

The Effect of Sentence-Writing Practice on Iranian low-intermediate EFL Learners' L2 Grammatical Accuracy

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of sentence writing practice on male and female low-intermediate students' English grammatical accuracy. The question this study tried to answer does English grammatical accuracy can be affected by sentence writing practice. To find the answer to the question, 15 low intermediate level students from Kish away institute were selected. They were both male and female. Low- intermediate level students were deal for the current study because they were learning all skills of language at the same time, and they were familiar with some words, also their English proficiency was enough to speak English and to understand the importance of grammar but they were not high enough to not make grammar errors during writing. The students were selected via administrating OPT which divided into two groups, one Experimental groups (with sentence writing practice) and one control group (no sentence writing practice). And the results revealed that the male and female participants performed better on English grammatical accuracy.

Key words: Sentence Writing Practice, EFL Learners, Grammatical Accuracy

INTRODUCTION

Teaching grammar has always been a matter of controversy especially in second language acquisition as Thornbury (1999) says “in fact no other issue has preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of claims and counter claims for and against the teaching of grammar”. According to Rutherford (1987) grammar is “a necessary component of any language teaching program”, and thus plays an important role in language teaching. However, the focus on grammar in language teaching was challenged with the emergence of teaching methodologies based on different learning theories, such a challenge influenced not only the content and the curriculum in language teaching, but also the implication for teaching grammar. Thus a fresh look at grammar was necessary causing linguists and language educators to rethink the status of grammar in

language teaching and learning. This led to a constant debate among language educators and linguists regarding the nature and type of grammar instruction, which affected the understanding of how second languages should be taught or learned.

Word order, in English, is more important than it is in many other languages. Very often ESL students produce sentences that sound strange to the native's ear because the order of the words in the sentences is wrong. The basic pattern for English statements is: SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT(S)-PLACE-TIME. Sentences do not have to have all of these parts, but if all of the parts do occur, they most likely will occur in this order. If a sentence has both a place and a time, one of these is frequently moved to the front of the sentence.

Writing is necessary for all students in higher education. It is a process. It starts from understanding your task. It then goes on to doing the research and reading. This should lead to the final text. Academic writing is a social practice. By a social practice I mean that it is what people do together. This means that you always write with a readership in mind. You always write with a purpose: to explain, to persuade etc. it also means what is right and wrong, appropriate or inappropriate is defined by the users in the social community. Writing has been one of the most difficult skills for learners to develop. Being a recursive process, it takes several times for learners to revise their writing before submitting their final draft (White & McGovern, 1994). During the course, they need feedback and comments to facilitate them to compose an essay with minimal errors well as maximum accuracy and clarity; hence, written feedback is quite essential (Crème & Lea, 1997; Ferris, 2002; Harmer, 2001; Krashen, 1987).

However, teachers often feel that their effort in giving feedback to correct learners work is not effective. Some of learners keep on committing the same errors, and teachers realize that it is a laborious way for learners to achieve accuracy in writing which is grammatically demanding (Littlewood, 1995). Therefore, teachers should realized the vital role of error correction and treat it carefully. Error correction is 'a response either to the content what a student has produced or to the form of the utterance' (Richards and Lockharts, 1996). When the focus is on forms, it is supposed to help learners to reflect on wrong forms and finally produce right forms (Krashen, 1987).

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Hassan (2013) cited, teaching is mainly an outcome of a teacher's perception. Philosophy of teaching revolves around one's understanding about how students learn, what type of instructions are the best suitable for deep and concrete learning, what actions should be taken to enact such instruction. He also defines teaching and learning goals and the specific areas in which a teacher wants herself/himself to improve his/her abilities. As Richards (1996) reflected in his book "work on teachers' maxims" that these maxims are a set of rational principles that function as "rules for best behaviour ". All these maxims cover all different aspect of teaching including planning, encouraging and motivating learners, maintaining order and discipline in the classroom and efficiency.

Importance of grammar teaching in second language learning is well known. Long ago from the fifteenth century there had been a long debate on problem of teaching grammar effectively. For centuries, language has been synonymous with language teaching then the role of the grammar declined with the introduction of communicative language teaching (Thompson 1996). At the beginning of 1970 the Interest of ‘real language ‘teaching emerged and more interest it was taken in social and cultural teaching of language. Consequently, it proved to be a shift from audio lingual and grammar translation methods to the exploration to communicative teaching of language. Hence integrative tasks were focused instead of discrete structures.

Teaching grammar has always been a matter of controversy especially in second language acquisition. Thombury (1999) says “in fact no other issue has preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of claims and counter claims for and against the teaching of grammar”

The main difference in grammar teaching methods is due to teachers’ different views about the role of grammar. According to the historic overview of the role of grammar Bygate et al. (1994) says that in the light of the centuries old traditions of language learning dominated by Latin and Greek, the study of language is mainly the study of its grammar. In old times grammar has the central role in structural linguistics. According to Bygate et al. (1994) the aim of the language teacher is to enable the people to learn it. Some people have a view that grammar teaching is not essential because it doesn’t facilitate second language acquisition. Krashen and Terrel (1983) are in favor of this idea when they say, “we prefer to avoid oral grammar instruction in classroom imply because they take time away from acquisition activities”. Whereas others own the view that it is essential to teach grammar. Furthermore, Ur (1996) has similar views when he shows his doubts about gaining communication competency to develop accuracy in learners when she says that the ability to communicate effectively cannot be acquired quickly or efficiently through pure class communication practice- not at least in the framework of formal study course. Thombury (1999) agrees with Ur and suggested that learning L2 without learning grammar is “at the risk of fossilizing sooner that those who receive”.

Dkhissi (2014) was cited about language and linguistics, Grammar teaching has often been regarded as a structure based formal activity. After the integration of several sources and techniques, which are mainly based on communicative activities, the teaching of grammar gained a new insight. In the teaching of grammar, focus on form is often modified to a meaningful structure discourse. In order to make a grammar lesson effective, beneficial, and interesting a teacher should use some well-developed, interactive and fascinating techniques in the classroom.

Research Question of the Study

The following research question was formulated:

Q: Does sentence-writing practice have any significant effect on Iranian low-intermediate EFL learners’ L2 grammatical accuracy?

Hypothesis of the Study

H0: sentence-writing practice does not have any significant effect on Iranian low-intermediate EFL learners' L2 grammatical accuracy?

METHOD

Since it was an experimental method of research, two groups of learners in a language institute were chosen to participate in the experiment. The researcher controlled all of the necessary criteria for such an experimental research. Thus, the researcher incorporated the qualities of a true experimental study in terms of the type of the participants, the instruments that were used to tap the grammar level of the learners, the design and finally data collection and data analysis of the study.

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 15 low intermediate level students out of 100 from Kish away institute. The students came from the same L1 background. The students' age range was from 12-15 years old. They were both male and female. Low intermediate level students were ideal for the current study because they were learning all skills of language at the same time, and they were familiar with some words, also their English proficiency was enough to speak English and to understand the importance of grammar but they were not high enough to not make grammar errors during writing. The students were selected via administrating OPT which divided into two groups, one experimental groups (with sentence writing practice) and one control group (no sentence writing practice). The research was conducted during their classes within 5 sessions in fall course, 2015.

Materials

This section elaborates on the instruments used in this research. These instruments used were: OPT, Pretest of grammar, treatment through sentence writing practice, and post -test.

In order to achieve maximum possible homogeneity among the subjects regarding their general English proficiency, an OPT test (appendix 1) was administered at the beginning of the study. Then the selected students were divided into two groups, control group and experimental one. After that a pretest of grammar (appendix 2) was administered to the two groups of the study including experimental and the control groups. It was conducted in the form of multiple choices, with the reliability of 0.72 estimated by KR 21 formulas same rating scale used throughout the treatment itself, to gain information on their grammar proficiency before the treatment, in order to compare with the post-test taken at the end of the treatment. The test contained 20 general questions which examined the aspects in learners' grammar.

Then, in each five sessions students of experimental group were thought grammar through sentence writing practice. At the end, post test administered to investigate the possible effect of the independent variables .The characteristics of the posttest of the study resembled those of the pretest.

Design of the study

In order to investigate the effect of sentence writing practice on Iranian learners' grammar knowledge, this study adopts a quantitative approach.

Quantitative methods are research techniques that are used to gather quantitative data - information dealing with numbers and anything that is measurable. In other words quantitative methods are a systematic process in which numerical data are controlled and measured to address the accumulation of facts and then utilized to obtain information about the world. This study found a quantitative research design to be appropriate for this study because it is statistically reliable and allow results to be analyzed and compared with similar studies.

The current study consists of two groups of low intermediate EFL students participated in class with a teacher in which one group was thought grammar according to sentence writing practice, the other group received grammar by the traditional method used in Iranian institutes. Both groups had pretest and posttest to measure their grammar. Only experimental groups received sentence writing practice to improve grammar, that is, the other group (control Group) didn't receive any sentence writing practice at all. At the end of the study, the results of pre- and post-tests of all two groups were compared with each other to see the possible effect of sentence writing practice.

Data collection

The groups of the study received treatment: the experimental group by experimental and control group a placebo. The students were divided into two groups, one experimental group received sentence writing practice, and the control group received the traditional way of teaching grammar. Prior to the treatment, a pretest was conducted to gain information on their grammar knowledge before the treatment, in order to compare with the post-test taken at the end of the treatment. In pretest the students were given a multiple choice test that all participants answer them. The questions consisted of sentences that students have difficulty in grammar. The total score for each participant, then, was 20. The same process happened for the post-test.

After obtaining necessary information on the participants' grammar through the pre-test, the treatment, which lasted for about five sessions started. Each session, all of the students were given some sentences to use sentence writing practice. Throughout the sessions, each participant in experimental groups was corrected by sentence writing practice.

At the end, a post-test was used, similar to the pre-test, to evaluate the changes that had occurred in the participants' grammar knowledge as the result of applying sentence writing

practice and the traditional way of teaching grammar. Then, the results of pre- and post-tests were compared with each other to see any possible changes that will be discussed in the next chapter

Data Analysis

Following the collection of data through pre-test and post-test, descriptive statistics and percentages were calculated for both tests. Both tests were scored separately for each participant. For each student, they were then entered into a computer-based statistical program (SPSS, that is the short form of Statistical Program in Social Sciences). The first format of the data collection process was designed for quantitative analyses, and involved listing the participants of both control and experimental groups, with their individual scores for each test. Learners scored one point for each correct grammar test. Participants received no score if the incorrect answer was given. The data obtained from testing the hypotheses of this study were analyzed via calculating the descriptive statistics as well as the inferential statistical method of T-test and correlation coefficient for determining the effect of the independent variable of the study on the dependent variable and the degree of progress of the participants from the pretest to the posttest of the study. The collected data were analyzed in order to answer the research questions. The numerical statistics and the analysis of the data obtained will be discussed through the following chapter.

RESULTS

Data Analysis and Results

The Descriptive Analysis of the Data

This section focuses on the descriptive analysis of the obtained data in this study. Such analysis was done using the SPSS software. Table (1) shows the descriptive analysis of the experimental and the control group of the study:

Table 1. The summary of the descriptive analysis of the study

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest Ex	16.0333	15	2.37697	0.61373
	Posttest Ex	17.5667	15	1.93388	0.49932
Pair 2	Pretest Control	15.7833	15	2.27211	0.58666
	Posttest Control	16.1167	15	1.54650	0.39930

As it is indicated in table (1), the number of participants has been 15 in each experiment which means that all selected participants participated in the experiments of the study. The mean for the pretest of grammatical accuracy for the EX group was shown to be 16.0333 as compared to the

mean for the posttest of grammatical accuracy which was 17.5667. Similarly, the mean for the pretest of grammatical accuracy for the CON group was shown to be 15.7833 as compared to the mean for the posttest of grammatical accuracy which was 16.1167. As for the standard deviations obtained for the experimental and the control group, there seems to be more variability among the pretests scores than the posttests scores. This may give an image of the participants' posttest scores being more homogenous after conducting the treatment of the study.

The Inferential Analysis of the Data

This section focuses of the inferential analysis of the obtained data of this study. Such analysis was done using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) from which the 'Compare Means', 'Independent Samples Test' and paired sample t-test for calculating the t value of the study was followed.

Table 2. T-Test Table for the experimental and the control group of the study

T-Test Results	Observed t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Between the Posttest Scores of the Experimental and the Control Groups of the Study (Equal variances not assumed)	9.345	28.00	0.000

As is indicated in table (2.), the t-value of the study was calculated between the posttests of grammatical accuracy the participant in the experimental and the control groups. The observed t value was calculated as to be 9.345 ($t_{obs} = 9.345$) and the degree of freedom was 58 ($df = 58$). The reason why the degree of freedom here was not calculated based on the common formula of $df = N - 1$ was that the SPSS calculated the degree of freedom. The observed t value calculated by the SPSS was 9.345 ($t_{obs} = 9.345$) while the critical value of t determined on the basis of considering the 2-tailed significance level of 0.00 ($P = 0.00$) was 2.048 ($t_{crit} = 2.048$). Thus, the observed t was higher than the critical t and high enough to reject the null hypothesis of this study. Finally, the level of significance was calculated as to be 0.00 ($p = 0.00$) which has been used in interpreting the data for the rejection or support of the hypothesis of the study in the next section.

The next inferential analysis of the data of this study was related to the degree of progress from pretest to posttest of L2 grammatical accuracy in each group of the study. This was indicated by calculating the paired sample t-test. The results of the paired sample t-test from pretest to posttest scores of the experimental and control group of the study have been illustrated in table (4.3) below:

Table 3. The paired sample t-test results for the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group and control groups of the study

Pairs Differences				
Pairs		T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pretest Ex-Posttest Ex	2.430	14	0.029
Pair 2	Pretest Control – Posttest Control	0.797	14	0.043

According to table (3) the observed t between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group is 2.430, and the observed t between the pretest and the posttest of the control group is 0.797, and the critical t was 2.145. Also, the level of significance in both pairs is lower than 0.05 ($P < 0.05$) which indicates that the obtained data have been dependable enough and the calculations are error-free.

Results of Hypotheses Testing

In this section, the results of testing the hypotheses of the study have been presented and elaborated. In order to give a detailed analysis, attempts were made to take advantage of the results of the study as evidence to determine the rejection or support of the hypothesis. In addition, the rejection or support of the hypothesis was justified by explaining the consequences of such rejection or support, i.e. what would happen if the hypothesis of the current study was rejected or supported. Before analyzing the hypothesis, it will be repeated below:

H0: Sentence-writing practice does not have any effect on Iranian Low-Intermediate EFL Learners' L2 Grammatical Accuracy

The hypothesis of the study which targeted the effect of sentence-writing practice on Iranian low-intermediate EFL learners' L2 grammatical accuracy was rejected. Evidence from various sources of data could help to verify the rejection. The results of the T-Test of the study (see table 4.2) could be employed to confirm this analysis, accordingly, the observed t value calculated by the SPSS was 9.345 ($t_{obs} = 9.345$) while the critical value of t determined on the basis of considering the 2-tailed significance level of 0.00 ($P = 0.00$) was 2.048 ($t_{crit} = 2.048$). Thus, the observed t was higher than the critical t and high enough to reject the null hypothesis of this study.

A further evidence for the rejection of the hypothesis of the study was the control group participants' lack of progress of from the pretest to the posttest. Table (4.3) provides the evidence for this. According to the paired sample t values illustrated in table (4.3), the observed t between the pretest and the posttest scores in the control group was lower than that of the experimental group. This meant that the posttest scores of grammatical accuracy were close to the pretest scores in the control group and indicated that not using sentence-making practice did

not have significant effect on the participants' L2 grammatical accuracy and caused the posttest scores to stand as close as possible.

DISCUSSION

As for the research question, the mean scores of the experimental and control group of the study are different, our answer is affirmative. The results of the T-Test of the study (see table 4.2) could be employed to confirm this analysis, accordingly, the observed t value calculated by the SPSS was 9.345 ($t_{obs} = 9.345$) while the critical value of t determined on the basis of considering the 2-tailed significance level of 0.00 ($P = 0.00$) was 2.048 ($t_{crit} = 2.048$). Thus, the observed t was higher than the critical t and high enough to reject the null hypothesis of this study. A further evidence for the rejection of the hypothesis of the study was the control group participants' lack of progress of from the pretest to the posttest. Table (4.3) provides the evidence for this, so the question got the answer.

It was concluded that the participants performed better when they took part in a test after they were treated with sentence-making practice for about 10 sessions. This was further confirmed by the sub-results from testing the hypothesis, that is, the participants in the experimental group showed a rise in their posttest scores while no significant rise in the posttest scores was shown in the control group of the study.

In terms of learning, the obtained findings revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed than control group when it comes to question development. The superior rates of making a sentence in the experimental group can be largely attributed to their saliency when compared to control group. As explained before, sentence-writing practice effects on Iranian low-intermediate EFL learners' L2 grammatical accuracy.

CONCLUSION

Language learning is a step-by-step process during which errors or mistakes are to be expected. The findings of this study can have various pedagogical implications in TEFL/TESL. These implications can be used in different domains of TEFL, like language teaching methodology, syllabus design, materials development and assessment. As far as the teaching methodology is concerned, sentence-writing practice can be very helpful. The current study made it clear that sentence-writing practice is definitely more effective than traditional approach in teaching grammar in general and in teaching writing modes like sentences, in particular. In fact, teaching writing to EFL learners through sentence-writing practice has all of the advantages of the process approach to writing. Sentence-writing practice pays enough attention to all of the processes which are involved in producing a good grammatical sentence. It fully considers such processes and helps learners generate more new sentences; it also activates their previous schemata and background knowledge, motivates the students and encourages them to write and talk freely

without any concern over formal linguistic features. It adopts a dynamic view toward the act of grammar and considers all of the involved factors and processes which take place when producing a sentence. It seems that sentence-writing practice is very effective in teaching grammar to EFL learners. Sentence-writing practice can be used in teaching grammar to the low-intermediate students and even in teaching writing skills to the beginners due to its robust pedagogical characteristics. Sentence-writing practice can also be employed in the teaching of letter writing to EFL learners and ESP learners in Iran, and probably in other EFL contexts. Sentence-writing practice seems to be the best methodology for teaching collaborative learning because it is quite interactive and follows the principles of cooperative learning.

With regard to the syllabus design and writing instructional materials, the findings of the present study suggest that each instructional situation is a unique one and it demands its own syllabus and instructional materials. According to the findings of present study teachers should write or select tasks for their own teaching situations. The teachers cannot use a set of fixed tasks or activities for all learners and in all situations, because in order to teach real-world and authentic language we have to use our situation aspects and the available resources in devising our tasks and instructional activities.

The findings of the current study also suggest that formative assessment during the course can be more effective than final summative assessment at the end of the instructional period. For example, the sentences written by the learners during the course can be assessed to check their progress instead of the final grammar post-test. Furthermore sentence-writing practice operationalizes the concept of alternative assessment in reality by focusing on the gradual progress of the learners' skill/knowledge during the instructional course.

Sentence-writing practice can be applied to teaching other writing modes such as descriptive vs. argumentative writing. It can be used in teaching other language skills and sub-skills like listening comprehension, vocabulary and writing. The effect sentence-writing practice on the writing performance of the Iranian EFL/ESP learners could also be a very good and interesting topic for further research.

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