

An Investigation into the Development of Young Learners' Grammatical Competence

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Introduction

This study is a small-scale classroom-based action research project which was carried out during my internship in a girls' primary school in the UAE. It investigates the teaching of grammar, and involved five young EFL learners between the ages of ten and eleven. The focus of this research is on raising young learners' awareness of grammatical patterns by implementing grammar consciousness-raising activities. Grammar has always been one of the most difficult elements in the English language. Teaching grammar in schools has largely been ignored and teachers have relied on heavy drilling and repetition of structures. Students memorize these structures without understanding their value or their meaning.

The outcomes of my preliminary investigation into the teaching of grammar to these students showed that the type of grammar instruction used by the classroom teacher was explicit instruction. In addition, learners arrived at the rule deductively. By this I mean that a presentation of the rule was provided at the beginning of a lesson, and this was followed by examples in which the rule is applied. Moreover, I realized that the lessons were form-focused, with no focus on meaning, and this is contrary to the communicative approach which suggests that a balance between the two is desirable.

Research question

When examining the literature in the area of raising learners' language consciousness, it seems that there was a lack of discussion about the effect of grammar consciousness-raising activities on young learners. Therefore, the investigation process sought to answer the following question:

- o How do grammar consciousness-raising activities contribute to improving young learners' grammatical competence?

Literature Review

The question of whether or not grammar should be taught has been persistently debated in the field of second language acquisition. However, the inclusion of formal grammar teaching has been favored over the past three decades. One of the reasons behind that is the lack of empirical studies that show the effectiveness and practicality of zero-grammar approaches in the ESL/EFL context, such as Krashen's Natural Approach. However, there have been several successful empirical studies on the effectiveness of formal grammar teaching, such as Long (1983, 1987), Pica (1985), and Ellis (1994) (All cited in Adnan, 1995, p. 2-3).

Inductive and Deductive Approaches

There are two main opposing approaches to formal grammar teaching: the deductive and the inductive approaches. In the former, the students are given the rule and they apply it to examples; whereas in the inductive approach, the students infer the rule by generalizing from a set of examples (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p.292).

There are arguments in favor of both deductive and inductive approaches. Thornbury (1999) asserts that one of the advantages of the deductive approach is that it saves time, as it gets straight to the point (p.30). However, he declares, starting the lesson with a grammar presentation can be off-putting for some students, especially younger ones, as a result of their insufficient metalanguage, and as a result of the ambiguous concepts involved (p. 30). On the other hand, some advocates of the inductive approach, such as Bourke (1996), believe that the deductive approach tends to focus on form over meaning, and encourages passiveness rather than activeness in terms of learners' involvement in the learning process (Mohamed, 2004, p.1).

Many specialists agree that inductive grammar teaching is more appropriate than deductive grammar teaching for ESL/EFL learners. However, encouraging learners to work out rules for themselves, as the inductive approach requires, also has some pros and cons. As Ellis (1997) argues, "Allowing the learners to take responsibility for discovering the underlying patterns of the [target language] affects retention" (cited in Mohamed, 2004, p. 2). This is supported by Nunan (2005) who states that "Rules learners discover for themselves are more likely to fit their existing mental structures, making them more meaningful, memorable and serviceable" (p.17). Furthermore, the active involvement of learners in the learning process is more likely to increase their attentiveness and motivation (Thornbury, 1999, p.54). Nonetheless, one significant factor in the implementation of the inductive approach is the possibility of having a misconception of the rule, or having either too broad or too narrow a version of the rule (Thornbury, 2001, p. 54).

Consciousness-raising

One type of inductive grammar instruction involves consciousness-raising, sometimes known as CR. Rutherford (1987) asserts that consciousness-raising is task-oriented and that the learner is actively engaged in solving problems (cited in Butler-Tanaka, 1998, p. 5). The term CR has different meanings. Rutherford's (1987) version of CR is summarized as follows by Yip (1994), cited in Butler-Tanaka (1998):

It focuses on aspects of grammar without necessarily using explicit rules or technical jargon. Instead of trying to impart rules and principles directly as in the traditional grammar lesson, it seeks to help learners discover for themselves by focusing on aspect of the target structure (Butler-Tanaka, 1998, p. 4).

A core concept in consciousness-raising activities is noticing, which was first introduced into the language of English language teaching by Schmidt (1990), who emphasized the involvement of conscious processes in language learning in which a degree of attention to language features is required (cited in Thornbury, 2001, p.36). As Hinkel and Fotos (2002) state, once a learner's consciousness of a target feature is raised through formal instruction, the learner often tends to notice the feature in subsequent input, and this noticing is thought to help acquiring the language (cited in Walsh, 2005, p. 8). To enable learners to notice features successfully, Cameron (2001) asserts that the focus will usually be on meaning as well as on form, and the new form should be contrasted with other, already known, forms (p. 109). One of the main debates around CR is that it doesn't emphasise the importance of practicing language. CR attempts to concentrate on the understanding of the target language, while grammar practice has as its objective the production of sentences exemplifying the grammatical feature that

is the target of the activity (Butler-Tanaka, 1998, p. 3). Ellis (1991) criticizes grammar practice by arguing that “[It] does not necessarily contribute to autonomous ability to use the structure due to psycholinguistic constraints” (Nitta and Gardner, 2005, p. 1).

In addition, Thornbury (1999) claims that “Immediate production ... may distract attention away from the brain work involved in understanding and restructuring (p. 105). In response to Ellis, Hopkins and Nettle (1994) have asserted that expecting learners to understand the language without being given an opportunity to use it will frustrate the learners (Ranalli, 2001, p. 4).

One type of classroom activity that is useful in consciousness-raising is what Ellis (1993) labels as “grammar consciousness-raising activity” (cited in Butler-Tanaka, 1998, p. 7). His definition of this activity is that “It [encourages] learners to learn facts about a grammar-point for themselves” (cited in Butler-Tanaka, 1998, p. 7). An example of such activity is when learners are asked to categorize a list of sentences or words into two groups and then have them explain how those two groups differ (cited in Butler-Tanaka, 1998, p. 7).

Grammar Teaching and Young Learners

Cameron (2001) suggests that children's way of learning grammar in their first language is likely to occur in foreign language learning (p. 102). She assumes that children hypothesize and amend their hypotheses by hearing alternative versions, “as if they have worked out a grammar rule and are testing it out” (p. 102). Therefore, a method that focuses learners' attention on grammatical features is needed. Furthermore, there is evidence from empirical research with young learners that, in the beginning stages, learners tend to use words or chunks strung together to express meanings, with little attention paid to grammar in those words or chunks (Cameron, 2001, p. 101). That is, young learners sometimes use correct grammar, as memorized, and at other times, they misuse the same grammar rule because it is stored in their minds to express meaning only (Cameron, 2001, p. 101).

Nunan (2005) suggests some vital principles for teaching grammar to beginning learners. Firstly, the learning load should be manageable in a way that simplifies the grammar for beginning learners, as they only have partial understanding at this stage (p. 45). Therefore, he suggests implementing consciousness-raising activities because it helps them to notice patterns and regularities that can be developed over time (Nunan, 2005, p. 45). The second principle is to emphasize inductive over deductive teaching because of the lack of linguistic ability to comprehend grammatical explanations at the beginning stages (p. 45).

The main limitation I encountered when conducting this research is the lack of literature about implementing consciousness-raising activities to young learners. All of the research I found was for adults learning and for more complicated grammar rules than what young learners can understand. Thus, I had to adapt and simplify the strategies to suit the language level of young learners. In light of this, the strategy I decided to implement for this research is grammar consciousness-raising activities that raise young learners' grammatical awareness inductively.

Teaching Strategy

Through examining the current practice in the teaching of grammar in the preliminary investigation in the school where I was placed for my Teaching Practice, I realized the importance of implementing a strategy that has a focus on meaning as well as on form, and I believe that this should be implemented within the communicative approach to English language teaching in government schools in the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, I decided that it is better to select another strategy than either the explicit or deductive approaches, as the literature suggests their ineffectiveness for long-term learning of grammar, so I decided to focus on grammar-consciousness raising activities.

The plan of action for the intervention in this action research was therefore to implement grammar consciousness-raising activities. Noticing activities were applied as an initial stage of the consciousness-raising (CR) activities. My lessons therefore started by focusing on the overall meaning of a text from the New English Parade course book (Herrera & Zanatta, 2000), which is one principle of a successful noticing activity, as mentioned in the literature. Then the learners were asked to highlight certain grammatical features in the text that was the focus of the next activity. After that, the consciousness raising activity required students to list sentences which contained the grammatical features listed on the board. Finally, the learners were encouraged to categorize that list and explain how the two categories differ.

The target language used for this research was past tense verbs, as they are immediately relevant to the learners because they feature in their course book, New English Parade. (Herrera & Zanatta, 2000). Through applying consciousness raising activities, students are active in the process of learning through hypothesizing and deducing the rules from the target language. A focus on written production was chosen in order to more easily ascertain the learners' grammatical competence. In addition, I preferred to focus on learners' writing rather than speaking because only proficient speakers can focus on accuracy as well as on meaning, whereas writing allows young learners to spend more time thinking about and revising their accuracy. However, writing activities used in the classroom did not engage students' attention. Thus, I found that I needed to create lessons on writing during the intervention.

This plan of action was conducted within a timeline that consisted of four sessions over five weeks. In addition, I conducted two sessions on writing that required the learners to show evidence of their ability to use the grammatical features learned. I first implemented a CR activity to differentiate between nouns and verbs. Although this was not the focus of my research, I found that going back a stage was vital, as a consequence of observing some learners who demonstrated lack of grammatical awareness by adding '-ed' to nouns. The second and third sessions were used for differentiating between past tense verbs and present tense verbs. In the same week, I conducted a writing session to collect data that showed students' use of grammar in writing. From those last two sessions, I realized that it was quite difficult for the learners to focus on two grammatical features. Hence, the next sessions focused on past tense verbs only, by differentiating between regular and irregular verbs. The last session was a writing session about an event that happened in the past.

The strategies I choose in my teaching are often influenced by my own experiences as a foreign language learner. After learning grammar rules deductively for twelve years in school, I kept making the same grammatical errors in speaking and writing. This is quite similar to what I observed in the young learners' classroom during my preliminary investigation. Although the Grade Five learners had been learning about past simple tense verbs since they were in Grade Four, they had a problem in their accurate use of the past simple tense. Furthermore, they did not have the awareness of the meaning of past tense verbs in order to use them appropriately and meaningfully.

Research Methodology

Data was collected to examine the effect of grammar consciousness-raising activities on young learners' grammatical competence in the written use of past tense verbs. I used a classroom questionnaire, I collected artifacts, I took anecdotal notes, and I conducted self-assessment with the young learners in the focus group. My area of focus, which concentrated on learners' knowledge and grammatical competence, also necessitated a quantitative technique for measuring the learners' development, so I chose to conduct a pre-test and a post test in addition to the above qualitative techniques. In order to measure the young learners' development, it was important to know their starting abilities and achievements. The pre-test was formative because it was designed "to monitor students' progress at the beginning of the intervention to diagnose strengths and weaknesses" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2001, p. 322). The post test was summative and was "designed to measure achievements, outcomes, or mastery" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2001, p. 322), and was conducted at the end of the intervention to measure learners' development in grammatical competence, specifically their awareness of past simple tense verbs.

Another data collection tool was anecdotal notes, which I wrote after each session during the intervention. This data tool was vital for my research as it provided deep insights into learners' progress and their ability to notice patterns in the target language during the discussion in the sessions. In addition, it provided valuable insights about learners' attitudes and their development through the intervention.

A further data collection tool was learners' self-assessment, which was administered at the end of the intervention. It aimed to show the learners' opinions about the strategy implemented, and also showed their preference for either the inductive method that I implemented, or the deductive method that their teacher used. The final data collection tool was a questionnaire for the classroom teacher which provided a third perspective about the effectiveness of consciousness-raising activities on learners' grammatical competence of past tense verbs.

One essential principle of action research is that it is undertaken within an agreed framework of ethics (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2001, p. 228). One principle of research ethics involves getting the informed consent of the participants whom the researcher is going to interview, question, observe or take materials from (Bell, 1999, p. 39). To carry out my investigation for this research, I informed participants about the purpose of my action research and its possible benefits to the fifth graders' grammatical competence.

Data Analysis

The data presented in this section are summarized from the large amount of raw data collected. The data collected were analyzed and grouped into three themes based on their manifestation as patterns in these data. Those themes are (1) noticing, (2) accuracy, and (3) attitudes toward the inductive method.

Noticing

In the first session, four of the six learners were able to identify both nouns and verbs accurately, while two were quite confused about identifying nouns and verbs. The consciousness raising activity I used in the second and third sessions was to differentiate between past tense and present tense verbs. When the students were asked to highlight the action words in the text, all learners were able to identify past tense and present tense verbs. However, one learner was still uncertain about the difference between nouns and verbs when she was asked to give examples of the words she identified from the text. A significant observation in this session, which is also supported by examining the artifacts, is that most students identified the past tense verbs that they learned in the unit, without being able to notice the pattern of the “-ed” ending in the regular past tense verbs that were unfamiliar to them. This showed me that their knowledge is based on memorization of words, and they are at the beginning stage of noticing and being aware of certain patterns in the target language.

The focus of the fourth session was on past tense verbs only. The CR activity in this session aimed to differentiate between regular and irregular verbs. Almost all students were able to identify most of the regular and irregular verbs in the text without confusing them with present tense verbs. As mentioned in the literature, one principle of successful noticing of certain features and patterns in an activity is to “contrast the form with other, already known, forms” (Cameron, 2001, p. 109). Thus, I assume that categorizing past tense and present tense verbs in the previous sessions helped the learners to notice the pattern of each category, which helped them to identify past tense verbs more accurately in this session.

Although almost all learners were capable of identifying the regular and irregular verbs as seen in both artifacts and anecdotal notes, they could not notice the pattern at the beginning of the CR activity, where they had to categorize the verbs. Only one learner, Learner #6, recognized the pattern of past tense verbs. This was recorded in my observation notes as follows:

L6 was the first one to give clear a explanation about categorizing the verbs by noticing the similar patterns. She explained, “these words have ‘-ed’ at the end but the others don’t have ‘-ed’.

The other students found difficulty in categorizing the regular and irregular verbs, except for L2 who just took more time to think about it. Through examining my observational notes, I interpreted that students did not know the pattern of “-ed” in regular verbs and started to develop their awareness and noticing from the CR task of this session.

Through examining the data above, I realized that the level of noticing varied from activity to another and from a learner to another. However, there is an indication of a

slight development in the learners' awareness of certain patterns and features from the target language. This was supported by the data collected from the teacher questionnaire when asked about the effect of noticing on the students' awareness of features and patterns. She noted that there was a slight development in their noticing and identifying words from texts.

Accuracy

In order to measure the development of learners' grammatical competence, a pre-test and post-test were conducted, and in general their grammatical accuracy seemed to increase, except for L2 and L3 whose scores declined in the second part of the post-test.

Through examining the answers in the pre-test, I interpreted that learners showed sound grammatical knowledge about past tense verbs, even though they did not get accurate answers for all questions. In part 2 of the pre-test, L2 and L6 showed an awareness of adding '-ed' for past tense verbs by generalizing the rule for unfamiliar words such as *drinked* and *keeped*. On the other hand, L3, L4, L5 showed a lack of awareness of the patterns of past tense verbs. This group of learners added '-s' for the verbs that were supposed to be in the past tense. The only learner who showed an awareness of irregular verbs is L1 by generalizing the patterns of irregular verbs for unfamiliar verbs. For instance, she wrote *kape* instead of *kept*, and *nede* instead of *needed*.

The post test showed an increase in the learners' grammatical accuracy. A significant increase was in L4's results, where she scored 9/10 points in both parts of the post test after getting 4/10 and 1/10 in the pre-test. A probable cause of this increase is that she was more familiar with the past tense verbs as memorized words, rather than awareness of patterns of regular and irregular verbs. Another significant increase is in L1 results.

She seemed to be familiar with the verbs, except the verb 'try'. She showed an awareness of the regular verbs patterns more than the pre-test by adding '-ed' to the word 'try'. On the other hand, L2 and L5 still over generalized the rule of adding '-ed' to the past tense verbs. The score of L3 decreased in the second part of post test. Although she tried to generalize the rule of adding '-ed' to past tense verbs such as *taked* and *haved*, she did not have the awareness of general patterns of past tense verbs, which was demonstrated through writing *running* and *coming* instead of 'ran' and 'came'.

Other evidence of learners' grammatical accuracy is the samples of their writing. Through examining the learners' writing, I realized that the use of verbs in their writing was more accurate than in the tests. L4, who had the lower level of awareness in the group, wrote all verbs accurately. The following sentences are examples from learners' writing:

L5: in the past, people eat by hand and fingers.

L5: I rode my bike last weekend.

L4: in the past people sewed clothes by hand.

L4: they eated by hand and fingers.

L5 in the first example used the present tense form in eat, but she was capable of writing an accurate verb in the next sentence, which is rode. L4 was also capable of writing the verb sewed accurately; however, she generalized the rule and wrote eated for an irregular verb. Considering the theory mentioned in the literature about the way young learners learn grammar, I think that the words rode and sewed were memorized as chunks, whereas eat and eated are stored to express meaning.

Attitudes towards the Inductive Method

Through examining the anecdotal notes, I noticed that learners' attitudes differed during the intervention because of implementing grammar CR activities inductively. L1, L2, L3, and L6 showed a noticeable enthusiasm to participate in the discussions in order to discover the rules. On the other hand, L4 and L5 were not active in the process of explaining and hypothesizing during the CR activities at the beginning. A probable cause of this is that the activities were not very comprehensible to them as they were not similar to what they were used to get. However, their participation increased after they slightly got used to the activity during the third and fourth sessions. This demonstrates, as mentioned in the literature, that one advantage of the inductive approach is that the learners "are more actively involved in the learning process, rather than being simply passive recipients", which is more likely to increase their attentiveness and motivation (Thornbury, 1999, p.54).

Although all learners agreed that the CR activities were useful, interesting, clear, and easy to understand, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6 feel more comfortable about their performance when the teacher gives them a grammar worksheet to practice. This is a very interesting finding to me as it is a characteristic of the deductive approach. I think that this is due to the pressure from the Ministry of Education on classroom teachers to practice language in order to record learners' academic progress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of the data indicates that grammar consciousness raising activities positively contributed to young learners' grammatical competence. Learners' grammatical accuracy and their ability to notice patterns increased for most of the learners. In addition, learners showed an initial awareness about grammar rules, and developed their knowledge about patterns and features in the language. The increase in the noticing ability of learners and their awareness differed from one activity to another and from one learner to another. Considering the short time of the intervention, I consider this as a significant achievement for those EFL young learners.

An interesting finding in this research is the learners' preference for receiving grammar worksheet to practice using the rules, despite their enthusiasm and the positive change in their attitude to learn through the inductive approach and its clarity to them. I assume that learning styles is a factor in their preferences for the grammar approach implemented. I am interested in further investigation to find whether learners' preferences are influenced by their learning styles, or whether they just need more time to feel more comfortable with the inductive method.

I recommend that teachers implement grammar consciousness-raising activities. Through my intervention, I found that implementing those activities for forty-five minutes once a week showed some indication of improvement in learners' grammatical awareness and accuracy. In addition, it is appropriate to the UAE context as the course book, *New English Parade* (Herrera & Zanatta, 2000) presents one grammatical structure for each unit, and thus the teachers will find time to implement the strategy once a week. More importantly, this research is promising in light of the Ministry of Education's intention to change grammar teaching to inductive methods and to change assessments tools to include alternative forms of assessment.

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