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Explicit teaching of grammar and improvement in the grammar of student writing

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the question of whether formal teaching of grammatical constructions results in a change in ESL students' written use of these constructions. It also tests the assumption that given a large amount of comprehensible input in academic English, ESL students will automatically acquire this variety including its grammatical features. The writing produced by BSc first year L2 students enrolled in an ESL course forms the data of the study. Four sets of data were collected: exam essays written in June and November of 1999 when formal grammatical instruction was not part of the course, and exam essays written in June and November of 2000 when grammatical instruction was introduced into the course. Matched t-tests indicate that in neither 1999 nor 2000 did students' grammatical proficiency improve. The implication of this is that in the context of the study grammatical improvement was not observed either as a result of formal teaching or as a result of extensive communication in the language. The article speculates that this may be a result of students' targeting a non-standard variety of English: BSAE.

Introduction

In a consideration of ESL teaching in a tertiary environment in South Africa today a number of factors need to be taken into account. Amongst these are: the variety of English that academics expect of students, the teaching approach employed in ESL teaching, and thirdly, the changing role of English and the uses to which English is put in South Africa today.

In the last twenty years the proportion of speakers of English as a second language entering historically white South African universities has increased rapidly. At the University of Natal in Durban, the proportion of African students, most of whom are L2 speakers, increased from 8% in 1986 to 27% in 2000. At the same time the number of ESL courses at South African universities has also increased. Such courses generally focus on academic skills such as essay writing and also aim to improve the grammatical proficiency of students. While the acquisition of academic English as a functional variety is necessary for all students, for L2 speakers this acquisition includes acquisition of the grammatical forms of 'standard' English. Thus, although ESL courses generally view themselves as attempting to improve grammatical proficiency, from a different perspective we can view ESL courses as aiming to facilitate the acquisition of academic English as a functional variety (including 'standard' grammatical forms). Chick (1996: 326) argues that by 'supplementing existing linguistic resources, enabling choice from a wider repertoire of varieties'

we can empower our students. From a different perspective (Kachru, 1982), we can view ESL courses as attempting to shift the variety of written English of L2 students from Black South African English (BSAE) in the direction of standard English.

Such a shift is viewed as desirable by ESL instructors because of the likelihood that certain grammatical features of BSAE are perceived as errors by the largely English-speaking academic staff members who assess the students' written work. Although I cannot support this with data, it seems to me that subconsciously or otherwise, staff may mark students down for such grammatical errors. If this is true, the level of grammatical correctness displayed by students in examinations and assignments in all their courses has at least some effect on the grades they achieve. That academic staff perceive grammatical features that deviate from standard SAE as error is reflected in recent suggestions within the University of Natal that students are graduating from the University without adequate proficiency in English. As van der Walt (1998: 36) has noted, proficiency is a difficult concept to define. It is distinct from native-speaker ability in the language (Davies 1995: 150), and distinguished from achievement in that achievement is related to a particular syllabus while proficiency is a more general measure (Davies 1995: 151). Richards, Platt and Platt (1992: 204) refer to proficiency as "the degree of skill with which a person can use a language", and to "skill in using a language for a specific purpose". Thus proficiency is closely related to context, and the purposes for which language is used. It is likely to include a range of elements including organisation and sociolinguistic appropriateness. In the context of tertiary education it becomes clear when the idea of adequate proficiency is aired, that in addition to these, part of what is meant is grammatical correctness as measured against standard SAE. It is apparent from such discussions that with regard to students' written production of English at least, most academic staff would prefer L2 students to have added to their repertoire of functional varieties a variety of written English close to standard SAE by the time they graduate.

In an attempt to meet such expectations, most ESL courses attempt to promote this shift in the variety of written English produced by L2 students from BSAE to standard SAE. The question facing designers of such courses is how this can be achieved. Should explicit teaching of grammar to ESL students be employed? Or can it be assumed that proficiency in a standard variety of English will grow naturally if students are lectured in English, use textbooks in English and write assignments and examinations in English, i.e. if they are given enough comprehensible input in the target variety? This distinction between explicit teaching of grammar and the expectation that student proficiency in grammar will improve naturally is not a distinction between an interactive, process-oriented approach (i.e. fitting into the Communicative Language teaching model) and a Grammar-oriented approach (i.e. product-oriented and teacher-centred). The discussion that follows takes a student-centred and interactive approach for granted, and asks whether explicit grammar teaching should form part of that approach or not.

The controversy over the value of explicit grammar teaching is a long-standing one. On the one hand, there is the claim that ESL students will learn better if there is no formal grammar instruction; on the other, there is the claim that explicit instruction will facilitate acquisition. In the approach that favours no formal instruction, students in the classroom are viewed as learning naturally by communicating and by being exposed to comprehensible input (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Krashen, 1982; Terrell, 1991; Prabhu, 1987). Some versions of this approach avoid error correction, which is viewed as interfering with the acquisition process by making students self-conscious (Krashen 1982: 74) or as being useless because students acquire grammar in a set order that cannot be altered by instruction (Dulay & Burt, 1973).

Krashen (1982) has distinguished between acquisition (spontaneous and subconscious) and learning (conscious knowledge of the rules of the language which can be derived from formal

instruction in grammar). The question is whether learning (explicit knowledge) can contribute to acquisition (implicit knowledge). Krashen (1982) maintains that explicit knowledge does not add to implicit knowledge, so formal grammar teaching is unnecessary and all teaching should be purely communicative. Prabhu (1987) also argues against grammar teaching on the grounds that grammatical rules are highly complex, making conscious knowledge of them difficult to attain.

Most sources, however, maintain that there is some benefit from explicit instruction. What Ellis (1994: 654) calls the facilitative position claims that formal instruction aids but is not a necessity for language acquisition. One version of this position (e.g. Ellis, 1987) claims that formal instruction has a positive influence over the careful style of the learners (for example, the kind of written task that forms the data for this study). Another version, that has become prominent in recent years, is the idea of 'noticing', in which formal instruction draws the learner's attention to a particular feature, and the theory holds that this subsequently leads to acquisition (e.g. Fotos, 1993; 1998). Formal instruction raises consciousness of a structure, making the learner notice the structure in future communicative input. Fotos (1993: 397) found that formal grammar lessons were slightly more effective in promoting noticing of the target structure than were communicative tasks with the target structure embedded in them. Some writers (e.g. Thompson, 1996: 11) suggest that there should be explicit examination of the grammatical forms used to realise a particular function and meaning only after the learner has experienced the structure communicatively.

Swain and Lapkin (1995: 371) suggest that having to produce output can promote learner noticing. In having to produce output learners consciously notice what they do not know or know only partially (Swain, 1995: 129). The role of output in promoting noticing has been investigated by Izumi and Bigelow (2000; 2001), who found (2000: 239) that repeated opportunities to produce output using a particular grammatical structure promoted noticing by many (although not all) of the learners of what they did not know. By alternating learner output with repeated opportunities to receive input of texts using the target form, many learners noticed the correct version of the form and improved in their use of the form.

Having looked at the variety of English the institution expects of students, and at two possible approaches to shifting the variety of English produced by L2 students, I now turn to a consideration of the role of English and the uses to which it is put in South Africa today.

Ellis (1996: 215) characterises ESL learning as integrative to the extent that it is designed to help individuals function in the community. However, in the South African context the motivation for learning English as a second language has little likelihood of being integration with L1 speakers of English (Van der Walt, 1993: 296). Only 8.6% of South Africans are mother tongue speakers of English (Census, 1996) while only 25% of African language speakers are able to understand English (PANSALB 2000). Thus, as de Klerk (1999: 320) points out, there is little opportunity for L2 speakers of English to be exposed to and assimilated with first language speakers of English. In this context the motivation for most learners of English in South Africa is more likely to be economic advancement than integration with L1 speakers. Further, as Wade (1996) points out, the increasing numbers of speakers of Black South African English (BSAE) with rapidly improving socio-economic status may favour a restandardisation of South African English in the direction of BSAE.

However, it is not clear that BSAE is a single stable variety. De Klerk (1999: 313) notes a continuum of L2 speakers of English consequent on educational level and exposure to English. This continuum ranges from speakers with very rudimentary English to fluent speakers of English. She argues (1999: 314) that speakers who have had little contact with the language and who consequently have a more rudimentary command of English, cannot be regarded as speaking BSAE, but rather as learners who have acquired very limited English.

Besides limited opportunities for acquiring standard English, Ellis (1994: 211) notes that learners may target a non-standard variety of the language. This depends on what the reference group is for the learner. In the case of the learners in this study (who are first year BSc students), the reference group may be educated speakers of Black South African English (BSAE) rather than L1 white speakers of South African English (SAE). This is particularly likely given their limited previous exposure to L1 speakers of English. In this case their target variety of English is likely to be educated BSAE. If this is indeed so, one would expect features such as writing in full sentences (a feature of educated writing by speakers of BSAE and SAE) to be acquired, but features such as subject-verb agreement, which is inconsistently applied in BSAE (Schmied, 1991; Wade, 1996), might be less likely to be fully acquired.

Context of the study

The students in this study are advanced learners of English. They speak an African language – in most cases Zulu – as a first language. However, the last 7 years of their schooling was through the medium of English, in general taught by teachers who shared the students' first language – making code-switching between English and mother tongue probable (Adendorff, 1993). Thus, the students have already been exposed communicatively – at school and elsewhere – to the grammatical forms taught in the study. However, the register of instruction is likely to have been BSAE (Buthelezi, 1995: 242). The students in the study are currently attending an English language medium university, which is an acquisition-rich environment, with most instruction (in whatever course of study they are pursuing) from speakers of standard SAE, and all textbooks, assignments and tests in highly formal and "correct" English. They also have the opportunity to interact with L1 English speakers in that about two thirds of their classmates are first language speakers of English. In reality, however, their social interaction with their English-speaking classmates appears to be limited. Although only about 27% of the student body are black, most of the students in the study live in student residences in which about 90% of residents are black, and are, thus, most likely to be second language speakers of English. According to the 1992 census (quoted by Lass, 1995: 89), only 0.04 million black South Africans speak English as a first language, so in this case we can assume that black students are not L1 speakers of English. The social contacts of students in this study are, therefore, largely with L1 Zulu or Xhosa speakers, or with speakers of other African languages. Thus, although there is some motivation to achieve greater competence in English for instrumental reasons (communication with and assessment by largely L1 English-speaker lecturers and future job prospects), there is little integrative motivation to do so.

Description of the study

The students in the study were all registered for a science writing course taught by the author. The course focuses primarily on the acquisition of genres important in science study such as the research report, essay, poster and oral presentation (see Parkinson, 2000a). Following the assumption that given enough comprehensible input L2 students would naturally acquire language, little grammatical instruction is provided in the course. Grammatical instruction is incidental to the genre being taught. For example, using the passive form in the past tense when writing a method section of a research or lab report is explained to students and practised by them in assignments. Forms for expressing modality are suggested and modelled for students when they write explanations in essays or the Discussion Section of a report etc. First drafts of student writing are corrected with a focus on grammatical correctness as judged by standard English and with individual written explanation of some of the grammatical forms.

During 2000, as the course instructor of the science writing course, I decided to include explicit grammar instruction as an element in the course, with the expectation that this would have a positive effect on the grammatical correctness of students' writing. At the same time I decided to test my initial assumption for the course that students' use of grammar improves naturally in response to large amounts of comprehensible input and considerable opportunities to communicate in the language – both in writing and speech.

Over a two-month period in the second semester of 2000, 90 minutes per week were devoted to grammar instruction. This represented half the contact time with students during these two months. Apart from my initial explanations, and interactive pair work on grammar tasks in class, students had a weekly assignment to do individually in their own time. This assignment contributed towards the class record for the course.

The approach taken was to choose certain grammatical constructions (see below), teach them, and compare their use in student writing before and after teaching. The model of language informing the teaching was functional to the extent that the focus was on the meaning of the various constructions within the context of real science texts, rather than on single sentences or invented examples. Students were also introduced to the clause rather than the sentence as the basic unit of meaning.

The 2000 class of students, who received the grammatical instruction, was compared to the 1999 class of students, who received no explicit instruction. Besides providing a control group, the 1999 group of students thus enabled me to test the contention that students' grammar will improve naturally if they are given comprehensible input. There is no reason to believe the students in the two groups were different. All were L2 speakers of English and were registered in the course as a result of being selected via an access course into the Science Faculty with fewer than the required matric points (see Parkinson, 2000b for a description of this access course).

The student writing used in the study was essays on science topics written by students in their June and November examinations (externalled to ensure equivalence). Four sets of data were thus collected, in June and November of 1999 and 2000. It may be argued that examination conditions are not ideal for the production of careful language. However, the examinations consisted of a single 1000 word essay which students were given 3 hours to write. Students were given a choice between two essay topics, and in each of the four examinations they were given readings on the topic of the essay weeks ahead of the examination, so that they could familiarise themselves with the topic. Because students were provided with readings and expected to base their answers on these readings, what they wrote may have been grammatically more correct than writing they do without the influence of readings. The magnitude of this influence is difficult to assess. Most writing done by students is based on written sources to a certain degree, so I do not feel that this factor is likely to invalidate the findings to any marked degree.

The constructions taught were:

Subject verb agreement (concord). This was chosen in response to the course instructor's intuition that lack of subject verb agreement was amongst the most common deviations from standard SAE in L2 student writing, and one that staff members who assess students' writing notice readily. It is less likely to interfere with meaning than are the other constructions taught, but on the other hand, the rules for subject-verb agreement are easily understood and easily explained.

Use of discourse markers (conjunctions). These were suggested by colleagues as most likely to interfere with meaning in explanations if omitted, or if the wrong discourse marker was selected.

Use of modal finites. These were selected as being important in science writing in order to express possibility and recognition of alternatives (see Butler, 1990; Hunston 1989; Myers, 1989).

What constitutes a complete sentence. A perennial complaint by academic staff marking the writing of both L1 and L2 students is that students do not always write in full sentences.

In an end of semester course evaluation questionnaire, students were asked whether they had learnt 'a lot', 'a little' or 'nothing' from various elements of the course (including the input on grammar, a content-based essay, and a content-based report). They were also asked whether they had enjoyed these elements 'a lot', or 'a little' or had 'not enjoyed' them. On average students judged the grammar input as slightly less enjoyable than the content-based elements of the course and said they had learnt slightly less from it than from other elements of the course. Nevertheless, 65% claimed to have 'learnt a lot' and only 25% reported that they had 'not enjoyed' the grammar tasks and assignments.

The type of grammar instruction used in the study

Three types of grammar instruction were employed in the study. Firstly, in the teaching of what constitutes a complete sentence there was formal explanation of the target form (i.e. what constitutes a finite/non-finite verb, and what constitutes a major/minor clause.) This was followed by exercises that were communicative to the extent that students worked on them in pairs. This is a 'preemptive focus on form' approach (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2001: 411) where preselected forms are taught through communicative activities. The following is a sample exercise:

Writing in full sentences

Circle the subject in the following clauses and underline the verbs. Say whether the clauses are finite or non-finite, giving reasons:

a) The world's climate cooled over millions of years, // slowly killing off the dinosaurs. (from DK Direct, 1993: 47)
b) Dinosaurs laid a lot of eggs // and their eggs were big, // so how could those little mammals have eaten all of the eggs? (from Benton, 1990: 42).
c) Only the mammals emerged from their holes // to root for food in the wasteland. (from Taylor, 1993: 26)

Secondly, in the teaching of discourse markers and modal finites, the 'noticing' approach was used. This involved alerting students to the functions of discourse markers and modal finites through discussion and classroom exercises done in pairs. Students were then asked to identify instances of modal finites and of discourse markers in a passage. In the case of modal finites they were asked to rewrite sentences from the passage, showing a greater or lesser level of certainty. The following is a sample exercise:

Modality

Much of what we do in science involves explanations. Sometimes we're 100% certain of the explanation, but a lot of the time we are not completely certain. At those times we need to be able to let the reader (or listener) know **how** certain we are. Are we very doubtful, or only a little bit doubtful? We have a number of ways of doing this. Read the following extracts and underline all the words that tell us the writer is suggesting possibilities, not certainties.

We can tell how old dinosaur fossils are by looking at the age of the rock they were found in. From this, we know that the last of the dinosaurs died out about 65 million years ago. But we can only guess why this happened. Perhaps a huge disaster wiped out all the dinosaurs in one go, or they may have become extinct over a very long time. Some scientists believe that a huge asteroid crashed into the Earth at the end of the Cretaceous Period. Possible evidence for this has been found in Central America in Yucatán. The huge impact of the asteroid could have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. (from DK Direct, 1993: 46)

In the case of discourse markers, students were asked to identify what function was served by the discourse markers they had identified in the passage.

Thirdly, in the teaching of subject-verb agreement, there was formal explanation only, repeated several times over a period of 2 months. The approach taken was that the course instructor elicited from the students what the simple present tense is. She then noted that in the case of the third person singular only, the form of the verb in the simple present tense changes. Several sentences illustrating this were elicited from the members of the class.

All three of these forms of instruction are aimed at developing explicit knowledge of a rule (i.e. students were given the rule), rather than implicit knowledge (learners required to induce rules from examples) (Ellis, 1994: 642). They constitute what Ellis (1994: 643) calls consciousness-raising, where students are expected to understand the target structure but not necessarily use or practice it spontaneously right away.

This research measures whether the teaching of these forms is positively related to correct use in learner output. These four target forms, although they by no means comprehend proficiency in English, are used as a measure of improvement in proficiency. What is tested is learners' spontaneous language use in a written communicative task (an essay) rather than their use of language in a formal language test. This was so that I could judge what language forms students actually use in the written tasks they submit to their lecturers such as examinations, lab reports and assignments, rather than in formal grammar tests where it is clear that the only focus is on language and that marks are assigned purely on the correctness of language items.

Results

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the results for subject/verb agreement, use of modal finites, and use of discourse markers. These Tables reflect the average number of times students used each construction in June and November of 1999 and 2000, and the average number of times they used the construction correctly. The tables also show average improvement in the construction between June and November of each year. Table 4 shows the average number of incomplete sentences students produced in each of the four sets of data, as well as the average improvement between June and November of each year.

One surprising feature of the results was the extent to which each of the language items taught was correctly used, both in the control (1999) and experimental (2000) groups. This can be seen in

Appendix 1, which shows a sample of student writing, together with an indication of whether the language item has been correctly used or not. On average, subject-verb agreement was correct in the student writing in the four sets of data more than 80% of the time. Modal finites were correctly employed by students more than 70% of the time. Discourse markers were correctly used about 90% of the time and on average students wrote only one incomplete sentence per 1000 words. These figures are reflected in greater detail in Tables 1–4 below, together with a discussion of the significance of any differences between the June and November data in each of the two years and of any differences between the two years.

Subject-verb agreement

Table 1 indicates the mean total number of uses of the simple present tense for the June and November data in both 1999 and 2000. Included in this count are:

> Instances where there is agreement between subject and verb in the simple present tense, e.g. *"One measure of population density is the amount of space available where **an individual lives**"*.
>
> Instances where agreement is lacking between subject and verb. This can be where a third person singular verb has no terminal s, e.g. *"**An increase in temperature** also **cause** the reduction of predators of mosquitoes"*. Less commonly, a terminal s is wrongly added to the end of the verb of a plural subject: *"**People seems** good at avoiding conflict."*

The proportion of students who used the simple present correctly was calculated in each of the four cases. A matched t-test, which compares two sets of data concerning the same students (Hatch and Farhady, 1982: 114), was used to compare the mean of June 1999 data with the mean of the November 1999 data. Similarly, a matched t-test was used for the 2000 data.

In both 1999 and 2000 the matched t-test indicates no significant improvement ($p<0.05$) in November compared to June. This means that on average students did not improve in their use of subject/verb agreement in either year.

Table 1: Subject/Verb agreement

	1999 (n = 40)			2000 (n = 26)		
	June	Nov	Mean improvement June/Nov	June	Nov	Mean improvement June/Nov
Mean total number of uses of the simple present tense per student	42.8	39.7		49.9	37.4	
Standard deviation	16.5	14.9		11.8	13.8	
Mean proportion of correct uses per student	0.84	0.84	0.000	0.83	0.87	0.015
Standard deviation	0.11	0.13	0.095	0.12	0.12	0.140

A t-test indicates that the mean improvement for 1999 compared to 2000 is not statistically different at the 0.05 level of significance indicating that the 2000 improvement was not better than the 1999 improvement.

Use of Modal finites

Table 2 shows the mean total number of uses of modal finites in the data. Included in this count are:

Instances where modal finites were correctly used: *"They protect the patient from hazardous effects that a drug **can** cause"*

Instances where modals were used but should not have been: *"Sometimes the result of the 3rd phase of a clinical trial **can** not be positive so the decision must be based on a huge sample of data* (is not)

Instances where modals should have been used but were not: *"Some scientists believe that with very low doses of radiation they ____ prevent cancer in the body"* (can).

Instances where the wrong modal was used: "One **may** see that the process is being conducted effectively when the patients are watched closely" (can).

For 1999, Table 2 reflects a lower mean proportion of correct uses of modal finites in November than in June. Using a matched t-test this difference is statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. This implies that the 1999 students actually deteriorated in their use of this construction. In 2000 the November use of this construction is also reflected as worse than the June use. However, the difference is not statistically significant ($p < .05$) using a matched t-test.

Table 2: Use of Modal finites

	1999 (n = 40)			2000 (n = 26)		
	June	Nov	Mean improvement June/Nov	June	Nov	Mean improvement June/Nov
Mean total number of uses of modal finites per student	16.2	16.4		17.7	7.4	
Standard deviation	10.1	10.0		20.3	5.4	
Mean proportion of correct uses per student	0.84	0.72	-0.119	0.87	0.80	-0.101
Standard deviation	0.15	0.24	0.267	0.17	0.21	0.262

The question of whether the 1999 deterioration is worse than the 2000 deterioration for this construction was tested using a t-test. This showed that the difference is significant at the .05 level of significance. This means that use of modal finites deteriorated in 1999 and remained more or less constant in 2000.

Use of discourse markers

Table 3 shows the mean total number of uses of discourse markers by students in the June and November data in both 1999 and 2000. Correct uses of discourse markers were noted as well as incorrect uses (such as "*Blinded trials give all patients the 'same' therapy. **Although** it looks the same **but** the therapy is either a placebo or the proposed therapy*")

In both 1999 and 2000 there was no significant difference between mean proportion of correct uses of discourse markers in June compared to November (as indicated by a matched t-test, $p < .05$). This means that use of this construction remained the same over the 6-month period in both groups.

Table 3: Use of Discourse markers

	1999 (n = 40)			2000 (n = 26)		
	June	Nov	Mean proportional improvement June/Nov	June	Nov	Mean proportional improvement June/Nov
Mean total number of uses of discourse markers per student	12.2	15.8		10.6	8.9	
Standard deviation	8.9	7.3		5.5	4.0	
Mean proportion of correct uses per student	0.91	0.91	-0.003	0.92	0.89	-0.064
Standard deviation	0.10	0.13	0.165	0.12	0.13	0.239

The mean proportional improvement was also not statistically different in 1999 compared to 2000 (t-test, $p < .05$). That is, the 2000 group did not improve or deteriorate relative to the 1999 group.

Incomplete Sentences

Table 4 shows the mean total number of incomplete sentences students produced in the June and December data in both 1999 and 2000. Incomplete sentences usually have non-finite constructions (*"Looking again at the climatic conditions rather than warming as the only initiator of conditions that favour an increase in vector borne diseases."*) or consist of subordinate clauses (*"When they added a new monkey to the group and knowing that monkeys hate newcomers.")* Considering all four sets of data the number of words produced by students in a task which called for 1000 words differed over a wide range from 464 to 1916 words, with a mean of 1074 words. The raw scores for number of incomplete sentences were, therefore, adjusted to indicate incidence of errors per 1000 words*.

Table 4: Incomplete sentences

	1999 (n = 40)			2000 (n = 26)		
	June	Nov	Mean improvement June/Nov	June	Nov	Mean improvement June/Nov
Mean number of incomplete sentences per student per 1000 words*	0.78	1.29	0.51	0.81	0.97	0.17
Standard deviation	1.05	1.64	1.94	1.11	2.70	2.77

In both 1999 and 2000 a matched t-test indicates no significant improvement ($p < 0.05$) in November compared to June. This means that on average students did not write fewer incomplete sentences in November compared to June in either year.

A t-test indicates that the mean improvement for 1999 compared to 2000 is not statistically different at the 0.05 level of significance indicating that the 2000 group did not perform better at writing complete sentences than the 1999 group.

Discussion

The results indicate that in neither the experimental group (2000 students) nor the control group (1999 students) was improvement (measured against standard SAE) experienced in student use of the four grammatical constructions taught. The 2000 group, who were given explicit instruction, showed no significant improvement (or deterioration) in any of the constructions considered. The 1999 group, who were given no explicit instruction, also showed no improvement in their use of subject/verb agreement, discourse markers, or the writing of complete sentences, and actually deteriorated in their use of modal finites. Their mean use of this grammatical form was significantly worse than that of the 2000 group, who showed no improvement or deterioration in their use of modal finites.

The implication is that this population of students does not show any grammatical improvement after being given merely comprehensible input (the 1999 group) or after being given comprehensible input plus some explicit instruction over a 2 month period (the 2000 group). One explanation for lack of improvement in the 2000 group could be that the amount of instruction was insufficient and the length of time over which students received the instruction (2 months) not long enough to make a significant difference.

However, lack of improvement in both groups may also be related to the fact that these students are second language learners, who use English as a *lingua franca*, and whose reference group is speakers of BSAE rather than any group of speakers of English as a first language. Features that this study has regarded as grammatical deviations from standard SAE are acceptable in BSAE particularly in informal contexts such as conversation. Of the features considered, this is true for subject/verb agreement, and use of modal finites. These are features which Wade (1996: 96) regards as fossilised in BSAE. For the L1 English assessors of the students' writing, however, these features remain mistakes. To varying extents they interfere with assessors' ability to understand what is said in student writing. Misuse of discourse markers for example can lead to serious problems in understanding, while lack of subject-verb agreement, although more common than the other features considered, is less of a problem for understanding. Nevertheless, all four of these features of BSAE are, in my opinion, likely to influence negatively the marks assigned.

As stated above, the students in the study are advanced learners of English. This is supported by the fact that for all language items that were considered, students use the construction correctly (as measured against standard SAE) far more often than they use it incorrectly. For subject-verb agreement, in June and November of both years, on average more than 80% of uses of the construction were correct. On average more than 70% of the time students use modal finites correctly. On average about 90% of the uses of discourse markers were correct. Very few incomplete sentences were found in the student writing. In the samples of writing which form the data for this study the mean number of words written by students was 1074. On average students produced only 0.98 incomplete sentences per 1000 words.

The fact that students use the language items correctly most of the time calls into question the claim that students are graduating without adequate proficiency in English. What seems to be concealed in statements concerning the proficiency of graduates is that what from one perspective appears to be graduates who have imperfectly acquired standard SAE, from another perspective could be viewed as contestation between two varieties of English: BSAE and standard SAE. The results summarised in the previous paragraph indicate that what is being contested are relatively small variations in language use. It is a question of which variety of English is acceptable, and who has the power to delimit acceptability. The power at the moment is in the hands of speakers of standard SAE who work from the assumption that standard SAE must be the norm, firstly, because

it is the English spoken by native speakers, and secondly, because it is close to the English regarded as standard internationally. However, it has been questioned whether native varieties are automatically superior to non-native varieties of English (Kachru, 1982: vii). We could also question whether acquiring a variety for the purposes of international communication is of such crucial importance for undergraduate students.

Although this study did not find any grammatical improvement in students who received comprehensible input only, it could be that the time frame was too short to measure any improvement. The study took place over a 4-month period (i.e. in the second semester of 1999, from August to November). However, the students in the study are first year students, who, as they are in a four-year degree programme, still have at least three years before they graduate. As they will spend this length of time in the acquisition-rich environment of the University, it is probable that their careful style will shift towards the variety of English spoken by staff and found in textbooks, lecture notes, examination papers etc. That is, from the institution's viewpoint, their language proficiency may well improve in this time. I plan to test this by comparing the present data to writing produced by the same students in two years time.

In spite of the fact that students' language does not deviate grammatically from standard SAE forms most of the time, it cannot be assumed that they have explicit knowledge of the grammatical rules concerned. When asked, some students are able to state the rules for subject-verb agreement, but nevertheless, given their inconsistent usage of these rules, it seems that these rules are less meaningful to them than they are to L1 speakers. Explicit knowledge of the form accompanied by inconsistent usage of the 'correct' form could on the one hand support Krashen's contention that explicit knowledge does not automatically lead to acquisition. On the other hand, it could be that the students in this study are not targeting the correct standard SAE form, and are instead targeting BSAE.

In light of the fact that forms displaying subject-verb agreement and forms lacking agreement are used concurrently, it may be asked whether lack of subject verb agreement in these students' writing is to be considered a 'deviation' or a 'mistake'. A deviation is systemic within a non-native variety – in this case BSAE (Kachru, 1982: 45) while a 'mistake' is an indication of a stage in language acquisition – in this case acquisition of standard SAE (Kachru, 1982: 325). Are both forms (forms displaying agreement and forms that lack agreement) found in BSAE in general? Or is it that BSAE systematically lacks subject-verb agreement, but because the students in the study are in the process of acquiring standard SAE as a functional variety, they usually show agreement between subject and verb, but occasionally make mistakes? Schmied's (1991: 65) statement that in BSAE "inflectional endings are not *always* added to the verb, but *in general* regular and unmarked forms are used instead" (my italics) indicates that both forms are present in BSAE, but that lack of subject-verb agreement is more common. My finding that the writing of the students in my study are far more likely to display agreement than not indicates either that they have been influenced by standard SAE to some degree or that the students in the study speak a particular variety of BSAE. Perhaps, reflecting the relatively high standard of education they have achieved, the students speak an educated variety of BSAE.

Although some students are able to state subject-verb agreement rules, students cannot state rules for use of modals and discourse markers or for the production of full sentences. Few L1 students, or native speakers generally, would be able to do so, as these rules are far more complex than those for subject-verb agreement are. Yet, they are used correctly by the students in the study most of the time, which would indicate that they have been partially acquired (rather than consciously learnt) by students. If, as I have speculated, students have targeted BSAE rather than

SAE as the variety of language they are acquiring, they may never cease to make what are regarded as errors by the academics who mark their work.

If it is the case that students do know (either consciously or subconsciously) the rules in question but are merely inconsistent in applying the rules, then it may be that explaining grammatical rules, exhorting students to use rules, and doing activities to practise the rules is a futile approach. On the other hand, large quantities of comprehensible input and ample chances of writing and speaking in English also appear to have little influence on the grammatical correctness of student writing. This is the case in the short term at least: the 4 months (from August to November) of the study. A longer-term study is needed to see whether the writing of students whose writing formed the data of the study is significantly different grammatically in their final year at university. To test my finding that explicit teaching has no effect on student use of language, a longer course is needed, of at least one academic year.

Conclusion and implications

This study has found that in response to neither explicit teaching of grammar nor extensive communication in the language was change in the direction of native speaker correctness observed in the production of certain grammatical constructions by a group of L2 university students. I have suggested that this may result from the variety of English targeted by this group of students being BSAE rather than standard SAE. This suggests the possibility of a gap between the expectations of the academic staff and the variety of English targeted by students. If L2 students target BSAE rather than Standard SAE, how successful are ESL courses likely to be if their goal is native speaker grammatical correctness for their students? A goal more likely to be achieved is that of increasing an awareness among students of the necessity of paying more attention to grammatical features in their careful style of writing, for example, in the writing of assignments and laboratory reports.

I have suggested that the variety of language used by university students is an area of contestation, and that the power to define which variety is acceptable is currently in the hands of speakers of standard SAE. As the academic staff of universities become more representative of the demographics of South Africa, it is likely that the notion of grammatical proficiency will itself shift to include or tolerate certain features of BSAE. This argument, coupled with the degree of correctness found in the academic writing of L2 students has implications for both ESL courses and the University as a whole.

Firstly, what are the implications for ESL courses? Given the context of the University environment and the expectations of academic staff, I believe that for the present the goal of widening students' repertoire of varieties of English to include a careful written style that approaches a standard academic variety in its grammatical usage remains a valid one. If students are, as I have argued, likely to lose marks because of the variety of written English they use, I believe that it is to their benefit if they are able to choose to employ the variety of English that will be acceptable to academic staff (see Kress, 1985; 1986). For most students this variety of English will also be of use in their working life beyond the university when they need to produce a polished and 'correct' piece of writing. However, the results presented in this article suggest that the goal of widening students' repertoire of varieties of English is not easy to attain. What, then, can ESL courses expect to achieve? Firstly, I suggest that ESL courses can increase awareness amongst ESL students of the expectations that academic staff have of student writing. Secondly, as Geslin and Wade (2000) suggest, ESL courses can guide students into editing their written work in the direction of the expected variety of English.

Thirdly, with respect to the University as a whole, there needs to be more recognition of BSAE as a variety of increasing importance and legitimacy in South Africa, in a number of prestigious and powerful domains (e.g. the media, business, government). Claims that graduates are not proficient in English because their written English does not conform to native-speaker and 'international' norms need to be countered. This is particularly true when it is considered that the deviation from standard SAE described in this article is relatively slight.

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Appendix

The following is an extract from an essay on whether global warming is likely to increase vector-borne diseases. This extract shows how grammatically correct uses of subject/verb agreement and discourse markers outnumber grammatically incorrect uses of these features (shown in bold).

Winter is considered a friend to people since (5) there are not many mosquitoes. However (5), this does not justify the statement that says (1) global warming increase (2) vector-borne diseases. The fact is (1) that in winter mosquito eggs freeze (1) and kill many larvae. Adult mosquitoes which survive (1) cold climate are weak and usually hibernate. In the other hand cold climate makes (1) the pathogen inside the mosquito to mature slowly, in this way the mosquito may (3) die before it infect (2) a person. Mosquitoes get (1) the pathogen from its blood meal. The pathogen must multiply in the mosquito and the process is favoured by warm conditions.

Let's view an increase in malaria and dengue disease increase also in the resistance of mosquitoes to malarial drugs. The more a drug is used, mosquitoes get (1) used to it and later the drug become (2) ineffective. This is (1) due to when people do not take a full treatment and the diseases persists (2). This as well is not related with global warming, but (5) behaviour of people. Altering people's behaviour by advising them to take a full course of treatment can (4) prove the best in bringing the pandemic to halt.

Even if global warming is also involved, but (6) it's faulty to emphasise that it will lead to vector-borne diseases. One must be careful about saying this because an increase in these diseases is (1) influenced by many factors...

Subject/verb agreement: correct use (1); incorrect use (2).
Modal finites: correct use (3); incorrect use (4).
Discourse markers: correct use (5); incorrect use (6).

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