Schulz, R.A. (2001). Cultural differences in student and teacher perceptions concerning the role of grammar instruction and corrective feedback

Summary

This article explores students’ and teachers’ perspectives regarding explicit grammar instruction and error correction by comparing two studies from the U.S. and Columbia. Both studies employed a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire for students and teachers, however a qualitative, follow-up study in the form of an interview question was used only with the Columbian teachers. Participants included 824 foreign language (FL) post-secondary students and 92 FL teachers for the U.S. study, and 607 post-secondary FL students and 122 FL teachers for the Columbian study. Students and teachers from the U.S. study were learning and teaching a variety of languages, including French, German, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian where the taught and learned language for the Columbian study was English at 79.5% and French at 9.8%. Analysis and discussion of the results indicated that Columbian FL learners have a greater preference for error correction and grammar than do U.S. FL learners, however, of particular concern to Schulz (2001) are the sizeable discrepancies between the teachers and students from both cultures concerning both the teaching of grammar and error correction.

Results showed that both students and teachers from both cultures acknowledged the importance of explicit grammar instruction to some extent, however students’ overall belief in the importance was much stronger. Of particular interest to Schulz (2001) was the discrepancy in results between students’ and teachers’ attitudes towards communicative activities. Only 66% of students gave preference to communicative activities to the 82% of teachers. Regarding error correction, 90% of students to 30% of teachers agreed that students’ errors should be corrected while speaking. According to Schulz (2001) the results should cause reflection for the educator who is reluctant to provide and explicit grammar instruction and error correction while students are speaking.

Schulz (2001) suggests possible reasons for the differences in student and teacher perceptions of explicit grammar instruction and error feedback, including 1) the way FLs are taught and tested, 2) derogatory myths about grammar, and 3) personal experiences learning grammar or receiving corrective feedback. High positive responses from students to the statement that learners prefer their teacher to be involved in the correction process indicate that they view their teacher as an expert to teach grammar and correct errors, which may also have contributed to the discrepancy.

To conclude, Schulz (2001) emphasizes the importance in teachers’ acknowledgement of student perceptions to enhance learning and to avoid potential conflict. She also states that because there is so much debate over the importance of explicit grammar instruction and error correction, the evidence her study presents may help to shed some light
on the debate.

Critical Analysis

The strength of Schulz’s (2001) comparative study is the large number of participants involved, totaling 1431 students and 214 teachers. For this type of research, of most importance is that the measures being used are reliable and that the participants we receive data from are representative of all the individuals we want to apply the results to (Slavin, 2007). Therefore, as the questionnaire was adequate and potential bias was taken into account, the results can be seen as representative of the population from which the questionnaires were received. The population was, however, only one university in either country. I attended Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, both in Ottawa, where the political and philosophical viewpoints from each were, and I believe still are extremely different. Therefore, to suggest putting our faith in results from this study instead of “in the conflicting proclamations of theorists in Applied Linguistics” (Schulz, 2001, p. 256), is asking the unreasonable, in my opinion, due to the limited scope of the study.

I am of the belief, however, that despite the limitations of this study and others similar, the findings can still be regarded as important contributions to a greater understanding of an issue. Whether or not the obvious differences in student and teacher perceptions regarding explicit grammar instruction and error correction are limited to the two specific contexts, the overwhelming differences in opinion suggest that there is cause of concern. This article made me realize that although I often hold a general belief that all of my students are sick and tired of studying grammar (having studied it explicitly for up to 9 years before entering my university course), that may not always be the case. Although it may appear that most dislike or feel they don’t need error correction during communicative activities, maybe that too is not the case.

How do you feel about the results from Schulz’s (2001) study in relation to your teaching context and practice?