



**The Effect of Cognitive Strategy-Based Grammar
Instruction on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Development of Both
Structural Knowledge and Strategy Use**

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Received 2010 July .7 Accepted 2010 September .8

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on cognitive strategy-based grammar instruction to reveal how effective strategy training is in learners' development of both structural knowledge and strategy use. Through the cluster sampling, 44 participants, who met the expected score in both TOEFL (2003) and the grammar sub-test of the same TOEFL, took part in this study. They were divided into the experimental group receiving cognitive strategy-based instruction and the control group receiving non strategy-based instruction i.e. being taught in the traditional way. Before and after receiving ten 90 minute sessions of instruction, the cognitive group received Purpura's (1999) cognitive questionnaire. The results of data analysis indicated that cognitive instruction does not significantly affect the learners' development of structural knowledge, while it makes a positive significant difference in the learners' strategy use.

Key words: Strategy-based instruction, cognitive strategies, grammar.

Introduction

According to many researches (e.g. Swan, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2001; Frodesen, 2001; Fotos, 2001; Achard, 2008), it seems that the answer of the question "Should teachers instruct grammar" is "Yes". Because it seems that "grammar is an integral part of language use; it

is a resource to be accessed for effective communication, nor just an isolated body of knowledge" Frodesen (2001, p. 234). Of course, it should not be rejected that the system of teaching grammar requires some changes (Achard, 2008). For example, the memorization of a tedious set of rules or only the focusing on

the correcting the grammatical errors of a sentence is not welcomed anymore (Frodesen, 2001). Therefore, grammar should be taught in a way that students find it interesting and useful so that it leads learners to the development of their structural knowledge meaningfully. and Hunt (2002) in their article state, tasks that generate more negotiation of meaning are more beneficial for inter language development. Larger amounts of pair and group interaction have positive effects on the negotiation of meaning. According to Shehadeh (2005, p. 15) "Task based language teaching proposes the use of tasks as a central component in the language classroom, because they provide better context for activating learner acquisition processes and promoting L2 learning". According to Long and Crookes (1992), task-based syllabuses utilize real – world target tasks. These syllabuses reject syntactic syllabuses and use tasks as alternatives. As Willis (2005) states, TBLT (Task Based Language Teaching) is a holistic approach where meaning is central.

Williams and Burden (1997) suggest that EFL learners should be aware of the process of their learning, that is, the comprehension of both what is learned and why it should be learned. It seems that the teaching of some learning strategies can result in learners' comprehension of the input in educational contexts (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 1) insist that "learning strategies are special ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of the information." Cohen (1998) also points out that knowledge of how to learn a foreign language is enhanced if instruction of content is accompanied with strategy training. Then, the answer to the question "How do we go about teaching grammar items in the most effective way?" can be "Teaching different strategies." Larsen-Freeman (2001, p. 40) also stats that

"since grammar is complex, and students' learning styles vary, learning grammar is not likely to be accomplished through a single means." It seems that learning different strategies can affect learning grammar so that Fotos (2001, p. 280) believes that "no cognitive model of second/foreign language grammar learning would be complete without considering strategies."

Cohen (1998) contends that both second language learning strategies and second language use strategies are two crucial elements of second language learner strategies. It means that these two elements jointly make strategies that enable second or foreign language learners in both developing and using the target or foreign language. Cohen (1998) continues that the former element consists of "strategies for identifying the material that needs to be learned" (Cohen, 1998, p. 5). Chamot (1987, p. 71) defines learning strategies as "techniques, approaches or deliberate actions" that facilitate language learning. Chamot (2001, pp. 25-26) points out that there are two targets in research on learning strategies: learning strategies "(1) identify and compare the strategies used by more and less successful language learners, and (2) provide instruction to less successful language learners that helps them become more successful in their language study." Cognition deals with brain and all kinds of mental processing such as "perception, comprehension, rehearsal, elaboration, retrieval, problem solving, and thinking" (Chastain, 1988, p. 43). From O'Malley's and Chamot's (1990) viewpoints, cognitive processing encompasses a set of behaviours engaging mentally to some tasks in order to promote comprehension, acquisition, and retention. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define

cognitive strategies as strategies that pertain to human information processing, such as repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, keyword, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, and inferencing. Wenden (1987, p. 6) stats that "techniques actually used to manipulate the incoming information and, later, to retrieve what has been stored are referred to as cognitive strategies." According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), cognitive strategies are as follows:

- 1) Resourcing: to make use of the target language sources, such as dictionaries or textbooks, in order to facilitate learning;
- 2) Repetition: to repeat the target language model to remember without any help;
- 3) Grouping: to classify words, rules, and so on in a group in terms of their related characteristics such as their meaning;
- 4) Deduction: to learn from the analysis and the focus on rules in order to make related examples;
- 5) Imagery: to find new information via focusing on its visual pictures;
- 6) Auditory representation: to learn from the sounds of words, phrases or longer structures;
- 7) Keyword method: to learn a word in target language via:
 - (1) identifying a familiar word in the first language that sounds like or otherwise resembles the new words, and
 - (2) generating easily recalled images of some relationship with the first language homonym and the new word in the second language. (p. 120);
- 8) Elaboration: to find a relationship between the existing knowledge with new information in target language in order to lead to meaningful learning;

9) Transfer: to use "previous linguistic knowledge or prior skills to assist comprehension or production" (p. 120);

10) Inferencing: to bring out conclusion from available information;

11) Note taking: to write main idea or key concepts of what has been read or listened to in an abbreviated form;

12) Summarizing: to make "a mental, oral, or written summary of new information gained through listening or reading" (p. 120);

13) Recombination: to combine the existing data in a new context in order to make a meaningful sentence or a longer structure; and

14) Translation: to translate the material from the second language to the first one to avoid misunderstanding.

In this research, the focus is in teaching cognitive strategies of repetition,

recombination, deduction, elaboration, translation, and transfer.

The underlying approach in strategy instruction "is that language learning will be facilitated if students become more aware of the range of possible strategies that they can consciously select during language learning and language use" (Cohen, 1998, p. 65). Cohen (1998, pp. 17-18) defines strategy-based instruction as "explicit classroom instruction directed at learners regarding their language learning and language use strategies, and provided alongside instruction in the foreign language itself." One of the significant tasks of a teacher is not only to encourage learners to recognize the applied strategies but also to present alternative strategies to provide opportunity for the recognition of the best strategies in approaching a problem in terms of the ability of each learner (Rubin, 1987).

2. Statement of the Problem

Although grammar is one of the university courses for EFL learners studying different branches of English, much of the prior research on learning strategy instruction has been limited to teaching reading, listening, speaking, and even vocabulary. Therefore, in this study, all of the efforts of the present research were to integrate grammar and *cognitive* strategy instruction in order to help foreign language learners develop both structural knowledge and strategy use autonomously and meaningfully.

3. Significance of the Study

Apparently, teachers play a leading role in facilitating learners' progress by encouraging them to think about the ways of learning. Most teachers consider grammar a boring and unrewarding sub-skill, because the centre of their attention is on the product of learning rather than the process of learning. In fact, they do not pay attention to the ways in which the grammatical points can be learned so that learners are actively involved in their own learning rather than being just passive viewers of the teachers' instruction.

The emphasis on the issue of strategy training can pave the way for learners, teachers, and educators in the realm of education in general and TEFL in particular. It can also help teachers in accomplishing their challenging task of teaching English grammar in EFL contexts where teaching grammar seems to be a norm in classrooms. Grammar instruction through teaching different learning strategies explicitly can make the boring task of learning grammar more interesting and can result in the development of both learners' structural knowledge and strategy use.

4. Research Questions

To fulfill the objectives of this study, these

research questions were posed:

1. Does *cognitive* strategy-based grammar instruction significantly affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' development of structural knowledge?

2. Is there any significant difference between the strategy use of cognitively trained EFL learners before and after cognitive strategy-based instruction?

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Sixty learners were randomly chosen from among the freshmen of Islamic Azad University of South Tehran Branch, who were studying English Translation Studies. The participants were either male or female learners who had registered for the "grammar" course at university and they were between the ages of 18 to 34. The cluster sampling was used to select and specify the number of students required to carry out the experiment, that is, the procedure of selection of participants started with randomizing the larger groups and moved toward smaller ones. Therefore, the unit of selection was not an individual but a group of individuals. Forty four participants, who met the expected score in both TOEFL (2003) collectively and the grammar sub-test of the same TOEFL separately, took part in this study. They were divided into two groups. Each group consisted of twenty two learners.

5.2. Instruments

The instruments used in this study included the 2003 and 2005 versions of TOEFL both in a Paper-based format, a 1999 English version of Cognitive Strategy Questionnaire by Item Type (CSQIT), and a Persian translation of this questionnaire. It should be mentioned that, this questionnaire was adapted from Purpura's

(1999) work on pages 219-221. The validity and the reliability of the questionnaire were also estimated by Purpura (1999).

5.3. Procedure

This quasi-experimental research was performed during twelve weeks; therefore students of two classes of Islamic Azad University of South Tehran Branch participated in this research for twelve sessions.

In the first session, the 2003 version of the TOEFL was administered for eighty minutes. An instructor devoted ten sessions, each with the duration of ninety minutes, for explaining directly about cognitive strategies through grammar instruction to the experimental group. Another ten sessions with the same duration was also allocated to teaching grammar without any strategy instruction.

After the administration of 2003 version of TOEFL, learners whose scores fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected. The performance of the learners on the "*structure and written expression*" section of the same TOEFL was also evaluated separately. In other words, after the learners were chosen on the basis of their performance in TOEFL, once more their performance on the "*structure and expression*" section of the same test was evaluated separately to ensure that the participants were homogeneous and of the same English structural proficiency level. Therefore, the sample of this study was selected both on the basis of the learners' mean scores in TOEFL and also their specific scores in the "structure and written expression" section separately. When the sample was selected, the 44 learners of these two classes were divided randomly into 2 groups in terms of the class that they had registered for. One of the groups, as the control group, received non-strategy-based instruction

i.e. was taught in the traditional way, and the other, the experimental group, received strategy-based instruction. Meanwhile, both of the two groups encountered the grammatical points either through the conversations inserted in their textbook or through the conversations that the lecturer herself provided for the learners.

This research was based on the practical and common aspects of O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) learning strategy classification. Therefore, to teach cognitive strategies, the present researcher chose repetition, recombination, deduction, elaboration, translation, and transfer. The book "Communicate What You Mean: A concise Advanced Grammar" (Pollock, 1997) was chosen as the base of teaching grammar during this research. Then, the grammatical points were selected randomly from this book. Meanwhile, the same grammatical point was taught in each class, that is, the difference between these two classes was only in the kind of instruction that they received (i.e., through cognitive strategy-based instruction or non strategy-based one) rather than the grammatical points. Before teaching the grammatical points at the first session, the instructor administered the English version of Cognitive Strategy Questionnaires by Item Type (Purpura, 1999) for the cognitive group. The result of the administration of the questionnaire before instruction was very useful for the instructor. It assisted the instructor to find a basis for initiating teaching different strategies. In other words, instruction could be built on the learners' knowledge of strategies. As Cohen (1998, p. 69) states, the first step in strategy training is "to help learners recognize which strategies they already use, and then to develop a wide range of

strategies, so that they can select appropriate and effective strategies within the context of particular language tasks." The Persian translation of the questionnaire was also administered in the cognitive group's class. The second session of the experimental class was allocated to teaching *coordinating conjunctions* (and, yet, but, so, for, or, and nor). Then, the instructor taught the *coordinating conjunctions* through cognitive strategies, that is, she indicated the grammatical points of these coordinating conjunctions through repetition, recombination, deduction, elaboration, translation, and transfer.

The third session she taught how to make use of cognitive strategies (repetition, recombination, deduction, elaboration, translation, and transfer) for learning *correlative conjunctions* (neither/nor, either/or, not only/but also, and both/and) in the experimental class. In the fourth session, the instructor corrected the learner's problems about the *coordinating* and *correlative conjunctions*. She encouraged learners to put into practice the cognitive strategies appropriate in each exercise. The fifth and the sixth sessions the instructor explained how to apply the same cognitive strategies in order to facilitate the learning of *conjunctive adverbs* (however, nevertheless, still, on the contrary, moreover, furthermore, also, besides, in fact, hence, therefore, consequently, thus as a result, otherwise, then, afterward, and later (on)) for the cognitive group and then they checked the related examples. In the seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh sessions, the instructor taught *indirect speech, subordinations*, that is, *in adverb clauses* (as long as, as soon as, after, as, since, until, when, while, where, so that, such that, although) and *in adjective clauses* (who, whom, which, that,

whose, when, where, why), and all three types of *conditionals* respectively. During these sessions, all effort of the instructor was to encourage the students to practice the cognitive strategies in the cognitive group's class in the different contexts. This was because the aim of this research was to teach students 'when' and 'where' these strategies should be applied.

In the control group's class, teaching of the same grammatical points was done according to the traditional way, that is, one of the learners read the conversation that had the grammatical point (rule) and gave some examples. Next, the instructor taught the rule followed by some examples. Then the learners were asked to answer the questions related to the same grammatical points at their homes. The next session was devoted to correcting the problems of the learners in answering the questions. The major difference between the cognitive and control groups was in the instructor's emphasis on the role of thinking in cognitive group in the process of learning. That is, not only the instructor taught different types of cognitive strategies explicitly, referred to above (for instance repetition, recombination, deduction, elaboration, translation, and transfer), and indicated how, when, and why these strategies were appropriate in approaching a problem for cognitive group, but also she encouraged the learners to think and then to select the appropriate strategies to assist themselves in engaging with the problems successfully. Whereas background knowledge of the learners about the nature of the language was different (Rubin, 1987), some strategies were effective for some of the learners while the same strategies probably did not work for the others. Therefore, each learner by himself or herself was responsible of his or her own learning.

After the treatment was given to the experimental group and the grammatical points were practiced sufficiently, the twelfth session was devoted to the evaluation of the experimental and control groups by the 2005 version of TOEFL's structure and written expression parts for 25 minutes. Next, the 1999 English version of Cognitive Strategy Questionnaire by Item Type (CSQIT) was administered for the cognitive group during 10 minutes in order to reveal how effective learning strategy instruction was and whether or not the participants learned how to apply these

strategies.

6. Results

A t-test was applied to ensure that there was not a significant difference between the learners in the pretest at 42 degrees of freedom. The descriptive statistics is shown in Table 1 and the inferential one in Table 2. Table 2 shows that the level of significance (2-tailed) exceeds the *P*-value at 0.05 level of probability, i.e., $0.206 > 0.05$. Therefore, the two groups were at the same level of structural knowledge and there was not a significant difference between the groups at the beginning of instruction.

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Control	22	14.1364	2.33596	.46803
	Cognitive	22	13.2727	2.11979	.45194

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on the pretest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.111	.741	1.284	42	.206	.86364	.67252	-.49356	2.22084
Equal variances not assumed			1.284	41.610	.206	.86364	.67252	-.49394	2.22121

Table 2. A t-test on the pretest

The post test was also administered to reveal the differences between groups after the treatment. That is, it measured the degree of achievement of the control and cognitive groups in development of their structural

knowledge. Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics on the post test. A t-test was applied to indicate whether there was a significant difference between the mean scores of groups after the treatment or no (see Table 4).

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Control	22	18.6818	3.44285	.73380
	Cognitive	22	19.2727	3.28317	.69997

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on the post test

Interestingly, since there was instruction for both groups, they had a kind of progress in development of their structural knowledge, since the amount of their mean scores compared with that of the pretest increased. Table 4 reveals that there was not a treatment effect on the groups' performance, since the level of the significance (2-tailed) is more than the *P*-value at 0.05 level of probability, that is, $0.563 > 0.05$. It can be concluded that although the amount of

the mean scores of the cognitive group is more than that of the control group on the post test, there is not a significant difference between the control and cognitive groups in the development of their structural knowledge. Therefore, cognitive strategy-based grammar instruction does not significantly affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' development of structural knowledge.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.142	.708	-.583	42	.563	.59091	1.01412	-2.63748	1.45566
Equal variances not assumed			-.583	41.907	.563	.59091	1.01412	-2.63762	1.45580

Table 4. A t-test on the post test

The cognitive questionnaire was also administered both at the first and the last sessions for the cognitive group to indicate how effective strategy instruction was and whether or no the participants learned how to apply these strategies as well. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test is applied to compare the amount of strategy

use of the cognitive group before and after cognitive strategy-based instruction. The descriptive statistics is shown in Table 5. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test is also indicated in Table 6. The amount of the level of significance is provided in Table 7. Table 5 refers to descriptive statistics

including the amount of means, standard deviations, minimums, and maximums of scores before and after strategy-based instruction. According to the analysis of the cognitive questionnaire of Purpura (1999), since the amount of mean of the cognitive group before instruction was 1.4545, it can be concluded that the cognitive group before strategy instruction was the low cognitive strategy users. Since the

amount of mean after strategy instruction changes to 2.3636, it is concluded that the cognitive group after instruction became the medium cognitive strategy users. Therefore, instruction of cognitive strategies enables the learners to apply these strategies more than before and strategy instruction was effective in encouraging the participants to learn and apply cognitive strategies.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-questionnaire	22	1.4545	.50965	1.00	2.00
Post-questionnaire	22	2.3636	.49237	2.00	3.00

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Cognitive Group's Strategy Use before and after Instruction

Table 6 provides the data about the negative ranks, positive ranks, and ties through the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Negative ranks indicate that none of the learners retrogresses in strategy use after cognitive strategy-based instruction, since the negative rank is 0. On the

other hand, the positive ranks reveal that seventeen learners have made a progress in cognitive strategy use. The ties also indicate that five learners had neither made a progress nor retrogression in cognitive strategy use after cognitive strategy-based instruction.

	N	Mean Ranks	Sum of Ranks
Post-questionnaire & Negative Ranks	0	.00	.00
Pre-questionnaire Positive Ranks	17	9.00	153.00
Ties	5		
Total	22		

Table 6. The Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test

The analysis of the Wilcoxon signed rank test in Table 6 and the amount of P value in Table 7 indicate that there is a significant difference between the strategy use before and after cognitive strategy instruction, since the amount of the P value is less than 0.05. That is, $0.00 < 0.05$. It means that there is a significant difference between the strategy use of cognitively trained EFL learners before and after cognitive strategy-based instruction, according to their answers to the questionnaires. As a result, cognitive strategy instruction was effective in encouraging the learners to apply cognitive strategies while encountering a problem. Meanwhile, at the end of instruction, the learners have changed to the medium cognitive strategy users.

Instruction

	Post-questionnaire & Prequestionnaire
z	-3.879
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Table 7. The Amount of Level of Significance of Cognitive Questionnaires before and after

7. Discussion

A shift from teacher-centered classroom practices to learner-centered ones has induced learners to be more responsible for their own learning and it leads learners to a kind of effort for becoming more autonomous (Rubin, 1987). Therefore, learners are no longer considered as sponges but they can rely on their own thinking ability and apply different mental strategies in order to tackle their learning problems. The most important pedagogical implication of the findings of this research can pertain to the issue of strategy training especially for learners,

teachers, and educators in the realm of education in general and TEFL in particular. It can help teachers in accomplishing their challenging task of teaching English grammar in EFL contexts where teaching grammar seems to be a norm in classrooms.

A need for the inclusion of and emphasis on learning strategies in EFL educational system is obvious. This research revealed that through instruction of teachers, learners become more aware of the effectiveness, purpose, and value of learning strategies and, in addition, they become more responsible for meeting their own goals. Therefore, teachers are no longer considered as providers of learning.

A skilful teacher should introduce different strategies in such a way that all learners become convinced that strategy learning is not an extra and useless effort but it is so worthwhile that triggers and facilitates their learning. Before teaching, a teacher should be aware of not only the concept of different strategies but also what strategies, what combinations of strategies regarding content can work better in learners' learning processes. Also teachers should know how, when, and why strategy use is appropriate in challenging a task while not with the others. Only in this situation, a teacher can translate his or her knowledge into these strategies. Teachers can lighten the problem of learners in strategy use by adding some practices relevant to taught strategies in order to help learners become more proficient in strategy use in different contexts so that it prepares the transfer of strategy use from one situation to another more easily.

Teachers should also provide rich opportunities for learners to engage them in interactive learning while coping with their learning problems via different strategies. Therefore,

teachers should not restrict strategy instruction to one or two common strategies but multiple strategy training is suggested in order to smooth the way for learners' choice.

8. Conclusions

The major finding of this study was that cognitive strategy-based grammar instruction did not affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' development of structural knowledge statistically significantly although cognitive strategy-based instruction was effective in the improvement of learners' strategy use. Meanwhile, the long duration of strategy training may assist learners in the development of their structural knowledge so that the cognitive group had made a progress in increasing their mean scores on the post test in comparison with that of the control group, although this difference was not statistically significant too. Therefore, a long period of time allotted for cognitive strategy training may demonstrate a significantly positive effect of cognitive strategy-based instruction on the development of learners' structural knowledge. Politzer and McGroarty (1985, cited in McDonough, 1995, p. 96) also states that "good language learning behaviour may, in the long run, be almost as elusive as good teaching behaviour. Depending on the level of proficiency or the frequency with which a particular behaviour is employed". Findings of this research indicated that strategies can be taught explicitly for EFL learners. The strategy training can also be embedded with a regular classroom teaching. Therefore, the findings of this research can be used as a guideline for syllabus designers to incorporate sufficient practices in the scope of language learning strategies in EFL syllabuses in order to encourage learners in the

development of their strategic competence while learning a specific skill in a target language. As O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggested, the exercises should be designed in such a way that they elicit and induce learners in the use of the taught strategies. All of these issues can be fulfilled if an educational system takes into consideration enough time for the implementation of different learning strategies inside the classroom.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Professor Esmail Faghih, my mentor and thesis advisor, who provided me with instructive ideas, received and edited my work and encouraged me throughout my research and this article. I would also like to express my thanks and gratitude to Mrs. Moazzeni who not only permitted me to do my research in her class of 'Grammar' but also accepted the responsibility of instructing the participants

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