

*Original Article***The Study of Structural Practice Approach vs. Awareness-Raising Approach in Teaching Verb Tenses to EFL Students****Amir Mashhadi* and Mehdi Haghnevis**

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to investigate the differences between two approaches to teaching English verb tenses to EFL learners, i.e., the formal instruction of structural pattern drills and the other is grammar task performance through 'awareness-raising approach'. The participants in this study include 50 university students majored in English who were randomly selected from Islamic Azad University of Behbahan. To carry out the study, two kinds of teaching materials were utilized, i.e., the 'awareness-raising' tasks on verb tenses selected from "Grammar in action again" textbook and the 'structurally-based' lessons and activities on English verb tenses taken from "Communicate what you mean" textbook. Analyzing the data, the researchers came to the conclusion that in teaching English verb tenses to intermediate learners, awareness raising approach could lead to a better and more efficient contribution to learning verb tense aspects. The statistical analysis of subjects' performances also proved that recent communicative approaches like awareness rising or consciousness rising, which use authentic and meaningful materials, are more favored by language learners. The implications of this study are considered in foreign language learning programs as well as material developing and text-book writing.

Key words: EFL learners, awareness-raising approach, teaching verb tenses

INTRODUCTION

A continuing debate in second language pedagogy is whether grammar should be taught or if it is learned naturally through communication. Researchers like Fotos and Ellis [1] give the term "zero position" to the viewpoint of those who maintain that the teaching of grammar has only a small effect on the acquisition of linguistic competence in a second language. However recent studies [2] show that knowing how to build and use certain structures makes it possible to communicate certain types of meaning successfully.

Now, many scholars agree that grammar is too important to be ignored, and that without a good knowledge of grammar, learners' language development will be severely affected. For centuries linguists have been trying to describe grammar in different ways, leading to different grammatical approaches; mostly formal whose main concern has been to help learners internalize the structures by practicing those [3]. Looking at the history of second or foreign language teaching, one can see that to develop a new communicative language program, there has been a great shift of emphasis in this field from the structurally-based methods and techniques of teaching language structures to the more recent task-oriented and task performance ones. The move toward a communicative approach to language pedagogy in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in alternative syllabuses; in part, the Notional-Functional syllabus, the Task-Based procedural syllabus and the Process syllabus [4].

This study intends to investigate the differences between two approaches to teaching English verb tenses to intermediate EFL learners: One is the formal instruction of structural pattern drills and the other is the view that has developed in awareness-raising approach in recent years, that is, grammar task performance through 'awareness-raising approach'. Out of so many aspects of English structures, the verb tenses are the focus of this research to be taught to students studying English in their second year of education in Islamic Azad University of Behbahan'.

1. Definition of key terms

2.1 Verb tense

It is defined as the relationship between the form of the verb and the time of the action or state it describes. In English, verbs may be in the past or present tense [5].

2.2 Structural practice approach

Rivers [6] interprets it as an approach to teaching of language structures in which having been presented an explanation of a grammatical features, students are required to change unnaturally complicated sentences from singular to plural, from affirmative to negative, from declarative to interrogative, or from one tense to another. Students may be asked to combine sentences, to add some elements to sentences, or to fill in blanks with words which change according to structural environment.

2.3 Task

It is a (teaching) activity which is designed to help achieve a particular learning goal [5].

2.4 Awareness-raising activities

Tasks by which learners' general awareness of language should be raised as a preliminary to second language teaching, partly through grammar. If the students know the kind of thing to expect, they are more receptive to it. They invent their own label for grammar rather than being taught as a pre-established style. So the pupils investigate the grammar by, for example, deciding where to insert "see-through" in the sentence: "She put on her cozy, old, blue, nylon, blouse" [7] Language Awareness (LA).

3.1. Definitions and scopes of language awareness

Tomlin and Villa [8] provide a restricted definition of awareness derived from second language acquisition and cognitive science. They maintain that "awareness refers to a particular state of mind in which an individual has undergone a specific subjective experience of some cognitive content or external stimulus".

A key element of a language awareness approach is that learners 'discover language for themselves'. Hawkins [9] says it involves challenging 'pupils to ask questions about language', encouraging learners to gather their own data from the world outside school into the way language works to convey meaning. This approach also gives language teachers a greater awareness of the resources they already have at their disposal-their knowledge as 'expert users' of the language.

In a similar vein, Frank, and Rinvoluceri [10] maintain, language awareness activities can be seen as guided exercises where there is still some control over the students' responses in performing the grammatical tasks; however there is no control over the content of the response, so that the student can express his or her own opinion of the world. This adds up to total involvement of the learner's whole person, with total responsibility for what he or she produces in a rather loose framework of predetermined cues.

3.2. LA and Knowledge about Language (KAL)

Little [11] maintains that there is agreement that: "LA is imparted to learners through school and draws upon metalanguage to explain aspects of the language code in the classroom." Andrews [12] also defines LA as "teachers' explicit knowledge of language or pedagogical content knowledge." These definitions equate 'knowledge' and 'awareness'. Alderson, Clapham, and Steel [13], see the term 'KAL' and 'LA' as interchangeable, as well.

In a similar vein, James [14] defines LA as "the promotion of understanding of what linguists (and others) have discovered about language and what these findings have to say teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other non-linguists.

3.3. LA as Linguistic Awareness (LGA)

While LA as KAL figures in language education, LGA is a term from psycholinguistics. LGA is seen as a way for the researcher, he be psycholinguist or grammarian, to access his subjects' implicit or unconscious knowledge [14]. Masney [15] claims "LGA unlike KAL is not constituted of encyclopedic knowledge, but of linguistic intuitions that have been raised to awareness, an indicator of what learners know about language through reflection on language."

On the other hand there are researchers like Hawkins that believe LA to be different from LGA. Hawkins [9] sees LA as helping learners to "gain insight into pattern" while LGA work involves bringing this tacit knowledge to the speakers' attention.

3.4. LA as Metacognition

James [14] maintains that the definition of LA makes reference to a 'sensitivity' factor, i.e., explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use. James emphasizes that the key to sensitivity is an ability to respond to language other than at the bare functional-communicative level. Swain and Lapkin [16] refine this sensitivity by reflection, saying that reflectivity is an alternative knowledge source upon which language awareness as KAL must draw.

During the period when the Audio Lingual approach to foreign language teaching was dominant, the learner reflectivity that had been promoted by GTM approach in favor of fluency, as well as the reflectivity time needed for translation was suppressed. This reflectivity or self-critique is the key to the definition of LA as Metacognition.

3.5. Pragmatic Aspects of LA (Pragmatic Awareness)

From a pragmatic perspective, Van Lier [17] defines LA as understanding how language is used as a tool. This is a view which is also shared by Sharwood-Smith [18]. For him also the recipients of LA are 'teachers, learners, government officials, the media, the general public', and the source of knowledge about language is 'the insights and frameworks provided by modern linguistics rather than the traditional grammarian.'

Tomlinson [19] proposes the following as objectives of a pragmatic awareness approach.

- To help learners notice the way that proficient users of the L2 typically use pragmatic strategies;
- To help learners achieve deep, learner-driven analysis of language in use this can help them to note the gaps and to achieve learning readiness.
- To help learners develop cognitive skills;
- To help learners become independent.

Such goals, as Hanford [20] says, evaluate what can be developed through awareness rising. He adds that opportunities for communicative practice and activities such as role plays, drama, or pair-work seem real as they allow for students to experiment and receive feedback in a controllable environment.

3.6. Awareness-raising and “noticing strategy”

‘Noticing hypothesis’ which is attributed to Schmidt [21], states that consciousness, in the sense of awareness of specific forms in the input at the level of noticing (conscious attention), is necessary for language learning to take place. He suggests that two kinds of noticing are necessary conditions for acquisition:

1. Learners must attend to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to, without which ‘input’ cannot become ‘intake’.
2. Learners must ‘notice the gap’, i.e., make comparisons between the current state of their developing linguistic system available as input.

The first kind of noticing, according to Sharwood-Smith [22] is customarily promoted through activities and procedures involving input enhancement, whereby as in the presentation stage of the traditional ‘Presentation-Practice-Production’ (PPP) mode of instruction, targeted features of the input are made salient in order to facilitate their becoming intake.

The second kind of noticing is traditionally mediated through corrective feedback. However, Thornbury [23] believes that “when it comes to correction, there is a considerable mismatch between teacher intentions and learner outcome.”

“Reformulation” and “reconstruction” are two kinds of tasks which according to Thornbury [23] provide opportunities for noticing. These tasks are both meaning-focused and form-focused. Reformulation tasks, as he says, are consistent with a fluency-to-accuracy or task-based model of instruction, while reconstruction activities activate bottom-up processing. “Dictogloss is a kind of reconstruction activity that has been popularized recently; it is also known as “dicto-comp/dictation/composition” or ‘grammar dictation’.

4. The application of LA in teaching of different language skills

4.1. Teaching of grammar

Combining grammar instruction with communicative language learning, Ellis [24] explains a method in which the learners can benefit from explicit instruction prior to the activity to facilitate awareness of the form they will face. This can be through giving learners short grammar lessons that are followed by communicative input containing the target forms. The communicative activities are often followed by teacher guided review of the target forms and feedback on errors. As stated by Schmidt [21], after awareness of grammatical structures has been raised by formal instruction or some implicit focus-on-form, many learners notice the target structures in later communicative input. The repeating of noticing helps the progress of the learners’ comparison of the correct forms with their own interlanguage forms.

4.2. Teaching of reading comprehension

Wallace [25] believes that it is possible to devise simple literacy awareness tasks which involve L2 students observing who reads what kinds of material in different social settings. It also means inviting students to consider their own needs and roles as readers in both a first and a foreign language. Wallace [25] has offered some of these awareness tasks which can be appropriate for both early readers and more proficient ones. They involve, for example, students devising matrices of the reading activities which they observe in their everyday environments, keeping a diary of their own reading activities and noticing the range of textual material which surrounds them, either or both in the L1 or target L2 setting.

4.3. Awareness-raising in the context of TEFL training

Edge [26] uses the term ‘applied linguistics’ referring to two types of language study; the first type aims to improve the trainees’ own command and use of English, for example, explicit grammar study in support of weaknesses diagnosed in written work. Explicit work on language awareness will directly support the learning styles of some trainees. The awareness-raising aspect of language study, as she says, provides the experiential base for the learning of descriptive terminology which trainees will need in their own advanced and professional lives.

The second type of work under the term ‘applied linguistics’ is the explicit study of language and language learning that is necessary to support the working of decisions as a language teacher; for example they need some information about error analysis in order to decide which mistakes to correct [26]. Trainees’ awareness and knowledge of the content of linguistics develop as they become more skilled in the interpretation and application of information that is available.

Edge [26] believes that the development and sharing of methodological procedures, which will integrate an individual’s growing language awareness into its doubly supportive role in TEFL training, is necessary for TEFL training purposes.

5. Research Questions

1. Does formal instruction of “verb tenses” through structural practice approach have any significant contribution to the retention of these features by intermediate EFL learners?
2. Do grammar task performance techniques of awareness-raising approach have any significant contribution to the retention of “verb tenses” by intermediate EFL learners?
3. Is the study of “verb tenses” through formal instruction of structural practice, as effective as the study of the same features through awareness-raising task performance?

6. Null Hypotheses

Based on the above-mentioned research questions, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

1. Structural practice techniques have no significant effect on developing “verb tenses” by intermediate EFL learners.
2. Awareness-raising tasks have no significant effect on developing “verb tenses” by intermediate EFL learners.
3. There is no significant difference between two different classes, due to the effect of structural practice approach and awareness-raising approach on an intermediate grammar proficiency test.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this section, different steps taken to perform this study will be discussed. These steps include the following issues respectively: subjects, instrumentation, teaching materials and procedures. The participants in this study include 50 university students, both male and female. These students were randomly selected from Islamic Azad University of Behbahan. They were all majored in English and were studying in their second year of education at university. Twenty five students were randomly assigned to control group and the other 25 students were assigned to experimental group, each at intermediate level.

The TOEFL test used in this study included 90 items in a multiple choice format. It consisted two sections, namely ‘verb tenses’ as the grammar section, and ‘reading comprehension’. The verb tense section contained 40 questions. The reading comprehension section also contained 50 questions with 5 texts for reading.

Two kinds of teaching materials were also applied: One was the ‘awareness-raising’ tasks on verb tenses selected from a book called “Grammar in action again”, by Frank and Rinvolucrici [10]. The other teaching material was the ‘structurally-based’ lessons and activities on English verb tenses, taken from a textbook called “Communicate what you mean” by Pollock [27].

Research Design & Procedure

First of all, the 50 participants were randomly assigned into two groups; one as the control group and the other as the experimental group, each with 25 students at the intermediate level. Then both groups were given a TOEFL test which comprised of two sections; section one with 40 tests of verb tenses and section two with 50 tests of reading comprehension, both in multiple choice formats. Before the administration of the teaching materials, the two sections of TOEFL test were given to both control and experimental groups. To insure the homogeneity of the two groups, an f-test of homogeneity was taken based on the scores of both groups. In the next step, 40 tests of verb tenses stood as the pre-test for both groups. That was for the sake of assessing participants’ verb tense proficiency before being exposed to teaching materials. Then, the researcher held 9 sessions for each of the two groups separately. He taught the control group based on the traditional structural approach followed by structural pattern drills, and the experimental group based on the new method of awareness rising to see the effect of this method which was the focus of the study.

Each group had two sessions in a week; thus the course lasted for nearly 5 weeks. This helped to control for the time variable. Right after the end of the 9 sessions of the course, section one of the TOEFL test, that is 40 tests of verb tenses, was conducted again to both groups as the post-test of the study. The final step was to decide whether the three null hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the study shall be rejected or accepted. For so doing, three t-tests were applied.

RESULTS

To assure the homogeneity of variances of the two groups, a TOEFL test of 90 items was applied which comprised of two sections: section one with 40 tests of verb tenses, and section two with 50 tests of reading comprehension; both for assessing the general proficiency of the two groups. Then the performance of the two groups were compared and analyzed through the statistical technique of F-test which was used based on the results of pre-test scores of both groups as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Analyzing the pre-test results

Group	N	Mean	SD	Variance (s ²)
Control	25	53.84	8.557	73.223
Experimental	25	53.68	8.702	75.726

Here, the F-observed is 1.034 which is less than the F-critical value at 0.05 level of significance that is 1.96 (1.034<1.96). Therefore, the difference between the variances of the two groups is not significant; that is to say, the two groups are homogeneous in terms of their general language proficiency. At the post-test stage, i.e. after the administration of the treatment to both groups and at the end of the course, section 1 of the TOEFL test, i.e. 40 tests of verb tenses was administered again to both groups. Its aim was to prove if each of the teaching methods, have been practical to its specific group; and also to prove if which of the methods, that is, 'structural practice' or 'awareness raising' has been more effective for contributing to develop the verb tense proficiency of the students. For so doing, three t-tests were used.

The second null hypothesis assumes that awareness raising tasks have no significant effect on developing 'verb tenses' by intermediate EFL learners. To prove whether to accept or refuse this null hypothesis, the second t-test was used which compared the pre-test results with post-test results of experimental group. Table 2 shows the difference between the pre-test performance with post-test performance of the experimental group:

Table 2. Analyzing the results of experimental group

Experimental Group	N	Mean	SD	Variance
Pre-test	25	23.32	4.140	17.143
Post-test	25	29.84	3.578	12.806

The t-test formula was applied to the results of experimental group shown in table 2. The next table shows the results of the second t-test:

Table 3. Analyzing the results of the second t-test

T value	DF	T critical value for a two-tailed test	
		0.05 level of significance	0.01 level of significance
5.956	48	2.704	2.021

As shown in table 3, it could be concluded that the difference between the mean scores of pre-test results with those of the post-test results of experimental group is significant and cannot be attributed to the sampling error. So the null hypothesis 2 is also rejected, leading to the conclusion that awareness raising tasks are effective on developing the mastery of 'verb tenses' by intermediate EFL learners.

The last null hypothesis assumes that there is no significant difference between the effect of structural practice approach and awareness-raising approach on an intermediate grammar proficiency test. To prove whether to accept or refuse this null hypothesis, the third t-test was used which compared the post-test results of control group with post-test results of the experimental group. Table 4 shows their differences.

Table 4. Comparing the results of experimental group with control group

Group	N	Mean	SD	Variance
Control	25	27.00	3.662	13.416
Experimental	25	29.84	3.578	12.806

The t-test formula was applied to the results shown in table 4. The next table shows the results of the third t-test:

Table 5. The results of the third t-test

T value	DF	T critical value for a two-tailed test	
		0.05 level of significance	0.01 level of significance
2.772	48	2.704	2.021

DISCUSSION

Analyzing the data, the researcher came to the conclusion that in teaching English verb tenses to intermediate learners, awareness raising approach could lead to a better and more efficient contribution to learning verb tense aspects. The statistical analysis of subjects' performances in this research also proved that recent communicative approaches like awareness rising or consciousness rising, which use realistic and authentic as well as meaningful materials, are more favored by language learners thus such approaches should be included in any foreign language program, like material developing and text-book writing. Although the results were supporting awareness raising practices, there is no simple choice between the deliberate practice and study of grammatical forms, and intuitive acquisition of these forms through using in real life contexts. Thus, one can say both processes come into play and should be encouraged in a teaching program.

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