Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks and Intermediate Learners' Achievement and Perceptions

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While there is lots of empirical evidence showing that grammar consciousness raising tasks (GCRTs) have an edge over the traditional modes of grammar instruction, there is very little qualitative evidence reflecting learners' perceptions of externally imposed educational changes including GCRTs. To extrapolate the previous findings and fill in this gap, this study aims to: (1) test the alleged superiority of GCRTs in grammar instruction and (2) explore learners' perceptions of learning grammar through GCRTs. To this end, this study used a mixed-method design including a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. The former dimension aimed at testing the superiority of GCRTs on a random sample of intermediate learners from Simin language school in Karaj, Iran through the robust Solomon-four-group design and the latter dimension aimed at collecting and analyzing qualitative interview data on learners' perceptions of GCRTs. The quantitative results clearly showed that learners being taught through GCRTs significantly outperformed those instructed through the traditional mode of grammar instruction and the qualitative analysis of learners' perspectives showed that the participants had a positive perception of GCRTs and this positive perception was rooted in GCRTs' potential to: (1) facilitate the internalization of grammar and (2) involve learners in discovery learning. The findings have clear implications for syllabus designers and practitioners.

Keywords: consciousness-raising tasks, discovery learning, willingness to learn, traditional approach

Introduction

The researchers' negative experience of learning grammar through the deductive approach which focused on detailed explanation of rules and exception hunting coupled with their awareness of the facilitative role of GCRTs in enabling learners to internalize grammar and raise their awareness of language forms motivated them to undertake this mixed-method study which aims at extrapolating the previous quantitative studies related to GCRTs and add to the body of knowledge of presenting grammar by exploring and conceptualizing intermediate EFL learners' perception of GCRTs. The study is significant to the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) since unlike the hypotetico-deductive mode of inquiry which unidirectionally imposes research findings on classroom practice and take learners as the consumers of top-down educational reform, this study makes a case in the opposite direction by conceptualizing learners' perceptions of GCRTs and giving voice to the oft-silent language learners in the decision-making process. The facilitative role of GCRTs might have been repeatedly tested through scientific experimentation. Nonetheless, they cannot be taken as a recipe for practice until learners' positive perception of GCRTs would have been explored through qualitative

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data-driven studies, which complement the findings of theory-first inquires.

Review of Related Literature

Since grammar is an integral part of language learning, there have been some debates on how grammar should be taught in the classroom. Crivosand Luchini (2012) argued that the emphasis has moved from the teacher's task in teaching grammar towards the learner's task in discovering, learning, and applying it to an effective use, with a shift from what grammar is to how it can be taught to students. Larsen Freeman (2003) asserted that learning about the form of the language is important for students and that deductive application of grammar rules is considered as a useful pedagogical technique. However, enabling learners to notice the linguistic feature through grammar consciousness-raising (CR) has proved to be more effective than an explicit presentation of rules through the deductive approach.

Ellis (1997) has defined consciousness-raising tasks as:

> Activities by which learners are provided with L_2 data in some form and are required to perform some operation with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property or properties of the target language. (p. 160)

CR is a device for facilitating the grammar knowledge which is required for communication. Ellis (2002) believes that presenting CR tasks involves: (1) isolating a specific feature for focused attention; (2) providing the learners with data which illustrate the target feature and an explicit rule describing or explaining the feature; (3) involving learners in an intellectual effort to understand the target feature; (4) clarifying misunderstandings or misconceptions in the form of data, description or explanation; and (5) encouraging learners to articulate the rule describing the grammatical structure.

It is believed that CR tasks lead learners to acquire the grammar of the target language by providing them with data and by developing the learners' explicit knowledge of its grammar and this explicit knowledge aids learners in noticing and comparing. As McNicoll and Lee suggest (2011), CR plays an important role in L2 development and therefore, learners are prepared for the integration of new linguistic feature. According to Ellis (2002) integration is the last step in the three-step process of L2 development: (1) noticing, i.e., the learner becomes consciously aware of a linguistic feature; (2) comparing, i.e., the learner compares his or her new understanding of the feature with his or her mental grammar and identifies the gap between them; and (3) integrating, i.e., the learner integrates the new feature into her or his mental grammar. In short, CR tasks lead to cognitive restructuring or remapping of the mental grammar. As Brown (2007) asserted learning occurs through a process of relating new ideas or items to already existing cognitive concepts and reshaping and enlarging them through subsumption. This process can be accelerated by learners' willingness to learn, i.e., the condition in which the learner is highly enthusiastic to learn. Willingness to learn can be characterized by someone who shows a positive "can do" attitude; and enjoyment of the task in hand (Martin & Hughes, 2009).

Though promising in theory, CR cannot be suggested for practice unless there is enough empirical evidence supporting its facilitative role in language development. To investigate the influence of grammar consciousness-raising tasks on EFL learners' performance, Amirian and Sadeghi (2012) exposed the control group to pattern drill practice and the experimental group to grammatical consciousness-raising tasks and found that the experimental group outperformed the control group. In another study, Doan Dang (2012) compared the differential effects of CR and the deductive approach under experimental conditions. In the control group learners received grammar rules deductively while the experimental group first read or listened to a passage and

then interacted with the teacher based on the presented grammar rules in the context to enable learners to notice the grammatical structure. The results revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the analysis of grammar rules and the oral proficiency. In a pre-experimental static group design, Sugiharto (2006) compared students' performance in pre-test and post-test and found that consciousness-raising activities produce a significant difference in learners' internalization and use of present tense. In another experiment Moradkhan and Sohrabian (2009) exposed the experimental group to grammatical consciousness-raising activities to reinforce the grammar points and the control group practiced the grammar through the use of communicative techniques. A comparison of learners' performance in the post test showed that the experimental group performed better than the control group.

As the review clearly shows there is ample evidence which verify the hypothesis that learners exposed to CR mode of presenting grammar significantly outperform those exposed to other forms of grammar instruction. However, very little is known about learners' willingness to learn grammar through CR; hence, taking this gap into account, learners' willingness to learn grammar through CR should also be investigated through a qualitative mode of inquiry.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This mixed method study aims at: (1) comparing the differential effect of GCRTs under controlled experimental conditions and (2) exploring why learners prefer GCRTs mode of instruction in learning grammar through open-ended qualitative interviews. More specifically, the research hypothesis, "Students being exposed to GCRTs significantly outperform those exposed to the traditional mode of grammar instruction", directs the quantitative dimension while the research question, "What is your perception of GCRTs?" directs the qualitative dimension.

This study is significant in that the qualitative findings will shed some lights on the quantitative results. While the quantitative findings have descriptive power, they lack explanatory power since they do not explain why learners prefer GCRTs. Moreover, the study is significant in that it gives voice to the learners who are often taken as the consumer end of educational changes. While rigorous research designs and solid statistical analysis may provide the field with generalizable findings which may have both internal and external validity, they deprive the field from learners' perceptions of externally imposed instructional innovations. This study offers an edge over the reviewed studies since it juxtaposes learners' perceptions of GCRTs with quantitative evidence and as such presents the field with findings which have both descriptive and explanatory power.

Research Method

Mixed Method Design

The study aims at: (1) testing the effect of GCRTs under experimental conditions and (2) explore learner's perceptions of learning grammar through GCRTs. To this end, the study uses a quantitative and qualitative design respectively. In what follows the researchers first elaborate the quantitative experimental design to show that the findings have acceptable internal and external validity and then they clearly explain how they elicited students' perceptions of GCRTs and how the collected interview data were coded and conceptualized.

Experimental Design

Sampling procedure and participants. From the total population of intermediate female learners learning English as a foreign language in Simin private language school in Karaj, Iran, 40 learners aging

between 15 and 18 were randomly selected through systematic random selection. They were then randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions. Although random assignment ensures an even distribution of any possible pre-existing differences between the two groups, they were also given a pre-test to ensure that there was no significant difference between the two groups prior to treatment.

Instrumentation. This study used two maximally similar tests, i.e., parallel tests of grammar for pre-test and post-test. The tests were found to be reliable and valid. The former was established through split-half method and the latter was established by ensuring that the test has syllabus-based validity, i.e., one-to-one correspondence between grammar items presented in the test and the grammar items presented in the syllabus. In this study the syllabus covered the grammatical structures presented in chapter one, four, and twelve of the New Interchange 4th edition, the second student's book. The grammatical points included past tense, simple past versus present perfect and past continuous.

Qualitative dimension. The qualitative dimension was conducted on participants who were exposed to GCRTs. Since the other participants had not experience of GCRTs, they were eliminated from the qualitative inquiry. To explore learners' perceptions of GCRTs and their willingness to learn grammar through GCRTs, this study collected interview data through the general question, "What is your perception of GCRTs?" If they had a positive perception of learning grammar through GCRTs, they were then asked to explain why their preferred GCRTs tasks in learning grammar.

Data Collection and Analysis

Having ensured their informed consent, the researchers audio-taped learners' perceptions and transcribed them verbatim. In the process of open-ended interviews, the researcher encouraged the learners to clarify their perspectives if they were vague. The data were then read many times over to identify recurrent themes. If a theme was not clear or there were not sufficient data to substantiate it, the learners were interviewed on that theme. Once the researchers found that learners' perspectives reached a point of redundancy, they stopped data collection. To establish credibility of the findings, the final report of the qualitative findings were shown to the participants, modified and finally verified through member checking.

Quantitative Results

This study has used Solomon four-group design to test the null hypothesis, "There is no significant difference between the performance of learners who were exposed to GCRTs and those who were exposed to the traditional mode of grammar instruction". According to Ary, Cheser, Sorenson, and Razavieh (2010), "solomon four-group design has two pretested groups and two without a pretest; one of the pretested groups and one of the non-pretested groups receive the experimental treatment, and then all four groups take the posttest" (p. 328). Along these lines, a pre-test was administered to the experimental group and the first control group. The descriptive statistic of the learners' performance in the pre test is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	St. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control 1	20	12.29	0.82	0.29
Experimental	20	12.22	0.84	0.29

As shown in Table 1, the performance of the two groups was almost similar. However, a t-test was run to compare the mean score of the experimental group (M = 12.22, SD = 0.84) and the first control group (M = 12.29, SD = 0.82) to make sure that they did not differ significantly prior to the treatment. Table 2 schematically presents the results of the t-test.

Table 2

Comparing Means of Pre-test (Levene's Test for Equality of Variances T-Test for Equality of Means)

	Sig.	t	df	F	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean df	Std. Error df
Score equal Variances Assumed	0.120	0.55	0.14	38	0.34	0.05	0.50
Equal Variances Not assumed	0.14	37.99	0.34	0.05	0.50		

As shown in Table 2, the p-value, i.e., p = 0.55 is bigger than the level of significance; hence, prior to the treatment the two groups were not significantly different. After treatment, a post-test was administered and the results were analyzed by one way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to compare within group variance, the error term, with between group variance. Table 3 shows the results of ANOVA.

Table 3

Summary of the Analysis of Variance of the Four Groups

Source of variance	SS	df	MS	F	Sig
Between groups	37.4	3	12.46	4.43	.000
Within groups	101.4	76	2.81		
Total	138.8	89			

Although the researchers observed a difference in the performance of the four groups randomly chosen and randomly assigned to four groups, they related the between group difference in the post test to chance factors and formulated the null hypothesis as follows: "There is no significant difference between the performance of learners who were exposed to GCRTs and those who were exposed to the traditional mode of grammar instruction". To test this null hypothesis they used one-way ANOVA test of significance. Table 3 schematically represents the results of analysis. As shown in Table 3, the F ratio of 4.43 shows that between-group variance is much higher than within-group variation. Furthermore since the p-value (p = .000) is much smaller that the predetermined level of significance (P < 0.05), the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis and the researchers safely conclude that learners exposed to GCRTs significantly outperform those exposed to the traditional mode of grammar instruction.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative analysis of learners' perspectives concerning GCRTs revealed that this approach to grammar instruction leads to a positive perception of learning grammar. That is, while prior to experiment, the participants had a negative perception of learning grammar, after the experimental treatment they had a positive perception of learning grammar and consequently more willing to learn grammar. Further analysis showed that this positive perception, among other things, is deeply rooted in two features of GCRTs: (1) facilitating the internalization of grammar and (2) involving learners in discovery learning. What follows aims at substantiating these two features by grounding them in learners' perspectives.

Facilitating the internalization of grammar. Prior to this experiment the learners were not familiar with grammar consciousness raising tasks. Having been exposed to the traditional forms of grammar instruction, they found learning grammar quite daunting and difficult. When they became familiar with GCRTs during this experiment, they had a positive perception of grammar and their perception was rooted in the facilitative role of GCRTs. Reiterating the facilitative role of GCRTs, Tina says:

> I can't believe that I've learnt the tenses, finally I've made it. Previously I had lots of difficulties for learning grammar rules, but now I can discover the rules without having any serious problem.

Prior to the experiment the learners hated learning grammar since they found it difficult. In this approach, however, learners had no difficulty in internalizing grammar. Complaining about the difficulties she faced in learning grammar Nazanin explains:

> Grammar rules used to be too difficult and complex to learn. I had to memorize them but the problem was that I always forgot what l learned after a little while. I hated taking part in the class when the teacher taught grammar and I preferred to spend more time on listening than waste my time learning something which was difficult to understand. Now that I know how to learn and use grammar I put my heart in it and try to develop my knowledge of rules.

Involving learners in discovery learning. While previously learners were bombarded with detailed explanations of grammatical rules, in this approach, learners were exposed to conditions and examples which enabled them to notice regularities and discover rules on their own and this improved their willingness to learn grammar. Expressing how the new approach changed her perception of learning grammar, Samira explains:

> I had always thought that grammar rules are so disgusting but now I've changed my mind. The new technique is really motivating because we can discover the rules by ourselves.

GCRTs tasks gave the learners a basis for comparison. The found shift away from the passive receiver of facts about language towards an active participant who is encouraged to discover rules, improved the learners willingness to engage themselves in tasks that aimed at developing their mastery over form. Comparing her role in the previous classes with her role during GCRTs tasks, Niloufar states:

> We used to write down the rules and memorize them, but the newly used technique helped us to discover the rules by ourselves, we've become more active and more willing to participate in this process because not only we are learning the rules but also we can teach them to ourselves by making some discoveries.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The purpose of this mixed-method study was twofold: (1) to test the effect of GCRTs under controlled experimental conditions using the Solomon four-group design and (2) explore learners' perceptions of GCRTs. The quantitative findings have external and internal validity. The former was guaranteed through random selection and random assignment of the participants and the latter was ensured through the rigorous Solomon four-group design, which is the most robust experimental design. Similarly the qualitative findings show rigor and credibility since the final conceptualization of learners' perceptions of GCRTs were verified through member checking.

Since the quantitative results clearly show that learners who were exposed to GCRTs significantly outperformed those who were exposed to the traditional mode of presenting grammar and due to the fact that learners have a positive perception of GCRTS, it is suggested that:

(1) Syllabus designers and materials developers make use of GCRTs in presenting grammar;

(2) Practitioners make room for GCRTs in their presenting grammar to EFL learners;

(3) Practitioners consider language learners as active participants who can discover grammar rules rather than consider them as empty vessels waiting to be filled with useless facts about English grammar.

Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to explore and investigate the effect of consciousness-raising tasks on Iranian intermediate EFL learners. It also took learners' willingness to learn the grammatical rules into account. The findings indicated that GCRTs are more in comparison to pattern practice drills. Since GCRTs can motivate learners for learning grammar, they are suggested as an alternative to traditional grammar teaching and therefore, syllabus designers and practitioners are encouraged to use them as an effective technique in prompting learners' knowledge and autonomy.

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