The usefulness of giving grammar rules for accuracy in a free writing task

What this research was about and why it is important

Teachers often have to make decisions about if and how to teach the grammar of the second language. Should they explain all the rules of grammar, or can learners use grammar without knowing about the rules? Previous research has shown that rules can help students correct errors in a test that forces them to focus on grammatical accuracy, but does knowing rules also help students on tests that require more spontaneous language use? This study compared learners on a free writing task. Two rules of grammar were chosen. The rules were explained to one half of the learners, and not to the other half; but all the learners completed the same reading comprehension activities. The study showed that providing the rules was helpful for only one of the two rules, and only if learners had that rule in a similar form in their first language.

What the researchers did

- Learners were 67 students of Dutch as a second language, aged between 12-18. They had 33 different language backgrounds. Their proficiency was equivalent to one-year intensive training in Dutch.
- Learners completed a series of 8 computer-based text comprehension lessons over four weeks.
- Lessons focused on two grammar rules (a) degrees of comparison in Dutch, which are made with adjectival endings (*klein* (short); *kleiner* (shorter); *het kleinst* (shortest)) and (b) on word order in Dutch subordinate clauses (*John is klein* (John is short) versus *omdat John klein is* (because John is small).
- Learners were split into two groups and did comprehension activities that also presented the language patterns. One group also received brief explanations about the grammar rules, but the other group did not. Both groups saw the same number and type of sentences in their reading activities, making their experience with the patterns equal.
- To test how learners used the grammar in their writing, they were tested before and after the instruction on a 'free writing test', in which they responded in a few sentences to questions. To test whether the learners knew the actual rules themselves, they were also given a 'grammar test' in which they identified and corrected errors.

What the researchers found

For degrees of comparison
- All students improved on both the free writing test and the grammar test after the instruction. Students who received explanations were better after the instruction at identifying grammatical errors in the grammar test – suggesting they had learnt the rules more than the group that hadn't been taught them.
- Learners who received no rules showed improvement on the free writing test. However, learners who received the rules did better than those who did not receive the rules, but this was only if their first language also used adjectival endings to create degrees of comparison, as in their L2 Dutch. Learners who received the rules did worse than learners who did not if their first language expressed degrees of comparison differently, i.e., with comparison words only, such as 'more' and 'most'.

For word order
- All students improved equally on both tests, irrespective of the instruction received. Word order in students' first language had no impact.

Things to consider

- In this study, exposure to the grammatical patterns (i.e. in the comprehension activities, without any explanations of rules) always improved the students' use of them in free writing. This seems a safe pedagogical option, but it may be difficult to give learners sufficient exposure to the grammar for them to pick up patterns.
- This study showed that 'rule explanation plus exposure' was sometimes more effective than just exposure (i.e. the comprehension activities only), and sometimes less effective, depending on the rule taught, the type of test used, and students' first language. More research is needed to uncover when and for whom rule explanation is effective.