Consciousness Raising Activities in some Lebanese English Language Classrooms: Teacher Perceptions and Learner Engagement^{1, 2}

Agneta M-L Svalberg

CELTEAL-School of Education, University of Leicester, 21 University Rd., Leicester LE1 7RF, UK

The paper starts from the premise that approaches to the teaching of English can only be assessed in the particular settings where they may be used. Cultures of learning, teachers' and students' beliefs and prevailing material conditions will all have a bearing on how a particular approach is received. In the case study reported on here, four teachers implemented a Consciousness Raising (CR) approach to grammar instruction with nearly 200 students in years 7, 8 and 9 of a Lebanese Secondary School. The teachers' and students' reactions to the particular set of activities trialled were recorded in teacher diaries and reports and through interviews with the teachers and their coordinator, and discussions with the participating students. Both teachers and students were overall positive to the approach. The prevailing culture of learning, which encourages learner autonomy and an analytical approach to language seems to have contributed. It was found, however, that in order to avoid discrepancies in the use of metalanguage and classifications and to allow insights from CR to be used in language production-for-practice, CR would need to be an integral part of the regular integrated skills syllabus.

Keywords: grammar, consciousness raising, language awareness, culture of learning

Introduction

The topic of this paper is an evaluation of the appropriacy of a Consciousness-Raising (CR) approach to grammar learning/teaching in a Secondary School in Lebanon, and a discussion of its implications. The research was carried out in a case study project called the 'Grammar Awareness in Lebanon (GAL) Project', supported by a grant from the Council for British Research in the Levant.

The setting for the study was Lycée National in Bchamoun³, in the greater Beirut area, Lebanon. The learners were Secondary School Pupils in year 7, 8 and 9. Their English teachers implemented a set of CR exercises in their language classes over a period of four weeks and reported to the researcher on both their own views and the reactions of their students.

Lebanon is home to a range of ethnic, religious and language communities. Its long history as a sea faring, trading nation and its colonial past are evident in the present, sociolinguistically and educationally. Multilingualism and bilingual education are the rule rather than the exception. The school referred to has a French and an English Medium stream and the first language of the children is Arabic. From Primary Grade One, Maths and Science subjects and Computer Skills are taught in either English or French while Social Science subjects are taught in Arabic. The research was carried out in English Medium classes. The children appear to be highly communicative in their first foreign language. The main concern of the teachers is thus not fluency but accuracy.

Some of the characteristics of a CR approach are apparent in the materials used in the present study (see sample in Appendix 1) and in the discussion below. The terminology may be less obvious. James (1992) made a distinction between the raising of 'awareness' and 'consciousness'. According to this, a person can be made

aware of what they already know while raising consciousness, in contrast, involves the creation of new knowledge. The awareness/consciousness distinction can, however, be difficult to maintain in relation to learners as the exact state of their knowledge is not usually known. I will use the term CR to mean making learners aware of how language is used, whether or not they had some unconscious knowledge of it before. In those terms, CR aims to create heightened language awareness. The awareness can relate to grammar rules, or to other patterns such as the appropriate use of language in specific contexts for particular purposes. According to Ellis (1994: 643):

...in consciousness raising activities the learners are not expected to produce the target structure, only to understand it by formulating some kind of cognitive representation of how it works.

This means that the learners will gain an understanding of how, for example, the grammar rule works but that production-for-practice exercises are not part of CR. As we shall see, this had consequences for the design of this study.

While CR activities can, in principle, be inductive or deductive, I would argue that the approach has come to be associated with a learner centered classroom and that CR activities are therefore more likely to be inductive. The activities used in this study have elements of both but are mainly inductive. Perhaps due to its usually inductive nature, Hedge (2000) considers a CR approach compatible with "the culture of the communicative classroom". Another common feature of CR activities which would justify this assessment is that they involve learners in talking about language, thus providing a communicative dimension.

Below, I will first address the issue of appropriacy of CR as an approach. This is followed by a brief description of the research method and a longer presentation and discussion of findings. The paper ends with some reflections on possible implications and suggestions for further research.

Appropriacy of CR in Different Contexts

The study was prompted by the realization that recommendations by English Language Teaching (ELT) experts from 'Inner Circle' countries (the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand; Kachru 1985) are not always either welcome or appropriate in other countries (Ellis 1996). The purpose of the GAL Project was to explore the viability of inductive CR, a relatively recent approach to the learning/teaching of grammar, in a particular classroom context outside the 'Inner Circle'. Little research has been done in this area. Mohammed (2004) found that adult learners in New Zealand liked both a deductive and an inductive CR exercise, but did not explore their perceptions further.

From an SLA perspective, our increased understanding of the role of noticing and awareness (Schmidt 1990; Fotos 1994; Izumi 2002) makes CR seem an attractive pedagogic option in principle. However, the case of CLT indicates that one should not take a positive response to any new approach for granted. Gupta (2004) relates how CLT was imposed from above but in effect rejected by teachers and students in Panjab University in India until, more than ten years down the line, the social and linguistic context has changed and CLT is becoming accepted and appreciated as fulfilling a genuine need for communicative competence. This and other studies, e.g. Liao (2004) and Lewis & McCook (2002), suggest that attitudes to teaching

approaches are based on a variety of factors among which SLA research evidence may play a very minor role.

Hence the assumption of the present study that a CR approach might be more or less appropriate and effective in different cultural contexts. Informal discussion with Lebanese teachers prior to this study had indicated that teacher fronted explanations followed by structured grammar exercises were common in Lebanese schools. At the same time, my impression was that Lebanon was far too multifaceted for generalizations about Lebanese teachers and students to be useful. In this study, 'culture' thus means the 'small culture' of a particular school or a particular classroom (Holliday 1999). It is assumed that one school can differ from another, even in the same region or country, in terms of its 'culture of learning'. This concept was discussed in some depth by Cortazzi & Jin (1999) in the context of a national (Chinese) culture. By culture of learning Cortazzi and Jin (1999:169) mean that:

behaviour in the classroom is set within taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach and learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education.

A culture of learning is part of the 'hidden curriculum'. As Cortazzi and Jin (1999) point out, in many language classrooms more than one culture of learning is represented. Choice of texts, lay-out, exercise and activity types and so on, all encapsulate expectations and ambitions which are part of particular cultures of learning. CR activities are no exception and so their compatibility with the prevalent culture needed to be investigated. In the present study the teachers and students are all Lebanese with Arabic L1. It was assumed that whatever small cultures of learning they represented would be fairly similar and that there would also be a particular 'school culture'.

Although some locally produced books are used in the school, a different cultural influence could be exerted by the majority of the textbooks which originate in the Inner Circle countries. These contain occasional CR activities in the form of 'guided discovery' exercises. The English Language Coordinator, however, indicated that CR was a new approach to the teachers and students, and this was also borne out by the research data.

The study discussed set out to answer the following questions in regard to the particular research context:

Qu.1: How do the teachers perceive CR activities?

Qu.2: How do the students perceive CR activities?

Methodology

In the case study, four English Language teachers implemented a series of five or six CR activities, each lasting 15-30 minutes, over a four week period in Secondary levels 7, 8 and 9 of the English Medium stream. Nearly 200 students carried out the activities.

The sample depended on the availability of classes, including the willingness of teachers to participate. Hence there was not an equal number of students in each level and there were more boys than girls.

Table 1 The students and their teachers

<i>Level</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
Year 7	56	51	107	T1, T4
Year 8	32	14	46	T3
Year 9	22	22	44	T2
	110	87	197	

According to the English Language Coordinator (ELC), the classes are mixed ability as regards English Language. The students do not generally use English out of school: “All the English they know is from the textbook” [ELC Interview].

All the English Language teachers in the school are university graduates and receive some in-service training at the school. In the interview, the ELC said:

The office is always a workshop. I meet [the teachers] almost every Saturday. Usually on Saturday. I introduce the technique that we’ll be doing in class over a period of time. We see what new things we are going to be doing in the lesson. It is a practical classroom – they do the activities that they will be doing in their classes with their students [ELC I].

This description coincided well with the ethos and activities I had observed on my visits to the school.

The teachers’ involvement in the research took the form of an Action Research (AR) project in which they were asked to implement the CR activities, keep a diary as they were doing so, and write a brief report at the end of it. The embedding of the AR is illustrated in fig.3, below. The questions included in the smaller box are ones the teachers themselves tried to answer during the implementation phase. They are not the main concern of this paper. Nor will the third research question in the large box be discussed here. The research questions that will be discussed in this paper are Qu.1 and Qu.2, in bold, at the top of the larger box in the figure.

Figure 1 The 'nested' design of the GAL project.

Once the form of cooperation with the school had been established the study proceeded as follows:

1. Training of teachers in the use of the CR activities and in Action Research
2. Pre-test of students (not discussed here)
3. Teachers implement CR activities over a four week period, keep a diary and write a final report.
4. Post-test of students (not discussed here)
5. Individual teacher interviews, and interview with English Language coordinator.
6. English Language coordinator conducts class discussions to collect student impressions.

The project rested on the teachers' involvement in the study. All were interested and supportive, and the proactive and very competent interventions by the ELC were particularly helpful. As all the participants were to some degree researchers, I will refer to myself as 'the principal researcher'. Being based in the UK, I made four visits to the school in Lebanon to set up, monitor and eventually wrap up the project. On the first visit, I was given samples of students' writing and the English teachers nominated the main learning/teaching problems in Secondary levels 7-9. The feedback suggested that both students and teachers would perceive CR activities on the use of clauses and sentences as relevant to their needs. Run-on sentences and poor punctuation were major problems in all three levels, and one of the teachers' main concerns.

The second visit involved training the teachers in Action Research and in the use of the CR activities, in two three-hour workshops. What I have called Action Research here did not fulfil all the criteria for such research (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, Nunan 1992, McNiff & Whitehead 2002). Crucially, it was not initiated by the

practitioners, nor did they have much control over its design. Nevertheless, the implementation part of the research was carried out by the practitioners in their own classrooms and the activities trialled responded to a grammar problem identified by them.

Following the Action Research, there were semi-structured interviews with the teachers. These lasted 10-15 minutes. They were conducted by the principal researcher and took place in a small, general purpose room next to the ELC's office. There was a fair amount of background noise and occasionally teachers would wander in to fetch something.

There were 14 questions (Appendix 2). As the principal researcher had not been present when the activities were administered, the first three questions tried to establish how this was handled. The remaining 11 questions aimed to give the teachers opportunity to relate their impressions of students' attitudes and engagement with the material and to give their own views on the type of activity.

The interview with the ELC was unstructured. It dealt first with the administration process and she was then asked to give a brief background sketch of the teachers and the students.

The interviews were transcribed ignoring elements deemed not to have a major bearing on the intended message, such as most pauses, hesitations, and interjections in Arabic (e.g. discourse fillers). Some portions of the interviews, marked {...} in the transcripts, are unintelligible. Unbracketed ... (three dots) indicate that a transcribed portion has been left out.

The research design had a number of limitations, the most important being the near absence of learners' voices. It had originally included interviews with a number of students from each level. However, a clash with Ramadhan, exam dates and the principal researcher's other commitments meant that the interviews could not be conducted within a reasonable time after the end of the trial. The ELC instead visited each of the classes involved in the trial and held a 15 minute discussion with them about their impressions. The students' views were collated into a one page report and sent to the principal researcher. Information about the students' views could also be gleaned, indirectly, from the teachers' verbal and written reports of the students' engagement with the activities. It would be important for any similar, future study to include the voices of the students.

The role played by the teachers who implemented and reported back on the CR activities was both a strength and a limitation. The teachers volunteered to participate which means that they may not have been representative of the teaching staff as a whole. A number of variables could not be controlled for, e.g. individual teaching styles and preferences, and the pressures of the regular syllabus, which influenced the year groups differentially (see below). On the other hand, an account of the teachers' first hand experiences of implementing CR was the very basis of the study. The fact that they kept diaries helped avoid the presence of an outside observer in the classroom.

The data thus consisted of teacher interviews, interviews with the coordinator, the teachers' diaries and teachers' reports, plus the ELC's report on the students' views. The discussion of findings below will be illustrated with excerpts. The coding of their provenance is given in square brackets immediately after each excerpt and consists of the teacher code and data type, e.g. [T3 I] = Interview with Teacher 3. 'Report' and 'Diary' are coded R and D respectively.

The CR activities

There was one text with one set of exercises for each year group. The year 7 materials can be seen in Appendix 1. The reason for not varying the text was to save time. A comprehension check was only needed in the first session. After that, the learners could go straight into the new exercise each time.

The students were induced to notice certain grammatical features in a text by having to mark them in some way, e.g. underlining all the verbs or putting slashes between clauses. They then compared and discussed their answers, typically in pairs first and finally with the whole class.

The activities aimed to make available to conscious reflection an understanding of the clause as a concept, and how clauses function to form sentences. It was thought that this might eventually help the learners acquire an improved command of punctuation, including a decrease in run-on sentences. (The pre and post-tests, not discussed in this paper, were administered to see whether there was any such effect in the immediate term.) As the core of the clause is the verb group, the CR started with a verb recognition exercise. The last exercise had students picking out and counting clauses in sentences. In between, there were activities highlighting the difference between tensed and untensed verbs and establishing the concept of 'verb group' (Appendix). The most salient features of the CR activities as a type were that there was 'induced noticing' and a 'talking-*about*' grammar element, but no production-for-practice of clauses and sentences.

Findings

The findings from the different types of data will be discussed together, starting with some background about the classroom administration of the CR, continuing with the students' perceptions and their engagement with the activities, mainly as reported by the teachers, and finishing with the teachers' own perspective on the CR activities.

Classroom implementation

How the teachers handled the administration of the activities in their classrooms gives some insight into how CR was situated relative to the particular culture of learning and the existing curriculum.

Language use: In accordance with school policy, all the work was carried out in English. This was not a problem as the students are used to discussing a range of topics in English.

Work Mode: All of the teachers reported doing the exercises according to a similar pattern: the students did the exercises first individually, and then usually shared their solutions in pairs as they were seated. This was followed by a class discussion which took slightly different forms depending on the teacher. The year 9 teacher (T2) first nominated a student to suggest an answer. Students who disagreed would raise their hands and the alternatives would be discussed. She reported that as time went by and more exercises were done, disagreements became more rare despite the greater complexity of the later exercises. T3, in year 8, had a different approach in that following the class discussion she read the correct answers to the students. This might have happened because the students were still unsure of the answers. The teacher was also either puzzled by or did not agree with some of the answers, as will be discussed below.

Student autonomy: T3 described her interventions as ‘interfering’ which seems to indicate a belief that it is good to let students find their own answers if possible. This impression is supported by comments from other teachers as well.

[The year 7 students] gave back correct answers – I didn’t give them correct answers. But, we discussed: is it correct or isn’t it correct? And we all agreed what is the correct answer. We came up with it. I won’t give them the answer, the right answer. [T1 I]

In an exercise which some students in year 9 found puzzling, the teacher gave the first few answers and then: “they started figuring out the mistakes by themselves and correcting before we even come to it.” [T2 I]

Timing: The teachers reported supplying extra examples and occasional explanations when needed. OHTs of the keys were available but were not used, probably because projectors are not a permanent feature of the classrooms. Some of the year 7 students felt they could have gone through the exercises more quickly but generally time was perceived as being too short. In the words of T4, “timing was really an obstacle”. This is supported by T3, who wrote:

“To me I felt that these concepts are easy but not to teach so quickly since I needed more time to introduce the idea of clauses – tensed untensed/verb groups.”

and also:

“I think that if I had enough time to complete this activity as a “lesson” on it’s own, it would have been worked out more properly by the students and the teacher as well”.

Relationship to the curriculum: The above extracts imply that the CR activities did not fit in with the other activities of the class at that time. T3’s students in year 8 were, in fact, working on reading and writing poetry. In contrast, the year 9 students were learning to use ‘Adjective Clauses’ and ‘Noun Clauses’ (clauses with an adjectival or nominal function). The year 9 teacher said the following about teaching her students pseudo-cleft sentences: “noun clauses were something new to them this year. The [CR] activity itself – knowing that this is a clause - facilitated the explanation definitely” [T2 I]. The teachers were experienced practitioners and probably attempted in one way or another to make links between the CR activities and the rest of the classwork. This would have proved the hardest for the year 8 teacher and easiest in year 9.

The use of terminology and concepts in the CR activities differed to some extent from that of the regular syllabus. This will be discussed below.

Students’ attitudes and engagement

The overall mood: The teachers were asked about the general mood while the students were doing the CR activities. The response was mostly positive. Words used were ‘nice’, ‘really good’, ‘motivated’, ‘interested in the analysis’, ‘very cooperative’. T3 said that “the students like grammar a lot” and T4 that the students “liked the exercises...they were working.”

There were also, however, some aspects of the activities which were less popular. For example, both according to the teachers, and to the students themselves (ELC R), all the groups were disappointed and bored to find they had to work on the same text for all five exercises. (This was a time saving measure, see above.) But, at least in T3's classes, "when they started, they forgot about it – they forgot it was the same text" [T3 I].

Metalinguage & Concept: The activities were a novelty in two ways. One was the CR approach itself and the particular format of the activities, the other was use of metalinguage and concepts. T3 wrote with reference to year 8:

...all this material/activity/ies were brand new to the students
because they take these concepts in the upper intermediate classes.
[T3 R]

In all the levels, unfamiliarity caused students to feel confused [T2 I, T4 I] and upset [T2 I]. T3's report explained:

[Some students] worked feeling so enthusiastic about things they were doing. But one of the classes felt so confused where I had then to keep on explaining the concepts given especially the one about "tensed" and untensed [T3 R].

The main sticking points were the distinction between tensed and untensed verbs and the concept of a verb group. Neither is included in the regular curriculum. According to one teacher, "[verb group] really goes against everything we teach" [T1 I]. T1 explained in her report that the students are taught that, for example, 'was taking' or 'had been going' is 'the verb'. This is obviously difficult to reconcile with a tensed/untensed distinction and re-labelling these units as 'verb group' can be puzzling. Some year-7 students "felt {...} upset about the verbs – the tensed/untensed. They asked, 'Miss {...}, why are we taking these, what for?'" [T4 I]. The teacher commented that "it's good to know them but they didn't know how they should deal with them in future". The students seemed to have been unsure if this distinction would be required knowledge beyond the trial of these exercises, and thus if it was worth their while getting to grips with.

There was not complete agreement on this, however, as T3's comment indicates:

And when they had the progressive - 'was eating' - they didn't know that it was a verb group – they thought that 'was' was separated and 'eating' was separated – they were taught but they forgot about it – this exercise was really important to them to learn that this is a verb group. [T3 I]

For the teachers, the new terms and concepts could to some degree have been unsettling as they had to deal with the students' questions and provide extra explanations and examples. They may not have been convinced themselves that they were useful. In her report, T1 stated "I don't agree on tensed and non tensed verbs." When the students were not satisfied with her explanation she reportedly told them "Just do it – don't discuss it"! (laughter) [T1 I]. This raises questions about the nature of linguistic analysis in a CR approach, to which we will return in the conclusion.

T1 did not seem to think the ‘confusion’ and ‘upset’ feelings had been a major problem. She summed up her impressions from year 7 by saying “Everyone felt that he could do it – this was very positive. This gave the pleasant environment in the class that I was talking about” [T1 I]. The other year-7 teacher was similarly unperturbed and she and her students seemed to enjoy discussing grammar [T4 I].

T4’s detailed diary notes show that her students were able to justify some of their choices. Below is a compilation of the reasons they gave for classifying some words as verbs:

1. translated to Arabic
2. using ‘to’
3. it shows an action/ something that happened
4. –ing shows this is a verb
5. verb in the past (-ed shows it is a verb)
6. it is preceded by a subject
7. it is followed by an object
8. I know it before/ because it is a verb (background knowledge)

[T4 D]

Collectively, the students were able to use a range of criteria for the determination of word class and in six of the eight justifications display a knowledge of formal or informal metalanguage to talk about it.

The new and different terminology and concepts did not put the students off the tasks as such. T4 made the assessment that “the chart ...the clauses were really efficient - the linker and the chart, and the ones that explained {...} verb groups. This - they liked it a lot.” [T4 I]

Level of concentration: One of the interview questions dealt with the students’ level of concentration. The teachers all agreed that the students had been concentrating on solving the exercises. This is how T2 explained it:

Yes, definitely because you know it requires analysis, where to put the slash, what to circle, then they have to do the counting, then compare the counting, they were interested now, “Did you circle this, did you slash?” Yes, the task itself calls for concentration. [T2 I]

In the year 9 classes there was silence or quiet talking in English, sharing and justifying solutions (T2 I). About year 7 doing the first exercise, T1 wrote that they focused on the task and didn’t speak much” [T1 D]. T3 uses the terms ‘active’ and ‘focused’ to describe students’ engagement [T3 D].

Silence could be a sign of boredom or lack of engagement, but the teachers reported that the students were talking to each other, “but not noisily” [T2 I]. There was an “acceptable” level of noise [T1 I]. The students of T3 “talked about the exercise. Not about {...} something nonsense not related to the thing we’re doing” [T3 I]. Even T4, who said that one “could hear the silence” in the classroom, reported that “they discussed but very silently and they were trying to find things {...} together” [T4 I].

Training effect: There seems to have been some training effect over the four weeks. The further on they got with the exercises, the more interested the students became. T1 said: “Later on they were more engaged in the exercises” [T1 I], and T4 concurred:

The first activities, one to four, they were not so motivated as in five and six, the clauses ones. This is the change I noticed - I noticed their attitude was really different. They were more excited at the end than the beginning. [T4 I]

The increased interest may have been partly due to the greater cognitive challenge of the later exercises but familiarity also played a role. T3 made a comment pointing out the facilitating effect of each exercise building on the previous ones: “It was easier to them – the following exercises. They remembered every past exercise” [T3 I]. Several factors thus seem to have contributed: accumulated grammatical consciousness, increased level of difficulty and familiarity with the exercise type:

When they took the 3rd paper – the 3rd activity, they read it alone and they knew what to do. Then they asked the questions: ‘What’s the meaning of this?’ ‘I don’t understand.’ In the beginning, no, they were confused, but later they got accustomed. [T3 I]

In the teacher’s view, the year-8 students’ questions were a sign of student engagement. Prior to the third activity, they had been too puzzled to formulate any queries.

A learning process?: In their normal day-to-day practice teachers will continuously try to assess, however impressionistically, whether learning is going on. The teachers were therefore asked whether they perceived this to be the case when the students were doing the exercises. T1 and T2 were the most positive in their replies. In the interviews, T1 said that when sharing their answers and explaining, the students were definitely learning. T2 also mentioned as indicators of learning the increasing speed with which students were working and correcting their work. T3 was more reserved in her assessment and stated that the exercises were “just reinforcement”. An interpretation is that, in her eyes, stand-alone grammar activities such as these are insufficient to cause learning. T4 mentioned the figure 60% - whether this referred to the amount of intake or to the proportion of students who were learning is not clear. However, she made an interesting assessment to do with culture of learning:

they don’t interpret it as a concept - this is the difference - the way they studied it... [T4 I]

T4 added that the students could benefit from the adoption of a conceptual approach to grammar. There were also appreciative comments from the teachers about the mental activity and discovery process triggered by the activities:

I think that it got them thinking, “Ah, this is this, we always read these kind of sentences, but I didn’t use to slash it to see this is a clause.” Now they know the ‘why’, there are more clauses in one sentence, sometimes {...}. So the analysis itself was a challenge to them. I like activities which involve them mentally, and they like it – yeah we like it more than, like drills {...} [T2]

T3 found the sharing aspect of the CR activities interesting and added that “Some students notice important things ... I was amazed that they noticed such things” [T3 I]. While noticing (Schmidt 1990) does not guarantee intake (Leeser 2003, cited in VanPatten 2004), CR assumes it to be a first step. T3’s comment seem to relate to students’ independent, non-induced noticing, showing that the students were mentally alert during the activities.

The teachers' own views of the CR

Absence of a production element versus integration of skills: In the interview, the teachers were asked their view on the lack of a production-for-practice element in the activities (see above). Production exercises had been excluded from the activity package in order to obtain teachers' and students' views on CR as such, and not on what might follow. To some extent this created an artificial situation. The question had to be rephrased as the teachers saw the pre and post test (not discussed in this paper) as part of the activity package. When the point of the question was eventually put across, the response was mixed. T1 was non-committal but described the situation as follows:

The activities were different. We teach the students to apply what they learned not only to be aware of it. In our activities we stress the usage. It's important to know how to apply, e.g. to write a sentence or make a question using a certain grammar concept or rule. [T1 R]

T3, who was the most critical of the teachers, was clearly sceptical about the value of exercises which do not contain a production element: "We have to write sentences, and text - write paragraphs. Every time, we give them a writing task" [T3 I]. About exercises without a production element, T3 said:

I think it's not so effective. You know, they forget. It's important to write – to implement such tasks and such exercises and such activities in their writing. It will be more reinforced. I don't think that when they took the activities and the post-test they learned from some of the activities a lot - they still have their own ideas – they still have their own background – I don't think it affected them a lot. [T3 I]

Later on in the interview, T3 emphasized her belief in the integration of skills, an approach adopted by the school. T2 also pointed out that she always tries to integrate skills and ask for either written or spoken production and expressed her conviction that if you ask students to use a linguistic feature they have been taught, whether vocabulary or grammar, "one time, two times, three times - at last they will be able to pick it up, they'll know how to" [T2 I]. In all, three of the four teachers made explicit statements in favour of an integration of skills approach, which is already practiced in the school.

Challenges: Any activity which invites discussion of language form or usage presents a special challenge to the teacher. Student questions are likely to be unpredictable; terms and concepts may need to be explained; illustrative examples may be needed; seemingly contradictory evidence may have to be dealt with. In the present study, the teachers encountered all of these situations. The year 9 teacher, for example, had to explain the nesting of one dependent clause in another ("It seems [that [if you want to live a long time,] you should...]"). There were teacher's notes to help with this. In some cases, however, the teachers were not in agreement with the analysis presented in the CR activities but, feeling constrained by the research context, could not deviate from the programme. One such instance, has already been mentioned above. Another occurred in year 9, where the text included a present participle. The sentence was: "...you stand a good chance of living a long and healthy life." It appears that the teacher and the students were used to considering -ing forms 'gerunds' and, though deverbal, basically non-verbs⁴. In the CR materials, the form was classified as an untensed verb. The teacher commented: "I didn't focus that it is a

verb – they couldn't see it was a verb. It is taken out of a verb – it functions as a – so I didn't impose it" [T2 I] Rather than reinforcing the tensed/untensed distinction, the classification of 'living' in this context thus remained unresolved. In year 8, the teacher's diary states that "During verb identification, students were confused about underlining the verb 'to be' alone without underlining the active verb" [T3 D]. The sentence referred to is "I was shocked when I heard ...". It is not clear from the diary whether the teacher was of the view that 'shocked' functions as a verb in this context, despite it being classified as an adjective in the teachers' notes. In any case, such student queries demand a high level of language awareness on the part of the teacher who may need to resolve them adequately on the spot.

Personal interests and preferences: The personal experiences, beliefs and preferences of the participating teachers will have played a part in the degree of acceptance of the CR activities by both teachers and students. All the teachers said that they had approached the trials in a positive frame of mind. In one report, the teacher commented: "I'm interested in any action research." [T4 R] T1 was keen to see how effective the exercises would be: "I was interested from the beginning. I wanted to know the result of the whole thing" [T1 I]. T2 found the approach intrinsically interesting because: "I like analysis. That's why I like the last parts, four and five and six." [T2 I] At the end of the trial, T4 expressed her strong support for an inductive approach.

if we teach grammar this way it will be much better. This is how we should teach – the only way. We explain {...} then we go onto the exercises, the drills, whatever, but this is much better because they discovered the content – like the clause part – they really discovered - because to put clauses on the board and keep on talking about it [voice trails off] [T4 I]

T4's body language and tone of voice indicated that the traditional, deductive approach had not hitherto been effective.

Discussion

It was important in this study not to prejudge perceptions and attitudes but to allow participants to express their views as freely as possible. Hence a qualitative approach was appropriate. Teachers' and students' eagerness to be helpful might have had a biasing effect, but both positive views and criticism were expressed.

A misunderstanding which led to the completed exercises being collected in by the teachers was unfortunate. It may have meant that the students did the exercises more conscientiously than would otherwise have been the case. There is no reason to assume, however, that the exercises were confused with tests as solutions were discussed and checked, and students encouraged to correct their mistakes. Both teachers and students were aware that they were participating in research (or 'trying something out') and it appears that the collection of the papers was seen as part of this process.

The expectations and beliefs of individual teacher can have an effect on how student perceive of and interact with approaches and materials (Carless 2003, and Karavas-Douka 1995 cited in Carless 2003). The teacher who was most critical of the CR activities was T3. This coincided with her students (level 8) being the most critical, according to the ELC's report. As these classes had some difficulty fitting the CR into their regular syllabus (which included reading and writing poetry) a combination of contextual factors and the teachers' beliefs can have affected their

perceptions. In contrast, a couple of the teachers stated that they personally liked analysis of language. This might have prompted not only them but also their students to take a positive stance towards the CR activities.

How do the students perceive the CR activities? It was unfortunate that student interviews were not able to be carried out. The data indicates, however, an overall positive student response. Despite being somewhat bored with the same text and occasionally anxious or confused by some of the terminology and classifications, the students seemed to enjoy sharing and discussing responses and reacted well to the analytical nature of the tasks, engaging actively and focusing on the task. A perception of relevance (particularly of the clause concept) contributed to the positive reception while apparent irrelevance (e.g. of terminology) may have detracted. Some reasons for the generally positive student response to the CR activities in this particular setting emerged from the data:

- ❖ the students were used to explicit grammar instruction
- ❖ the students already had some formal and informal metalanguage
- ❖ the students were used to discussing (grammar and other topics) in English
- ❖ many of the students liked analytical tasks

How did the teachers perceive the CR activities? The overall positive teacher response to CR may in part have been due to a self-selection effect. Those who volunteered to participate in the study, may have been more open to change than some of those who did not. Nevertheless, the teachers were critical of the lack of integration of skills and had some difficulty with the terminology/classifications used in the material. The latter was partly due to the stand-alone nature of the exercises but also, arguably, to the demands of a more in-depth language analysis than is usual in text books. A consequence was that some student questions were left unresolved. On the other hand, the teachers appreciated the analytical, inductive nature of the tasks and the active student engagement and enthusiasm they observed. The teachers positive reactions seemed to outweigh the negative comments.

Several factors may have predisposed the teachers in this particular context to react positively to CR activities:

- ❖ the teachers were open to change
- ❖ the teachers were well able to deal with student questions
- ❖ there was a culture of encouraging student autonomy
- ❖ the teachers liked analytical tasks

In addition, the CR activities focused on an area of genuine, recognized need.

Conclusions

There is a good chance that a CR approach could be useful and effective in the school if the teachers were able to integrate it into their regular syllabus. At least three of the four teachers appeared to find the analytical nature of the CR activities enjoyable and useful. They did not seem put off by unexpected student questions but dealt with them and any lack of clarity by supplying their own examples and explanations. Finally,

there seems to be a general culture of encouraging student autonomy, which allowed for lively and productive pair and class discussions.

It is clear from the data that to make the best use of CR it should fulfil certain criteria. It should be part of the prevailing integrated skills approach, rather than in the form of stand-alone activities. A mix of analytical CR tasks and creative writing/speaking might be well received. Metalanguage and classifications would need to conform to what the students and teachers are used to, though one can imagine over time that insights from CR would lead to gradual changes in the syllabus. One of the reasons for the relative success of the GAL materials was that it focused on an area of the grammar which was considered especially relevant. Ideally, the teachers themselves should be in charge of identifying other areas where CR might be useful. The study indicates that while 'easy' activities have a place, cognitively challenging material may in fact be perceived as more stimulating and fun. Finally, an integration of CR into the regular curriculum, along the lines suggested, is likely to result in greater efficiency in terms of time (a problem mentioned by the teachers).

Further case studies of teacher and student perceptions of CR would be useful as the particular setting for the GAL project had characteristics not necessarily shared by other contexts⁵. For example, the Lycée National students were in the English Medium stream and well able to discuss grammar issues in the target language. This will obviously not be the case everywhere, and could have a major effect on the conduct and reception of CR. As was pointed out above, CR can take many different forms and so there is also the question of how different types of CR activities are perceived.

The research design of the GAL study also deserves a concluding remark. The local teachers' active involvement was invaluable in permitting the principal researcher to carry out a study in a learning/teaching contexts of which she had little knowledge. This kind of collaboration has the potential to benefit all concerned. Local teachers and the school can gain from an outsider's perspective and the research experience and initial training in the basics of Action Research might help teachers set up their own Action Research.

Since the conclusion of GAL, the ELC has trialled a modified version of her own design of the CR activities, incorporating a production element plus CR tasks and class discussions on the students' own writing. This integrates CR into the regular syllabus and introduces a 'noticing the gap' component (Thornbury 1997) which, due to the research purpose, was not present in the GAL materials. Further contacts with the school will show to what extent the teachers' experiences with CR has affected classroom practice.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 7th International Conference of the Association for Language Awareness at the University of Lleida, Spain, 19-21 July, 2004.
2. I am grateful to the University of Leicester for granting me study leave without which the timely completion of this paper would not have been possible.
3. I am indebted to the Lycée National for giving me access to its teachers and students; to the teachers and students for their enthusiastic participation and, especially, to the English Language coordinator, Ms Juheina Yakzan for her very competent and well informed supervision of the implementation face.

4. Since, in their regular syllabus, year 9 were studying 'noun-clauses' (clauses with nominal functions), this could have been an opportunity to reinforce that concept by pointing out the nominal function after preposition of the untensed clause of which 'living' is the verb. Identifying the unstated subject of 'living' should help distinguish its verb function from the use of -ing participles as nouns or adjectives.
5. The author will be happy to make the CR activity packages used in this study available to researchers wishing to conduct parallel or similar studies.

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