

Collaborative Planned Form-focused Activities Vs Collaborative Incidental Form-focused Activities: Elementary EFL learners' grammar learning in focus

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of collaborative form-focused activities on grammar learning of elementary EFL learners. To this end, 58 adult male Iranian EFL learners at elementary level of proficiency in three classes of language institutes were chosen. They formed the three groups of the study. The grammar section of Cambridge Michigan Placement test was used to ensure the homogeneity of the groups. Then, a grammar pre-test was administered to all groups to ensure that the participants were unfamiliar with the target grammatical items (irregular past tense of the verbs). At this stage, the treatment started and while one experimental group received collaborative planned form-focused activities, the other experimental group received collaborative incidental form-focused activities. The control group underwent regular classroom patterns and methods. After the treatment sessions, all the groups took a grammar post-test and their knowledge of the target irregular past tense was checked. Finally, SPSS software was used to run *t*-test. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the three groups regarding grammar learning, and that the group who experienced collaborative planned form-focused activities outperformed the other two groups.

Keywords: Collaborative form-focused activity, planned form-focused activity, incidental form-focused activity, Grammar learning, EFL learners

Introduction

By the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) into the field of language teaching in the 1970s and 1980s, formal teaching of grammar reduced. Mitchell (2000, p. 285) underscored that "based on the CLT approach, explicit grammar teaching was considered as an inefficient tool for developing communication skills". Because CLT is a learner-centered approach, the learners have the opportunity to participate in meaningful interactions in order to respond to communicative needs (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1991). Therefore, the learners' grammar needs are determined based on their performance on fluency activities (Brumfit, 1979). Over the years, it was shown that CLT has been successful in developing learners' fluency (Nunan, 1989) and has had a positive impact on learners' motivation and language use. Nonetheless, there is still one important concern regarding the grammatical competence of learners who were taught through CLT approach. It was claimed that such learners gain low levels of grammatical accuracy. The reason was that by focusing on the negotiation of meaning, the issue of form was overlooked. The purpose of the present study was to investigate two related issues. First, it attempted to identify the impact of collaborative form-focused activities on EFL learners' learning of irregular past tense verbs. Second, it tried to compare the

impact of collaborative planned form-focused activities and collaborative incidental form-focused activities regarding their effectiveness for the learning irregular past tense.

It seems necessary here to define planned and incidental form-focused activities from descriptive and operational viewpoints. To describe these concepts, it can be said that while a planned form-focused activity focuses the learners' attention on the forms during communication, an incidental form-focused activity focuses EFL learners' attention on a whole range of forms. In the present study, to implement a planned form-focused activity in the classroom, it was necessary to limit the learners to the past tense of some specific verbs through designing a collaborative activity. However, for incidental form-focused activity, while the learners' attention was drawn to the target forms, learning was not limited to these forms and the learners could communicate through using other forms. Based on the research hypotheses, experimental method was used and the unit of analysis was the irregular past tense of the verbs the participants had learned.

Background of the study

It is believed that paying attention to the grammatical form is crucial for language learning, but many issues related to teaching grammar still need further research and more treatment. In the meantime, one of the most recent approaches to grammar teaching is centered on focus-on-form in the communicative classroom (Parviz, & Gorjian, 2013). It is claimed that FFI is making efforts to intervene in the process of language learning by providing opportunities for them to practice specific features based on a syllabus and the systematic treatment of those features (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

It is now evident that EFL learners benefit from FFI because it assists them more efficiently to use their limited exposure to the sounds, words, and sentences of the language they are learning (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). One significant point is that FFI does not just focus on grammar. Teachers and students can focus on forms in language teaching which can be pronunciation, vocabulary, or other types of linguistic form central to language learning (Ellis, 2008). However, one of the crucial aspects of language learning has always been gaining grammatical knowledge that leads to accuracy in using a language for communication.

Grammar learning is considered a challenging task for EFL learners. According Spada and Lightbown (2008), on the one hand, improvements in language performance indicates learners' ability to make appropriate use of language forms they have learned during form-focused practice or to use metalinguistic knowledge they have acquired during grammar lessons to monitor their output. On the other hand, when learners produce language under conditions of time pressure or competing demands on attention, they may reveal that their grammatical knowledge is flawed and they still need some kind of treatment to help them internalize the grammar. It shows that grammar learning is a complicated process that has to be supported by appropriate teaching methods.

For implementing FFI in the classrooms, the learners are required to produce output in a collaborative way (Mayo, 2002). In fact, collaborative activities have recently received attention for grammar teaching. They are performed when learners assist each other in reconstructing linguistic forms (Foster & Ohta, 2005). The combination of the form-focused activities and collaborative activities are also common in language teaching. Collaborative focus-on-form tasks are designed to integrate attention to language forms into a communicative orientation (Ellis, 2000). Through collaboration, the learners regulate or restructure their knowledge and as a result, learning, cognition and interaction are closely connected (Esteve & Canada, 2001). The sociocultural approach also claims that collaboration is an opportunity for learning a foreign

language. During collaboration, learners can develop both their linguistic skill and their cognitive and problem solving ability (Abbasnasab Sardareh, Aghabozorgi & Dutt, 2015; de la Colina & Mayo, 2007).

Collaborative learning is a process to facilitate the achievement of a learning goal through working together in groups. During collaboration, the teacher still controls most of what is going on in the class, even if the students are working in groups. Collaborative learning requires the students to take full responsibility for working together, building knowledge together, changing and evolving together, and improving together. Collaborative learning is based on constructivism. According to the constructivist approach, knowledge is constructed and transformed by students. The learning process must be understood as something a learner does by activating existed cognitive structures or by constructing new cognitive structures that accommodate new input. Learners do not passively receive knowledge from the teacher, but teaching becomes a transaction between all the learners in the learning process. Collaborative learning shifts the responsibility for learning to the student, in the role of researchers and self-directed learner (Abbasnasab Sardareh, 2016; Dooly, 2008).

Collaborative learning centers on how learners help each other in reconstructing linguistic forms rather than engaging in negotiation of meaning caused by a communication breakdown (Jahangiri & Abbasnasab Sardareh, 2016; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Lee, 2004; Swain, 2001).

Research questions

Based on what was stated above, the following research questions were addressed in the present study:

Q1. Is there a significant difference between adult elementary learners taught through collaborative form-focused activities and those taught through traditional methods in learning irregular past tense?

Q2. Is there a significant difference between adult elementary learners taught through collaborative planned form-focused activities and those taught through collaborative incidental form-focused activities in learning irregular past tense?

Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant difference between the groups taught through collaborative form-focused activities and the control group regarding learning irregular past tense.

H2: There is a significant difference between the group taught through collaborative planned form-focused activities and the group taught through collaborative incidental form-focused activities regarding learning irregular past tense.

Methodology

Participants

Since the aim of the present study was to evaluate the impact of incidental and planned form-focused instruction on elementary EFL learners' grammar learning, the participants were all adult Iranian elementary EFL students of a private language institute. They were all males, with age range of 17 to 24. Because Iranian language institutes usually have students of one gender, it was by no means possible to include both genders in the study. Thus, the elementary students in three classes formed the three groups of the study including two experimental groups and one control group. The first and the second experimental groups consisted of 18 and 21 participants respectively, and the control group was formed by 19 participants.

Instruments

To achieve the purposes of this study, three instruments were used, 1) the grammar section of Cambridge Michigan Placement Test to check the homogeneity of the groups-- this Test is a general proficiency test for adult non-native speakers of English. It is designed to measure the learners' level of English proficiency in the six basic language skill areas including writing, grammar, and vocabulary, listening, reading, and speaking. Since the aim of our study was related to grammar teaching and learning, for practical reasons, we decided to administer only the grammar section of the Test, which included 40 multiple-choice questions, 2) a grammar pre-test to ensure that target grammatical items (irregular past tense of the verbs) were unknown to the participants--this instrument was used to check the participants' initial knowledge of the target Items. The grammar pre-test was in the form of a checklist and the participants were given a list of simple present verbs and were required to provide the past tense of the verbs, and 3) the grammar post-test--the aim of this test was to assess the learners' grammar learning at the end of the treatment. This test was in the form of fill-in-gap task. The participants were required to read the sentences with blanks and fill the blanks with the past tense of the given verbs.

Procedure

After choosing the participants based on the intact group sampling, homogeneity of the groups was checked by administering the grammar section of the Cambridge Michigan Placement test. Students who were not homogeneous with others were not excluded from the study physically. Their scores were just excluded from the data. The next procedure was to check the participants' knowledge of the target grammatical forms, i.e. irregular past tenses of the verbs. This procedure was considered as the pre-test. The participants were given a list of verbs and were asked to provide the past tense of the verbs. Verbs whose past tenses were known to the participants were excluded from the study. In this way, known verbs were excluded and, at the same time, the participants' initial knowledge of grammatical forms was measured. The next step was to teach irregular past tense which was part of the students' syllabus, through different activities. Actually, one experimental group received collaborative planned form-focused activity and the other received collaborative incidental form-focused activity. The control group underwent their regular classroom pattern and method.

For collaborative planned form-focused activity, a communicative task was used based on *Picture Description Tasks* introduced by Mackey and Gass (2005). According to Mackey and Gass (2005), picture description tasks are a kind of information-gap tasks and the successful completion of the tasks depends on the learners' information sharing. Learners were required to work in pairs and they were given some pictures and a list of irregular past tense of verbs with their meaning in front of them. The pictures illustrated some actions. One of the learners in each pair was required to make a sentence in past tense to explain a picture and the other guessed which picture was intended. The pictures were all obtained from Mackey and Gass (2005). The teacher observed the participants to ensure the correctness of the procedure.

For collaborative incidental form-focused activity, the same communicative task was used; however, learners were required to explain the pictures by saying the colors and number of the objects in each picture and make both present and past tense sentences for the pictures in pairs. In this way, using the target verbs past tenses was not the only way they could explain the pictures and guess which picture was intended. The teacher observed them to ensure the correctness of the procedure and to answer their questions regarding the meaning of the actions shown on the pictures and past tense forms that may arise incidentally.

After the treatment sessions, all the groups took a grammar test. Their knowledge of irregular past tense of the target verbs was tested by a short test considered as post-test. They were given a list of the target verbs and were required to provide their past tenses.

Results

In order to determine possible differences in learning irregular past tense, ONE WAY ANOVA was used. Table 1 below shows the results:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Standard deviation	Mean	Number	Groups
1.46	14.15	19	Control group
1.40	17.11	18	Planned
.810	15.57	21	Incidental

In table 1 above, the standard deviation and mean of the three groups were estimated. As can be seen, the mean of the first experimental group (planned) was higher than that of other groups: 17.11 ± 1.40 . This test can be used in conditions where variances are equal. This condition was identified through Leven's test as follows:

Table 2. Leven's test (variances equality condition)

P-Value	Second freedom degree	First freedom degree	F-test
.140	55	2	2.037

As it is seen, the homogeneity of the variances is admitted; therefore, ANOVA use is allowed here (Table 3 below).

Table 3. ANOVA

Sig	F-statistics	Mean square	Freedom degree	Sum of squares	Changes source
.000	25.947	40.311	2	80.622	Among groups
		1.554	55	85.447	Within the groups
			57	166.069	Total

The amount of F-statistics ($\text{sig} < 0.01$) is significant. In other words, learning irregular past tense is different among groups. Therefore, regarding the higher mean of the experimental groups in comparison with the control group, there is a significant difference between adult elementary learners taught through collaborative form-focused activities and those taught through traditional methods in learning irregular past tense-answer to the first research question.

Table 4. Post hoc test

Sig	Mean Difference		
.000	-2.95322*	Planned	Control group

.001	-1.41353*	Incidental	
.000	2.95322*	Control group	Planned
.000	1.53968*	Incidental	
.001	1.41353*	Control group	Incidental
.000	-1.53968*	Planned	

The above test shows the denotative comparison among groups with respect to one another. As it is shown, according to the observed level of error (less than 0.05), it can be detected that there is a significant difference among the three groups regarding the amount of grammar learning.

To answer the second research question, independent t-test was used to compare the scores obtained from the first experimental group (planned) with the scores obtained from the second experimental group (incidental).

Table 5. Independent t-test table

The comparison of the experimental groups' posttest					
Sig	T	Standard deviation	Mean		
.000	4.257	1.40	17.11	Planned	Posttest scores of grammar
		.810	15.57	Incidental	

Interpretation: the amount of F-test (sig < 0.01) is significant. In other words, there is a significant difference between the obtained scores of the two groups. However, based on the mean score of the planned group with higher scores in grammar learning, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the group taught through collaborative planned form-focused activities and the group taught through collaborative incidental form-focused activities regarding learning irregular past tense.

Discussion

The findings of the present study are comparable with the results of other research in this area. This comparison can be helpful to judge the findings and reach deeper understanding about the impact of collaborative form-focused activities on grammar learning. It is worth noting that previous studies in this area investigated the impact of collaborative form-focused activities on language learning without categorizing the activities into incidental and planned forms. Therefore, although a comparison can be made between the result of the first hypothesis of the present study and the previous findings, no evidence was found to make comparison between the previous findings and the results of the second hypothesis. In other words, previous studies advocated that collaborative form-focused activities can affect language learning positively, but they did not address the difference between the impact of planned and incidental form-focused activities. Although this issue makes the comparison difficult, it shows that the present study was successful in filling the gap in the literature by providing evidence regarding the distinct impacts of the two types of activities.

To make a comparison where possible, some studies can be mentioned. For instance, de la Colina and Mayo (2007) investigated the effectiveness of collaborative FFI for grammar learning and concluded that this type of instruction can affect grammar learning positively. Marzban and

Mokhberi (2012) investigated the influence of FFI on intermediate EFL learners' grammar learning. They also found positive evidence in this respect. Their results were also maintained by the findings of Parviz and Gorjian's (2013) study which focused on FFI for teaching grammar to Iranian intermediate learners. Tajeddin and Jabbarpoor (2013) investigated the effectiveness of individual and collaborative FFI on the learning of English inversion structures and Ebrahimi, Rezvani, and Kheirzadeh (2015) explored the effect of teaching grammar using FFI on learning conditional sentences. Their obtained results were in line with the findings of the above-mentioned studies.

All in all, it can be observed that previous research in this area unanimously has held the positive impact of FFI and collaborative FFI on grammar learning, while the present study proved that planned FFI is more effective than incidental FFI for grammar learning.

Conclusion

On the basis on descriptive statistics, the majority of participants of the present study were between the ages of 20 and 23 and had diploma as their last academic degree. Most of them were university students and only a few participants were employed. It is worth adding that although the groups were homogenized based on the results of the Michigan proficiency test, the incidental form-focused group had a mean score that was a bit higher than those of the control and planned form-focused groups.

With respect to the inferential statistics of the study, it was revealed that there is a significant difference among the three groups regarding the amount of grammar learning. In other words, the first hypothesis of the study which stated, "There is a significant difference between the groups taught through collaborative form-focused activities and the control group regarding learning irregular past tense" was verified. Actually, based on the findings, the treatments, i.e. collaborative incidental and planned form-focused activities, caused the difference in the experimental groups. However, the question remained that which one was more effective for grammar learning, incidental or planned form-focused activities. This question was answered based on the second research hypothesis, i.e. "There is a significant difference between the group taught through collaborative planned form-focused activities and the group taught through collaborative incidental form-focused activities regarding learning irregular past tense". The results of inferential statistics indicated that this hypothesis was verified as well. Considering the groups' mean scores, it was actually revealed that 'collaborative planned form-focused activities' was more beneficial than 'collaborative incidental form-focused activities' for adult elementary learners in learning grammar.

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