

Enhancing Secondary Stage Students' Writing: Effects of Context of Songs in Teaching Grammar Implicitly

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Abstract

The study reported in this article investigated the effect of context of songs in teaching grammar implicitly on students writing. The study was conducted on sixty students who were assigned to an experimental group and a control one. The control group was taught grammar explicitly with an explanation of grammatical rules; however, the experimental group was taught the same grammatical structures implicitly with the help of selected songs clips accompanied with their lyrics (English subtitle) through which the grammatical features were impeded in without explanation of the grammatical rules and without learners' awareness. The data were collected through a pre-test and a post-test of writing. The findings were very promising for the experimental group and indicated that using context of songs in teaching grammar implicitly has effects on improving the writing performance of junior at high schools.

Keywords: context of songs; implicit grammar instruction; writing

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, grammar instruction has long been a controversial issue in the field of second language. During the long history of second language instruction, Savage, Bitterlin, and Price (2010) stated that grammar was viewed as a body of knowledge to be studied and a set of rules to be memorized than as a skill to be practiced and developed. Today, grammar is still taught and tested in this way in many parts of the world. The problem with this knowledge-transmission approach to grammar is that for most students it leads to limited language acquisition. Students know the rules of grammar but are unable to use it. As a result of the observed gap between knowledge of grammar and its successful application, there has been a shift in our view of grammar instruction.

Some researchers think that knowing the grammar does not necessarily lead to language mastery. They claimed that focusing on explicit grammar teaching produces unsuccessful language users. They think that people can acquire language without any overt grammar instruction like the way children learn their mother tongue. They prefer language use to language usage through providing contextualized and authentic language without referring to rules or forms at all.

In many schools, the writing of secondary stage students was characterized by basic grammatical errors and lack of cohesion and coherence as they used to study isolated grammatical rules to answer isolated grammatical use. This problem due to the fact that the way grammar is taught for the secondary stage depends on providing traditional and tedious explanations. In this article, the researcher presented an implicit grammar instruction through the context of songs by providing video clips of songs accompanied with their English subtitles to develop the writing skills of secondary stage students. In the implicit grammar presentation, the researcher impeded the target structures in the context of songs which presented a meaningful context. In this way, the researcher avoided the use of metalinguistic terms and analytical explicit explanations about the grammatical structures. This way was also accomplished without learners' awareness of target grammatical structures. Using songs was helpful for providing nonthreatening atmosphere and presenting grammar in a better way for improving students' writing skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Effectiveness of Explicit Grammar Teaching

The studies investigated the beneficial effect of explicit grammar teaching showed that instruction based on explicit rules and relevant

metalinguistic terminology has no or limited effect on students' writing skill (Lock, 2010). Robust meta-analyses by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963), Hillocks (1986) and most recently, by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI) (Andrews et al., 2006; EPPI, 2004) have concluded that there is no evidence that teaching grammar is of benefit in supporting writing development. In addition, Jaeger (2011) conducted a study investigated the effectiveness of teaching traditional grammar on writing composition at the high school level. The findings showed that traditional grammar instruction has little to no effect on students' writing. Furthermore, Haussamen and Assembly for the Teaching of English (2003) stated that teaching grammar in isolation failed to improve writing. In addition, Wyse (2001) stated that there are two comprehensive reviews that were conducted in 2001 and 2006 to evaluate the effectiveness of traditional grammar instruction on improving students' writing. These reviews echoed the same conclusion that traditional grammar teaching showed no measurable benefits. Similarly, Andrews et al. (2006) concluded that the teaching of syntax (as a part of a traditional or transformational/generative approach to teaching grammar) appears to have no influence on either the accuracy or quality of written language development for 5-16 year olds. This lead to the fact conducted by Myhill (2005) that the rejection of grammar teaching was largely because

explicit grammatical knowledge was no longer considered a necessary precondition for students' ability to communicate. Indeed, Johnson (2009) argue that 80 years of research concluded that the study of formal grammar taught by traditional methods has very little or no effect on students' use of language.

2.2. Contextualized Implicit Grammar Teaching

Many researchers stated that grammar needs to be taught and used primarily in context (Dean, 2008; Sjolie, 2006; Weaver, 1996; Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Slagter, 2010). Teaching grammar in isolation doesn't improve writing, while teaching it in context holds more promise for long-term gains (Weaver, 2007). Teachers can make grammar useful by going beyond the idea of grammar as a list of rules to be memorized and trying to place grammar within context (Weaver, Bush, Anderson, & Bills, 2006; Hoffman, 2006) . In addition, Hinkel (2004) clarified that L2 writers can be exposed to text and discourse to learn from them and, thus, acquire L2 grammar naturally. Of the main advantages of looking at grammar in context is that it can reveal information about the use of particular structures, and the patterns the grammar structures enter into such as what proceeds them and what follows them in the discourse (Pérez-Llantada & Larsen-Freeman, 2007). Indeed context is very important for grammar teaching as Thornbury (2012) argues that in the

absence of context, it is very difficult to recover the intended meaning of a single word or phrase.

There are no large-scale studies which investigate the benefits of teaching grammar implicitly in context of songs for developing students' writing performance. Mashhady, Manzuri, and Lotfi (2011) conducted a study aimed at finding how much learning of grammatical points transfers through the context of reading tasks (discourse-based or context-based). The results indicated that the experimental group performed much better than the control group and grammar instruction is more effective if it is discourse-based and context-based than if it is sentence-based and context-free or than the use of explicit discussion of grammar rules.

There are also few studies that showed the effectiveness of implicit grammar instruction. This is evident in a study conducted by Gelderen (2006) in which he investigated two ways of approaching grammar teaching on primary and secondary graders: the learning of explicit rules and meta-linguistic knowledge about language on one hand and learning without awareness of linguistic structure (implicit learning) on the other hand. The article shows that implicit learning is more important for acquisition and for accurate and fluent mastery of linguistic structures. Furthermore, T. L. Johnson (2011) conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of metalinguistic grammar terminology (explicit instruction)

on the acquisition of past unreal conditional structures. The treatment group (n = 12) was instructed using metalinguistic terminology, while the control group (n = 9) was not (implicit instruction). After the second and fourth lesson, all students completed an impromptu writing task. The findings showed that the control group wrote significantly more correct past unreal conditionals in response to both prompts, while the treatment group could not apply the learnt grammar rules during the writing tasks. This finding suggests that implicit instruction may positively affect writing. In general, studies investigated contextualized implicit grammar instruction was very few because grammar has traditionally been taught and learned in sentence-based not text-based teaching (Thornbury, 2005) that is devoid of context.

Based on the previous literature, this study introduces the context of songs to learn grammar implicitly. This study tries to answer the following question: what impact does the use of context of songs in teaching grammar implicitly have on enhancing the writing of students at secondary stage?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Two classes of students (n=60) were randomly selected to involve in this study. All the students were native speakers of Arabic. As for

demographics, all the participants were in their first year, and their average age was 15.5. They were all females. The students represented one nationality. In terms of background information, baseline data about participants were collected teacher and student level. At teacher level, data were collected on the methods they followed in teaching grammar for these participants and it was clear that they were using the deductive method of teaching grammar. At student level, students were studying English for 8 years and their English writing skills did not meet the local standards for academic success.

3.2. Sampling Procedures

The sample was randomly assigned to two groups, the treatment group (Group 1=30 students,) and the control group (Group 2=30 students). To ensure that the two groups were matched (besides equating the age level, and the years of studying English), the researcher administered writing pretests on both the experimental group and the control one. T- Test was used to compare the mean scores of the subjects of the two groups obtained on the writing test. The t- value showed that both groups had almost the same level of experience as t- value (.407) is not significant at 0.05 level as shown in Table (1) below.

Table (1)

T. Value and means of scores obtained on the pretest of writing of both the experimental and control groups

Group	No.	Means	St. Deviation	D.f.	t. value	Sig. level
Pre Exp.	30	24.2333	3.71097	58	.407	.685
Pre. Con.	30	23.8333	3.89592			

3.3. Target structures

Grammatical structures included in the study were around the use of 3 English grammatical structures (cohesive devices, unreal conditional, and relative clause). The choice of the grammatical content was driven by a number of considerations. First and foremost, an attempt was made to select target language structures that were known to be universally problematic to students (i.e. to result in errors in their writing). Second, the structures were selected to represent grammatical features of the content of the English syllabus of those participants this year. Third, the structures were chosen to include both morphological and syntactic

features. Fourth, the structures were chosen to include the grammatical features that were being studied for the first time.

3.4. Instructional procedure

Six lesson plans were developed to be taught to the participants of experimental group. Three English language senior teachers were asked to review the lesson plans and make suggestions for improvements. The researcher was responsible of teaching grammar implicitly to the experimental group and another English teacher, who was expertise with the English syllabus of this grade, was responsible of teaching grammar explicitly to the control group. The researcher and teacher of the control group followed each lesson plan as written and were responsible for monitoring and checking off each part of the plans as they were completed.

Prior to implementing the intervention, 5 essay topics were suggested as questions in the writing test. They were generated from the students' English syllabus, a review of the specifications of the ministry of education of the writing exams used, and with teacher's instructional materials. The three English language senior teachers were asked to review the topics and evaluate each with respect to appropriateness, relevance, and difficulty. Of the topics reviewed, three were determined

unsuitable and therefore were not included in the study. Essays not used in the writing test were used during intervention as examples.

The two groups received two different treatments during six sessions of 45minutes each. These sessions were designed to take approximately six weeks of timetabled English lessons. One group (control group) was exposed to an explicit instruction of grammatical structures, direct explanation of the rule on the part of the teacher, having students work individually or in pairs composing sentences to extract and explain the use of rules, having the learners do the related exercises from their activity book. In other group (the experimental group), the same grammatical structures were impeded in the context of songs and the teacher did not provide an explicit instruction for these grammatical structures. The teacher followed the following steps. First, the students listened to the song. Second, they watched the video clip of the song with lyrics. Third, they were asked listen again to the song and to do an exercise by completing the missing words. Fourth, the teacher presented a guided writing. Fifth, they were asked to be divided into small groups to write about a topic (collaborative writing). The leader of each group read the topic to the teacher and the teacher corrects the grammatical errors implicitly through recasting or repeating with giving any explicit explanation. Finally, they were asked to write individually about given topics (independent writing).

3.5. Data analysis

The data presented in this article are from the writing test. First, the essays the students wrote were scored based on quality using an analytic scoring rubric. Both the researcher and the other teacher who taught the control group participated in scoring the essays. The inter-reliability of the author's rating was checked through randomly selecting the two essays written by 13 students (22.81%), and having them rated by another researcher. The average Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of inter-rating were all above or equal to .91; these are considered high reliability. The lead author and a second language teacher read the essays and scored them on a 4-point scale, with 1 representing the lowest quality indicator and 4 representing the highest quality. When the graders gave scores that were considered adjacent, an average of the two scores was recorded. If the graders gave scores that were discrepant, a third reader equally qualified was called in for a third read. His or her score was then averaged with the previous two scores. Discrepant scores occurred less than 2% of total reads. Second, the total scores of the current study were analyzed with SPSS version 17.0 via applying t-value for independent samples. The independent samples t-test was calculated between the posttest scores of writing in the two participant groups to show the effect of context of songs in teaching grammar implicitly to develop writing. There were two groups: the control group (group 1) and the experimental

group (group 2). Group 1 received explicit instruction of grammar (explanation of rules using metalinguistic terms) and Group 2 received implicit instruction of grammar (without awareness and without explicit explanation) through context of songs. The study was blind for the experimental group (group 2) as participants of this group were not told the research focus was grammar; instead they were told the focus was on the enhancement of writing.

4. Results

Results for the writing test

Table 1 shows the summary of descriptive analysis for the data related to the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study. It presents the means and standard deviations of the two groups on the writing test.

Table (1)

Descriptive statistics on the test of writing

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	30	32.833	2.715	.496
Control group	30	26.733	5.368	.980

As table (1) indicates, the mean of the Experimental group is higher than that of the control group. In addition, the amount of the standard

deviation was lower in the experimental group as compared to the control group of the study which indicates that the experimental group posttest scores are more homogenous than those of the control group.

An independent t-test was run to see if the mean difference between the two groups is significant or not. Table 2 shows the summary of t-test between the posttest scores of experimental and the control group of the study.

Table 2.

Mean comparison of the groups on the test of writing

Variance	t	Mean Difference	Sig. Level
Equal variances assumed	5.552	6.100	.000

As can be seen in Table 2, the result of t-test (5.552) at 58 degree of freedom is significant at $p < 0.01$. So it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. Such a result proves the effects of the context of songs in teaching grammar implicitly on enhancing learners' writing.

Table (3) below shows the results of the means and standard deviations and T-Value of the writing test calculated separately between

the pretest and the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study:

Table 3.

T-value of Means of Scores Obtained on the Pre- Post Writing Test of both the Experimental and Control Groups

Group	No.	Means	St. Deviation	D. f.	t-value	Sig. Level
Pre/ Experimental	30	24.233	3.71	29	9.880	.000
Post/ Experimental	30	32.833				
Pre/ Control	30	23.833	8.895	29	2.528	.017
Post/Control	30	26.733	5.368			

As can be seen in Table 3, the result of t-test between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental was 9.880 at 29 degree of freedom and significant at $p < 0.01$. So it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the experimental groups in the pretest and posttest. Furthermore, table 3 presents the result of t-test between the pretest and the posttest of the control group which was 2.528 at 29 degree of freedom and significant at $p < 0.05$. This means that there is little improvement in the control group.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of the study was to demonstrate that the context of songs could be used to teach grammar implicitly to enhance learners' writing. Regarding the questions posed in this study, a comparison of the performance of the control group (taught grammar explicitly) and experimental group (taught grammar implicitly) on the writing tests lends support to the claim that implicit grammar instruction is effective in teaching grammar and enhancing learners' writing. This is obvious in the T-test values (32.833) and the mean scores between experimental and control group in the pretest and posttest of writing favoring the experimental group. This study also lends supports to the claim that explicit instruction of grammar has a little effect on developing writing. In this study, learners have benefited in this respect from informal instruction of grammar in the L2. The results show that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the writing test.

The results also indicated that students who were taught under the implicit conditions generally outperformed those who had been exposed to explicit presentation of the grammar structures. Therefore, it can be concluded that using the context of songs in teaching grammar implicitly enhanced the writing performance of students.

6. Conclusion

This paper reported the findings of an investigation into the use of the context of songs in teaching grammar implicitly. The findings of this study suggested that using songs is an effective method in teaching grammar implicitly and enhancing learners' writing. Generally speaking, when learners are not informed of the grammatical rules, they feel more comfortable, self-confident and motivated in the classroom. They can use language smoothly and automatically. Thus, it would be wise for educators, material developers and course book designers to pay attention to this fact and take cautious measures in planning strategies in teaching grammar implicitly.

In general, many studies showed the bad effect of explicit instruction of grammar on improving learners' writing. Therefore, there is an obvious need for studies that can provide relatively separate measures of the effectiveness of implicit grammar instruction.

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