The Influence of Pre-task Grammar Instruction on L2 Learning: An Experimental Study

Shaofeng Li · Rod Ellis · Jeungeun Kim
(Florida State University · Curtin University · Florida State University)


This article reports a study examining the impact of pre-task explicit instruction on L2 learning outcomes. 72 eighth-grade EFL learners at a Chinese middle school were assigned to three groups: Explicit Instruction + Task (EI), Task Only, and Control. Both experimental groups performed two communicative tasks providing opportunities for the learners’ exposure to and use of the English passive voice—the target structure. The EI group were given a brief grammar lesson on the target structure before performing the tasks, while the Task Only group performed the tasks without receiving the grammar lesson. The control group did not receive any instructional treatment. Learning was measured via an untimed grammaticality judgement test and an elicited imitation test. The results showed that pretask instruction resulted in greater learning gains, but the effects were only evident on the grammaticality judgment test. The results suggest that pretask instruction may facilitate the learning of explicit knowledge but its effects on implicit knowledge remain unclear.

Key words: Pre-task grammar instruction, task-based language instruction, foreign language education, second language acquisition, English as a foreign language

I. Introduction

The field of second language acquisition has witnessed a large volume of research on task-based learning and teaching over the past two decades. The enormity of the research is evidenced by the publication of a number of
volumes (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015; Robinson, 2011; Skehan, 2014) and special journal issues (Solon, Long, & Gurzynski-Weiss, 2017; Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Mackey, 2016) that examine the claims, principles, and procedures of this instructional and learning approach. However, one core issue that has not been empirically examined is the effects of pretask instruction on second language (L2) development. The necessity and impact of pretask instruction is at the core of the debate over task-supported instruction (TSI) (Ellis, 2017) and task-based instruction (TBI) (Long, 2016). Task-supported instruction is an approach to teaching based on a structural syllabus and typically involves presentation-practice-production (PPP). In this approach, the instructional cycle starts with explicit instruction on a linguistic structure, followed by controlled practice to enable the learner to gain more control over the structure, and ends with free production practice activities where the learner applies the learned knowledge in real operating conditions. Task-based instruction emphasizes the importance of addressing linguistic forms while, but not before, learners are performing a communicative task (Long, 2016). In this view, pretask instruction is not an option, and focus on form, if necessary, must occur in response to errors learners make in their oral production. The pros and cons of the two approaches have been extensively debated. However, to determine the superiority of each approach, one must collate empirical evidence to show what influence pretask grammar instruction may have on learning outcomes. Nevertheless, despite its theoretical and pedagogical significance, this seemingly simple and yet important question has not been investigated in task-based research. This study sought to fill this gap by examining the impact of explicit grammar instruction preceding communicative tasks on the development of learners’ explicit and implicit knowledge of the linguistic target.