Pedagogical Efficacy of Planned vs. Unplanned Focus on Form Instruction in Scaffolding Transitional Devices Used by Iranian EFL Learners in Writing Paragraphs

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Abstract

Indubitably, the efficacy of metalinguistic awareness in improving EFL learners grammatical knowledge and writing quality has long been an area of great interest in applied linguistics Brown (2001). Accordingly, the main objective of the present study was to investigate the impact of planned and unplanned focus on form instruction on students ability to learn grammar and use it appropriately in their writing. For this purpose three intact classes registering for the Grammar and Writing course in university of Isfahan ,Iran were chosen for teaching the target structure (i.e., transitional devices) through different methods of focusing on form instructions. The selected samples comprised 30 in each group, male and female sophomore students with the age range of 19 to 24, studying English translation at university of Isfahan. The samples received instruction through planned focus on form instruction (PFFI), unplanned focus on form instruction (UFFI) and zero focus on form instruction (ZFFI) respectively. The results of the post-test on paragraph writing and on the subsequent delayed post-test revealed that the participants in the planned group notably out performed those in the unplanned and zero focus on form groups in handling transitional markers in the writing of paragraphs.

Introduction

Many writers strongly believe that grammar is one of the most controversial and demanding abilities for both L2 learners and teachers. Fact, L2 teachers are currently concerned about the ways of incorporating grammar in to language teaching classes since it plays a crucial role in different language skills. Accordingly, experts in the language teaching give many suggestions concerning grammatical instruction in the L2 environment.

Undoubtedly, much of the second language can be learnt without formal instruction; however, there are numerous situations in which we somehow need to pave the way for the learners through instruction if they are to learn a second language effectively. It is often stated that adults do not develop a full competence in a second language mostly because these learners rely on their L1 experiences and the application of metalinguistic knowledge for analyzing L2. Apparently, these factors may lead to the development of consistent errors called fossilization, which prevent learners from learning a second language efficiently. In such cases, we can no longer rely on sheer natural approaches and wait for the learning to happen. We surely need to assist them to internalize a near native competence Nunan (2001).It is clear that this will be impossible without considering the influential role of instruction in the teaching/ learning process. As Ellis (2008, p 15) puts it, there may be certain linguistic properties that cannot be acquired by L2 learners unless they receive instruction in them

As such writers have recognized two kinds of instructional interventions in the EFL context; namely, direct and indirect (Dekeyser, 1995). Indirect instruction is usually aimed at developing the learners` communicative skills and sets the conditions for learners to learn experientially. In direct instruction, on the other hand, accuracy takes priority over fluency and as Widdowson (1989) maintains, this kind of instruction is an investment for the future and is known as Form-focused Instruction.

A quick glance at the literature available in second language acquisition and language teaching reflects that focus on form instruction has an important part in teaching grammar and language

forms in L2 classrooms. Apparently, the question of whether or not to teach grammar and grammatical forms in second language classrooms has always been a matter of great controversy; sometimes it has been so baffling, and oftentimes highly problematic to the EFL teachers.

Unquestionably, clarifying the concept of grammar in language teaching is very important since it means various things to different people. As Rivers (1981) states grammar is the rules of a language set out in a terminology which is hard to remember with many exceptions appended to each rule (p.63). In another attempt to conceptualize the word grammar ,the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary(2007) defines it as a person smanner of handling language forms in speech or writing judge as correct or erroneous based on whether it complies with or deviates from the grammatical rules of the language in questions

A historical overview of English language teaching indicates that it was once highly dependent on this notion of grammar in the classroom when Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was in vogue. The assumption was that conscious attention to language forms would lead to a better understanding of language or in better terms, would enable the students to analyze the language they are supposed to learn. In fact, the ultimate goal for the students was to benefit from the mental discipline and the intellectual development that result from foreign language study (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p.5). In the direct method and the natural approach, grammar teaching or the overt focus on language forms was believed into be futile if not very dangerous. Later on, in 1970s, with the advent of communicative approaches, teaching of grammar or language forms was overtly questioned to the extent that some researchers in specific versions of Communicative Language Teaching placed no emphasis on the direct teaching of grammar.

However, the pendulum of English language teaching has swung back to the extent that teachers and researchers once again are talking about the importance of grammar teaching in the classroom and its applications for better understanding of the L2 students, in general. Not surprisingly, second language teachers have come to describe it as

grammar revival (Thornbury, 1999, p. 23). Although it is not the same case among the scholars, many SLA researchers follow Long (1991) in proposing a focus on form and its importance for the L2 proficiency development (as cited in Nunan, D & Carter, R.A, 2001. p.37). Other scholars, namely, Ellis (2008), have also emphasized the role of form-focused instruction in language teaching. For example, since there is a limit to what humans can pay attention to at any one time and since attending to features of English may be necessary for learning them, grammar instruction may enhance learners` ability to notice aspects of English that might otherwise escape their attention while engaged in communication (Schmidt, 1990).

In short, focus on form instruction is a type of instruction that, on the one hand, holds up the importance of communicative language teaching principles such as authentic communication and student-centeredness, and, on the other hand, maintains the value of the occasional and overt study of problematic L2 grammatical forms, which is more reminiscent of non-communicative teaching (Long, 1991). Nowadays; however, it is often suggested that the issue has influenced both educators and researchers so that they no longer believe that the grammar should not be taught. Instead, the real question now is: How to teach grammar for helping learners to develop second language proficiency.

Alternatively, there are two kinds of knowledge; namely, Implicit and explicit knowledge which are closely intertwined with form ˚ focus instruction. Ellis (2003) defines the former as the knowledge which the learner is unaware and therefore cannot verbalize, and the latteris defined as the L2 knowledge the learner is aware of and can verbalize on request   (p .139).

According to Bialystok(1994) implicit knowledge is mostly intuitive, procedural, systematically variable, automatic and thus available for use in fluent, unplanned language use Additionally, Ellis (2008), in the field believe that this kind of knowledge is only learnable when learners still have not passed the critical period or the age of puberty. By contrast, explicit knowledge is conscious, declarative, anomalous, and inconsistent. This kind of knowledge,

according to Ellis, is generally only accessible through controlled processing in planned language use.

By contrast, Researchers like Krashen (1982) disagree on the notion that explicit grammatical knowledge would help the learners and actually claims that its role is very much limited. In other words, learners can only use explicit knowledge when they monitor their output, which requires them to focus on form (as opposed to meaning) and in this way will have sufficient time to access the knowledge they need. In addition, There is also some evidence that teaching explicit knowledge by itself-that is, without any opportunities for practicing the target feature) is not really effective.

Empirical investigations studying the role of explicit instruction have been numerous. For example, Ruhi (2001) in a study investigated the effect of explicit and implicit focus on form reinforced by incidental recast on second language development on 72 adult learners. He found out that both techniques had a positive impact on the learners language development. In another study, Ellis (2004) conducted a research to contrast the classroom and naturalistic settings, and the results showed that the classroom setting is more effective than natural setting. Similarly, Rahimpoor and Maghsoodpour (2011) investigated the impact of form focused instruction on L2 learners communication skills, and they concluded that form focused group was more successful than task based instruction group. Andrew (2007) conducted an empirical study to investigate the effects of different grammar instruction at a college-prep, private school on 70 participants in grades seven through twelve. The results revealed that teaching does make a significant difference in learning, that explicit group outperformed in complex rules but for simple rules both methods were equally efficient. Radwan (2005) aimed to scrutinize the impact of the explicit teaching on facilitating language learning. The researcher wanted to understand if the degree of explicitness influence the learning of the target structure, to answer these questions, the researcher randomly selected 42 EFL participants in 2 universities in Washington; he distributed the learners into 4 groups and randomly assigned four learning conditions: textual enhancement, role-oriented, content-oriented and non-treatment of

grammar teaching in the control group. The target structure (direct object) was thought explicitly .The results showed that rule-oriented group whose degree of explicitness is better than other groups who had been taught either implicitly or who had not received any instruction.

Clearly, There have been many studies concentrating on various types of grammar instruction, but the present study sought to explore the area of form-focused approach, focusing on the impact that different types of l2 instruction; namely, ˚planned focus on form, unplanned focus on form and zero focus on form- and their impact on the learning of the grammatical form (i.e., transitional expressions) in the paragraph writing of Iranian EFL learners.

On this basis, the following questions were addressed in this study:

1)   Does explicit or planned focus on form instruction improve the accurate use of transitional expressions in the paragraph writing of Iranian EFL learners?

2)   To what extent can implicit or unplanned focus on form instruction improve the accurate use of transitional expressions in paragraph writing of Iranian EFL learners?

3)   Is zero form focus instruction as effective as explicit or planned focus on form instruction in scaffolding transitional devices used by Iranian EFL learners?

4)   Is zero form focus instruction as effective as implicit or unplanned focus on form instruction in scaffolding transitional devices used by Iranian EFL learners?

Method

Participants

From the population of sophomore EFL learners studying English translation at university of Isfahan, three intact classes served as the samples in this study. These participants were both male and female students with an age range of 19-23 who had registered for the paragraph writing course. They were randomly assigned in to three groups, 30 each. The participants were homogenized by administrating the Key English Test (KET) for the purpose of

measuring the learners initial knowledge of transitional markers. Participants with scores below 12 were considered as limited English Proficiency (LEP) students were excluded from the study. Finally the Target groups were instructed by the researcher on alternative days for two hours every week.

Materials

The instruments used in this study comprised three tests. First the key English Test (KET) was used for homogenizing the selected samples by measuring their knowledge on transitional devices. Then at the end of the treatment, which was a full term, a Paragraph Development Test (PDT) was administrated to gauge the learners knowledge of transitions and their application in writing narrative, descriptive, and cause and effect paragraphs. Finally, a clozenthrapy test, as a delay post-test, was given to gauge the influence of the type of FFI on the retention of transitions by Iranian sophomore translation students in the writing of paragraphs.

Procedures

Various teaching methods were used for instructing transitional devices, addition and contrast types. The PFFI group received 2 sessions of explicit instruction on transitional devices, their logical meaning and their application. Using Macaro and Mastermans (2006) explicit approach , the target forms (i.e., transitional devices) were directly explained and their application was explicitly indicated through relevant examples .After each sessions the teacher made students work either individually or in pairs composing sentences and writing paragraphs employing the related transitional devices in the class. Alternatively ,the UFFI group were taught the transitions implicitly ,based on Sargent s(2009), a schema building approach was utilized in which the learners were asked to read a story then answer related questions and writing a paragraph . These prompts helped learners to implicitly use the target forms (i.e., transitions) in the class without teacher s providing any direct and explicit instruction on the transitions. Finally, the ZFFI group was exposed to a reading based approach to paragraph development in which the teacher did not make any reference to the target forms, either

explicitly or implicitly. All three groups developed a paragraph on the same subject.

Data analysis

The scores obtained on both the post-test and the delayed post-test (i.e., clozenthraphy) were analyzed by relevant statistical procedures such as the Condescriptive Task and ANOVA.

Results

The results of the Condescriptive Task can be observed in table 1. As can be seen, the descriptive analysis of the data produced the means and the standard deviation values for the scores obtained on the post-test. At first glance, it was observed that the mean score of the explicit group receiving direct instruction on transitions was higher than that of implicit and zero focus on form types of instruction .To examine whether the difference was significant, the ANOVA statistics was utilized.

Table 1

The result of Condescriptive Task related to the post-test (Paragraph Development Post-Test)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
explicit	30	18.5000	1.00858	.18414	18.1234	18.8766	17.00	20.00
implicit	30	16.0000	1.23176	.22489	15.5401	16.4599	14.00	18.00
zero	30	13.5000	1.33261	.24330	13.0024	13.9976	11.00	17.00
Total	90	16.0000	2.37023	.24984	15.5036	16.4964	11.00	20.00

Table 2 is quite revealing in a significant way. From the data displayed in this table we can see that the target sample receiving planned focus on form instruction on transitional markers have meaningfully outperformed the other two groups since their average scores is significant at p<0.05.

Table 2

Mean comparison of groups tests by ANOVA statistics

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	375.000	2	187.500	130.500	.000
Within Groups	125.000	87	1.437		
Total	500.000	89			

To examine the extent to which the type of instruction has been effective in scaffolding and retaining the transitional forms a clozenthraphy as a delayed post0test was administrated after 2 weeks. It can be seen from the data in table 3 that the explicit group had a higher average score compared with the other groups. As a delayed post-test was administrated after 2 weeks, it can be seen from the data in table 3 that the explicit group had a higher average score compared with the other groups.

Table 3
Statistic related to the delay post-test (clozenthraphy)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Mini mum	Maxi mum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
explicit	30	19.0000	.87099	.15902	18.6748	19.3252	17.00	20.00
implicit	30	16.0000	.94686	.17287	15.6464	16.3536	14.00	18.00
zero	30	12.0000	1.31306	.23973	11.5097	12.4903	10.00	14.00
Total	90	15.6667	3.06851	.32345	15.0240	16.3094	10.00	20.00

To compare the average scores attained 2 weeks after the initial post-test, once again an ANOVA test was run. The results obtained from this test are shown in table 4.

Table 4
Mean comparison of three tests by ANOVA statistics

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	740.000	2	370.000	328.469	.000
Within Groups	98.000	87	1.126		
Total	838.000	89			

Interestingly, it is apparent from this table that the explicit or planned focus on form instruction significantly results in the meaningful subsumption of the knowledge of transitions. In fact, the difference is significant at the level of $p<0.05$.

Discussion

Regarding the questions posed in this study, the result revealed that for the chosen target grammar, students who were taught under the explicit conditions generally outperformed those who had been exposed to implicit or zero presentation of the grammar structures. In fact, the explicit group proved to be more precise in developing different types of paragraphs.

There might be many reasons for the superior performance of the explicit group. The students who took part in this study were all adult learners who were familiar with traditional methods of education in Iran. The major teaching strategy in Iranian contexts, in case of English grammar in particular, is the explicit teaching strategy. Therefore, learners' expectations could be met through direct explanation of rules

Another reason responsible for the better performance of the explicit group is the test itself. The test contained paragraph development in which the learners were required to unify their information first and then use the rules. Since students in the implicit group were never given the opportunity to organize their information under grammatical captions such as transitional devices, they might have had difficulty in constructing the right forms because, filling of the blank spaces on the clozenthraphy test need conscious attention to grammatical structures. The results suggest that when students concentrate on the content and do not pay attention to form of a message, they are less likely to learn specific grammar structures. Alternatively according to the scores on post-test, again the explicit method seemed to be not only a familiar methodology for students, but it also provided a way of organizing and appraising the material the students had already learnt. This monitoring of production could have been resulted from bringing back the knowledge gained under selective attention and applying the required rule.

There are some studies such as Radwan (2005) Andrews and (2007) that approve the results of the present study. They both conducted a research and concluded that explicit group outperformed other groups. In general, the results of most studies point to the notion that explicit teaching of target forms has a powerful impact on the improvement of

L2 grammar by learners of English as a foreign language. However, as mentioned before, the type of the test could also have an impact on learners' performance as the contextualized part of the grammar test and the writing test were tests of production that required the learners to refer to the rules they had learned and organized in their brain. The grammatical structure chosen for this study (transitional devices) might have also been effective in determining the result of this study. As Andrews (2007) showed in his study, a simpler grammatical structure could lead to a completely different result.

Conclusion

Many studies have been performed to show which method of instruction is more effective in learning and using grammar, but there is not much agreement in this regard among the researchers yet and the existing contradictory results call for more investigation in the field. This study aimed to investigate how the various methods of instruction might influence the learners' achievement in writing Paragraph.

Findings from this study indicate that planned or explicit instruction is a suitable type of focus on form for learning grammar in the productive mode and led learners to produce coherent paragraphs by focusing on transitional form.

To conclude, our research like most of the studies so far, has confirmed the fact that explicit teaching strategy has a greater effect on improving the EFL learners' L2 grammar. However, more research is required to come to the point of certainty.

Generally speaking, when learners are informed of the grammatical rules, they feel more comfortable, self-confident and motivated in the classroom. Thus, it would be wise for educators, material developers and course book designers to pay attention to this fact and take cautious measures in planning grammar teaching strategies.

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