Pedagogical suitability of data-driven learning in English grammar classes in Taiwan

What this research was about and why it is important

The data-driven learning approach (DDL) is a method where students take on the role of learning detectives of a foreign language, investigating for themselves designated linguistic features from authentic language material. DDL students learn by discovering rather than being taught what something is (that is, the traditional deductive approach: TDA). These features of DDL are believed to nurture students’ language skills and motivation to learn. Many scholars even believe that DDL treatments are superior to TDA in learning a foreign language. However, DDL is relatively new to cultural contexts like Taiwan, where learners are used to lectures where instructors explain everything for them. Whether DDL treatments would help Taiwanese language students learn is thus an interesting, important line of inquiry to pursue. This study compared the effects of DDL with TDA on a group of Taiwanese college students learning English grammar. The study results lend support to the legitimacy of practicing DDL in different educational areas, like Taiwan.

What the researchers did

- A total of 52 first-year Taiwanese undergraduates of English as a foreign language (EFL) from three classes (A, B, C) joined this study.
- The students involved were between 18 and 19 years old and had never learned English grammar using DDL but had been taught TDA before.
- All classes completed the same grammar units. Class A (16 students) was taught with TDA; Class B (17) and Class C (19) learned grammar using blends of DDL and TDA.
- In TDA treatments, the teacher explained all the grammatical points. With DDL, the students were given several concordance lines (example sentences), observed and analyzed the linguistic features that they had, and finally generalized grammatical points on their own.
- The grammar units were about passives, relative clauses, and phrases indicating purpose, result, and contrast.
- The study was 10 weeks in length.
- To compare the effects of DDL and TDA, the three classes attended grammar tests before and after the instruction; their perspectives on the treatments were also surveyed throughout the experiment.

What the researchers found

- All classes significantly improved on the grammar tests after the instruction.
- No differences were found in the degree of improvement between the three classes.
- However, as the experiment proceeded Classes B and C showed growing endorsements for DDL whereas Class A liked TDA less and less.

Things to consider

- In this study, DDL and TDA brought about similar pedagogical effects on grammar students’ performance. This suggests that DDL can also serve as an effective teaching method in an EFL context like Taiwan—at least as effective as the traditional approach (TDA) that Taiwanese undergraduate students are used to.
- The fact that DDL treatments were more favored by students than the traditional approach may lend further support to the pedagogical suitability of DDL to undergraduate students in Taiwan.
- Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that running a DDL class demands a lot of time and effort, which is an investment that most traditional classes do not have to make. This issue is particularly important given that DDL brought about only similar effects to those of TDA but was so much more time-consuming to practice.
- An equally important issue for future researchers to consider is DDL teachers’ perspectives, an aspect that has not yet been fully exhausted.