

The Effect of Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks on EFL Learners Performance

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate different approaches in grammar teaching and compare the traditional approaches with Consciousness-Raising (CR) tasks. The author implements some CR tasks in the classroom during the second semester of educational year, one session per week and investigates the effectiveness of these tasks. The participants were female senior high school students in Sabzevar, Iran. The results were compared with a control group who were taught based on the pattern drill practice and traditional approaches. Analysis shows that using CR tasks in grammar teaching is significantly more effective than the traditional approaches. Therefore, it is recommended that other teachers consider CR as an option in teaching grammar in their classrooms.

Keywords: Grammar teaching, Consciousness-raising tasks, Traditional approaches, Declarative knowledge

1. Introduction

There has been a controversy among different linguists and researchers whether teacher should teach grammar or not; and also how teachers should teach grammar in the classroom. Some linguists such as Krashen (1982) believed that formal instruction in grammar would not lead to the acquisition of knowledge. Prabhu (1987) also argued that by practicing in meaning-focused tasks, learners can acquire L2 grammar naturalistically. Others, including Ellis (2002), have discussed that grammar teaching will contribute to L2 acquisition. Ellis (2002) believes that formal grammar teaching has a delayed rather than instant effect. For most teachers, teaching grammar means helping learners internalize the structures taught in such a way that they can use them in real life communication. In so doing, the learners can practice the structures of language. But, there are teachers who believe that Consciousness Raising Tasks (CRT) enable learners to develop explicit knowledge of grammar. Consciousness-Raising (CR) does not involve the learner in repeated production. This is because the purpose of this kind of grammar teaching is not to help learners to perform structures correctly but to help them to gain some knowledge about it.

Most of the textbooks in our schools in Iran have a grammar basis. Therefore, it is important for a teacher to know the effective methods for teaching grammar. In the present study we sought to investigate the effect of grammar consciousness-raising tasks on EFL learners' performance.

1.1 *Consciousness Raising (CR)*

Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined CR as

techniques that encourage learners to pay attention to language form in the belief that an awareness of form will contribute indirectly to language acquisition. Techniques include having students infer grammatical rules from examples, compare differences between two or more different ways of saying something, observe differences between a learner's use of a grammar item and its use by native speakers. A consciousness-raising approach is contrasted with traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar (e.g. drilling, sentence practice, sentence combining), in which the goal is to establish a rule or instill a grammatical pattern directly (p. 109).

CR constitutes an approach to grammar teaching which is compatible with current thinking about how learners acquire L2 grammar. It also constitutes an approach that accords with progressive views about education as a process of discovery through problem-solving tasks (Rezaei & Hosseinpour, 2011).

Many teachers clearly attempt to combine the teaching of communication with the teaching of structure. Importantly, structural and communicative approaches have a common overarching goal: to teach students to communicate. The debate continues on the best means to this end. The structural approach calls for the teacher to present students with an explicit description of grammatical structures or rules which are subsequently practiced, first in a mechanical or controlled manner and later in a freer, communicative way. This is often called the present, practice, produce (PPP) approach to grammar teaching.

Implementing a communicative approach requires a different starting point. Instead of starting with a grammar point, a lesson might revolve around students understanding content or completing a task. When a grammatical problem is encountered, a focus on form takes place immediately by drawing students' attention to it, i.e. promoting their noticing. At a later point, activities may be introduced which highlight that point in the target language.

Stemming from a similar approach is the use of input-processing (Lee and VanPatten, 1995) and CR tasks (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1988) which also do not require students to produce the target structure. Instead, the teacher makes students aware of specific grammatical features using tasks (Dickens and Woods, 1988); e.g. students are given a set of examples and asked to figure out for themselves the rule regarding the correct order of direct and indirect objects in English.

I bought many presents for my family.

I bought my family many presents.

She cooked a delicious dinner for us.

She cooked us a delicious dinner.

Students work in small groups so that they simultaneously use the target language communicatively as they induce the grammatical rule.

Very straightforward examples of this task are found in 'Grammar Questions' in *New Headway English Course* (extract 1 below). In order to build an explicit understanding of the targeted rule, this task has a relatively 'direct' link to the grammar points. The task provides metalanguage (e.g. *tenses*, *reported speech*), and it is highly likely that learners will use metalanguage for describing the rule. In other words, learners realize that they are truly absorbed in 'grammar' tasks.

Below, there is another grammar consciousness raising task.

Read the sentences and answer the questions.

'I'm with my husband,' she said.

She said (that) she was with her husband.

'I was ...

What is the basic rule about the use of tenses in reported speech?

What is the difference in the way 'say' and 'tell' are used?

'Are you on your own?' He asked.

He asked if I was on my own.

'How do you ...

What differences are there between direct questions and indirect questions?

When is *if* used?

Extract 1: New Headway Student's Book, p. 117

(Nitta & Gardner, 2005)

1.2 Declarative vs. Procedural Knowledge

Fotos (2001) argues that knowledge has been divided into two general types: 1) declarative or explicit knowledge and 2) procedural or implicit knowledge. Declarative or explicit knowledge is knowledge about something. It is factual information which is conscious, and is thought to consist of proposition (language-based representation) and images (perception-based representation). In contrast, procedural/implicit knowledge is knowing how to do something and is usually unconscious. In the past, many advocates of communicative language teaching argued that these two knowledge systems lacked any interface, so to teach students the grammar rules of a second/foreign language only gave them explicit knowledge and did not develop their ability to use the grammar points in real communication. However, recent research suggests that the two language knowledge systems are, in fact connected by noticing and awareness, a connection which has referred to as 'Noticing Hypothesis'. Once a student becomes aware of a particular grammar point or language feature in input—whether through formal instruction, some type of focus-on-form activity, or repeated exposure to communicative use of the structure—he or she often continues to notice the structure on subsequent input, particularly if the structure is used frequently (Schmidt 1990). Repeated noticing and continued awareness of the language feature is important because it appears to raise the student's consciousness of the structure and to facilitate restructuring of the learner's unconscious system of linguistic knowledge (Fotos, 2001).

Ellis (2002) believes that 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. The main characteristics of CR activities are the following:

- 1) There is an attempt to isolate a specific linguistic feature for focused attention.
- 2) The learners are provided with data which illustrate the targeted feature and they may also be supplied with an explicit rule describing or explaining the feature.
- 3) The learners are expected to utilize intellectual effort to understand the targeted feature.
- 4) Misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of the grammatical structure by the learners leads to clarification in the form of further data and description or explanation.
- 5) Learners may be required (although this is not obligatory) to articulate the rule describing the grammatical structure.

Willis and Willis (1996) suggested that teachers can provide students with language data either in the form of a single text or a set of examples from familiar sources. Students will then perform certain operations on these samples of language. The outcome of these operations will be an increased awareness of and sensitivity to language. Willis listed seven kinds of operations that students might be asked to perform in the classroom:

- 1) *Identify/consolidate*: Students are asked to search a set of data to identify a particular pattern or usage and the language forms associated with it
- 2) *Classify (semantic; structural)*: Students are required to work with a set of data and sort it according to similarities and differences based on formal or semantic criteria.
- 3) *Hypothesis building/checking*: Students are given (or asked to make) a generalization about language and asked to check this against more language data.
- 4) *Cross-language exploration*: Students are encouraged to find similarities and differences between patterning in their own language and patterning in English.
- 5) *Reconstruction/deconstruction*: Students are required to manipulate language in ways which reveal underlying patterns.
- 6) *Recall*: Students are required to recall and reconstruct elements of a text. The purpose of the recall is to highlight significant features of the text.
- 7) *Reference training*: Students need to learn to use reference works - dictionaries, grammars and study guides.

2. Review of Literature

Several studies have explored the effectiveness of consciousness raising tasks. One study was conducted in Japan by Fotos and Ellis (1991, as cited in Peterson, 1997) in which they compared the effectiveness of consciousness raising tasks with traditional teacher-fronted grammar lessons. The subjects were young Japanese adults, half of whom were studying at a junior college and the other half at a university. The grammar lesson and the task were identical in content, both presenting word order of direct and indirect objects following specific verbs. In the task group, students were divided into groups of four, and each student was given a card with a sentence written on it. Each student would read his or her card to the group, and then the group decides if that sentence was correct or incorrect. Students were not allowed to show their cards to each other. But they could ask each other for repetition or clarification as needed. Fotos and Ellis conclude that the task appeared to have functioned equally well as the grammar lesson in the short term, and was only slightly less effective in maintaining proficiency than the grammar lesson after 2 weeks...Fotos and Ellis agree that the quality of interaction was limited. The negotiations made by both groups (college and university) were found to be qualitatively limited in either language and consisted of asking whether a sentence was correct or incorrect, asking for repetition of a sentence, part of a sentence, or a single lexical item or making a comprehension check.

In another study, Yip (1994) investigated whether consciousness-raising tasks can help ESL learners overcome errors in the usage of ergative verbs. Subjects were advanced ESL students at the American language Institute at the University of Southern California. Five students were in each class, and their first language included Spanish, Hebrew, Korean, Chinese, Indonesian, German and Greek. Pretests involving a scaled grammaticality judgment task and error correction task were administered to the subjects in two classes. Yip then taught the two classes using the consciousness-raising approach. In the first class, she used similar items that

were on the pretest, but in the second class she used exactly the same items that were on the pretest. The first class failed to achieve any significant improvements, whereas the second class showed significant improvement in their scores. The second class members showed more interest in the topic and had access to the answer in the pretest. The author concluded that using the consciousness raising method in teaching can be effective in teaching the eragative construction. However, because of the small number of participants involved in the research, the author suggests the results may not be generalized. Moreover, the effect of the instruction could not be measured longitudinally.

As for the CR tasks (which can be deductive and inductive), Mohamed (2004) examines learners' perspectives of the effectiveness of such tasks. The findings indicate that learners have no strong preference for a particular type of task over the other. They view the tasks to be useful in assisting them to learn new knowledge about language. The finding suggests that CR tasks (both deductive and inductive) are effective learning tool and can therefore be used to raise learners' awareness of linguistic forms.

Sugiharto (2006) investigated Indonesian students' ability in understanding the simple present tense rules, which often pose a problem for the students. Using a grammatical judgment test, Sugiharto compared the results from students' pre-and post-test, and found that students performed significantly better on the post-test. This study indicated that CR is effective in helping students develop their explicit knowledge of the simple present tense.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Sixty female students at a senior high school in Sabzevar, Iran, participated in the study. The participants were all native speakers of Persian with their age between 16 and 17. They were divided into two groups, 30 students in control group and 30 in experimental group. The experimental group is taught by the researcher using CR task and the control group is taught by another English teacher, teaching grammar based on practice and traditional approaches.

3.2 Instrumentation

A language proficiency test was used to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. The test consists of 30 multiple choice items with three sub-tests (a 10-item grammar test, a 10-item vocabulary test and a 10-item reading comprehension test).

The second instrument was a teacher-made grammar test which aimed to determine their grammar knowledge. The test consisted of 60 multiple choice items mainly constructed on the basis of the grammar points of students' text book. The grammatical structure of the book included: *infinitive verbs, reported speech, present and past participle adjectives, order of adjectives and adjective use after linking verbs*.

The main source used for both the control and experimental groups was lesson four and five of book three in high school. The grammatical structures of lesson four and five of their text book included: *infinitive verbs, reported speech, present and past participle adjectives, order*

of adjectives before a noun and adjective use after linking verbs. There are different types of follow-up exercises in their text books that students do after each lesson.

3.3 Procedure

The first step in conducting this research was dividing students in two groups: control group and experimental group. Then both groups took a proficiency test to ensure their homogeneity. After the pretest, students in both groups were exposed to an instructional program. The control group was instructed through the use of pattern drill practice and the experimental group through the use of grammatical CR activities and tasks. After the treatment, both groups took a grammar post-test. Then a t-test was run to detect differences between the means of the two groups.

To illustrate how the instruction of grammar points was carried out, one of the grammar points, *using infinitives after verbs*, that was taught based on CR task is explained here. The students were given some examples in which the main verb was highlighted and the infinitive verb was underlined. The students were asked to read the examples and detect the grammar point. The following sentences show some of these examples in their handouts:

Look at the following examples. Can you explain the grammatical point?

*I **want** to go home now.*

*They **like** to watch the cartoons on Friday.*

*She **decided** to buy a blue dress.*

*I'm **trying** to learn French, too...*

Now compare these sentences with the following sentences. What are their similarities and their differences?

*I **wanted** him to wash the dishes.*

*The teacher **asked** me to answer the questions.*

*The doctor **has advised** Mina to stay at home.*

*They **promise** us to come to the party on time.*

Then the students were asked to compare the characteristics of different verbs in the following table:

(1) (2) (3)

She is planning <u>to visit</u> our country.	He never stops <u>trying</u> .	I should <u>study</u> more.
I have decided <u>to sell</u> my car.	We enjoy <u>speaking</u> English.	We might <u>go</u> to Mashhad.
	I like <u>swimming</u> in summer.	Please let me <u>know</u> the details.

She expects me <u>to tell</u> the truth.	Can you finish <u>typing</u> the report today?	They made children <u>work</u> hard.
He encouraged Reza <u>to study</u> English.		

Another grammar point was the differences between present and past participle. The students were given a table. They were asked to compare the two columns and tell the characteristics of each column. Here are some examples:

Look at the following table. Can you say what the differences between the meaning and structure of present participle and past participle adjectives are?

Present Participle	Past Participle
-His job is boring. -The football match is exciting. -It was surprising that my sister passed the exam. -The cartoon was very amusing yesterday. -"How were the math problems?" -"They were really confusing."	-I was bored while driving so I decided to rest. -She has never been in Mashhad before. She is excited about going there. -The children were amused. They watched the cartoon very carefully. -I couldn't answer the math problems because -I was confused.

By comparing these two columns the students tried to explain the differences between present and past participle. The treatment in this study corresponds to different levels of consciousness-raising activities identified by Gimeno (2003). He believed that "There are several levels of consciousness-raising activities, ranging from the presentation of examples relevant to a problematic construction where the formal properties of this construction are made salient (Doughty, 1991), to the eliciting the rule, to explicit explanation of applicable grammatical rules. Three steps should be followed- examples should be given, students should try to discover the rule and an explanation of the rule should be elicited from students and feedback provided since rule explanations draw students' attention to an aspect of the linguistic system..." (Gimeno, 2003, p. 42)

3.4 Treatment

The type of the material used for the experimental group was not much different from those of the control group. In the experimental group, first, the teacher wrote and highlighted some examples of the grammar on pieces of papers and delivered them to students at the beginning of the grammar session. The students were then asked to read the examples and induce the grammar rule by themselves or in groups. They could explain the grammar point based on

their understanding. First, they could work in groups and share their understanding of the grammar point with their peers, and then some of them could have presentation in front of the class. Then, the students were given some sentences which contained one error. They should detect the errors and try to correct them.

5. Results

In order to determine the homogeneity of the participants, a language proficiency test with 30 items was administered to 60 students. The descriptive statistics of the proficiency test is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Proficiency Pretest

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
score	groups				
	control	30	20.76	2.31	.42
	experimental	30	20.70	2.33	.42

As Table 1 indicates, the performance of the two groups on the proficiency test showed remarkable similarities. However, a t-test was run to compare the mean score of the experimental group ($M = 20.7$, $SD = 2.33$) and the control group ($M = 20.76$, $SD = 2.31$) in order to make sure that the two groups did not differ significantly before they were exposed to the instructional intervention.

Table 2. Comparing Means of the Proficiency Pretest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
score	Equal variances assumed	.190	.66	.11	58	.91	.06	.60
	Equal variances not assumed			.11	57.99	.91	.06	.60

As we can see in Table 2, the t-test results indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the grammar pretest and thus the two groups

belonged to the same population before the treatment. After the treatment, a 60-item grammar test was used as the posttest. The descriptive statistics of the experimental group ($M = 42.60$, $SD = 8.78$) and the control group ($M = 37.66$, $SD = 7.24$) are demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Grammar Posttest

		groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
score	control		30	37.66	7.24	1.32
	Experimental		30	42.60	8.78	1.60

The means of the two groups on the grammar posttest were compared through another t-test. As Table 4 shows, the obtained p value ($p = .05$) confirmed the equality of variances and $t(58) = -2.37$, $p < .05$ suggested that the mean differences of 4.93 is significant and the null hypothesis can be safely rejected.

Table 4. Comparing Means of the Grammar Posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
score	Equal variances assumed	3.92	.052	-2.37	58	.021	-4.93	2.078
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.37	55.97	.021	-4.93	2.078

Therefore, as it is shown in the table above, it is found out that the CR group significantly outperformed the control group. This indicates that CR was more effective in developing learners' knowledge of grammar than traditional approaches.

6. Discussion

The findings obtained in this research led to the conclusion that there was a significant difference between the grammar mean of the two groups allowing the researcher to reject the

null hypothesis of no difference between the mean of the two groups. Therefore, this study supports the effectiveness of CR activities in teaching grammar to EFL learners in senior high school. This study also suggests that implementing CR activities can help learners to improve their knowledge of grammar. This study showed that the students were more active in class while they were learning the grammar point because they were asked to extract the grammar point themselves by focusing on the examples in their handout.

This finding is in line with Mishan's (2005) argument that the rationale of the CR approaches is that given sufficient exposure and opportunity, learners will discover elements of L2 grammar. This involves reconciling their new finding with their current interlanguage that is, 'noticing the gap' between their understanding of the use and usage of a particular feature, and examples of its use by native speakers. This leads to revision of the interlanguage towards more a native-like form and eventually towards acquisition of that form. This naturalistic aspect is only one of the advantages of the CR approach. Another is that in the longer term, it nurtures language awareness sensitizing learners to the structure of target language in a way that passively receiving information that language rules does not. Applying this approach trains learners in techniques which they can then use to study independently. One crucial benefit of using a CR approach is that by linking the study of grammatical structure firmly to language encountered within text, it checks the tendency to perceive grammatical form as isolated phenomena.

In addition, the result of this study suggest that because of their important role in extracting and even explaining the grammar point in front of the class students were all motivated in learning the grammar point which can lead to language acquisition. The result of this research also corroborates other similar studies. For example, Yip (1994) indicated the effectiveness of CR in teaching ergative construction. Mohamed (2004), also, suggested that CR tasks, both deductive and inductive, are effective learning tools and can therefore be used to raise learners' awareness of linguistic forms. Sugiharto (2006) contended that CR is effective in helping students develop their explicit knowledge of the simple present tense. Moradkhan and Sohrabian (2009) argued that the use of CR activities could be a very efficient technique in improving the grammatical knowledge of EFL learners. They believed that the combination of explicit and implicit learning can guide students toward language acquisition. The need for explicit rules can be more justified if it is embedded in communicative task.

This study is not going to reject the role of other techniques in teaching grammar. The present research merely aimed to hold up the claim that the use of CR activities in the classroom is a suitable technique in teaching grammar to EFL learners. It seems that it is better for the teacher to be aware of different techniques in teaching grammar and use them based on different circumstances. In Iran, learning grammar is one of the most important parts of learning English in the educational system.

7. Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of CR grammar tasks on Iranian EFL learners. The findings of the study suggested the superiority of CR grammar tasks to pattern practice in promoting grammar knowledge in Iranian high school students. Although

practice has a role to play in language learning, Ellis (2002) maintains that its value is rather limited. He argues that the available evidence seems to suggest that practice, be it controlled, contextualized, or communicative, may not be as effective as people claim it is. CR, on the other hand, offers an attractive alternative to traditional grammar practice. As a result, language teachers are encouraged to consider CR tasks as an effective means in promoting learner's grammar knowledge.

However, as it is pointed out by Larsen-Freeman (2002), grammar is best conceived as encompassing three dimensions: form, meaning and use. While productive practice may be useful for working on form, associative learning may account more for meaning, and awareness of and sensitivity to context may be required for appropriate use. Since grammar is complex, and students' learning styles vary, learning grammar is not likely to be accomplished through a single means.

Since CR tasks for teaching grammar could be of various forms, future studies may investigate the effectiveness of various techniques that are available to language teachers for raising the consciousness of their students to grammar rules. A second line of research may address the appropriateness of CR tasks for teaching young learners as it is not known how CR tasks could be applied to younger learners.

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