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METALANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR LEARNING OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

Abstract:

Metalanguage did not receive a lot of attention in communicative language teaching (CLT), which greatly focused on fluency and communicative competence. Metalanguage has remained an untouched area in second language studies. This research was conducted on Iranian EFL learners in Tehran Institute of Technology (The West Branch) to examine the effect of teachers' metalanguage on learners' learning of grammatical points across proficiency levels. In each level of elementary and intermediate, two groups were chosen, an experimental and a control group. In the experimental group, the teachers used metalanguage to teach grammar points. However, in control group the teachers used examples to teach grammar points. A questionnaire was administered to the two groups to collect data. The result indicated that metalanguage had impacted on the learners' learning of grammatical points. The effect was more obvious with regard to the learning of grammatical points where the intermediate learners remarkably did better than the elementary ones.

Keywords:

Metalanguage, Metalinguistic terminology, Teacher Talk, Grammar Learning, Interaction

Introduction

In English language teaching, implicit/explicit instruction has an important role. Ellis (2005) claims that implicit knowledge is unconscious and “is available for use in rapid, fluent communication”, and it “can only be verbalized if it is made explicit” (p. 36). On the other hand, Ellis (2004) points out that “explicit knowledge is the declarative and often anomalous knowledge of the phonological, lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and socio-critical features of an L2 together with the metalanguage for labelling this knowledge” (cited in Ellis, 2005, p. 36).

Explicit knowledge has two different sides that are distinguished from each other. According to Ellis (2005), there is a distinction “between explicit knowledge as analyzed knowledge and as metalingual explanation. The former entails a conscious awareness of how a structural feature works while the later consists of knowledge of grammatical metalanguage and the ability to understand explanations of rules” (p. 36). In addition, Ellis (2005) suggests that “learning necessarily commences with an explicit representation of linguistic forms, which are then developed through implicit learning. He suggests that teaching grammar early is valuable because it provides a basis for the real learning that follows.” (Cited in Ellis, 2006, p. 90).

Most researchers assume that explicit instruction types are more superior to implicit instruction types. Ellis (2001) points out that “the most explicit type of instructional treatment is typically classified as focus-on-forms, during which, as the label implies, teachers and learners intensively focus on the formal aspect of language” (cited in Roehr, 2004, p. 4). Roehr (2004) claims that learners learn grammar rules either directly by explicit instruction of rules or through discovering the rules, while students exposure with examples they will encourage to discover the grammar rules (p. 4). He also believes that “as focus-on-forms instruction relies on an explicit approach, pedagogical grammar and the metalinguistic terminology used to describe its categories and relations are an inherent part of the teaching and learning process” (p. 4).

Here the question is whether metalanguage and metalinguistic terminology are equal? On the basis of the definitions about metalanguage, metalanguage is the use of language to talk about language and according to Berry (2014), “metalanguage is a much broader linguistic concept, involving all of the language that is used to talk about language. So, for example, when someone says ‘I don’t like the way he said that’, this is metalanguage, but it contains not a single term.” (p. 24).

Purpose of the Study

The present research was an attempt to make a connection between metalanguage and learners’ learning of grammar. In other words, the researcher intended to examine whether teachers’ metalanguage had any impact on the learner’s learning of the grammar points.

Research Question

On the basis of the purpose already illustrated, the research question of the present study can be stated as follows:

Does metalanguage have any impact on grammar learning of Iranian EFL learners of different levels?

Research Hypothesis

The research hypotheses of the present study also can be stated as follows:

Metalanguage does not make a statistically significant difference in the grammar learning of Iranian EFL learners of different levels.

Literature Review

Interaction and teacher talk

As mentioned before teacher talk has an important role in teaching, classroom activities and the relationship between students and teachers. Therefore interaction between students and teachers is related to teacher talk. Yanfen and Yuqin (2010) point out that "Interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas, between two or more people" (p.77). They believe that interaction is a crucial concept that teachers may use to teach English. Furthermore, when the students are talking with their teacher, they can use their language store and increase the amount of it during interaction. Long (1996, cited in Yanfen and Yuqin, 2010) claims that "interaction facilitates acquisition because of the conversational and linguistic modifications that occur in such discourse and that provide learners with the input they need. Through the interaction, learners have opportunities to understand and use the language that was incomprehensible." moreover, they could have the chance of receiving more input and so more output. (p. 77)

The role of teacher talk in L2 learning

Teacher talk has an important role in interactions between teachers and learners. Yanfen and Yuqin (2010) believe that "The success of teaching depends to a large extent on the way teachers talk and interactions that occur between teachers and students. And the happening of interaction is affected directly by ways of teacher talk" (p. 76).

In addition, they point out that "teacher talk plays a very important role in the teaching process as an interactive device. For teachers would employ a lot of interactive devices such as repetition, prompting, prodding, and expansions, which would be evoking more interactions between teachers and student" (p. 77).

Metalanguage

Metalanguage and teacher talk are related to each other and metalanguage is a sub-variety of teacher talk. Effective teacher talk helps students to learn English and comprehend grammar; therefore, the use of metalanguage by the teacher may be beneficial for learners' comprehension and learning. According to Berry (2010, cited in Schleppegrell, 2012) "metalanguage can be conceived of as both *thing* (terminology) and *process* (talk about language)" (p. 156).

Importance of metalanguage

By using teachers' metalanguage not only do the students learn how to communicate but also they can explain and analyze the language that helps them to have more accuracy, self-correction and proficiency. Recently there are some studies indicating the importance of metalanguage in language learning and students' proficiency. Wach (2007) points out that nowadays "more and more teachers and researchers notice that the practice of communicative language teaching may not contribute significantly to the development of the linguistic competence" (p. 1).

The ability to use metalanguage is an important skill that teachers need to learn. Hu (2010, cited in Ellis, 2012) points out four reasons for the importance of knowing and using metalanguage by the teachers:

- 1) many learners possess a rich metalinguistic knowledge and teachers need to be able to tap into this,
- 2) explicit discussion of language is advantageous at times, even incommunicative lessons,
- 3) the use of metalanguage allows for 'explanatory precision', and
- 4) metalanguage can help learners make the link between what they already know and new knowledge. (p. 132)

Teachers can use metalanguage for teaching grammar, vocabulary or writing. However, the focus of the present study is on the use of metalanguage for teaching grammar. Ellis (2012) claims that "teachers can make effective use of metalanguage in communicative-type lessons as well as more traditional, form-focused lessons" (p. 132).

Metalanguage and L2 learning

Metalanguage is a useful technique for teaching that most of the teachers use it in the class. Shakoor, Rehman and Raees (2013) claim that "the use of metalanguage in teaching English as a second language is like a toolkit. Teachers use this toolkit in teaching L2 to make the lesson easy and understandable for the learners. The importance of metalanguage in L2 cannot be denied" (p. 63).

Metalinguage has an important role in grammar instruction. It helps learners to have a conscious attention to the language, explore and discover it. Ellis (2004, cited in Shakoor, Rehman and Raees, 2013) argues that "Access to metalinguage can sharpen a learner's understanding of the structure of the target language and lead to verbalizable, analyzed knowledge, which according to Bialystok (1990) and Schmidt (1990) constitutes the highest level of consciousness of language." So he believes that metalinguage has a crucial role in L2 foundation and students may achieve their aims in L2 learning. Moreover, for improving students' confidence, the use of metalinguage is essential. (p. 64)

Participants

Participants were learning English in two levels: Elementary and intermediate. The participants of this study were selected from Tehran Institute of Technology. The researcher administered the Oxford Placement Test to four intact classes of elementary and the intermediate to guarantee their homogeneity with regard to their proficiency levels. The experimental group and the control group of the elementary level each included twelve learners, that came to 24 participants altogether. On the other hand, the experimental and the control group of the intermediate level was each composed of thirteen participants, which came to 26 participants.

Instruments

The following instruments were used in order to collect the required data for this research:

- a. **Oxford Quick Placement Test:** It is a placement test constructed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The test include two part. The first part is composed of 40 items which all the students in the two groups, that is the elementary and intermediate groups, were asked to answer. However, only the learners in the intermediate level were required to answer the next twenty questions which were from 41 to 60.
- b. **Questionnaire:** A questionnaire consisting of two parts were used to collect data. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of two examples of the grammar structure with an underlined word or phrase in each. Following the two sentences, there were 3 questions that the learners were asked to answer in their native language.
- c. **Voice Recording:** The teacher's voice was recorded not as a tool to collect data, but to make sure that he used metalinguage.

Procedure

Two levels of elementary and intermediate were selected for the present research. In each level, there were one control and one experimental group. The first step was to administer the Oxford Quick Placement test in order to guarantee the homogeneity of the learners. The teacher in elementary level taught 'articles' (a/an vs the) using only metalanguage in the experimental group and only examples in the control group. All the students in this level had already learned the articles 'a' and 'an'; however, they were going to learn the article 'the' and distinguish it from 'a/an'.

In the intermediate group, the teacher was requested to teach 'so and such' using only metalanguage in the experimental group and only examples in the control group. Then the researcher handed the questionnaires to check learners' learning.

Data Analysis

A Two-way multivariate ANOVA (2-way MANOVA) was run to answer this research question. Group (effect of metalanguage) and level of proficiency were considered as the two independent variable (Between-Subjects factors).

Result and Discussion

The research question of the present study sought to find out whether metalanguage has any impact on learning of Iranian EFL learners of different levels. Independent samples *t*-test was used to answer this research question. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the experimental and control learning scores before discussing the results of independent samples *t*-test. As it can be seen in Table 1, in elementary level, mean of learning for experimental group ($\bar{x} = 8.83$, $SD = 3.51$) is greatly larger than control group ($\bar{x} = 5.00$, $SD = 4.04$). In addition, Table 1 shows that, in intermediate level, mean of learning for experimental group ($\bar{x} = 11.46$, $SD = 2.14$) is noticeably higher than control group ($\bar{x} = 6.38$, $SD = 3.50$).

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for Two Groups' Learning Scores (Elementary & Intermediate)

Level	Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Elementary	Experimental	12	8.83	3.512	-.272	-.149
	Control	12	5.00	4.045	.504	-.997
Intermediate	Experimental	13	11.46	2.145	-.536	-.165

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Elementary	Experimental	12	8.83	3.512	-.272	-.149
	Control	12	5.00	4.045	.504	-.997
Intermediate	Experimental	13	11.46	2.145	-.536	-.165
	Control	13	6.38	3.501	-.104	-.674

The results of independent samples *t*-test that was used to compare the experimental and control groups' learning scores in elementary and intermediate levels are laid out in Table 2 below. Table 2 shows that we enjoy the assumption of equality of variances since the Sig. associated with Levene's test is more than .05 in the two levels.

Table 2.

Independent Samples T-test for Two Groups' Learning Scores (Elementary & Intermediate)

Level	Levene's Test for Variances			T-test for Means			
	Factor	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Elementary	Equal variances assumed	.566	.460	2.479	22	.021	3.833
Intermediate	Equal variances assumed	3.672	.067	4.458	24	.000	5.077

T-test results (Table 2) shows that there is a statistically significant difference in learning scores for experimental ($\bar{x} = 8.83$) and control ($\bar{x} = 5.00$) groups in elementary level, ($t(22) = 2.47$, $p = .02$, $p < .05$, in which the *t*-observed (2.47) is above the *t*-critical (2.02). Consequently, we can claim metalanguage develops learning of Iranian elementary EFL learners.

In the same way, based on Table 2, independent samples *t*-test found a statistically significant difference in learning scores for experimental ($\bar{x} = 11.46$) and

control ($\bar{x} = 6.38$) groups in intermediate level, $t(24) = 4.45$, $p = .000$, $p < .05$, in which the t -observed (4.45) is higher than the t critical (2.02). As a result, we can declare that metalanguage improves learning of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Figure 1 graphically demonstrates the results. As Figure 1 displays, in both elementary and intermediate levels, the students in the experimental group have surpassed those in the control group regarding learning.

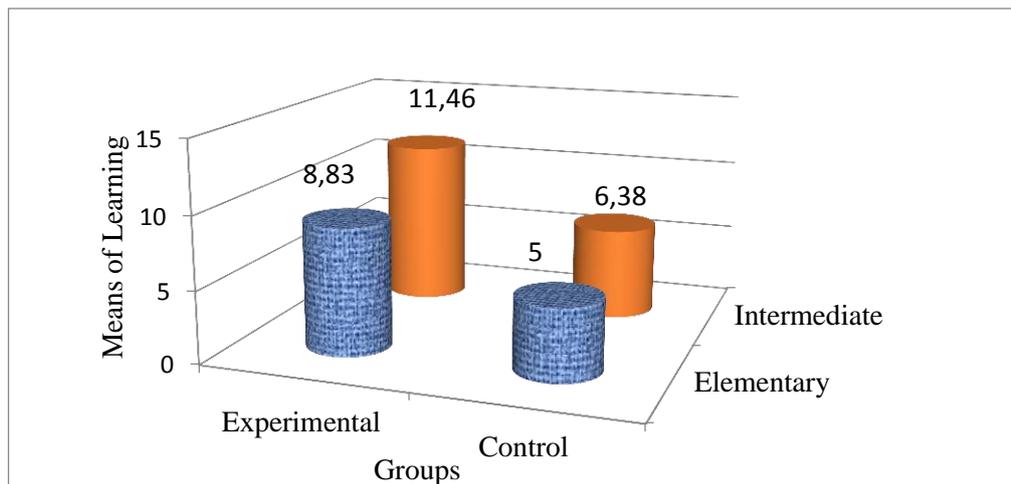


Figure 1. Two groups' learning means in elementary and intermediate levels

Discussion

As shown in the previous section, all the hypothesis of the current research has been rejected. However the grammar learning mean of the intermediate level is considerably more than the elementary level.

Not a lot of studies have been done on the relationship between teachers' metalanguage and learner's comprehension, learning, and noticing of grammar points. However, a comparison and a contrast are made between the findings of this study and those of others.

The findings of this research are in contrast with those of the research done by Arghamiri and Sadighi (2013) claim that "as the students' proficiency level increases, their understanding of the knowledge about language also increases. In their study, they investigated learners' metalanguage, but in the current research teacher's metalanguage was the focus of research.

The findings of this study are in line with Roehr (2008) and Elder (2009) who found positive correlations between metalinguistic knowledge and proficiency test results in more advanced learners, and found significant correlations between students' proficiency test scores and metalinguistic knowledge" (p. 8). In the present study, all the learners in the intermediate level outperformed those in the elementary level.

There was a remarkable difference in the grammar learning where the intermediate learners were better.

Furthermore, the results of the present research correspond to those found by Tokunaga who found that there was a strong relationship between proficiency levels and metalanguage, something which was demonstrated in the current study.

The present research does not correspond to the finding of research by Hu and Ellis (1998). Again here they conducted their study on learner' metalanguage. However, their study proved that the use of metalanguage affected the test takers' performance on proficiency tests.

Overall, all the studies done so far put the stamp of approval on the use of metalanguage as an effective tool in second language development. But most studies have concentrated on learner's use of metalanguage rather than the teacher's.

Conclusion

Regarding the research hypothesis, the data analysis run through MAOVA found significant differences between the target and control groups on *grammar learning* ($F(1, 46) = 21.99, p = .000, p < .05, \text{Partial } \eta^2 = .32$ representing a large effect size); therefore, the null hypothesis that 'Metalanguage does not have any impact on grammar learning of Iranian EFL learners of different levels'; as a result, with high level of confidence, it can be claimed that metalanguage influences grammar learning of Iranian EFL learners of different levels.

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