

Title

The Implicit Instruction of Grammar via Pictures: A Technique to Improve Writing and Speaking Abilities of Iranian Elementary EFL Learners

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Bio Data

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from an experimental study of the effect of implicit instruction of grammar via specially-designed pictures on the writing and speaking abilities of elementary EFL learners. It was conducted on 66 participants in two second grade classes—one as the control group and one as the experimental group—in a junior high school in Mashhad, Iran. During the school year, the control group

received the traditional instruction whereas the experimental group was taught through the employment of the special pictures. The results of the pretests and posttests, analyzed through the employment of both matched and independent t-tests, revealed that the experimental subjects got significantly higher mean scores in both their speaking and writing achievement tests. The findings of this study may help the school teachers to enhance their students' ability in speaking and writing, the two areas which are often neglected in the Iranian school ELT curriculum.

Keywords: implicit grammar instruction, picture, writing, speaking

1. Introduction

An important component of a language class which does not seem to have received much attention in the body of research in ELT is to provide education which is entertaining to the learners. The entertaining education, according to Thekes (2011), occurs when students feel involved and motivated as they acquire a new part of language and involves providing students with appropriate stimuli and making the language class interesting to them. Holliday (1994), also, refers to such education as a learning festival which entails active and stress-free participation of the students in the enjoyable learning activity.

The entertaining education becomes of particular importance when the subject being taught is grammar. The reason is that grammar teaching, which commonly involves constant explanation of decontextualized grammatical rules, is usually associated with boring minutes in the classroom and brings about lack of interest and demotivation on the part of the students (Thekes, 2011; Vágó, 2007; Xiao-Yun, 2010).

As evident in the above-mentioned arguments, these problems are mainly attributed to the traditional explicit instruction of grammar. Hence, the solution seems to be implicit grammar instruction. The implicit approach to grammar teaching was promoted by appearance of the direct way at the turn of the last century which resulted in a shift in how grammar teaching and language acquisition is looked at (Bárdos 2005). The term implicit learning, coined by Reber (1967), describes a situation where a person acquires some knowledge without explicit intention of learning, without awareness of the learning process and without knowledge of what has been

learned. In grammar teaching, Krashen (1987) is perhaps one of the most well-known proponents of implicit instruction. Questioning the extensive use of conscious grammatical rules and tedious drills and rote learning, he called for implicit teaching of grammar through comprehensible input.

One remarkable way to facilitate implicit grammar teaching, make it entertaining, and turn it into a learning festival, to use Holliday's (1994) term, could be the use of pictures. In this regard, a number of TEFL professionals have acknowledged that the presentation and explanation of grammar accompanied by visuals will be more comprehensible (Bárdos, 2000; Mumford, 2008; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Ur, 1991; Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 2009). This way pictures could act as the necessary stimuli Thekes (2011) calls for in order to engage and motivate the learners.

Bárdos (2000) asserts that visualization plays the role of a medium through which the teacher can pass the grammar knowledge to the learners. According to him, the importance of visualization lies in the fact that it has both a motivating effect and the capacity for creating associations. Mumford (2008) highlights the use of pictures as a powerful source in the elicitation process that involves the teacher's prompting and encouraging the learners to create meaningful acts of speech. Similarly, Ur (1991:7) points out that seeing something at issue, through the use of pictures, facilitates thinking. Finally, Scarcella and Oxford (1992) state that simultaneous implementation of linguistic elements and pictures enhances the comprehension of the grammar point. They, further, suggest the provision of stimulating and motivating visuals to foster grammar development.

On the grounds of the presented arguments in favor of the implicit instruction of grammar via pictures, the present study seeks to utilize this technique, as a CLT technique in the traditional atmosphere of ELT in the Iranian school system, and examine its possible effect on the speaking and writing abilities of the elementary learners.

2. Iranian formal system of education

The educational system in Iran is a conservative centralized system with "a one-size-fits-all policy" (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008, p. 103). This policy is evident in the exertion of the prescribed textbooks all over the country, the administration of national tests, and demanding full conformity from teachers in an attempt to unify their instructions and, hence, the students from

all around the country. Therefore, the system gains itself the control over not only the input, through the prescribed curriculum, but the output, through the national testing scheme (Ostovar-Namaghi, 2006).

English teaching in this system in all levels seems to pivot around one central policy, i.e., developing and enhancing the reading skill at the expense of the other three skills. Such trend of English instruction is implemented via two factors: textbooks, and exams.

Textbooks, according to Sheldon (1988, p. 237), “represent the visible heart of any ELT program”. The above-mentioned central policy can be clearly observed in the Iranian English textbooks (Allami, Jalilifar, Hashemian, & Shoostari, 2009; Ghorbani, 2009; Hosseini 2007; Jahangard, 2007; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). That is, the materials which are primarily aimed at developing the reading ability constitute a big share of these books. The listening skill, on the other hand, is hardly ever addressed and one can rarely find exercises particularly designed to enhance the listening ability. The productive ability, i.e., speaking and writing skills, is taken into account peripherally through isolated sentence production activities in a decontextualized and sterile milieu of communication. Moreover, alongside the reading skill which constitutes the first priority in the design of the books, a large portion of the lessons is devoted to the explicitly stated grammatical rules and various grammar drills as well as long lists of vocabulary and their poor contextualization (Jahangard, 2007).

Regarding the incomprehensiveness of the textbooks, one might argue that, still, it is the duty of the teachers to strike a balance between creative instruction and being a slave to their texts (Garinger, 2002). However, there is another problem which impedes the teachers’ freedom to do so and that involves the second factor.

The other factor guaranteeing the implementation of the educational system’s policies is an external pressure in the form of the administration of national examinations. The importance of such exams lies in the great negative washback effect they produce (Ghorbani, 2011; Jahangard, 2007; Ostovar-Namaghi, 2006). That is, by focusing basically on grammar, vocabulary, and reading, such exams, in practice, promote a trend of English instruction in the formal system of education which puts a premium on these areas of language knowledge and disregards the other skills which are equally important. So, due to the common view which considers high score equal to high achievement, the grade pressure from students and parents gains the upperhand and leads the way for the process of English instruction in schools. This situation leaves teachers no

choice but to surrender, mostly despite their will and standards of teaching, to the strong negative washback effect of such exams and shape their teaching practices based on the demands of these exams and, hence, act as pure implementers of the prescribed initiatives.

That is why the common method of English instruction in schools is the grammar-translation method with all its emphasis on the explicit instruction of grammatical rules, reading, translation, use of L1 as the medium of instruction, linguistic accuracy of form and structure, and memorization of long lists of vocabulary (Ghorbani, 2009). Not surprisingly, the product of such instruction is remarkably incompetent in oral communicative skills and productive ability (Farhady, Jafarpoor, & Birjandi, 1994; Hosseini, 2007; Kamyab, 2008).

In the macro level, this weakness of ELT in the formal education system has been repeatedly acknowledged and reported by teachers and experts who called for a change in the policy making and a paradigm shift toward more communicative methods of instruction and revision of the textbooks accordingly (Allami, Jalilifar, Hashemian, & Shooshtari, 2009; Farhady, 2000; Ghorbani, 2009; Rahimi, 1996; Rashidi, 1995; Razmjoo & Nouhi, 2011; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006; Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2002; Yarmohammadi, 2000;). In the micro level, however, little research has been carried out in this regard proposing feasible solutions which can be actually implemented by the teachers in their local contexts in order to improve the status quo.

As an example of such research, Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini (2005), investigated how dialogue journal writing, as a kind of written conversation, may provide an opportunity to bring critical pedagogy and foreign language education together in a productive way in the context of a critical literacy practice. Based on the results, writing dialogue journals as a language education activity in EFL pedagogy may empower learners and provide them with opportunities to express their 'voice'. It further revealed that dialogue journal writing led to gains in critical self-reflective EFL writing ability.

Also, Khatib, Derakhshan, and Rezaei (2011) highlighted the significant role literature can play in enhancing learners' language development, cultural awareness, pragmatic awareness, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and motivation. In their study, they proposed a new model called "Whole Literary Involvement" to be adopted in junior high schools and high schools in Iran which provides teachers with a procedure of how to utilize and integrate literature in their classes capitalizing upon task-based approach.

In the same vein, Ghorbani (2011) proposed a new technique in phonetic instruction aimed at improving the listening skill. In his study, he experimentally showed how phonetic instruction followed by the learners' checking of their pronunciation by the use of phonemic transcription would enhance Iranian students' listening ability. Based on the results, the proposed technique significantly facilitated the listening ability of the students.

In line with these studies, the researchers believe that some innovative techniques and supplementary materials need to be proposed in order to compensate for the shortcomings of ELT in the Iranian system of education. Accordingly, with the aim of proposing a useful technique in grammar instruction, this paper examined whether the use of specially-designed pictures for the implicit instruction of grammar would improve students' writing and speaking skills. Hence, the present study set itself the goal to shed some light on the following research questions:

- 1) Does implementing pictures for the implicit teaching of grammar have any effect on learners' writing?
- 2) Does implementing pictures for the implicit teaching of grammar have any effect on learners' speaking?
- 3) Is there any relationship between the two productive abilities, i.e. writing and speaking, of the learners?

These questions were then formulated into the following null hypothesis:

HO1: Implicit instruction of grammar through pictures has no effect on learners' writing.

HO2: Implicit instruction of grammar through pictures has no effect on learners' speaking.

HO3: There is no relationship between the writing and speaking abilities of the learners.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Setting

This study was conducted on 66 female junior high school students. They consisted of two second grade classes (one as the experimental group and one as the control group), each having 33 students. Since random assignment was not possible, the nonequivalent group, pretest-posttest design was employed in this study. That is, subjects were tested in existing groups.

To enhance the homogeneity of the participants, the students who attended English classes outside school were not included; thus, any exposure to formal instruction of English other than that of school was controlled for.

3.2. Instrumentation

Two similar tests of writing were designed by the researchers and were employed one in pretesting to ensure the homogeneity of the groups at the very beginning of the course and the other in posttesting to observe the differences between the groups, i.e. the effect of the treatment. KR20 was used to measure the reliability coefficient of the tests, which was found to be $r = .85$ and $.89$. The pretest and posttest were similar but the focus in the pretest was what students had studied the previous year whereas the post test was an achievement test of what students had learned in the current school year.

The other instrument used in this study was two similar sets of questions (each consisting of 10 items) designed by the researchers to be used in the interviews. The pretest interviews were conducted in the beginning of the course to ascertain that both groups were initially on a par as far as their speaking was concerned. And the posttest interviews were held at the end of the course to measure the gain of the students in their speaking.

3.3 Procedure

The study was conducted in the school year 2011-2012, in Rahmat Junior High School in Mashhad, Iran. Two second grade classes of which one of the researchers was the teacher were chosen as the experimental and control groups. As mentioned earlier, in the beginning of the course, the pretest of writing was administered and also the pretest interviews were held in order to make sure both groups are similar regarding their writing and speaking abilities. Based on the curriculum, English classes were held two sessions a week. During the sessions involving grammar instruction, the control group received the traditional explicit instruction through the explanation of the grammatical rules in L1 and doing the exercises in the textbook while the experimental group was taught implicitly via the use of pictures.

The set of pictures had been designed and prepared by the researchers before the course started. It consisted of 10 pages (one for each lesson of the textbook), each containing a number of pictures associating with the grammar presented in the given lesson. For instance, for lesson 5

presenting imperative structure, there were 5 pictures: the first picture showed two students in the classroom, one writing his name on the blackboard and the other writing on the wall, with a red cross on his hand; the other was a picture of a library with two girls, one studying at a desk and the other taking a book out with her, with a red cross on her hand; and so on. As another example, the page for lesson 6, presenting simple present tense, contained 10 pictures illustrating the boy character's (Ali) routine activities: one showing his bedroom with him in the bed waking up and the clock on the wall showing 6 o'clock, the other showing him having breakfast with his family with the clock showing 6:30, and so on (see Appendix).

The process of grammar instruction involved first distributing the pictures associating with the focal lesson to the students and making some examples about the pictures by the teacher. Then students were asked to make sentences (orally) about the pictures and then about themselves and their friends. Finally, as their homework, they were supposed to write down their sentences and bring them the next session to be corrected by the teacher. This way, by the end of the course, students had a booklet of grammatical pictures with a number of sentences about them.

At the end of the course, the writing and speaking posttests were administered to measure the final achievements of the learners. Like the pretest, the posttest of writing was corrected on a scale from zero to 20 by two raters. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was employed both in pretest and posttest stage to determine the inter-rater reliability of the two sets of scores on subjects' writings which ranged from .91 to .85. As with the pretest interviews, the posttest interviews were tape-recorded and scored on a scale from zero to 20. In the process of scoring the interviews, mainly the two factors of accuracy and fluency were attended to. To determine inter-rater reliability, ten oral recordings were randomly selected from the data. A trained rater and one of the researchers scored the data using the aforementioned measures. Inter-rater reliability was determined by looking at the percentage of agreement between the raters. Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient for the scores of the two coders was 0.83. At the end, a Pearson Product Moment correlation was conducted to check for the possible relationship between the writing and speaking abilities of the learners.

4. Results and discussion

The two research questions addressed the effect of the implicit instruction of grammar via pictures on the learners' writing and speaking abilities. The descriptive statistics for the achieved results presented in Table 1 summarize the performance of the two groups on the writing and speaking tests at the pre-test stage and post stage.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the achieved results on the writing and speaking tests

Groups	Dependant variable	N	Stage	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. error mean
Control	Writing	33	Pretest	16.15	1.17	0.20
			Post test	17.12	1.11	0.19
	Speaking	33	Pretest	15.36	1.41	0.24
			Post test	16.75	1.42	0.24
Experimental	Writing	33	Pretest	16.03	1.26	0.21
			Post test	19.30	0.91	0.15
	Speaking	33	Pretest	15.30	1.44	0.25
			Post test	18.81	1.10	0.19

In response to the research questions, a series of t-tests were carried out on each dependent variable. First, regarding the achieved results on the writing tests, two independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the performances of the experimental and control groups on the pretests and post tests.

Table 2: Independent sample t-test on the experimental and control pretest and posttest writing scores

Stage	Groups	Mean Differences	Std. error	t observed	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Pretest	Control-Experimental	0.12	0.30	0.40	64	.68
Post test	Control-Experimental	-2.18	0.25	-8.69	64	.000

As illustrated in Table 2, the difference between the experimental and control group writing scores was insignificant at the pretest stage, i.e., the significance value (.68) was greater than the

critical value (0.05). In other words, the two groups were homogeneous at the start in terms of their writing abilities. At the post test stage, however, the experimental group outperformed the control group since there was a significant difference between the experimental and control group scores. This is evident from the fact that the significance value (0.00) was smaller than the critical value (0.05). It can be concluded that implicit instruction of grammar via pictures has had positive impact on the experimental group's writings. Hence, the first null hypothesis (implicit instruction of grammar through pictures has no effect on learners' writing) is rejected and it can be claimed that subjects' writing abilities improved through implicit instruction of grammar via pictures.

Table 3: Dependent Sample t-test for the writing performance of experimental group at pretest and post-test stage

Group	Pair	Paired Differences			t observed	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error			
Experimental	Pretest- post test	-3.27	1.48	0.25	-12.66	32	.000

In addition, to see the gains in the writing ability of the experimental group separately, a two-tailed matched t-test was run on the experimental group (Table 3). A comparison of the significance value (0.00) and the critical value (0.05) reveals that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest and post test means of the experimental subjects. Thus, it can be claimed that the students' writing ability in experimental group improved significantly from pretest to post test. This result strengthens the evidence to reject the HO1 and to conclude that the described instructional technique has had positive impact on the writings ability of the students.

The results of the speaking tests were also analyzed applying the same procedure used for the writing test results. That is, first, two independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the speaking performances of the experimental and control groups at post test and pretest stages. Then, a two-tailed matched t-test was run on the experimental group to compare its performance in the pretest and post test stages.

Table 4: Independent sample t-test on the experimental and control pretest and posttest speaking scores

Stage	Groups	Mean Differences	Std. error	t observed	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Pretest	Control-Experimental	0.06	0.35	0.17	64	.86
Post test	Control-Experimental	-2.06	0.31	-6.59	64	.000

According to Table 4, there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control group speaking scores at the pre-test stage as indicated by the significance value (.86) which was greater than the critical value (0.05). It means that the two groups were homogeneous at the start regarding their speaking abilities. At the post test stage, on the other hand, the performance of experimental group was significantly better than that of the control group. This is evident from the fact that the significance value (0.00) was smaller than the critical value (0.05). The possible explanation for this difference in performance could very well be the impact of implicit instruction of grammar via pictures on improvement of experimental group's speaking ability. Hence, the second null hypothesis (Implicit instruction of grammar through pictures has no effect on learners' speaking) is also rejected.

Table 5: Dependent Sample t-test for the speaking performance of experimental group at pretest and post-test stage

Group	Pair	Paired Differences			t observed	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error			
Experimental	Pretest-post test	-3.51	1.75	0.30	-11.52	32	.000

Moreover, to see the gains in the speaking ability of the experimental group separately, a two-tailed matched t-test was run on the experimental group (Table 5). Comparing the significance value (0.00) and the critical value (0.05) reveals that, once again, there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest and post test means of the experimental subjects. This result again gives evidence to reject HO2 and suggests that students' writing abilities in experimental group improved significantly due to the described instructional technique.

Finally, to test the third hypothesis, a Pearson Product Moment correlation was conducted on the post test writing and speaking scores of the experimental group. As indicated in Table 6, the correlation coefficient was found to be $r = .730$ ($p < .01$) which denotes to a pretty strong relationship between the two productive abilities and therefore the third null hypothesis (There is no relationship between the writing and speaking abilities of the learners) is also rejected.

Table 6: Pearson Product Moment correlation on the writing and speaking abilities

		Writing
Speaking	Pearson Correlation	.730**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	33

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To conclude, analyzing the results obtained from the experimental and the control groups with regard to their performances on the writing and speaking tests, deductions can be made that implicit instruction of grammar via pictures significantly improved both writing and speaking abilities of the learners.

5. Conclusion

Each system of education has its own merits and shortcomings and Iranian educational system is not an exception. With the intention of overcoming the problems and improving the system, a responsible teacher would criticize the educational system, its textbooks, instruction methods, testing schemes, etc. and call for the necessary changes to be made by the authorities (top-down change). This is for sure commendable but not enough; Since the true improvement of the status quo needs more than just having high hopes for the big change to happen. That is, aware autonomous teachers can at the same time make their own contributions to the system and through action research devise and implement simple innovative techniques to foster the education and start the change from their local contexts (bottom-up change).

As mentioned earlier, English in the formal education in Iran is taught through the textbooks which overemphasize the explicit grammatical rules and unilateral development of reading skill and through a method of instruction which is a mixture of boring Audiolingual drills for grammar and grammar-translation method. This trend in ELT can have demotivating effects on the learners (Thekes, 2011, Xiao-Yun, 2010, Vágó, 2007). Such demotivating effect provokes more concern when elementary level students are involved.

The technique proposed in this study, i.e. implicit instruction of grammar via the use of specially-designed pictures, which is devised in reaction to this important problem is believed to have two advantages: first, instruction through visualization provides the necessary stimuli for making the students engaged and motivated, making the learning practice interesting and enjoyable, and hence, providing students with entertaining education which enhances their learning and gives them a sense of accomplishment (Thekes, 2011). Second, by employing pictures as a rich source in the elicitation process – process of eliciting spoken and written speech from the learners – this technique fosters the productive and communicative abilities which are neglected in the curriculum and thus compensates for this shortcoming.

We believe that by devising or implementing facilitative techniques such as the one described in this study, teachers can provoke the necessary bottom-up changes and contribute to the revitalization of English language teaching in Iranian junior high schools.

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Appendix

