

The Use of L1 as a Consciousness-raising Tool in Teaching Grammar to Beginner and Upper-intermediate EFL Students

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Abstract—The notion of consciousness-raising came to vogue in second language teaching with the advent of Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1990) who strongly believed that learning does not occur unless the learner's consciousness is raised about what is intended to be learnt. With so many advocates (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Weschler, 1997; Phillipson, 1992; Burden, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999; Schweers, 1999), L1 has been proved to be a facilitative tool at the teacher's disposal to be used for different pedagogical purposes. Adopting "principle grammar teaching" model by Batstone and Ellis (2009), the present study aimed to examine the effect of utilizing L1 in an EFL context as a consciousness-raising tool on teaching grammar to the students at beginner and upper-intermediate levels. For each proficiency level, fifty participants were selected based on Oxford Placement. Twenty five participants in each proficiency level (the experimental group) received L1 treatment in teaching grammar, whereas in the control groups L1 was not used. The analysis of the data obtained from the post-test yielded contradictory results in different proficiency levels. The findings showed a marked improvement on the students' command of grammar at the beginner level; however, for the upper-intermediate level, no statistically significant difference was observed. In line with the literature, the results of this study revealed that the use of L1 as a consciousness-raising tool can be a facilitator in teaching grammar to beginner L2 learners. Conversely, students of upper-intermediate level did not benefit equally from L1 implementation in teaching grammar.

Index Terms—first language, consciousness-raising, teaching grammar

I. INTRODUCTION

A review of what literature has to offer on the role and significance of teaching grammar indicates how the view on grammar instruction has undergone dramatic changes with a thorough teaching of grammar on one side of a spectrum, and no teaching of grammar on the other side. Grammar translation method is considered as one of the first advocates of teaching grammar explicitly along with certain translation activities geared to the students' needs of attaining the presented structures (Thornbury, 1999; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). On the other hand, the advent of natural approach could be seen as a turning point in the teaching of grammar as it proposed a zero grammar approach, prioritizing a meaning-based strategy (Krashen, 1983). Accordingly, Krashen (1993) contends that grammar teaching has to be limited to certain simple and portable rules, such as 3rd person-s, that can be utilized to monitor the produced output. He grounds his arguments on the basis that most language learners only recognize and learn simple rules. Moreover, the learning of high level rules and applying them through monitoring are beyond the students' capability (Rod Ellis, 2006). However, there is a bulk of research concerning the students' ability to learn complex rules (Green and Hecht, 1992; Macrory and Stone, 2000; Hu, 2002). Unlike Krashen's proposition that explicit and implicit grammar knowledge is completely unconnected and inconvertible, Ellis (1993) claims that the conversion of explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge is possible if the language learner is ready for the acquisition of the targeted structure, and at the same time this conversion happens by priming some key acquisitional processes.

Conceding that SLA is mainly driven by what learners notice in the target language input and what they understand of the gravity of the noticed input to be, Schmidt (1990) introduced two pronounced processes, namely *noticing the gap* which refers to a conscious comparison learners make between the features they have observed in the input and the language they normally produce, and *noticing the hole* which is the students' awareness of the fact that the language they have at their disposal is insufficient to express the meaning they intend to share. As it is argued by Schmidt (1990) and Ellis (1993), noticing is a key acquisitional process which facilitates the students' processing of the meaning of a given structure through paying conscious attention to the input, which in turn increases input comprehensibility. To that end, many different strategies are devised by the teachers to ensure the students' comprehension of language

components. Many researchers, substantiating the pivotal role of L1 in the students' comprehension, argue in favor of L1 use in the second or foreign language classroom as a strong strategy to facilitate the process of learning and teaching (Patcher & Field, 2001; Cook, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Burden, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999; Schweers, 1999; Weschler, 1997; Auerbach, 1993; Phillipson, 1992; Harbord, 1992; Atkinson, 1987). Following the line of research investigating the contributing role of the students' L1, this study sets out to examine the effect of L1 use on the students' noticing the grammar input at two different proficiency levels, namely beginner and upper intermediate. To effectuate the intentions of the present study, the following research questions were found worthy of investigation.

1. Does using L1 have any effect on students' noticing of the new grammar input at beginner levels?
2. Does using L1 have any effect on students' noticing of the new grammar at upper-intermediate levels?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The History of L1*

A methodical study over the history of language learning and teaching presents an issue which is long-standing and of paramount importance to second and foreign language teachers in a variety of contexts, i.e. the teacher's use of first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom. The use of the students' mother tongue in the classroom has been differently looked upon since the dawn of the first teaching approaches. The Grammar-Translation Method should be considered as the strongest supporter of L1 use in the classroom, as the teacher did not need to be able to speak the target language; instruction was given in the students' native language, and translation was widely used as an exercise (Celce-Murcia, 2001). GTM was not met with universal acclaim and several objections were raised regarding the efficacy of such a method to fulfill the needs of a language classroom. Direct method as the pioneer of such an objection rejected any application for L1, and the students were not allowed to resort to their native language in the class. Likewise, Audio-Lingual method, pivoting on the principles of behavioral psychology, advocated that the way to acquire the language was through good habit formation, and that was the reason for the elimination of L1 use by the teacher (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

However, in the time of alternative approaches, a more moderate stance was taken towards L1 use and its integration in a systematic way as part of the teaching and learning process. For instance, as stated by Larsen-Freeman (2000), in the silent way, the students' native language can be used to give instructions when necessary. In addition, the native language is also used during the feedback sessions. She also mentions that as Community Language Learning gained dominance, the students' native language was used for meaning clarification and building a bridge from the known to the unknown in order to give the students a sense of security with regard to comprehension. With the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching, judicious use of L1 was accepted in order to ensure the students' comprehension (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

B. *On the Judicious Use of L1*

Regarding the judicious use of L1, literature is enriched with a great number of studies. Swain and Lapkin (2000), in search for the role of the first language in the task-based interactions in a French immersion context conducted a study on 22 pairs of grade 8 students who were assigned two different tasks, namely a dictogloss and a jigsaw. They found that despite the fact that approximately in about one quarter of the turns the students made use of some English, only about 12 percent of the L1 turns were off-task. As a result, they concluded that the use of L1 should neither be precluded in immersion classrooms, nor should it be actively encouraged since it may hinder second language learning. They also argued that "without students' L1 use, the assigned task may not have been done as effectively or perhaps it might not have been fulfilled at all" (p.268).

In agreement with findings of Swain and Lapkin (2000), a comparative study of students', teachers' and teacher educators' perceptions regarding the adequacy of cross-linguistic grammatical comparisons in the monolingual classroom was carried out by Ferrer (n.d). The findings suggested that judicious and systematic use of cross-linguistic referencing may present the teacher with opportunities for equipping the learners with explicit knowledge of the target language systems. This in turn may help students to notice the gap between the state of their inner grammar knowledge and the target language and ultimately aid acquisition.

C. *L1 as a Cognitive Tool*

By considering the studies conducted on the role of L1 in language classrooms, it is evident that the focus of research studies has shifted from substantiating the positive effect of L1 use to discovering the domains in which L1 can be incorporated. Scott and De la Fuente (2008) in a study on the use of L1 during consciousness-raising and form-focused tasks, reported that the exclusive incorporation of L2 during those types of tasks might impede cognitive requirements to accomplish the tasks which demand cognitive sources on the part of the students. Moreover, it hinders collaborative interactions and obstructs the use of meta-talk and learning strategies. Therefore, as they reported, it seems pointless to preclude the use of L1 by the students when L1 use is a natural and cognitive strategy.

Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo (2009) carried out an experimental study with the purpose of exploring the functions of the L1 in the oral interaction of Spanish EFL learners with low proficiency in the target language while engaged in three collaborative tasks. In the study, 24 (12 females, 12 males) undergraduate first year students were

selected. The participants were divided into three groups of four pairs. On the whole, there were 12 self-selected pairs to perform 3 different tasks, namely jigsaw, text reconstruction, and dictogloss. Finally, the discourse taken place among the pairs was transcribed for further analysis. The results showed that 1) EFL learners of low proficiency used L1 to manage the task and to discuss grammar and vocabulary and 2) the use of L1 brought forth the needed cognitive support for promoting attention and meaning comprehension. Moreover, by means of L1 the students could think and self-regulate faster and consequently transfer their cognitive, metacognitive, and social skills to the L2 more effortlessly. Taking into account the obtained findings from the above-mentioned research and several others (Cook, 2001; Burden, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999; Schweers, 1999; Weschler, 1997; Phillipson, 1992; Atkinson, 1987) the benefits of utilizing L1 and its facilitating role in learning L2 are evident.

D. Views on Grammar Teaching

In the same vein, the teaching of grammar has undergone fundamental changes due to the fact that the concept of grammar comprises numerous meanings and references. Moreover, this variety has caused the generation of a multitude of interpretations (Swan, 2005). Structuralists, considering language as a system consisting of structurally related elements (phonemes, morphemes, words, etc.), believed in the hierarchical structure of language where lower level elements constitute the building blocks of higher rank levels. On the other hand, for most Universal Grammarians, grammar is realized as the subconscious internal system that proficient language users are endowed with and language learners develop (Chomsky, 1965). In functional approaches, the notion of context played a critical role and grammar was regarded as a source for making meaning (Mystkowska & Pawlak, 2012). These two determining factors distinguished functional approached from the afore-mentioned theories. Similarly, Ellis (2009) asserted that a key aspect of acquisition of grammar for second language learners involves learning how to make appropriate connections between grammatical forms and meanings. Therefore, in retrospect, it is discernable that the views on grammar have led their way from sheer componential to a more holistic and meaning based concept.

E. Theoretical Framework

Batstone and Ellis (2009) argue that different theories of grammar generate various models of grammar teaching. Therefore, it is pointless to substantiate the superiority of one model due to having greater advantages over another one. As Batstone and Ellis rightly mention, “effective grammar must complement the process of L2 acquisition” (p.195). Therefore, the goal of a model of grammar teaching should be devising theoretical principles which enhance the possibility of recognizing and internalizing the presented grammatical points on the part of the students, and enable them to further their interlanguage. With this aim in mind, Batstone and Ellis (2009) devised the “principled grammar teaching” model, which concentrates on enabling the students to acquire new form-meaning mappings and to incorporate them with their form-meaning system. In this model, there are three interrelated principles, 1) *Given-to-New*, referring to the notion that “the process of making new form/function connections involves the exploitation of what the learners already know about the world – as part of their ‘given’ schematic knowledge” (p. 195), 2) *Awareness* which refers to “making learners aware of how a particular meaning is encoded by a particular grammatical form” (p. 197), and 3) the *real-operating conditions* principle which indicates that “learners need the opportunity to practice language in the same conditions that apply in real-life situations – in communication, where their primary focus is on message conveyance rather than on linguistic accuracy” (p.199). This model has been adopted as the theoretical framework of this study.

Based on this model, effective grammar teaching activities are characterized by two features. Firstly, they are required to be consciousness-raising in nature by retrieving the students’ relevant schematic knowledge about the grammatical structure to be learnt, and also facilitating by easing the process of incorporating the meanings the grammatical structures represent into the learners’ form/function system. Secondly, these activities need to provide the learners with real-life tasks to enable them to utilize grammatical structures for the purpose of communicating their intentions in real-life situations.

To our knowledge, thus far, almost all studies conducted in this area of enquiry are targeted to investigate the role of L1 as a cognitive tool on the part of the students. However, far too little attention has been paid to how EFL teachers can take advantage of L1 in teaching grammatical structures and whether students of different proficiency levels can equally benefit from L1 use in grammar instruction. More specifically, the present study seeks to investigate the potential role of student’s mother tongue in teaching grammar with regard to the first two principles of principled grammar teaching model, namely *Given-to-New* and *Awareness* in the beginner and intermediate levels.

III. SAMPLING

The participants in this study were one hundred EFL students studying at Navid English Language Center in Iran. The participants, both male and female (60 male, 40 female) ranged in age from 18 to 30 and all shared Farsi as their first language. Through the administration of Oxford Placement Test, 50 beginner level and 50 upper-intermediate level students were selected. For the purpose of the study, the participants in each level were put into two classes (control group n=25, experiment group=25).

IV. MATERIALS

A. Oxford Placement Test

To select homogeneous groups of students, the researchers administered Oxford Placement Test. The students' scores at the beginning of the instruction could assure the researchers that each group of the students in each level of language learning shared a similar command of English.

B. Touchstone Conversation Book Series

The classroom materials in this study were the Touchstone series published by the Cambridge University Press. Based on the students' proficiency, one of the course books was selected as the means of instruction for each level. For the students in the beginner level, Touchstone 1A and for the students in the upper-intermediate level, 4B were chosen. Touchstone series consist of different parts, namely conversations, vocabulary sections, grammar, etc. As for the scope of this study, the grammar sections were the focus of concentration.

C. Cambridge Test Booklet

To ensure the reliability and validity of the post-test, a 30-item grammar test from the Cambridge test booklet, developed and published by the Cambridge University Press (the publisher of the Touchstone conversation series) was selected in order to measure the participants' level of grammar intake after the administration of the treatment.

V. PROCEDURE

After selecting the participants and determining their proficiency levels through the administration of Oxford Placement Test, the instructor of the classes was briefed to teach the grammar sections of the books following the steps of the principled grammar model (Batstone & Ellis, 2009) to the students in both the experimental and control groups. It is well worth mentioning that the students in all of the classes were taught by the same instructor to avoid the probability of different methods of teaching which could have affected the results of the study. The classes were held twice a week for a 60 hour course. For the purpose of the study, only the students in the experimental groups were instructed using L1. In doing so, students' mother tongue was used for the schematic activation in the *Given-to-New* phase to explain how a given concept or function already known to the learners could be conveyed by a specific grammatical structure. Also, in the *Awareness* phase, the instructor fully explained to the learners how a given meaning could be encoded by a grammatical structure. However, during this time the control groups were only instructed in English. At the end of the course, the control group and the experimental group in each level were given a post-test to see how effective the use of L1 was on the students' command of new grammatical structures.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULT

The collected data through the post-test were utilized to answer the research questions. In doing so, two independent sample *t*-tests were run on the students' scores obtained from the post-tests in each level to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups, the result of which is presented in the following Tables.

TABLE 1:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND *T*-TEST RESULT OF THE GRAMMAR SCORES OF THE BEGINNER LEVEL

Groups	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	Df	sig
Control group	25	23.16	3.99	-2.65	48	.011
Experimental group	25	25.80	2.95			

Considering the data presented in Table 1, the difference between the means of the scores of the two groups is evident. According to the analysis of the significance of the difference between the mean scores by an independent sample *t*-test, there is a significant effect for the use of L1, $t(48) = 2.65$, $p < .05$, with the experimental group receiving higher scores than the control group.

The result of the second sample *t*-test on the scores of upper-intermediate students is presented in the following Table.

TABLE 2:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND *T*-TEST RESULT OF THE GRAMMAR SCORES OF THE UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Groups	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	df	sig
Control group	25	19.96	4.41	-1.85	48	.07
Experimental group	25	22.08	3.65			

According to the data presented in Table 2, although there is a difference between the two groups, the statistical analysis of the data does not show a significant effect for the use of L1, $t(48) = 1.85$, $p > .07$.

VII. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the potential role of L1 in teaching grammar at two different proficiency levels. To effectuate the intentions of the present study, the following questions were raised.

1. Does using L1 have any effect on students' command of grammar at beginner levels?
2. Does using L1 have any effect on students' command of grammar at upper-intermediate levels?

Regarding the first research question, according to Table 1 showing the result of the *t*-test on the grammar scores for the beginners, it can be concluded that L1 use as the medium of instruction for teaching grammar was quite effective. This finding is in line with that of other researchers (Scott & De la Fuente, 2008; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Ferrer, (n.d)) who investigated the role of L1 in teaching a second or foreign language. Moreover, the finding is supported by the same assumptions that the Skill-Acquisition Theory is based on. According to this theory, students should get involved in awareness-raising activities targeted at the aimed grammatical features (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). By the same token, Vygotskian socio-cultural theory requires the urge for forming an explicit understanding of a grammatical feature prior to use (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). In addition, according to the concept based instruction proposed by Lantolf and Johnson (2007), the instruction has to initially establish a conceptual understanding of a form-function mapping and then provide the students with a real operating condition. The present study finds the use of L1 to be effective as a tool to set the stage for the teaching of grammatical structure to help the low proficiency students' processing of form-meaning mapping. However, the same cannot be held true for the students with a higher level of proficiency. As Table 2 shows, although the mean score for the experimental group is higher than that of the control group, there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups. It can therefore be concluded that although the use of the students' mother tongue as a consciousness-raising tool for the instruction of grammar was effective for the beginners, the upper-intermediate learners did not benefit equally from the same method of teaching.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

To date, research into the incorporation of L1 use in the teaching grammar has had a wealth of publications and findings to offer (Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Ferrer, (n.d); Scott & De la Fuente, 2008). In fact, in recent years there has been an increasing interest into discovering the facilitative roles that students' mother tongue could play in the instruction of language structures. In line with the previous research, the results of this study reached the conclusion that the use of L1 as a consciousness-raising tool can be a facilitator in second language classrooms. This is mostly prominent in lower levels, since students' command of language is at its early stage and full comprehension of the material can significantly assist their grammar acquisition. If students have little or no knowledge of the target language, L1 can play a major role as a consciousness-raising tool to introduce new grammatical structures and the major differences between L1 and L2 grammatical characteristics. As many would agree (Cook, 2001; Weschler, 1997; Phillipson, 1992; Burden, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999; Schweers, 1999; Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993; Patcher & Field, 2001; Harbord, 1992; Swain & Lapkin, 2000), judicious use of L1 in upper levels can also be a motivating and facilitating factor in the process of teaching and learning. Following Thornbury (1999), teaching grammar should be efficient (in terms of time and energy, among other things). In the same line, the findings of this study suggest that L1 use contributes to the efficiency of teaching grammar in lower levels.

Among many pedagogical implications suggested in previous studies (Atkinson, 1987; Phillipson, 1992; Cook, 2001; Schweers, 1999) the findings of this study can indeed be helpful for teachers, as some would still show hesitations when asked about the use of L1 in the classroom. Moreover, the findings have implications for teacher trainers as they can raise teachers' awareness about the applicability of the students' mother tongue in beginner levels, so as to efficiently and economically (Thornbury, 1999) facilitate the process of grammar instruction on the part of the teacher and grammar acquisition of the part of the student. In other words, teacher trainers can instruct the teachers on the judicious use of L1 with respect to the appropriate pedagogical activity (i.e. grammar instruction) and the appropriate proficiency level (beginner level).

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