

## TEACHING GRAMMAR FOR ACTIVE USE: AN EXPLORATION OF THREE INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES

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### Abstract

The present paper reports on a study that was carried out to compare the effectiveness of three instructional techniques, namely dialogues, focused tasks, and games on teaching grammar. The participants were 48 pre-intermediate EFL students that formed three experimental groups. A posttest consisting of 20 productive items was administered at the end of the treatment period which lasted for four sessions. The results revealed no statistically significant difference between the three groups. This suggests that the three instructional techniques had relatively the same effect on the accurate grammatical production of the learners.

**Keywords:** dialogue, focused task, game, grammar, role-play.

### 1. Introduction

Teaching grammar has always been one of the controversial issues in both second and foreign language teaching. There have always been many arguments about the best way of teaching grammar. Different methods and strategies have permanently waxed and waned in popularity. Richards and Schmidt (2002) have defined grammar as a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in a language. Nunan (2003) has distinguished between two types of grammars, namely prescriptive grammar, which refers to the rules concerned with what is right and what is wrong and descriptive grammar, which deals with the ways people actually use language.

Regarding grammar teaching, Brown (2001) has postulated that whether you choose to explain grammatical rules or not depends on your context of teaching. If you are teaching in an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) context in which students share the same native language, elaborating on grammatical details will not be an activity in vain. On the other hand, in an ESL setting, explaining grammatical rules might overwhelm students and

will not prove an effective strategy.

There is a variety of grammar teaching techniques introduced in the literature (e.g., Batstone 1994, Thornbury 1999). However, the purpose of the present study is to focus on three popular and widely used activities: dialogues, focused tasks, and games.

## **2. Dialogues**

According to Rivers (1981), there are two broad categories of dialogues: conversation-facilitation and grammar-demonstration dialogues. Conversation-facilitation dialogues provide students with useful phrases with which they can begin to communicate. These dialogues are often short and therefore students are encouraged to memorize them. Grammar-demonstration dialogues, on the other hand, are longer pieces and contain certain grammatical structures that are to be studied. They provide contextualized examples from which students will deduce generalizations about a particular grammatical structure.

Apart from memorization, widely used in the audio-lingual era, dialogues can be exploited for role plays through which students can practice language more freely. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) has pointed out, role plays give students the chance of interacting and practicing communication acts in different contexts and because of this, they are of primary importance in language teaching. Obviously, role-playing grammar-demonstration dialogues provides students with ample opportunity for leaning the targeted grammatical features.

## **3. Task-based teaching**

It seems that task-based teaching (TBT) has gained the status of unsurpassed orthodoxy in both second and foreign language pedagogy. A pedagogic task, according to Nunan (2004: 4), has been defined as:

a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Therefore, a pedagogic task involves communicative language use in which the learner's attention is on meaning rather than the grammatical form. Tasks, according to Ellis (2009), should have a number of features as follows:

1. The primary focus should be on "meaning," which means that learners should be mainly concerned with processing both semantic and pragmatic

meaning of utterances.

2. There should be some kind of “gap,” which points to a need to convey information, to express an opinion, or to infer meaning.
3. Learners should draw on both their linguistic and non-linguistic resources in order to complete the activity.
4. There should be a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language. In other words, language should serve as a means to achieve the outcome, not as an end in itself.

A distinction has been made in the literature between two types of tasks: focused and unfocused (Ellis 2003, Nunan 2004). A focused task is one which requires learners to use a particular grammatical form to complete the task. Nevertheless, an unfocused task is one in which the learners can draw on all their linguistic resources to complete it. For example, a task that prompts learners to list three of the most risky sports in the world is considered to be a focused one because the learners would have to use superlative adjectives to complete it. Nonetheless, a discussion task in which the learners express their opinions about a particular topic would be an unfocused task, since it does not involve elicitation of any particular grammatical forms.

Obviously, focused tasks can be employed as a useful methodological device for the teaching of grammar in what has been named task-supported language teaching (Ellis 2003, 2009) or task-supported structural syllabus (Balegizadeh 2010) in which the syllabus is still structural, yet the majority of the activities are tasks.

#### **4. Games**

Games have always been used in education to give students motivation. According to Malone (1981), there are three main ways through which learners are motivated: fantasy, challenge, and curiosity.

**Fantasy:** Malone and Lepper (1987) have defined fantasy as an environment that evokes “mental images of physical or social situations that do not exist” (p.240). Games represent imaginary worlds that have no impact on the real world. In other words, games represent a separate world that has a discrepant nature in comparison to that of the real world.

**Challenge:** Malone and Lepper (1987) have claimed that motivating students requires an optimal level of challenge. In other words, they should be faced with activities that are neither too easy nor too difficult. There are different ways through which this optimal level of challenge can be obtained. For instance, goals should be clearly specified, yet there should be a level of uncertainty in whether these goals can be achieved or not. Games must also contain progressive levels of difficulty, multiple goals, and contain a certain amount of informational uncertainty and ambiguity to ensure an uncertain

outcome as well. There are also natural features to the games that ensure that individuals track progress toward prespecified goals such as performance, feedback, and score keeping.

**Mystery:** Malone and Lepper (1987) have noted that curiosity is one of the primary factors that drive learning. Garris, Ahlers, and Driskell (2002) have stated that there is a distinction between curiosity and mystery in that curiosity is a feature intrinsic to learners. On the other hand, mystery is an external characteristic of games. Thus, according to this view, mystery evokes curiosity in learners.

Based on the brief foregoing discussion, games can be a potentially powerful tool for practicing grammatical structures, which are often assumed to be boring by most language learners.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effectiveness of three instructional techniques on productive ability of EFL learners. Given that there are very few studies in the literature that have compared the differential effects of various grammar instructional techniques, it is necessary to conduct a study that explores which instructional technique tends to mobilize the passive grammatical knowledge of the learners. The study, therefore, seeks to answer the following research question:

What is the differential effect of the three given instructional techniques (dialogues, focused tasks, and games) on the accurate production of Iranian EFL learners?

## **5. Method**

### **5.1. Participants**

The participants in this study were 48 pre-intermediate female students with an average age of 22. The participants were members of three intact classes at Kish Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran. All three classes were taught by the second researcher of the present study.

### **5.2. Materials and instruments**

There was no pretest because the participants had already gone through successive achievement tests and were supposedly homogeneous in terms of their language proficiency. The focus of the study was on two similar grammatical structures that deal with present unreal situations: *Conditional Type II* and *Wish*. It should be mentioned that the participants of the present study had some prior knowledge of the two target grammatical structures. However, they were not able to produce well-formed grammatical sentences using them.

In line with the three instructional techniques, three types of materials were used. The participants in the dialogue group were presented with two dialogues for each grammatical form. One of the dialogues was selected

from *Interchange: Third Edition (Student's Book 2)* and the other one was written by the second researcher. The participants in the focused task and game groups were presented with activities selected from *Teaching Grammar Creatively* by Gerngross, Puchta, and Thornbury (2006).

The posttest, which was given to the participants at the end of the treatment period, was designed in a way as to assess the productive knowledge of the given structural patterns. The posttest consisted of 20 items and provided the participants with some prompts to write sentences using *Conditional Type II* or *Wish* structures (see Appendix A for sample items).

### **5.3. Procedure**

The study involved three experimental groups and the treatment period for each lasted for four sessions. In the dialogue group (n=15), the first two sessions were devoted to practicing *Conditional Type II*, and the next two sessions to *Wish* structure. After reading the dialogues and asking their questions, the participants were asked to role-play the dialogues in pairs. In the next step, they were required to come to the board and present the role-played dialogue for the rest of the class. It should be mentioned that the participants were not interrupted during their performance unless they made a serious global error.

The participants in the second experimental group (n=18) received focused tasks for four consecutive sessions (two sessions for each grammatical pattern). For the *Wish* structure in the first session, the participants were divided into pairs. One of them was given a picture of a lion trying to catch a man and she was asked to make some sentences using *I wish*, saying what she would wish to do in that situation without elaborating on the picture in her hand. For instance, she was required to produce a sentence like *I wish I could run faster*. The task of the other student was to listen to her partner's utterances attentively and guess the situation in the picture. In the second session, the participants were given a chart which contained *I wish*, past tense verbs, and some sentences. They were asked to complete the sentences in a way that was appropriate to their personal lives. However, the card that contained *I wish* structures was cut into two halves and each participant received one half of the card. The participants worked in pairs and each of them received one half of the cards and they were asked to make sentences using *I wish* structure. The cards were cut in a way that the participants were required to help each other in making sentences. For example, in one of the halves that belonged to one of the students in the pair, *I wish* and *had* existed but there was no noun to make a complete sentence. The task of the other student in the pair was to help her friend by putting one of the nouns she had in her card to complete the sentence her friend was trying to make. Needless to say, the participants were provided with minor

corrections or explanations from the teacher, if needed. For *Conditional Type II*, the participants again received two sessions of treatment. In the first session, they were provided with a table containing some hypothetical situations and were asked to complete the missing parts in pairs using the second conditional. In the second session, they were provided with three hypothetical situations and were asked to express their ideas about what they would do in each situation.

The participants in the third experimental group (n=15) practiced the two target grammatical structures through a grammar game called “chalkboard and erase.” In this game, the participants were provided with some prompts of the grammatical structures with some blanks and they were asked to come to the whiteboard one by one, erase the previous student's choices, and fill in the blanks on the board with the words they thought would be appropriate to their own personal lives or in line with their own interests. In the first two sessions, the second conditional was practiced. In one of the sessions, the participants were provided with a prompt on the whiteboard with two blanks like this: *If I had....., I could.....* or *If I were a ....., I would be.....*. Then half of them were asked to come to the whiteboard and complete the prompts using the words they liked. In the second session, the same procedure was repeated, but this time the other half of the participants came and completed the prompts. The same procedure was repeated for two sessions for the *Wish* structure.

## 6. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the three experimental groups.

Groups	n	M	SD
Dialogue	15	14.86	4.67
Task	18	16.30	3.91
Game	15	16.46	3.20

Table1. Descriptive Statistics for All Experimental Groups

In order to determine if there mean scores between the three groups were statistically significant or not, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed, the result of which indicated no significant difference across the groups,  $F(2,45)=2.07$ ,  $p=.13$  (see Table 2).

Source	df	SS	MS	F	sig
Between groups	2	65.29	32.64	2.07	.13
Within groups	45	709.53	15.76		

$p<.05$

Table 2. One-way ANOVA for the Productive Grammar Test

## **7. Discussion and conclusion**

This study sought to explore the effectiveness of three instructional techniques on the performance of Iranian EFL students on a productive grammar test. The results obtained showed no statistically significant difference between the three groups. The mean scores of the three experimental groups (all around 15 out of 20) indicate that all three instructional techniques had been equally successful. Given the strong theoretical support for the use of tasks in terms of promoting interaction among learners, the successful performance of the participants in the task group is not that much surprising. Nevertheless, the equally successful performance of the learners in the other two groups requires some pondering.

The reason why dialogues were successful is perhaps due to the fact that grammar should not be taught in isolation; rather, it should be accompanied with the four language skills. Moreover, grammar should be practiced not only at the utterance level but also at the discorsal level. In addition to learning grammatical forms through drills, students should also interact with the other speakers using the patterns they are studying.

Finally, as for games, since they are played in non-threatening situations, they allow learners not only to get familiar with and practice structures but also to consolidate the already learnt structures (Gaudart 1999). Another reason why games were successful lies in Macedonia's (2005) statement that "games serve the function of redundant repetition of grammar structures (morphological, syntactic) and vocabulary in a playful way" (p.139). This researcher has further pointed out that while playing games, students are not aware that they are learning something. Moreover, as Garris, Ahlers, and Driskell (2002) have argued, games facilitate the process of converting declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. In other words, knowledge that has been stored in memory is activated and is converted into procedural knowledge that can be used in communication acts.

This study has an important pedagogical implication. While using tasks has recently found a great number of advocates and, as mentioned earlier, has become the current orthodoxy of language teaching, it cannot be widely practiced in some settings due to a number of contextual constraints such as student motivation, teacher competence, etc. The findings of this study suggest that, fortunately, there are other techniques that work as well as tasks. For example, games can be used in settings where TBT is not welcome or where students are demotivated and find English grammar boring. Alternatively, dialogues and role-plays can be used in contexts where teachers lack the necessary confidence and expertise to work with tasks.

Finally, despite all the foregoing discussion, it should be mentioned that this study suffers from a number of limitations that would hinder wide generalizability of the findings. The first obvious limitation is concerned

with the number of participants as well as the number of grammatical forms under investigation. Another limitation is that the task given as the posttest was a written one. One wonders what the results would be if an oral task had been used. Overall, it is felt that more research is needed to shed more light on which instructional technique works better in EFL grammar teaching.

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### **Appendix A. Sample Posttest Items**

1. My friends have a lot of money. I don't have any money.  
I wish .....
2. Julia has an attractive red car. But mine is blue and small.  
I wish .....
3. I speak French badly.  
I wish .....