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Research Paper

Impact of Elementary Learners' L1 in Consciousness-raising Tasks on Their L2 Writing Accuracy

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to investigate the impact of elementary learners' L1 in consciousness-raising tasks on their L2 writing accuracy. To achieve this end, 32 male and female elementary EFL learners aged 17 to 26 participated in this study. They were assigned to two experimental groups (L1 and L2 groups) using the intact group sampling technique. The treatment was 13 two-hour sessions in which the participants of the L1 group were exposed to consciousness-raising tasks through their L1, but the L2 group experienced the same tasks in English. In the end, a writing test was administered for both groups, and the data collected through the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using a paired-samples *t*-test and one-way analysis of covariance. The results of the data analysis showed that the L1 group significantly outperformed the L2 group in writing accuracy. This finding verifies the rejection of the ideological dogma of using the first language in foreign language classes.

Keywords: *Consciousness-raising Tasks, Elementary Learners, Writing accuracy*

تأثیر زبان اول فراگیران ابتدایی در تمرینات افزایش آگاهی بر دقت نوشتاری آنان در زبان دوم
این مطالعه تأثیر افزایش آگاهی در زبان اول فراگیران ابتدایی بر دقت نوشتن در زبان دوم آنها را بررسی نمود. برای دستیابی به این هدف، 32 زبان آموز انگلیسی زبان ابتدایی مرد و زن 17 تا 26 ساله در این مطالعه شرکت کردند. آنها با استفاده از روش نمونه گیری گروهی در دو گروه آزمایشی L1 و L2 قرار گرفتند. آموزش 13 جلسه دو ساعته بود که در آن شرکت کنندگان گروه L1 از طریق L1 خود در معرض تمرینات افزایش آگاهی قرار گرفتند، اما گروه L2 همان تمرینات را به زبان انگلیسی تجربه کردند. در پایان برای هر دو گروه آزمون نوشتاری انجام شد و داده های جمع آوری شده از طریق پیش آزمون و پس آزمون با استفاده از زوجی و تحلیل کوواریانس یک طرفه مورد تجزیه و تحلیل قرار گرفت. نتایج تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها نشان داد گروه L1 به طور قابل توجهی از گروه L2 در دقت نوشتن بهتر عمل می کند. این یافته تأثیر استفاده از زبان اول در کلاس های زبان خارجی را تأیید می کند.
واژگان کلیدی: تمرینات افزایش آگاهی، فراگیران ابتدایی، دقت نوشتن

Introduction

Nowadays, it is common for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers to use the students' mother tongue (L1) as a tool for conveying meaning and as a means of interaction both in English language institutes and in the classroom. Research shows that the complete deletion of

L1 in L2 situations is not appropriate (Butzkamm, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nation, 2003; Schweers, 1999). When used appropriately, the use of L1 can be very beneficial. According to Brown (2000), “First language can be a facilitating factor and not just an interfering factor” (p. 68), and Schweers (1999) encourages teachers to incorporate the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamics and suggests that “starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves” (p. 7). Research has shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2 (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Wells, 1999). The use of L1 in language classes can thus help both EFL learners and teachers. There are some concepts and activities which are very difficult to be described in the TL, and it is very difficult to obtain contextual clues to explain a meaning (Gomez and Fuertes, 2003). The use of L1 not only facilitates but also avoids ambiguity and guarantees that students get the meaning through.

A consciousness-raising activity is basically another term for a grammar activity, or as Thornbury (1999) defined it, it is a smart term for what was once called grammar presentation. Consciousness-raising tasks are designed to raise the learners' language awareness (Roza, 2014). The immediate aim of these tasks is to help learners notice something about the language that they might not notice on their own. They are typically asked to reflect on it, usually by talking to peers. Consciousness-raising tasks can help build their conscious knowledge and understanding (their L1) of how the language works grammatically, socially, and culturally. It is an attempt to isolate a specific linguistic feature for focused attention (Ellis, 1993). Smith (1981) uses the term “consciousness-raising” (CR) to refer to any kind of grammar focus utilizing varying degrees of ‘explicitness’ or overt rule stating and/or ‘elaboration’ or inductive presentation. Ellis (1993, 2000, 2003) uses the term specifically to mean a grammar focus activity that does not require the learners to produce sentences in the target language right away but simply aims to foster noticing. CR “involves an attempt to equip the learner with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature – to develop declarative rather than procedural knowledge of it” (Ellis, 2002, p. 168). For consciousness-raising, “Activities are provided to make learners aware of certain linguistic features in the input, without necessarily requiring them to produce them” (Richards, 2002, p. 158).

Regarding the importance of CR tasks, some studies have been conducted at national and international levels. Fotos and Ellis (1991) compared two groups of college students in the Japanese EFL context. One group was instructed with the direct CR tasks (teacher-fronted grammar explanations), and the other group received the indirect CR tasks (consciousness-raising tasks only). The results indicated that both groups progressed significantly on grammaticality judgment tests. In another study, Fotos (1994) examined the effects of direct CR tasks with the indirect CR tasks in the Japanese EFL context again. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups. In another study, Alcon-Soler (2005) compared the effects of explicit versus implicit CR instructional tasks on English requests. Results of the study demonstrated that both tasks were effective; however, the participants in the explicit CR group gained better results than their counterparts in the implicit CR group. Concerning the effectiveness of CR tasks, Takimoto (2006) examined the effectiveness of two types of CR instruction, namely CR task only and CR task with explicit reactive feedback. The study was on English polite requisite forms and compared the performance of the two treatment groups with that of the control group. The results showed that the instruction was effective for the participants in both instructional groups and that they outperformed the learners in the control group. Regarding the between-group differences, the findings revealed that both instructional approaches were somehow equally effective in improving the participants' English polite request forms. O'Brien (2015) explored the impact of developing a CR approach in error correction at the

sentence level to improve students' proofreading ability. Test results indicated a significant improvement in student performance as a result of structured input (specially prepared grammar material) and focused instruction (teaching that focuses on each specific grammar point identified as problematic). In another study, Tajeddin and Hosseinpour (2014) investigated the effectiveness of deductive, inductive, and L1-based CR instructional tasks on EFL learners' acquisition of the request speech act during a seven-week instruction period. The results of this study showed that by administering written DCT to 140 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, instruction had a significantly positive effect on the learners' acquisition of the request speech act. This comparison showed that the learners who were receptive to the L1-based awareness-raising tasks were more successful than inductive task group learners. Moradkhan and Sohrabian (2009) investigated the impact of grammatical CR tasks on the improvements of Iranian high school female students' knowledge of grammar. The results showed that the use of CR activities could be a very effective method of enhancing the grammatical knowledge of EFL learners. Behrouzi and Kazemirad (2012) examined the effect of CR tasks on the syntax acquisition of Iranian elementary EFL learners. To do so, the Cambridge Key English Test (KET) was administered to 85 elementary-level learners at a language institute in Tehran. The results of the data analysis showed that the experimental group that worked on a sequence of CR tasks outperformed the control group in the post-test. Concerning the effects of CR activities on L2 production and reception, a study was carried out by Nosratinia and Roustayi (2014) in which the reading and writing skills were taken into consideration. They stated that "As a way of teaching grammar, CR tries to provide a language environment for learners to discover grammatical features on their own in order to develop their capability in writing" (p. 205). The results revealed that grammar CR tasks led to improvements in overall L2 writing and reading skills.

Because of the importance of L1 in L2 learning and also due to the significance of CR in developing and improving different skills of L2 learning, this study attempted to examine the impact of L1 in consciousness-raising tasks on L2 writing accuracy. It should be mentioned that previous studies have not addressed this impact, and they mostly took into consideration the effect of consciousness-raising tasks on grammar learning (Behrouzi and Kazemirad, 2012; Moradkhan and Sohrabian, 2009; O'Brien, 2015) without considering the role of L1. Even when they focused on the role of L1 in consciousness rising tasks, they investigated the impact on grammar learning (Arshad et al., 2015; Fotos and Ellis, 1991; Scott and De la Fuente, 2008) or pragmatics (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005) and speaking (Tajeddin and Hosseinpour, 2014).

Based on what was stated above, the present study could fill the gap in the literature by providing evidence regarding the impact of L1 in consciousness-raising tasks on EFL learners' writing accuracy. In addition, the primary goal of this study was to find evidence to support the theory that L1 can facilitate L2 acquisition and help improve L2 writing skills and to reject the existing notion that L1 acts as a hindrance to L2 acquisition. Considering the objectives of the study, the following research questions were posed:

Q1: Does the use of L1 in consciousness-raising tasks engender a statistically significant improvement in the writing accuracy of elementary-level EFL learners?

Q2: Is there a difference between the L1- vs. L2-mediated consciousness-raising as far as the writing accuracy of the elementary EFL learners is concerned?

Method

Participants

In this quasi-experimental study, the participants were 37 male and female elementary EFL learners who were between 17 and 26 years old. They were either school students or university students learning English as a foreign language at Shokooh Language Institutes in Tehran, Iran.

Since participants were already members of the existing classes in the language institutes, it was not possible to choose them randomly. Therefore, the sampling procedure was based on intact group sampling, and participants from two classes of the institute were chosen. Then, the learners whose Oxford Placement Test (OPT) scores were between 15 and 23 were selected as elementary students. As a result, 5 learners were excluded, and a total of 32 participants in two groups of L1- and L2-mediated classes (hereafter L1 group and L2 group for short) provided data for this study.

Materials

In order to assess consciousness-raising tasks in this study, the tasks developed on the basis of the consciousness-raising sequence presented in *Impact Grammar* (Ellis, 1997) were used. These tasks consist of five sequences as follows: Attending task, noticing task, Analysis task, Checking task, and Production task.

- (1). Attending task: Students read/listened to a text that they processed for meaning.
- (2). Noticing task: Students read/listened to the same text, which was now gapped, and filled in the missing words.
- (3). Analysis task: Students discovered how the target structure worked by analyzing the data provided by the text (In this research, the focus was on understanding).
- (4). Checking task: Students completed an activity to check if they had understood how the target structure worked.
- (5). Production task: Students were given the opportunity to try out or experiment with the target structure by producing their own sentences and writing about subjects. The texts used for these tasks were a paragraph of the three units of *Top-Notch*, Third Edition Intro Student's Book (Richards, 2005). These conversations were chosen based on the aims of the study. They contained examples of correct usage of the target structures, which were bolded and underlined by the book to enable learners to attend to the aim features.

Instruments

To determine participants' level of proficiency, an OPT was used. The test had three parts, including vocabulary, reading, and grammar, consisting of 60 multiple-choice questions. To check the practicality of the test, it was first piloted with 29 similar learners to determine whether there were any problems concerning test administration and/or scoring. In so doing, the reliability of the test was also calculated through the KR-21 formula, and the coefficient turned out to be .85. The time allocation of this test was 60 minutes.

To assess the writing accuracy of participants, two parallel writing tests (with prompts of argumentative type) were administered as the pre-test and the post-test. The tests lasted about 30 minutes each time they were administered. The topics of the writing tests were chosen from the content of the book the learners were studying in the language institute. The reliability coefficients of the tests were estimated using the KR-21 formula, and the result was .81 for the pre-test and .79 for the post-test.

Procedures

Having taken the OPT and the writing pre-test, the learners in the two groups were exposed to the interventions. The treatment was given during 13 sessions, each lasting 2 hours. In the first experimental group was called the L1 group and the learners underwent the treatment, including consciousness-raising tasks. In each session, they were given time to talk and understand the main purpose of the target language structure in their own native language (Persian), and this was

followed by the teacher's elaboration and explanation. In the other group, which was called the L2 group, instead of giving time for talking in the native language, the learners were asked to talk and think about the structure under question in the target language (English), followed by the teacher's instructions in L2. The learners began by reading a text (conversation) that contained examples of new structures. They processed the text for meaning. Finally, a writing post-test was administered to both groups at the end of the instructional period. After the required data were collected, descriptive statistics were calculated (mean and standard deviations) and paired-samples *t*-test and one-way ANCOVA were employed to analyze them and find answers to the research questions.

Results

OPT Results

As mentioned above, an OPT was used to determine the English language proficiency level of the participants. Its statistical results are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the mean OPT score of subjects was 19.69, with a standard deviation of 4.97.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for OPT

<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Mode
37	19.69	4.97	0.40	-0.32	18.00	19

It was pointed out above that the learners who obtained scores between 15 and 23 were selected to take part in this study.

Improvements from pre-test to post-test

Table 2 below shows the results of the paired-samples *t*-test for comparing the writing accuracy of elementary-level EFL learners on the pre-test and post-test in the L1 group. As can be seen, the mean score of the post-test ($M = 9.23$) is considerably greater than that of the pre-test ($M = 5.01$) on the test writing accuracy.

Table 2
Pre-test and Post-test Writing Accuracy Scores of the L1 Group

Tests	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Pre-test	5.01	1.32	14	-8.00	.00
Post-test	9.23	1.34			

The fact that the *p*-value under the *Sig. the* column was less than the significance level ($.00 < .05$) denotes that the difference between the pre-test and post-test writing accuracy scores of the learners in the L1 group was statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that using L1 for purposes of consciousness-raising in language classes would lead to the enhancement of the grammatical accuracy of the learners as manifested in their L2 writings.

One might speculate consciousness-raising, be it through L1 or L2, would bring about improvements in L2 written accuracy of language learners. Hence, the pre-test and post-test writing accuracy scores of the learners in the L2 group were compared via a paired-samples *t*-test.

Table 3*Pre-test and Post-test Writing Accuracy Scores of the L2 Group*

Tests	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Pre-test	5.19	0.94	16	-	.00
Post-test	7.47	1.66			

Since the difference between the pre-test ($M = 5.19$) and post-test ($M = 7.47$) writing accuracy scores of the learners in the L2 group was found to be of statistical significance ($.00 < .05$), it could be inferred that using L2-mediated consciousness-raising, not unlike L1-mediated consciousness-raising) significantly improved the L2 writing accuracy of the elementary-level EFL learners.

L1- vs. L2-mediated Consciousness-raising

Since both L1- and L2-mediated consciousness-raising techniques were found to be effective, it was necessary to examine which of the two techniques would bear more fruitful results with elementary-level Iranian EFL learners. Thus, to make such a comparison, one-way ANCOVA was used since this statistical test could control for the possible pre-existing differences between the two groups (on the post-test) and compare their post-test scores accordingly. The results of the one-way ANCOVA are represented in Table 4 below.

Table 4*One-way ANCOVA Comparing the Post-test Writing Accuracy Scores of the L1 and L2 Groups*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	28.00	2	13.00	.00	.00
Intercept	31.00	1	30.00	.00	.00
Pre-test	2.00	1	2.00	.00	.07
Groups	24.00	1	23.00	.00	.00
Error	30.00	29			
Total	2245.00	32			
Corrected Total	58.00	31			

The *p-value* under the *Sig.* column here is .00, which is smaller than the significance level of .05, implying that the difference between the post-test writing accuracy scores of the L1 group ($M = 9.23$) and L2 group ($M = 7.47$) was of statistical significance. In other words, L1 group learners could significantly outperform the L2 group learners on the post-test of writing accuracy. This means that L1-mediated consciousness-raising was more effective than L2-mediated consciousness-raising for the purpose of improving the writing accuracy of the elementary-level Iranian EFL learners.

Discussion

Although using L1 and consciousness-raising tasks are attractive subjects for many researchers, the impact of using L1 in consciousness-raising tasks for teaching writing accuracy has not been investigated; however, it is possible to compare the obtained results with the findings of some studies which are similar to the present study. For example, Arshad et al. (2015) carried out a study to examine the impact of using L1 in consciousness-raising tasks on teaching grammar to students at beginner and upper-intermediate levels. The results of this study revealed that the use of L1 in a consciousness-raising task can be beneficial for teaching grammar to



beginner L2 learners. However, students of the upper-intermediate level did not benefit equally from L1 implementation in teaching grammar. The first part of their results is consistent with our findings, but the second part is against our findings. The reason can be related to the learners' proficiency level. Overall, both studies claim that the use of L1 in a consciousness-raising task for grammar learning is useful for learners at lower levels of proficiency.

In another study, Scott and De la Fuente (2008) investigated the use of L1 during consciousness-raising and form-focused tasks for language learning. The results indicated that using L2 during these types of tasks can hinder cognitive requirements to do the tasks which demand cognitive sources on the part of the students. Moreover, it hinders collaborative interactions. Therefore, they mentioned that the use of L2 is pointless when L1 is a natural and cognitive strategy. Although in this study they did not focus on grammar learning, the results supported the findings of our study. What they found was also true in the context of our study where EFL learners used L1 for consciousness-raising to reach writing accuracy. It seems that in our study when the learners used L1, their cognitive resources were devoted to learning instead of using L2. On the contrary, the learners who used L2 for consciousness-raising did not succeed compared to the other group. In addition, the findings of Scott and De la Fuente can be attributed to the learners' proficiency levels which were intermediate in their study. The same as the previous study, learners with lower levels of proficiency, could benefit from the use of L1.

Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo (2009) also addressed the use of L1 in language learning of low proficiency learners. They reached a conclusion that low proficiency EFL learners benefit from the use of L1 in a variety of ways, such as managing the task and discussing grammar and vocabulary, promoting attention and meaning comprehension, faster thinking, and self-regulation. It seems that this study also endorsed the use of L1 for language learning by elementary-level L2 learners. The findings of the present study are in line with their results. Although they did not use L1 for the consciousness-raising task that was the focus of our study, their study indicated that the use of L1 in other task types and for a variety of purposes can also be influential for language learning.

Other studies such as Tajeddin and Hosseinpur (2014) and Eslami-Rasekh (2005) also advocated the use of L1 in consciousness-raising tasks for learning a different aspect of a foreign language, which indicates that in addition to the usefulness of L1 in a consciousness-raising task for grammar learning that was concluded in our study, L1 can be helpful for learning other aspects when it is used in consciousness-raising tasks. Overall, it can be claimed that the findings of the present study are supported by other research studies in this area. The findings of this study are also in line with the language teaching approaches adopted in the post-method area that resulted in Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, and Total Physical Response. In these teaching methods, the use of the mother tongue is permitted and is considered a facilitative tool for language teaching and learning. The results of the present study are in accordance with these approaches and provide additional evidence for their effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate whether the use of L1 in consciousness-raising tasks has any significant effects on the writing accuracy of elementary-level EFL Learners. Thirty-two male and female elementary EFL learners between the ages of 17 and 26 participated in the study and were divided into two groups. While one group experienced consciousness-raising using L1, the other group underwent consciousness-raising using L2. Data analysis results indicated that the group that experienced consciousness-raising using L1 managed to obtain significantly higher writing accuracy scores compared to other groups. Therefore, it is concluded that the use of L1 in consciousness-raising tasks does make a difference in the writing accuracy of EFL students and helps them to achieve higher writing accuracy goals.

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