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The Effect of Using Implicit Grammar Instruction on Developing Secondary Stage Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract

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This study investigated the effect of teaching grammar implicitly for developing expository, descriptive, and argumentative writing skills of the secondary stage students. Participants of the study consisted of 80 female students who were randomly assigned to one experimental group and one control group. The control group members were taught grammar explicitly with explanation of grammatical rules following their schoolbook; however, the experimental group members received implicit grammar instruction program through which the grammatical features were taught implicitly. A pre posttest control group design was chosen for this study. The data from the study were analyzed using independent samples *t*-test. Results showed that the experimental group members outperformed the control ones. The study showed that implicit grammar instruction is effective for adult learners. The study is significant as the first one to supply evidence for the benefits of teaching grammar implicitly to support development in expository, descriptive, and argumentative writing skills.

Key terms

Implicit Grammar Instruction; Writing Skills; Expository Writing; Descriptive Writing; Argumentative Writing

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Chapter I

Background and Problem

CHAPTER I

Background and Problem

Introduction

Whether grammar should be taught or not has long been a controversial issue in the field of second language and foreign language acquisition. This controversy has existed since the beginning of second language acquisition research (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Gelderen, 2006; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Today, grammar is taught and tested as a body of knowledge to be studied than as a skill to be practiced and developed, and it has been regarded as a set of rules to be memorized in many parts of the world (Savage, Bitterlin, & Price, 2010). Although meta-analyses of studies in the 80s and 90s showed the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000), many of the recent studies reviewed provided no support for explicit teaching grammar as a means of improving writing skills (e.g, Gao, 2001; Jaeger, 2011; Haussamen & Assembly for the Teaching of English, 2003; Wyse, 2001; Andrews et al. 2006). This is due to the fact that many studies investigating the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction used measures that require the application of explicit declarative knowledge and not the use of spontaneous, fluent, and contextualized language (Norris & Ortega, 2000). The problem with grammar instruction is that for most students it leads to limited language acquisition. Students know the rules of grammar but are unable to use them (Savage, Bitterlin, & Price, 2010). As a result of the observed gap between knowledge of grammar and its successful application, there is a doubt about the efficacy of explicit grammar instruction.

The study of grammar has had a long and important role in the history of second language and foreign language teaching. For centuries, to learn another language meant to know the grammatical structures of that language and to recite prescriptions for its use. Grammar was used to mean the analysis of a language system, and the study of grammar was not just considered an essential feature of language learning, but was thought to be sufficient for learners to actually acquire another language (Purpura, 2004). Hence, many teachers learn to think about grammar as a set of grammatical forms that are organized in forms sets (types of verb tenses, types of clauses, etc.) but not connected to any communication patterns (Byrd, 2005).

Despite the controversy about grammar instruction and the ineffectiveness of explicit grammar instruction, many teachers are still in favor of grammar instruction and prefer to use a deductive method to teach it. To illustrate, the teacher presents and explains the rules in the classroom. The teacher also gives examples of how the new structure is used. Many teachers believe that explaining the rules overtly helps students to understand what they are practicing and also improves the accuracy of the language. Not all teachers favor a deductive method to teach grammar. Some teachers favor an inductive method which is also an explicit instruction, that is, the students find the rules and meanings in examples provided by the teacher who guides the students in a process of discovering the language.

In the Egyptian secondary schools context, the "Hello" Series introduces grammar explicitly and the deductive approach to grammar instruction is mostly adhered to in the presentation procedure of the grammatical rules. Although this approach may be easy to use for teachers, students have difficulty with writing, and their difficulty is reflected in the lexical and grammatical features which consequently affect the cohesion, sentence fluency, content and ideas and conventions of their writing. Even

after many years of explaining grammar explicitly, many students have not yet mastered the grammatical and lexical features that enable them to present a coherent and organized writing which fails to meet the academic expectations. This problem is confirmed by the national tests and assessments which indicated that the students coming out of today's schools are lacking the ability to write a coherent, understandable sentence. Simply stated, the students write badly. Studies revealed that 40 percent of the students enrolled were incapable of college-level writing (Barrass, 2005; Richards & Miller, 2005; Zamel & Spack, 2004)

The problem with school grammar has not been grammar itself as much as it has been the way grammar is usually taught. Instead of helping students to focus on their writing, traditional grammar pedagogy requires students to divert their attention to the isolated sentences in a textbook. It focuses on errors instead of the understanding of language. According to Brock Haussamen and Assembly for the Teaching of English (2003), the English profession in general and the national council of teachers of English in particular began to reduce the emphasis on the traditional teaching of grammar, as research began to show that teaching grammar in isolation failed to improve writing.

Furthermore, many L1 and L2 composition specialists agree that formal grammar instruction is not necessary or effective for improving students' writing. In addition, L2 scholars and teachers have questioned the efficacy of grammar instruction, noting that the results of grammar instruction are often disappointing. Teachers find that even when a grammatical feature has been practiced, students may not use it accurately in their own writing. Furthermore, composition studies found that explicit teaching grammar (learning rules deductively, engaging in practice with

exercises, and so on) is not effective as a means of improving composition skills of 5 to 16 year-olds (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005).

Echoing previous investigations, there is no obvious evidence that the teaching of grammar is worth the time if the aim is the improvement of the quality or accuracy of written composition (Williams, 2005). In addition, Jaeger (2011) conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of teaching traditional grammar on writing composition at the high school level. The findings showed that traditional grammar instruction has little or no effect on students' writing. Wyse (2001) summarized two comprehensive reviews conducted in 2001, and again in 2006, that examine the body of research devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of traditional grammar instruction on improving students' writing. Their reviews echoed the same conclusion that traditional grammar teaching showed no measurable benefits.

After reviewing the previous literature and the studies that indicated the ineffectiveness of explicit grammar instruction on improving students' writing, it is time for introducing a different approach to grammar teaching. The challenge is to provide an alternative way to introduce grammar in a communicative and constructive framework of language teaching through adopting the implicit focus on form instruction which is a branch of the form focused instruction approach. Focus on form was coined by Long (1996, 2000; Long & Robinson, 1998), who argued for the insufficiency of approaches that followed a structural syllabus (which he called focus on forms) and those that focused exclusively on meaning (e.g., the Natural Approach; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Long characterized focus on form, as an implicit approach did not include any overt mention of a learner error or any metalanguage. It is also used to refer to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form (Ellis, 2012). Focus on form is implicit and do not