules and demonstrating their understanding of how the target form works.

Group 1 was assigned with the "identify" CR tasks, Group 2 was given the "classify" CR tasks and Group 3 received the "hypothesis-building/checking" CR tasks. Each individual received a task card and a task sheet designed specifically for the CR technique that he/she was assigned to. In "identify" CR tasks, learners were required to identify the verb "be" in the texts. In "classifying" CR tasks, learners had to indicate the accuracy of the use of the verb "be" by marking the sentence as wrong if the verb "be" is incorrectly used and as correct if it is accurately used. In "hypothesis-building/checking" CR tasks, learners were asked to identify errors in the use of the verb "be". Learners were expected to provide rules for the use of the target form in all tasks. For each task, learners were required to perform operations on three target forms from the texts given to them. Overall, there were three questions in each task that learners had to fulfil.

Each response on the target form that they were able to identify and write on their task sheet was assessed through the rubric to determine its quality, whether it was excellent, good, moderate, inadequate or poor where each category was allocated with a different score based on a range of criteria of students' responses on the tasks (See Appendix A). The tally sheet was used to measure the quantity of students' responses based on the maximum number of responses they were able to provide (two to three responses) in accordance to which category the response was assigned to (See Appendix B).

For every individual, each response that he/she gave was awarded with a score based on the category of the response. The scores that a student obtained from each response was totalled up and divided by the number of responses to obtain the mean of the scores. This total score was also converted to percentage.

Table 1
The categorization of the level of students' performance

Mean Level	Category
4.50 - 5.00	Excellent
3.50 - 4.49	Good
2.50 - 3.49	Moderate
1.50 - 2.49	Inadequate
1.00 - 1.49	Poor

Results and Discussion

The results were presented separately based on the three aspects of responses required by the tasks of each technique of CR: identifying, classifying and hypothesis-building/checking. The implementation and design of CR tasks correspond with the five stages of CR procedures proposed by Bankier (2010), Ellis (1991) and Willis and Willis (2007).

Identification of the sentences containing the target form

The first aspect of the CR tasks was to identify the sentences containing the target form in the texts on the task cards.

Table 2
Group 1 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 1	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	100	5.0
Student 2	100	5.0
Student 3	100	5.0
Student 4	100	5.0
Student 5	100	5.0
Student 6	100	5.0
Student 7	100	5.0
Student 8	73	3.6
Overall mean	96.6	4.8

Table 3
Group 2 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 2	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	100	5.0
Student 2	100	5.0
Student 3	100	5.0
Student 4	100	5.0
Student 5	100	5.0
Student 6	100	5.0
Student 7	100	5.0
Student 8	100	5.0
Overall mean	100	5.0

Table 4
Group 3 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 3	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	100	5.0
Student 2	100	5.0
Student 3	100	5.0
Student 4	100	5.0
Student 5	100	5.0
Student 6	100	5.0
Student 7	100	5.0
Student 8	100	5.0
Overall mean	100	5.0

All of the students attained the maximum mean score of 5.0 with the exception of student 8. The overall mean score for Group 1 is 4.8. Group 2 and Group 3 obtained a maximum overall mean score of 5.0.

In the first stage of CR tasks, learners ought to be provided with a text which contains the use of a target form. The text can be specifically produced for the purpose of learning the target form and it has to consist of sufficient examples of how the target form is used (Bankier, 2010). According to Rutherford (1987), it is important to organize language input in a controlled and guided manner that allows learners to make a generalization of how the target form is applied. Hence, the texts in each of the activity card were adapted to meet the need to ensure the students' noticing of the target form. In these tasks, the texts in each card were specifically modified in order to incorporate suitable and sufficient amount of the verb "be" that the students would encounter and attempt to understand. This may contribute to learners' ability to accomplish the first part of the task of identifying the sentences

containing the target form as the texts were adapted to meet the students' level of proficiency and assist them to identify the target form.

The second stage of CR tasks is also consistent with these findings. The second stage of CR tasks requires the target form in the text to be highlighted such as underlined or color-coded. At this stage, learners are also recommended to identify and underline the target form (Bankier, 2010). As asserted by Sharwood-Smith (1993), the target forms in a reading text can be visually enhanced through several techniques such as having the forms bolded, underlined, capitalized, or italicized. This will draw students' attention to the target forms. Svalberg (2012) suggests that students can use highlighters and are asked to highlight a particular grammar feature in order to train them to notice relevant forms in the language input. In the tasks, each target form in the texts in each activity card was bolded in order to enable learners to notice the structures by making the targeted linguistic features highly salient. This could possibly have facilitated students' performance in the CR tasks.

Description of the grammatical rules
The second aspect of the CR tasks required learners to provide descriptions of the rules that explain the use of the target form.

Table 5
Group 1 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 1	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	93	4.6
Student 2	100	5.0
Student 3	87	4.3
Student 4	100	5.0
Student 5	100	5.0
Student 6	100	5.0
Student 7	73	3.6
Student 8	80	4.0
Overall mean	92	4.6

Table 6
Group 2 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 2	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	86	4.3
Student 2	86	4.3
Student 3	93	4.6
Student 4	86	4.3
Student 5	73	3.6
Student 6	80	4.0
Student 7	100	5.0
Student 8	86	4.3
Overall mean	87	4.3

Table 7
Group 3 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 3	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	70	3.5
Student 2	90	4.5
Student 3	80	4.0
Student 4	80	4.0
Student 5	100	5.0
Student 6	100	5.0
Student 7	50	2.5
Student 8	80	4.0
Overall mean	81	4.1

The overall mean score obtained by Group 1 was 4.6 which showed the students' performance was generally excellent. Group 2 and Group 3 respectively attained overall mean scores of 4.3 and 4.1, which rated the students' general performance as good.

The third stage of CR tasks requires students to focus on the examples of how the target form is used in the text in order to understand it. They can be given some questions and assigned into pairs or groups to discuss and form their understanding of the grammatical rules. According to Bankier (2010), the discussion can be done in the students' native tongue or first language if their proficiency is low. According to Svalberg (2012), learners can be asked to come up with grammatical rules based on some carefully written examples that will assist them to formulate the rules. In these CR tasks, the task sheets contained examples of the rules of the target forms. Such clear and specific examples may aid learners to analyse the target form. Hence, they were able to perform the tasks accordingly.

The findings can also be evidently linked to the fourth stage of CR tasks which demands students to formulate or present rules and explanation for the target form (Bankier, 2010). Formulating grammatical rules is one of the prominent features of CR that help learners to develop explicit knowledge about the target form (Ellis, 2003). According to Roza (2014)**,** it is a natural inclination for learners to focus on meaning before form. Hence, the materials used in CR tasks must be specifically designed to teach the target forms through consciousness-raising. This is consistent with the inclusion of illustrative answers as examples in each task sheet together with instructions in the activity cards and task sheet that clearly asked for grammatical explanations for the target form in the text. In fact, the task sheet was designed in a way that required learners to provide general and specific rules of the use of the identified target form. Thus, the clearly defined instructions in the tasks and the illustrative answers in the task sheet could help leaners to concentrate on the grammar without being distracted by the meaning of the text. As a result, they were able to complete the tasks in accordance with the instruction and requirement.

Demonstration of understanding of the target forms
The final part of the CR tasks required learners to make a conclusion whether the use of the target form in each sentence was wrong or correct based on the grammatical rule.

Table 8

Group 1 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 1	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	93	4.6
Student 2	100	5.0
Student 3	87	4.3
Student 4	100	5.0
Student 5	100	5.0
Student 6	100	5.0
Student 7	73	3.6
Student 8	80	4.0
Overall mean	92	4.6

Table 9
Group 2 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 2	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	86	4.3
Student 2	86	4.3
Student 3	93	4.6
Student 4	86	4.3
Student 5	73	3.6
Student 6	80	4.0
Student 7	100	5.0
Student 8	86	4.3
Overall mean	87	4.3

Table 10
Group 3 scores based on frequency and quality of responses

Group 3	Score (%)	Mean
Student 1	70	3.5
Student 2	90	4.5
Student 3	80	4.0
Student 4	80	4.0
Student 5	100	5.0
Student 6	100	5.0
Student 7	50	2.5
Student 8	80	4.0
Overall mean	81	4.1

The overall means obtained by all three groups were the lowest in this aspect of task in comparison with the previous two. Group 1 obtained 3.0, Group 2 managed to get 3.5 while Group 3 attained 3.4.

It is important to note that the fifth stage of CR is an optional and additional stage that complements CR tasks and it does not necessarily take place at the end of the four stages. As for the additional fifth stage, the teachers have to supervise the students while performing the tasks and provide them confirmation of their understanding especially for students with lower proficiency or ability in forming generalizations (Bankier, 2010). The last part of these CR tasks demanded learners to either provide the correct form of the target form if it is used wrongly in the text or provide confirmation on the accuracy of the target form if it is used accurately. This was where the teacher attempted to review their responses and provide facilitative yet minimal feedback. Thus, the opportunity for the learners to receive

feedback from the teachers assisted them to reflect on the accuracy of their answers and possibly re-examined the series of steps they took to solve the tasks.

Students' performance in CR Tasks

All three CR tasks that were incorporated with three techniques of CR required learners to identify the sentences containing the target form. The findings indicate that learners from all three groups were able to execute the task of identifying the sentences containing the target form by writing them down on their task sheets. As for the second aspect of stating the rules that explain the use of the target form, the results imply that the learners were generally able to accomplish this skill. In the CR tasks involving the "identify" technique of CR, the learners of Group 1 did better compared with the learners of Group 2 and Group 3 who respectively performed the CR tasks involving the techniques of "classify" and "hypothesis-building." This can be attributed to the complexity of the task where the learners in Group 1 only needed to identify and provide explanations on the use of the target form in the text where all of them were used correctly.

As for Group 2 and Group 3, they respectively had to decide on the accuracy of each of the target forms to determine whether the use was wrong or correct. The complexity of the two techniques used in these two tasks made them more challenging. According to Skehan (1998), the more complex the skills involved in tasks are, the higher the task demand becomes on students. When learners experience cognitive demands, their allocation of cognitive resources will be affected as they have to invest more attention in completing the tasks (Levine, 2003). However, such demand can benefit students as they will be able to maintain heightened attention and retain longer memory on how the target form works (Robinson, 2003). Thus, although the two techniques are harder but the students might benefit from these techniques more as they will likely master the target form better. In general, ESL learners are able to perform this skill but the level of difficulty can be influenced by the type of technique. The final part of the CR tasks appeared to be the hardest, demonstrating their understanding of the target form. It can be deduced that students are able to perform the skill of demonstrating their understanding of how a targeted linguistic feature works but not to the extent of being excellent at it. Students probably need to invest more effort in performing this skill in CR tasks to be able to demonstrate their understanding competently.

Applicability and Feasibility of CR Tasks

Based on the findings, CR tasks are clearly applicable to be used by teachers and students for the purpose of learning and teaching grammar. Instead of merely giving students typical grammar tasks, teachers are able to exploit and incorporate specific techniques of consciousness-raising that will help students to develop awareness and understanding of grammatical structures. In fact, teachers can adapt any grammar tasks and language texts as materials to teach grammar more effectively by adopting

the procedures and designs of consciousness-raising approach which can highly emphasize the linguistic structures that teachers want students to master. The findings indicate that ESL learners generally are able to perform CR tasks in accordance with the instructions and the requirements of the tasks, even though the tasks might vary in terms of design and technique. This suggests that these tasks are applicable in ESL grammar lessons including lessons in Malaysian classrooms.

In addition, the rubric and tally sheet designed specifically to evaluate students' performance in these tasks also imply how such tools can be very beneficial for teachers and students. These tools can be used not just for evaluation and assessment but also guidelines for teachers to administer tasks and instruct their students in a way that they are able to perform CR tasks accordingly and attain optimal learning of grammar. In addition, students can also use such tools as reference for them to maximize their learning experience and improve their performance. Thus, the tools are applicable for teaching, learning and assessment.

Conclusion

It is crucial to evaluate the feasibility and applicability of a grammar task especially CR tasks to determine whether the students are able to perform the skills needed to complete the tasks. Some tools of assessing whether a particular task is doable and achievable are through the use of rubrics with rating scales and tally sheets that can indicate students' responses to the tasks through the quality and the frequency of their responses. The results of the evaluation of the students' performance indicate the feasibility of CR tasks in English grammar lessons. This suggests that CR tasks can be conducted in the ESL class to teach grammar and students will be able to benefit from the tasks.

Assessing the practicality of CR tasks is essential for teachers to make judgment whether a particular task is suitable for learners to do in accordance with their abilities and understanding. It also allows teachers to design, redesign or develop any CR tasks to meet the goal of CR which is to raise learners' awareness based on their evaluation and assessment of the tasks. There are five stages of how CR tasks should be designed and implemented as proposed by Bankier (2010), Ellis (1991) and Willis and Willis (2007). The findings indicate that each part of the CR tasks was consistent with at least one stage of the CR tasks. It is fundamentally imperative to ensure whether a particular CR task is incorporated with the characteristics of CR to ensure its effectiveness in raising learners' consciousness and explicit knowledge of the target form. Therefore, assessing learners' performance in the tasks is fundamental in identifying to what extent students are able to respond to the tasks as this may indicate their ability to accomplish the expected skills, progress in their learning and eventually acquire the target form.

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Appendix A
Rubric with rating scales used in assessing students' ability to solve the CR tasks

Rates Abilities	Excellent (5)	Good (4)	Moderate (3)	Inadequate (2)	Poor (1)
Accurately Identify the sentences containing the target form	Accurately identify the 3 following aspects: (a) Subject (b) Predicate (c) Verb "be"	Accurately identify 2 of the 3 following aspects: (a) Subject (b) Predicate (c) Verb "be"	Accurately identify 1 of the 3 following aspects: (a) Subject (b) Predicate (c) Verb "be"	Inaccurately identify the target form including subject and predicate or any related grammatical aspect	No identification is made
Appropriately state the grammatical rules	Appropriately state the 3 following aspects: (a) General rule (b) State the subject form (c) State the verb form	Appropriately state 2 of the 3 following aspects: (a) General rule (b) State the subject form (c) State the verb form	Appropriately state 1 of the 3 following aspects: (a) General rule (b) State the subject form (c) State the verb form	Wrongly state the grammatical rules or any related grammatical aspect	No rule is stated
Clearly demonstrate understanding of the target form	Clearly demonstrate the 3 following aspects: (a) the accuracy of the target form used in the sentence (b) The specific description of rules (c) (if applicable) Confirmation of the accuracy of the form (if correct) and the inaccuracy of the form (if wrong) by stating the correct form.	Clearly demonstrate 2 of the 3 following aspects: (a) the accuracy of the target form used in the sentence (b) The specific description of rules (c) (if applicable) Confirmation of the accuracy of the form (if correct) and the inaccuracy of the form (if wrong) by stating the correct form.	Clearly demonstrate 1 of the 3 following aspects: (a) the accuracy of the target form used in the sentence (b) The specific description of rules (c) (if applicable) Confirmation of the accuracy of the form (if correct) and the inaccuracy of the form (if wrong) by stating the correct form.	Insufficient demonstration of understanding of how the target form works and any related grammatical aspects.	No demonstration is made

Appendix B
Tally Sheet used to evaluate the quantity of individual students' responses in completing the CR tasks

Accurately identify the sentences containing the target form	(5)	F	(4)	F	(3)	F	(2)	F	(1)	F	total
Student 1											
Student 2											
Student 3											
Student 4											
Student 5											
Student 6											
Student 7											
Student 8											
Total											
Appropriately state the grammatical rules	(5)	F	(4)	F	(3)	F	(2)	F	(1)	F	total
Student 1											
Student 2											
Student 3											
Student 4											
Student 5											
Student 6											
Student 7											
Student 8											
Total											
Clearly demonstrate understanding of the target form	(5)	F	(4)	F	(3)	F	(2)	F	(1)	F	total
Student 1											
Student 2											
Student 3											
Student 4											
Student 5											

Student 6										
Student 7										
Student 8										
Total										
Grand Total										

*F=Frequency of responses

(5) – excellent, (4) – good, (3) – moderate, (2) – inadequate, (1) – poor