

The Effect of Grammar-Oriented Assignments as an Extra-Curricular Activity on Intermediate EFL Learners' Writing Performances

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Abstract – The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of grammar-oriented assignments as an extra-curricular activity on intermediate EFL learners' writing performances. To do so, having reviewed the related literature thoroughly, the researchers designed the present quasi-experimental study. Fifty homogenized intermediate learners (both males and females) in an institute in Tehran, Iran took part in the study in two groups (experimental and control groups) and the experimental group received separate trainings based on the specific grammar-based extracurricular activities. The participants received Cambridge Placement Test as the test of language proficiency. Two essay topics were introduced to both groups to compose as pre and post-tests. Both groups were instructed on how to compose a well-formed essay while the experimental group underwent treatment with extra-curricular grammar-oriented assignments as well. The essays were all scored by two EFL experts and the data was later calculated by SPSS software 21. Two independent T-tests were run to compare the means of both groups in pre and post-tests. The finding of the present study revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of writing performance. Thus it was concluded that homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity significantly affects second language writing performance of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. This research improves our understanding of second language writing performance in an EFL context and highlights the role that grammar plays in the enhancement of writing assignments. It was stressed that grammar-oriented assignments could pave the way for the learners in an EFL situation to improve their performance in their writing performances.

Keywords: Extra-curricular Activities, Grammar-oriented assignments, writing performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Nation and McAlister (2010) point out, "homework which is the part of the activity the learner deals with or practices out of the classroom environment should be an integral part of any second language curriculum and its offshoots" (p.112). Homework varieties as an extra-curricular activity can affect various language skills and components (Wang & Shiveley, 2011). Homework writing and practices are related and connected by the context where learners are learning on their own and applying new knowledge.

Knowing which type of homework is needed helps teachers design appropriate out-of-class assignments. Within the scope of ELT research, rarely has researchers focused on the

effect of extra-curricular homework varieties on the development of second language achievements, skills, or language components. Second language research also presents a poor record on the effect of extra-curricular homework varieties in the development of writing among ESL learners. Iranian context also has presented few researches on the same ground (Googol, 2012).

Grammar is thought to provide the basis for a set of language skills. In the context of writing, grammar allows learners to put their ideas into coherent sentences so that they can successfully communicate in a written form. In other words, by learning grammar, learners can transfer meanings in the form of phrases, clauses and sentences (Doff, 2000).

Effective grammar instruction begins with what students already know about grammar, and it helps them use this knowledge as they write. By connecting their knowledge of oral language to written language, teachers can demystify abstract grammatical terminology so that students can write—and read—with greater competence and confidence.

Through detailed studies of students' writing, Shaughnessy (1977) concludes that the best grammar instruction is that which gives the greatest return for the least investment of time. Shaughnessy advocates four important grammatical concepts: the sentence, inflection, tense, and agreement. She recommends that teachers encourage students to examine grammatical errors in their own writing. She also cautions teachers not to overemphasize grammatical terminology to the detriment of students' ability to understand and apply the concepts.

The present researcher's personal observations and experience also asserts that grammatical knowledge seems to play a very important role in writing performances. It seems those individuals benefitting from a very high mastery over grammar receive better scores in their writing performances. Therefore, the present study aims at determining whether the extra-curricular academic activities regarding grammar could promote EFL learners' English writing performances.

2. METHODOLOGY

Based on the problem stated above and purpose of the study, the following research question could be set:

2.1. Research Question

Do grammar-oriented assignments as an extra-curricular activity have any significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' writing performances?

2.2. Research Hypothesis

Considering the research question presented above the following null hypothesis was formulated:

H₀. *The grammar-oriented assignments as an extra-curricular activity do not have any significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' writing performances.*

2.3. Participants, Procedure, and Design

The participants of the study were about 40-60 intermediate learners (both girls and boys) in Islamic Azad University, Zanjan, Iran. These participants were selected on the basis of a placement test (Cambridge Placement Test) for the purpose of homogenizing the sample of the study. The age range of the learners was between 20 and 35. The subjects were randomly divided into 2 groups, each including equal number of learners. One group was the experimental group and the other one group shaped the control group.

In pre-treatment stage, in the first session, the learners were asked to compose an essay. One general topic was introduced to the students and they were asked to write an essay on it. The researchers after consulting three English language experts in EFL introduced one general and familiar topic rather than more specialized ones so that the participants could write about them at their ease.

After eight sessions, in the last session, again an essay topic was introduced to the participants to compose. Once the papers were collected, two EFL experts were asked to score them. The average of two scores accounted for their essay writing performance mark.

Each essay will later be scored on the basis of the five scales of “Task Achievement”, “Coherence and Cohesion”, “Lexical Resource” and “Grammatical Range” and “Accuracy”, for instance, Essays with almost no errors will receive 6. The essays with few insignificant errors will be given 5. The performances with occasional petty errors, but understandable will receive 4. The essays containing frequent errors interfering the meaning will receive 3. Performances with constant errors interfering the understanding will be given 2, and lastly, the essays including severe errors and uninterpretable will receive 1. In the end, the average of the five scales will show the last score given to any essay by each rater. Subsequently, the average score given by the two raters will represent the learners’ final score.

Both groups received similar materials from a book entitled as “Writing Academic English”, which included the key concepts and patterns of essay writing including process essays, cause / effect essays, comparison/ contrast essays, and argumentative essays. In the Experimental Group, the learners received extra-curricular of academic type in which they were supposed to work with types of sentences, parallel structures, noun clauses, adjective and adverbial clauses, participle phrases, reduced clauses, and the like.

The researchers employed a quasi-experimental design in order to evaluate the effect of the grammar-based homework as an academic extra-curricular activity on learners’ writing performances.

2.4. Data Analysis

The research question posed in this study was analyzed through independent samples and t-test which assumes normality of the data.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Pretest of Writing

An independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' means on the pretest of writing in order to prove that they were at the same level of writing ability prior to the main study. Based on these results displayed in Table 1 it can be concluded that the experimental (M = 5.65, SD = 0.41) and control (M = 5.50, SD = .193) had almost the same means on the pretest of vocabulary.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics; Pretest of Vocabulary by Groups

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Experimental	25	5.65	.416	.987
	Control	25	5.50	.193	.938

The results of the independent t-test ($t(48) = .25, p = .921, r = .041$ representing a weak effect size) (Table 2) indicated that there was not any statistically significant difference between the two groups' means on the pretest of writing. Thus, it can be claimed that they were at the same level of writing ability prior to the main study.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-test, Pretest of Vocabulary by Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.031	.861	.257	38	.799	.350	1.362	-2.40	3.10
Equal variances not assumed			.257	37.898	.799	.350	1.362	-2.40	3.10

The negative lower bound 95 % confidence interval of -2.40 indicated that the difference between the two groups' means on pretest could have been zero. Thus the above mentioned conclusion as no significant difference between the two groups' means was correctly made. It should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's $F = .031, p = .861$). That is why the first row of Table 3, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported.

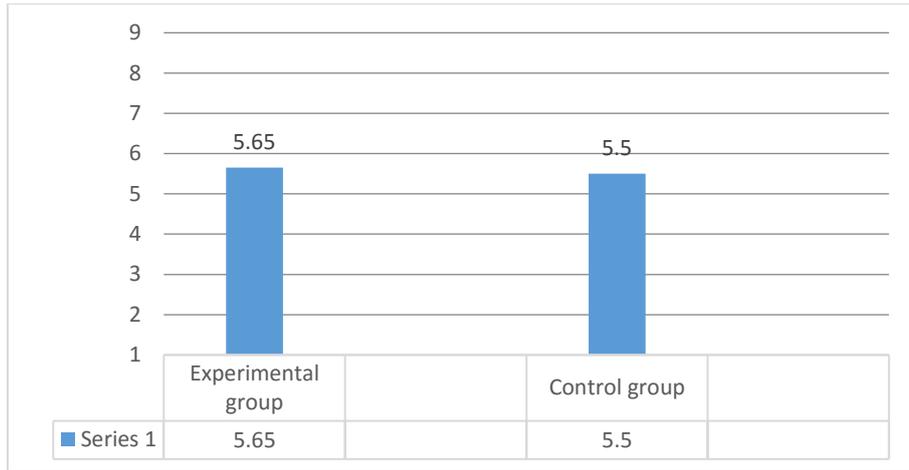


Figure 1: Pretest of writing performance by Groups

3.2. Inter-rater Reliability of the pretest

To make sure that the two raters fall in with each other over the scores assigned and don't deviate much, a Pearson correlation test is usually carried out. In this research, a Pearson correlation test was similarly run to probe the inter-rater reliability of the two raters who rated the subjects' writing performances. Based on the results displayed in Table 3 ($r(48) = .79$, $P < .05$ representing a large effect size) it can be concluded that there was a significant agreement between the two raters:

Table 3: Pearson Correlation; Inter-Rater Reliability of the pretest

		Rater2
Rater1	Pearson Correlation	.794**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	50

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.3. Testing the Null Hypothesis of the Study

The research question of this study was meant to explore if the grammar-oriented assignments have any significant effect on Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' writing performances.

To find the effects of the treatment on the learners, each group was asked to compose an essay as the post-test. An independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' means. Based on the results it can be concluded that the experimental group ($M = 7.60$, $SD = 0.598$) had a higher mean than the control group ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 0.962$) on the post-test of writing performance. Generally, the performance of the control group learners on

the immediate post-test was weaker than the experimental group. The descriptive statistics of both of the groups are compared and showed in Table 4 as follows:

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of writing performance by Groups

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test	Experimental	25	7.60	0.598	.805
	Control	25	5.90	0.962	.109

In order to verify the null hypothesis of the study, an independent t-test was conducted between the scores of the experimental group in both pre and post-test. The results are shown in table 5.

Table 5: Independent Samples t-test, Posttest of writing performance by Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.834	.101	11.127	38	.000	1.250	1.371	12.476	18.024
Equal variances not assumed			11.127	34.655	.000	1.250	1.371	12.467	18.033

The results clearly showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups' means on the post-test of writing performance of the independent t-test representing a large effect size ($t(48) = 11.12, p = .000, r = .87$). Therefore, we can say with confidence that "grammar-oriented assignments" improved Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing performances. So the null hypothesis of the study was rejected.

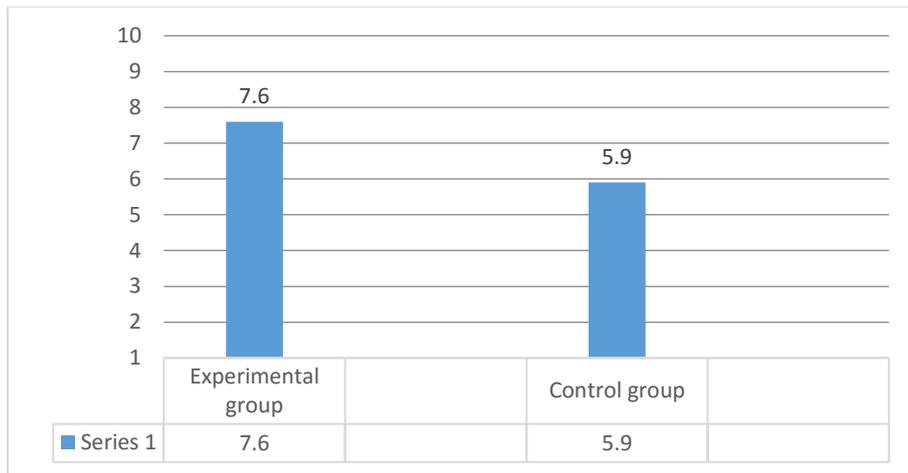


Figure 2: Post-test of writing performance by Groups

3.4. Inter-rater Reliability of the post test

To make sure that the two raters fall in with each other over the scores assigned and don't deviate much, a Pearson correlation test was similarly run to probe the inter-rater reliability of the two raters who rated the subjects' writing performances after the treatment. Based on the results displayed in Table 6 ($r(48) = .70, P < .05$ representing a large effect size) it can be concluded that there was a significant agreement between the two raters:

Table 6: Pearson Correlation; Inter-Rater Reliability

		Rater2
Rater1	Pearson Correlation	.704**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003
	N	50

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings of the present study revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of writing performance. Thus it was concluded that grammar-oriented assignments as an academic extra-curricular activity significantly affect foreign language writing development of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Findings of the research were in line with the ideas asserted in the literature in the ESL situation (Beck, 1999; Brown & Herry, 2001; Halpern, 1992; Ross et al., 1992) which provide support for using homework programs to build self-esteem of the learners and lead them towards creativity, while also finding that self-esteem can be a predictor of academic performance.

The findings of the study revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of writing performances. Thus it was concluded that grammar-oriented assignments as an academic extra-curricular activity significantly affected foreign language writing performances of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Learners dealing with grammar-based assignments outperformed those with the conventional writing performance. This revealed that the grammar-based homework assignments play a significant role in the improvement of one's writing performance. According to Nation and McAlister (2010), various types of homework are capable enough to energize the learner in different aspects of learning. The findings of the present study support the positive role of homework in the betterment of SL/FL skills: reading comprehension (Beck, 1999; Warger, 2011); listening comprehension (Bozorgian, 2012; Brown, 2007, Googol, 2012; and Lynch, 2011), and better performance in second language speaking (McLeod, 1987).

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