The Comparative Effect of Teaching Grammar through Interpretation Tasks and Pictorial Clues on EFL Learners' Writing Accuracy

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to investigate the comparative effect of teaching grammar through interpretation tasks and pictorial clues on EFL learners' writing accuracy. The participants were 60 female intermediate EFL learners with age range of 21-35 who were divided into two experimental groups after being homogenized by a piloted PET test. In the piloted researcher-made pre-test, the researcher required the participants to write a narration and also complete another narration with some blanks with provided words using grammatical points they were going to be taught. After the treatment phase, another researcher-made parallel form of the pre-test was administered as the post-tests. To investigate the research question of the study, an ANCOVA was conducted. The results revealed that there was not any significant difference between the performances of either group. In other words, the mentioned ways of teaching grammar had equal effect on the learners' writing accuracy.

***Keywords*:** Grammar, Interpretation tasks, pictorial clues, writing accuracy

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Introduction

One of the most important components in English language is writing skill. Nunan (2003) states that "writing is the process of thinking to invent ideas, thinking about how to express into good writing, arranging the ideas into statement and paragraph clearly" (p. 88). It indicates that the learners are expected to explore the ideas and change them into good paragraphs.

Improving students' writing accuracy is an essential factor in effective writing. Effectiveness of a piece of writing will be determined in part by its accuracy. Accuracy itself means the ability to do something in an exact way without making any mistake, but here Nunan (2003) mentions that it is the ability to produce grammatically and phonologically well-formed words, phrases and sentences; in other words, the careful use of language to express meaning. Accurate language requires the careful use of paragraph and sentence structure and word choice to describe and analyze a topic effectively.

Since grammatical accuracy is an essential feature of standard written English, it will be valuable to ESL/EFL teachers to be familiar with types of teaching grammar in order to help improve learners' grammatical accuracy in writing.

There is a mixture of beliefs, as Wong and Marlys (2012, p. 62) state, regarding grammar instruction .They mention that "Some scholars support the exclusion of grammar learning (e.g., Prabhu, 1987), while other researchers emphasize the need to include grammar teaching in CLT" (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Nassaji, 2000; Spada & Lightbown, 1993).

Regarding the dichotomy mentioned above, Setiono (2005) states that "The opposing views concerning whether or not to give grammar instruction to the students are derived from the controversial issue regarding the relationship between the dichotomy of explicit and implicit knowledge, that is, whether explicit knowledge can be converted directly into implicit knowledge". He maintains that " There are two stances: those who adopt non-interface position (i.e. no direct relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge) such as Krashen (1981), Zobl (1995), and Hulstijn (2002) and those who favor a strong interface position such as Smith (1981) and DeyKeyser (1998)". However he introduces "Interpretation-based

approach", which was first proposed by Ellis, (1995), maintaining that "this approach adopts neither of the two positions above, but is designed on the basis of so-called weak interface, that is, explicit knowledge facilitates the development of implicit knowledge" (p 172).

Ellis (1995) advocates an emphasis on activities which facilitate grammar comprehension, that is, the ability to identify and comprehend the meaning(s) of grammatical structures. He calls these tasks interpretation tasks and maintains that part of their role is to encourage the learner to notice the difference between the meaning conveyed by the grammatical structure in the input and how they are using it. This noticing, or cognitive comparison, can be achieved by drawing the learner's attention to common learners' errors. Ellis and Fotos (1991) argue that it is through noticing and understanding specific grammatical features in input that acquisition gets started. They believe that production does not serve as the primary means for acquiring new linguistic knowledge although it can lead to greater accuracy.

In addition, foreign language instruction material has become increasingly visual—from pictures on flashcards to illustrated textbooks, to multimedia software, to films and movies. As well as the pictures found in textbooks and other resources, teachers often use additional pictures to help facilitate students learning.

There may be several reasons why text illustrations enhance learning. Paivio's (1986) dual-coding theory emphasize the interconnectedness of two distinct cognitive systems-visual and verbal. The verbal system contains word-like codes including visual, auditory, articulatory, and other modality-specific verbal codes. In contrast, the nonverbal representations (the visual system) include modality-specific images for shapes, environmental sounds, actions, skeletal or visceral sensations related to emotion and other nonlinguistic objects and events. According to his theory, learning is generally considered to be better when information is referentially processed through the two channels than through either channel alone. Butcher and Aleven (2007) state that "One proposed rationale for these benefits is that temporal/spatial coordination reduces cognitive load demands associated with working memory maintenance and visual search" (Mayer, 2001). They discuss that "The reduction in cognitive effort needed to find and maintain

multiple sources of information allows students to engage in deeper processing. A cognitive load approach suggests that integrated materials reduce the extraneous effort needed to map between visual and verbal information, allowing more cognitive effort to be focused on deeper processing" (p. 137).

The points made above provide some justification for conducting further investigation into the nature of grammar teaching in two different ways and their effects on writing accuracy. The present study, therefore, tried to investigate the comparative effect of grammar teaching through interpretation tasks and pictorial clues on EFL learners' writing accuracy. To fulfill the objective of the study, the following research question was proposed:

Q: Is there any significant difference between the effect of interpretation tasks and pictorial clues for grammar teaching on Intermediate EFL learners' writing accuracy?

Method

Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, 60 female intermediate level students with age range of 21-35 who were learning English as a foreign language were randomly selected from 90 intermediate learners at Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Tehran, Iran. The researcher administered a Preliminary English Test (PET) to the above mentioned sample and 60 learners whose scores fell within one standard deviation above and below the sample mean were selected as the participants of the study. Finally, these learners were randomly assigned to two experimental groups with 30 homogenized participants. It should be mentioned that the proficiency test, PET, was first piloted among 30 participants with the same characteristics as of the target sample.

A rater assisted the researcher in the present study to evaluate the writing section in the PET. She was a teacher with 9 years of experience of teaching general English in the same language school.

Instrumentation

Language Proficiency Test

In order to homogenize the language proficiency of the students, the PET proficiency test (Preliminary English Test), which was developed in 2003, was administered. PET is one of the standardized tests among the series by Cambridge ESOL. It is an exam for people who use every day written and spoken English at an Intermediate level. It tests four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Rating Scales

An analytic writing rating scale by Wier (1990, cited in Weigle 2002, p.117) comprising 7 aspects of writing including relevance and adequacy of content, cohesion, compositional organization, adequacy of vocabulary for purpose, grammar, mechanical accuracy(including punctuation and spelling) was used for the purpose of rating the participants' performance on the pre-test and post-test writing. The band scores of the writing was 0-3. Since the researcher intended to study the effect on writing accuracy, the grammar part of the rating scale was considered.

The writing and speaking parts of the PET was rated according to the rating scale provided by Cambridge ESOL for PET by the researcher and another qualified rater.

Besides, the number of errors had to be adjusted as the participants were not expected to all produce the same length of compositions even if they were given the same amount time. Consequently, in order to control the differences in the length of the texts, the number of each error category was adjusted over 100, and a measure of error categories per 100 words were calculated (100×number of errors for given categories /total number of words in that text).

Moreover, the scores of the participants were the average score given by two raters both in writing and speaking.

Pre-test and post-test Writing

A researcher-made writing test was administered as a pre-test to both experimental groups. It consisted of two parts. Firstly, the participants were encouraged to choose one of the given topics and write a narrative about it

in 150-200 words in 30 minutes. The participants were encouraged to use certain grammatical points in their writing including choice of words (parts of speech such as pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions), conditional sentences (first & second conditional), past tenses (past continuous & past perfect), the past tense passive forms, relative clauses, verb complementation (verbs + infinitive & verbs+ gerund) and articles .

Secondly, the participants were required to complete a cloze test and answer a twenty- item multiple choice test in 15 minutes. The reliability of this researcher-made test was checked by Cronbach's alfa, which was equal to 0.75. The post-test, which was another researcher made parallel form of the pre-test, was administered after the treatment. The reliability of the second part in the post-test was 0.65.

Handouts

In order to focus on the grammatical points which the researcher considered to teach in the experimental groups, she designed two handouts including exercises in which the target points were presented. The exercises in the interpretation group were adapted to the principles of the design of Interpretation Tasks suggested by Ellis (1995).The exercises in the pictorial group were adopted and adapted to the exercises in the course books taught in many language schools.

Procedure

A piloted PET was administered to 90 intermediate students of Kish Institute of Science and Technology in order to classify the participants based on their language proficiency level. Two raters –the researcher and another qualified teacher- scored the speaking and writing sections according to PET rating scale, and upon ensuring their inter-rater reliability, the average of the scores given by them to each participant was considered the final writing and speaking score. Sixty participants whose scores fell one standard deviation above and below the sample mean were randomly assigned to two experimental groups of 30 learners each. Thus, two experimental groups with the same language proficiency were provided. In

the pre-test, all participants in both experimental groups were encouraged to do the researcher-made test (see the instrumentation).

The treatment was implemented in sequence for twelve sessions each lasting 1hour and 45 minutes. The classroom treatment in both experimental groups consisted of three parts. First, the teacher-researcher taught certain grammatical points including choice of words (parts of speech such as pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions), conditional sentences (first & second conditional), past tenses (past continuous & past perfect), the past tense passive forms, relative clauses, verb complementation (verbs + infinitive & verbs+ gerund) and articles. The teacher-researcher employed 2 handouts to teach the grammatical points through interpretation tasks in one experimental group and through pictorial clues in the other one (the details are discussed in the following sections). The time allotted for this part was one hour.

The second part included a narrative writing. In this part, the teacher-researcher gave the participants in both experimental groups some topics and they started writing an 80 to100 word narrative using the grammatical points which had been taught. This part lasted 15 minutes. Every participant in both experimental groups wrote 11 narratives in total during the treatment.

Finally, in the remaining time of the class, 30 minutes, the participants' writings were collected to be corrected. The teacher-researcher provided the participants with feedback on their errors in the writing. The researcher wrote the prominent errors of the participants' writing on the board and encouraged them to correct the errors by negotiating in pair or group work. The writing papers were corrected and given to the students the following session.

In two sessions, the teacher-researcher explained the time order, person, tone, topic sentence, supporting sentences and paragraph unity objectivity and subjectivity. She explained what they were and how they were used.
Analyzing the participants' papers, the researcher wrote some comments on other aspects of writing including cohesion, mechanical accuracy (punctuation and spelling) and adequacy of vocabulary. However, the main focus of the present study was on using correct grammatical points in the

writing. The papers were corrected in accordance with an analytic writing scale by Wier (1990).

After the treatment, a post-test writing was given to both experimental groups. The procedure in the post-test was the same as that mentioned in the pre-test; however, the topics about which the participants wrote changed.

Results

The first phase of data analyses was to pilot the sample PET investigating the reliability and also conducting an item analysis. The descriptive statistics include the PET administration and the pre- and post-tests data. As for the inferential analysis, independent samples t-test and ANCOVA were conducted, the results of which are presented in the following section.

Testing the Null Hypothesis

In order to test the null hypothesis of the research hypothesis, the researcher ran an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Prior to running it; however, a series of assumptions had to be met. The first assumption was the relationship between covariates. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1
Correlations between Covariates

		pretestINTER	pretestPICTO
pretestINTER	Pearson Correlation	1	.308
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.098
	N	30	30
pretestPICTO	Pearson Correlation	.308	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.098	
	N	30	30

As can be observed in the Table, the covariates were not correlated (r=.308, p>.05), satisfying the first assumption. The next assumption to be checked was the linearity the details of which are presented below.

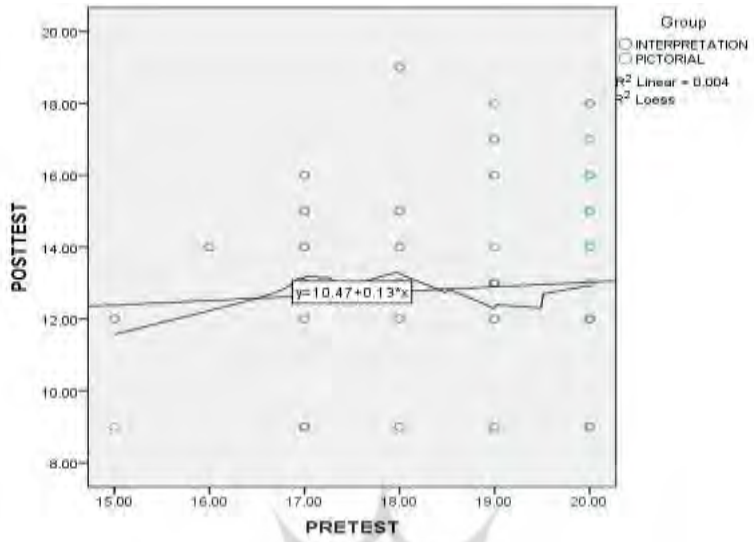

Figure 1
Scatter plot

As there were no curvilinear relationships, the linearity assumption was met, too. The next assumption to be checked was the equality of variances the details of which are presented in Table 2 - Levene's test of equality of error variance. As can be seen in the Table, the Sig. value .823 is greater than .05, showing that the variances were equal.

Table 2
Levene's Test of Equality Error Variancesa

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.051	1	58	.823

Upon ensuring that the assumption was not violated, the researcher went on with the ANCOVA. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3.608[a]	2	1.804	.255	.776	.009
Intercept	34.662	1	34.662	4.906	.031	.079
PRETEST	1.941	1	1.941	.275	.602	.005
Group	1.799	1	1.799	.255	.616	.004
Error	402.726	57	7.065			
Total	10288.000	60				
Corrected Total	406.333	59				

a. R Squared = .009 (Adjusted R Squared = -.026)

As indicated in the Table, the Sig value .616 is greater than .05, implying that the two groups were not significantly different. Only .4 percent of the variance in grammar accuracy could be accounted for by the method of teaching. As can be seen from the covariate Sig, p=.601>.05, showing that the covariates were not significant, and only .5 percent of the variance in the grammar accuracy posttest scores was attributable to the pretest scores. In other words, there was no significant difference between interpretation and pictorial methods in the effect they had on grammar accuracy of the EFL learners. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study could not be rejected.

Discussion

There is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master. Among the major skills, creating a coherent and extended piece of writing has always been considered the most difficult task to do in a language. Nunan (1989) remarks: " it has been argued that learning to write frequently and expressively is the most difficult of the motor skills for all language users regardless of whether the language in question is a first, second or foreign language" (p.35).One of the areas in which the difficulty lies is grammar.

The rules of grammar help to govern the mechanics of writing, which makes the connection between writing and grammar so important. Although controversies arise from time to time over its place in language classrooms,

grammar is still necessary for accurate language production. It has been shown that exposure to the target language is not enough for learners to 'pick up' accurate linguistic form, especially when the exposure is limited to the EFL classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). This finding validates the importance of grammar, especially for EFL settings. Bivins (2005) believes that "Writing is a technical skill as well as an art and, as such; it demands a thorough understanding of grammar" (p.1). He also states that "the simple fact is those who know and understand grammar are better writers than those who do not" (p.1).

The present researcher believes that by devising or implementing facilitative techniques such as the ones described in the present study, teachers can provoke the necessary changes and contribute to the revitalization of English language teaching in Iranian language schools.

The ways proposed in this study are devised in reaction to the important problem related to the communicative approach- applied in many language schools -which produces fluent but inaccurate learners. According to Brown (1994), the goal of communicative language teaching (CLT) is to develop the communicative rather than grammatical or linguistic competence of learners, with a focus on pragmatic, authentic, functional use of the language for meaning and with an emphasis on fluency, which keeps learners meaningfully engaged. CLT is defined as a foreign language teaching method that develops communicative competence, not just knowledge of grammatical structures (Matthews, 1997).

Considering the essential role of grammar in writing accurately, the researcher employed two ways of teaching grammar, i.e. through Interpretation tasks and pictorial clues. The data analyses and comparison carried out on the participants' pre-test and post-test writings in the present study confirmed the significant influence of teaching grammar through the aforementioned ways on learners' writing.

In Interpretation tasks approach, which was introduced by Ellis (1993), he supported the weak-interface position which proposes that explicit knowledge can primarily facilitate the processes in which explicit knowledge converts into implicit knowledge. This approach emphasizes the learner's comprehension of the specific grammatical features in communicative content. Specifically, it stresses the importance of input

processing rather than output processing. In so doing, the approach allows learners' awareness of the grammatical features to develop to facilitate and eventually accelerate the acquisition process.

What is suggested in the present study is in line with what Larsen-Freeman, 2003) believe. She notes that learners must have opportunities to encounter, process, and use instructed forms in their various form-meaning relationships so that the forms can become part of their intelanguage behavior. In this regard, Spada (1997) states that when learners receive communicative exposure to grammar points introduced through formal instruction, their awareness of the forms becomes longer-lasting and their accuracy of use improves. In addition, the findings of the present study are in agreement with those of recent studies on formal instruction carried out by Ellis (2002a), showing that extensive and sustained grammar instruction over a long period of time (several days or weeks) contributes to the development of implicit knowledge as measured by performance on free production tasks. Instruction also promotes accuracy in the use of difficult forms such as English articles. Ellis notes (2001, 2002b, 2003) that current research strongly supports the need for provision of communicative opportunities containing instructed grammar forms, recommending a combination of form-focused instruction and meaningful communication and suggesting possible intervention points for instruction in a task-based communicative curriculum (2002b).

Another technique addressed in this study to facilitate grammar teaching and make it entertaining was the use of pictures. The main goal of using pictures for teaching grammar in the present study was better comprehension and retention of new rules. Pictures were effective because they made the difficult task of grammar learning easier for learners. By using pictures, students could have more participation in learning task and students' motivation and interest increased.

In this regard, a number of TEFL professionals have acknowledged that the presentation and explanation of grammar accompanied by visuals will be more comprehensible. For instance, Miller (2006) states that visual aids help learners picture what teachers try to say, and they help teachers to convey what might be hard to state with words alone. Moreover, Wilson (2000)

maintains that visual aids can support the comprehension and usage of new items. Visual aids are beneficial to a wide variety of learners and provide an effective way for teachers to use visuals of all sorts with any subject matter at any level. Brod (1998) concentrates on this importance of visual aids, claiming that pictures are the most valuable source for teaching items to all types of learners in all levels of their learning.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the current study:

First, grammar instruction through pictures provides the necessary stimuli for making the students engaged and motivated, making the learning practice interesting and enjoyable. Solman & Wu (1995, p 234) refer to numerous studies suggesting that one great benefit of pictures is to enhance the incentive to learn. The affective factors such as attitude, motivation, and interest may lead learners to pay more attention and put in more effort, which may lead to better learning. Pictures may also "enhance the long-term retention" since "the dual coding effect" and the "greater effort" made "to process information and establish the relationship between the various sources of information may make learned information "more resistant to memory loss" (Solman & Wu 1995, p 235).

Second, the present research shows that learning can be affected positively when text and illustrations are presented together. Moeser and Bregman (1973, p 91), for example, reported that subjects learning a miniature artificial language did not manage to learn any syntax if 3,200 sentences were presented alone, but showed excellent results if sentences were accompanied with pictures.

Many other experiments conclude that if pictures and text are presented together, they should be presented simultaneously rather than separately, so that the two representations are in memory at the same time, and "construction of referential connections" can be done immediately (Mayer & Sims, 1994:391). This is in accordance with the 'multimodal theory of learning' and the 'Dual Coding theory', holding that learning is more effective when a learner uses more than one sense modality, for instance, verbal and visual processing, and when connections are clearly made between the information contained in each modality (Mayer & Sims 1994, p 390).

In sum, the mastery of grammar is an essential component of second language acquisition, so it is important for teachers and researchers to understand the necessity of grammar in gaining the knowledge of language. Frodesen (2001) has pointed that teaching grammar for writing means "helping writers develop their knowledge of linguistic resources and grammatical system to convey ideas meaningfully and appropriately to intended readers" (p.233). She has also noted that grammar in writing is an example of how second language learners can discover and use discourse – level grammatical principles.

The findings of the present study may help the school teachers to enhance their students' ability in writing, the area which is often neglected in the Iranian school ELT curriculum.

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