The Effect of Grammatical Consciousness-Raising Tasks on Iranian EFL Learners’ Knowledge of Grammar

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether Grammar Consciousness Raising (GCR) tasks can have a more significant effect on the grammatical knowledge of learners than Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approach. To this aim, 62 female pre-intermediate students assigned to two groups. The students in the experimental group received GCR treatment while the students in the control group underwent a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) method of grammar instruction. The results indicated higher improvement of learner’s knowledge of grammar in the experimental group. It is suggested that EFL learners benefit more from GCR tasks and teachers should consider including GCR tasks in their syllabus.

Keywords: Grammar Consciousness Raising (GCR); Task-based Instruction; Presentation Practice Production (PPP); Focus on Form

1. Introduction

The concept of grammar and whether it should be taught in the classroom or what is the best method for grammar instruction has received considerable debate in second language acquisition research. The words of language are arranged according to the set of formal patterns in order to convey the meaning of each larger or smaller part and this is what we mean by grammar (Savage, Bitterline & Price, 2010).

The grammar-focused method which only involved rules and structure is out of date now. The underlying assumption of such methods is the belief that language consists of a series of grammatical forms and structures and
the focus should be on accuracy and repetition. Such methods do not lead to successful development in using form communicatively. Moreover, fluency is considered to be an important factor in language and grammar learning and teaching. Overall, the approach which covers both accuracy and fluency in grammar teaching and at the same time does not neglect form and meaning is needed (Van Lier, 1988). The approach which addresses all this quality is a task-based one.

According to Ellis (2003), a significant factor that the learner, researcher and syllabus designer recently dealt with is task. It is believed that the task-based view of language teaching is a response to some of drawbacks of the traditional Presentation, Practice and Performance (PPP). Many instructors and researchers believe that the mental grammar of learners will improve if they engage in task-based instruction in order to learn the language. The emphasized elements in task-based syllabus are means and process rather than product (Nunan, 2004).

Task-based activity has been accepted all around the world as one of the best procedures for teaching different skills. But there are some researchers who distinguish the deficiency of this procedure. According to Richards (2001) task-based instructions may not provide grammatical accuracy in its acceptable level, although it is a perfect alternative to grammar-based teaching. In order to have a fluency, accuracy and restructuring, all at once, a more perfect method such as CR tasks is needed. Smith (2003) explicitly uses the word CR for grammar teaching: He defines CR as:

“The conveying of a rule to draw the learner’s attention to structural regularities….revealing some pattern or system in the target language the learner is being made conscious of some aspect of the language itself, but the manner varies.” (pp. 160-162)

The learner’s explicit knowledge of grammatical features will improve through CR instructions (Ellis, 2002). It also increases the learner’s responsibility and autonomy because they themselves are responsible for distinguishing and making the rules.

CR is highly student-centered in nature. Here, the teacher, instead of being the sole-source of knowledge, acts as a facilitator, providing appropriate opportunities for the learner to gain insights into the target language through exploration. Such exploration inevitably results in erroneous target language production. One feature of CR appears to be that its practitioners do not demand immediate mastery or accurate output upon instruction. As the pioneers in this approach report, this is because CR is not the end product but a means by which L2 can be acquired. This is not to say that errors are left untreated, only that it is assumed that learners require time to internalize the new language and incorporate it into their inter language system. To investigate how CR takes may affect the grammar knowledge of Iranian learners, the present study aims to answer the following research question:

Are Consciousness-Raising tasks more effective than PPP in improving grammatical accuracy of Iranian EFL learners?

2. Review of Literature

A number of studies have been undertaken to investigate the efficacy of grammar CR. Fotos and Ellis (1991) compared the effects of direct CR by means of grammar explanation and of indirect CR by means of a CR task on Japanese learner’s ability to judge the grammaticality of sentences involving dative alteration. They found that both methods of CR resulted in significant gains in understanding the target structure. In a similar study, Sheen (1992) compared direct and indirect CR in a six-week beginner’s French course for Japanese, finding that students in the two groups did equally well in a written post-test of the structure taught.

In an experimental research, Fotos (1994 investigated the amount of learner noticing produced by two types of grammar CR treatments: teacher-fronted grammar lessons and interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks. Involving 160 Japanese college students of English, Fotos designed her research by dividing the subjects into three different treatment groups, which were taught indirect object placement, adverb placement, and relative clause usage in communicative input. The findings revealed that the two types of grammar CR are effective in promoting
significant level of noticing the target language structures in subsequent communicative input.

Sugiharto (2006) also 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’ performance was 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.

Although grammar instruction is essential and it has received considerable attention in language teaching at Iranian high schools but it appears that it is mainly taught using Presentation- Practice- Production (PPP). However, still many learners have difficulty in producing grammatical sentences. In order to deal with this problem, the present study intends to investigate the effect of CR task instruction and compare it to PPP approach to find out which method can yield better results in grammar instruction.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Sixty two female students were randomly selected out of ninety, from a pool of second grade students of high school at the initial phase of the study. Participants consisted of homogenous female students at the pre-intermediate level based on their grades on the proficiency test they took. They were all between 14 and 15 years old and all of them were native speakers of Farsi. They were divided into two equal groups; one of the two intact groups served as the experimental and the other as the control group.

3.2. Instruments

Two instruments were employed in this study:

1- Prior to the experiment, and to assess the students’ level of proficiency in English, a sample of Preliminary English Test (PET), as a test which is supposed to match high school EFL learners’ level of proficiency, was administered. The purpose of this test was to ensure that the students in both experimental and control groups were at the same level of proficiency.

The PET test consisted of 50 items, 30 items addressing the students’ knowledge of grammar, 10 items evaluating the students’ vocabulary knowledge, and 10 items assessing the students’ reading comprehension skills. The total score on the test was 50 and the time allocated to the test was 30 minutes.

2- At the end of the experiment, all participants including the control and experimental groups were given a post test of grammatical knowledge. The purpose of this test was to compare the scores of the control and experimental groups. The test consisted of 30 multiple choice items. The time limit for the exam was 30 minutes.

In the post-test care also was taken to select those grammatical items that were at the level of students. To select grammatical questions of appropriate level, the researcher used the teacher’s experience and the teacher helped the researcher for providing appropriate questions. Also the researcher used different valid sources for choosing reliable questions such as Grammar in Use Books, Oxford Grammar Books, etc. Since it was not a standardized test, a pilot study was conducted with 35 grade two high school students of Fateh School who had similar characteristics of the original sample to check the reliability of the researcher-made tests. Then an item analysis procedure was carried out and the characteristics of individual items including item facility (IF) and item discrimination (ID) indexes were determined which indicated that the test enjoys acceptable degrees of reliability and validity.

3.3. Materials

One of the materials used in this study was the same for two groups. The second grade high school English book (Birgandi et al., 1390) was used and was taught during the term. Students’ English book in grade two has seven units. They are taught in two semesters in a year, three units in the first semester and four units in the second one. Because of time limitation only seven grammatical points were taught out of this book in the second semester
and the researcher also addressed these seven grammatical points. The grammatical focus of the last 4 units of the book include:

verb + to + verb, article “the”, If clause (type 1), If clause (type 2), personal pronouns, Wh-words ‘who’ and ‘what’, noun as modifier

Beside students’ book, the CR tasks based on Rod Ellis’s CR tasks model were also used in the experimental group. In this study, enhancing students’ consciousness of grammatical knowledge is carried out by using some kind of grammatical tasks. These tasks were offered only to the experimental group. In order to provide such tasks, the researcher prepared some texts followed by a few questions. The texts were downloaded from the Internet or they were selected from Standard English books such as Total English Books. The researcher avoided selecting the text with lots of unknown vocabularies which were above their proficiency levels.

Questions were developed according to the text. The questions were designed to tap autonomy and responsibility in students, because they were supposed to be aware of the new grammatical points in the text and were expected to distinguish the rules themselves.

The framework used by the researcher to devise questions out of the text, in CR tasks, was according to Ellis's sampling presented in Richards and Rogers (2007). Different kinds of questions in the CR tasks are as follows:

- When is ............ used?
- Which of the following sentences are ungrammatical? Why?
- Try and make up a rule to explain when ................. are used?
- Make up one sentence about yourself and use the grammar you learned.

After providing tasks, the researcher asked some experienced teachers to evaluate them and give comments for their improvement. The final draft of these tasks was employed after receiving comments from teachers and revising the tasks.

3.4. Procedures

In order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, a PET proficiency test was administered to 90 students at the beginning. Then the participants were assigned to two groups of control and experimental. Grade two high school students attend the English class twice a week, which is forty-eight sessions during two semesters (six months). The treatment was carried out during three months, seven sessions, that is one session every other week. Every lesson consisted of at least a two-page text, comprehension exercises and a grammatical point with its related exercises. It should be noted that the researcher and the English teacher were not the same. The researcher followed the following steps to complete the studies.

In the experimental group, first the teacher wrote and boldfaced the grammar point on the board and explained how it is used in a five-to-ten minute teacher fronted grammar explanation. In fact, the teacher clarified the points that students were going to read in the CR task. Then students took CR tasks in which they would distinguish the grammar more easily. The students were aware of the kind of the grammatical point and they knew what they were doing. After students finished reading the text, the teacher began asking some questions in order to make sure that they comprehended the text. Next, students attempted to distinguish the rules, how it worked and where it appeared. They answered the follow-up questions which improve their knowledge in configuring the grammatical points. Finally, they were supposed to distinguish the rules without the help of the teacher. They were free to guess about the rules. At this time the teacher stayed quiet and just listened to their suggestions. When they made the correct rules, she confirmed it by illustrating the point in the previous text which they read. The tasks took only 15 to 20 minutes; it is not a time-consuming activity. After the treatment period, both groups took part in a grammar post-test. Then, a t-test was run to detect differences between the means of the two groups.
4. Results

To compare the effectiveness of GCR and PPP in enhancing learners' grammar knowledge this experimental study was designed. Having collected the data for the PET proficiency test, the descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS software (version 21). The results are illustrated below in Tables 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Post-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14.6167</td>
<td>5.84230</td>
<td>34.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29.0000</td>
<td>7.57036</td>
<td>57.310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To estimate the reliability of the teacher-made post-test, KR21 formula was used. The results are shown in the next table.

Table 2. Reliability Indices for the Post-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistics</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>Variance</th>
<th>KR-21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28.91</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the above table, the reliability of the teacher-made test is 0.77 which is acceptable. Therefore, the multiple grammar test used in this research enjoyed acceptable indices of reliability. Having administrated the proficiency test to 90 students, the researcher scored their performance and those participants who scored within the range of one SD above and below the mean were selected as the participants of this study that were 62 students and the rest were excluded. At the end of treatment which was carried out during seven sessions, the multiple choice grammar tests were administered to both experimental and control groups. The test was administered in order to discover if there were any significant differences between the mean scores of the two groups after the treatment.

The performance of the two groups on the multiple choice grammar post-test was compared running an independent sample t-test.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Post-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11.6774</td>
<td>2.91418</td>
<td>.52340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14.4194</td>
<td>3.74855</td>
<td>.67326</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Independent Sample T-Test of the Post-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leven’s Test for Equality of Variance</th>
<th>T-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Variance Assumed</td>
<td>1.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Variance not Assumed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the table, t- observed (t (60)= 3.215, P<.05) is bigger than t- critical (2) at 0.05 level of significance; so there is a significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups in multiple-choice grammar post-test. As a result, the null hypothesis stating that CR tasks are not more effective than PPP in improving grammatical accuracy of EFL learners is safely rejected. Thus, the alternative hypothesis that CR tasks are more effective than PPP in improving grammatical accuracy of EFL learners is accepted.
5. Discussion

The obtained results prove that the students’ awareness of grammatical points is enhanced and it also proves that GCRT is more effective in promoting explicit grammatical knowledge than PPP. Some reasons can be assigned for this. In order to distinguish the especial grammatical point of the lesson, students were exposed to awareness enhancement. To achieve this, they read the texts more deeply and comprehend them better. It seemed clear that the students’ awareness improved by doing so. After reading comprehension, they were supposed to answer some questions. The students can find the answers to the questions very easily in the texts. In fact, they do not need to comprehend the text deeply to answer them. Therefore, the students’ involvement in doing so would increase their awareness of grammar because the texts were based on grammatical points which were in students’ course book. It is observed that focus on answering reading questions improve the students’ responsibility and autonomy because they themselves tried to make up the rules based on the reading. The students determined different information in the text and their relation to each other. They recognized the structure of the sentences, how the sentences were made, and their underlying grammar and after observing many examples they were able to create their own rules. There is no doubt that students’ involvement in these activities promotes their explicit grammatical knowledge.

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of some studies in the CR domain such as Moradkhan and Sohrabian’s (2009) study which indicated that awareness of form will contribute to language acquisition and grammar learning. Also, Alirezaei and Hoseinpour (2011) suggested that the evaluation of the CR tasks used for the study by the learners showed that the learners were generally receptive to them. The results of this research also corroborate other similar studies (Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Fotos, 1994; Moritoshi, 2000; Sugiharto, 2006; Yip, 1994) who found that CR activities are effective tools for the development of grammar. The results indicated that the learners viewed the tasks to be useful in imparting new knowledge about the language.

In addition, Ranalli (2001, p. 10) mentioned that “Perhaps the way to think about CR, then, is not as a blueprint for a new paradigm of grammar teaching, but rather as one more very useful tool we can add to our toolboxes”. Hence, grammar CR task is one of the perfect ways of teaching grammar, but it is not going to reject other effective techniques which were proposed and applied by other researchers such as form-focused suggested by Nassaji and Fotos (2011).

The findings of this study on the superiority of CR to PPP in grammar instruction is further supported by Schmidt's “noticing hypothesis”. Schmidt (1990, 1994) emphasized the role of consciousness in language learning and argued that learners must first consciously comprehend the input before any subsequent processing of that input is to take place. Ellis (2002) also believes that CR improves the declarative knowledge of specific grammar points. He contends that CR develops explicit knowledge of grammatical features which certainly equip learners with acquirement of important knowledge.

The researcher noticed that students in the CR group were more enthusiastic about grammar learning and showed greater interest and involvement in tasks. This is a desirable situation since language teachers have always been looking for ways to engage learners in learning drawing on their full potentials.

It has to be emphasized that the grammar instruction in this study was carried out according to the principles of task based instruction which emphasizes communication and is totally different from mechanical grammar teaching. This is acknowledged by Fotos (1994) who maintained that “GCRT provides learners with grammar problems to solve interactively…it is communicative and has an L2 grammar problem as the task content. Although the learners focus on the form of the grammar structure, they are also engaged in meaning-focused use of the target language as they solve the grammar problem. They develop grammatical knowledge while they are communicating” (p. 96).
6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed that CR is a more effective means of improving learners' grammar than PPP. The implication for the language teacher is that CR tasks are effective means of grammar instruction which can improve learners' grammatical knowledge and promote their autonomy. But it has to be noted that CR takes are more suitable for more proficient learners and less proficient learners may benefit more from other methods of grammar instruction.

Moreover, by creating opportunities to raise the consciousness of learners on the grammatical points in textbooks, teachers encourage learners to overcome their grammatical barriers by discovering the rules of grammar by themselves which is in line with the principles of discovery learning. Hood (1994) maintains that “drawing the learners’ attention to the linguistic patterns and providing them with the underlying rules and principles can enhance the learning process since learners usually try to discover rules from the language data for themselves.” (P. 28).

Besides, teachers can perform an extra role in the GCR classroom and can be a person who helps learners to become aware of what happens in their mind during learning a foreign language, especially during grammar teaching and learning, because grammar is believed to be a boring component in language learning by many learners.

Besides, teachers can encourage the students to be inquisitive and not believe and accept whatever they are told. This aligns with critical learning principles. But, this entails that teachers themselves be aware of the significance of promoting learners’ awareness and as a result their autonomy and responsibility. GCRTs are also effective in promoting the four learning skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In such tasks both reception and production are focused and emphasized. Students’ development of the skill reveals the success of the tasks. This study focused on a few CR tasks without intending to compare their relative efficacy; thus, it is suggested that futures studies be conducted to compare the relative efficiency of different types of CR tasks.

References:


