

The role of explicit instruction on using conjunctions in Iranian EFL learners' written performance

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to examine the effects of a process oriented program focused on the teaching of three types of conjunctions on Iranian EFL learners' ability to produce coherent and well –organized texts. The researcher as the teacher explained about the different usage of conjunctions for the experimental group. Furthermore, this group received model essays in the form of cloze tests (conjunctions were omitted). Students should complete the cloze tests by using conjunctions. Later on they had access to the completed form of those cloze tests and then summarized the texts. Control group did not get any explicit instruction about using conjunctions or any cloze test. They just received the same model essays and summarized them. In the post-test, both groups wrote about the same writing task. The results show that students in the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of using conjunctions appropriately.

Keywords: Cloze Tests, Conjunctions, Explicit Instruction, Summarizing, Written Performance

1. Introduction

Writing is a difficult process and for learning writing input is essential but not sufficient (e.g. McKay, 1984) believes that “Writing is such a complex process that one cannot be able to give his/her students simple formula for good writing. What do the students to engender is an awareness of the complexity of the process and to help them better manipulate each component of the process in order to meet their writing objectives” (p. 254). That is, learners may benefit from some type of form-focused instruction, defined by Spada (1997) as consisting of “events which occur within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways” (p. 73).

2. Explicit Instruction and Developing Writing

White (1987) states that there has been a renewed interest in whether grammar should be taught in second language classes and how this could be incorporated. She further mentions that this stems from an effort to strike a balance between structuralism approach which emphasizes accurate production of L2 forms, and the communicative approach which focuses

on promoting meaningful communication in real context. Furthermore, she asserts that this attempt has culminated in what has been known as focus on form. A complete lack of attention to form may not be in the best interest of learners. She also believes that when instruction focuses on meaning to the virtual exclusion of formal aspects of language, learners may fail to reach high levels of linguistic knowledge and performance despite extensive exposure to target language input. Lightbown (1985) claims that the purely communicative approach does not serve language learners well enough. Similarly, Swain (1998) claims that a focus only on meaning provides insufficient input of certain forms and no way to encourage practice of others. Dekeyser (1995) states that focus on form does not need to imply a return to a structural syllabus but, in his opinion, can, for some learners, imply the explicit teaching and systematic practicing of certain forms. According to Poole (2005), it is a type of instruction that, on the one hand, holds up the importance of communicative language teaching principle such as authentic communication and student-centeredness and, on the other hand, maintains the value of the occasional and overt study of problematic L2 grammatical forms, which is more reminiscent of non communicative teaching. Furthermore, Long and Robinson (1998) claim that formal L2 instruction should give most of its attention to exposing students to oral and written discourse that

mirrors real-life, such as job interviews, writing letter to friends, and engaging in classroom debates, nonetheless, when it is observed that learners are experiencing difficulties in the comprehension and/or production of certain L2 grammatical forms, teachers and their peers are obligated to assist them notice their erroneous use and/or comprehension of these forms and supply them with the proper explanations and models of them. Moreover, teachers can help their students and learners can help their peers notice the forms that they currently lack, yet should know in order to further their overall L2 grammatical development.

According to Crawford (1990) language whether it is input or output, should emerge from the context in which it occurs. That is to say, while deciding to teach the learners formally, the teacher should consider the learners' purposes. If the learners' purpose is to promote their writing skill, teaching the overall structure and grammatical features of the written text seems inevitable in helping learners achieving this goal. Gor and Chernigovskaya (2001) propose that positive role of implicit instruction remains to be proven empirically. In fact, research has failed to show the positive influence of implicit instruction, so far (e.g., Ellis, 1993, White, 1987). However, instruction, which provides explicit instructions of grammar rules, especially simple rules involving transparent form-function relations, proves beneficial to adult learners' writing skill (Alanen, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Williams & Evans, 1998). Nunan (2001) proposes that a major challenge for language educators is to investigate different ways of helping language learners produce coherent written discourse. It seems that what stands in the way of producing a coherent text is deficient knowledge of cohesive ties on the part of language learners which is complemented by insufficient practical opportunities to engage in the process of writing within the classroom and under the supervision of the teacher. Such opportunities can be provided in the form of individual pair and group writing activities of different types proceed by explicit instruction of major elements of written discourse. Nazari (2013) investigated the effects of implicit and explicit language instruction on students' ability to learn grammar and use it appropriately in their writing. To this purpose, two intact classes of 30 adult learners were chosen for teaching the targeted structure (present perfect) through different methods of instruction. The results indicated the outperformance of the participants in the explicit group over the performance of the participants in the implicit group in both productive and receptive modes. Furthermore, (Rahimpour & Salimi, 2010; Marzban & Mokhberi, 2012) found explicit instruction effective. However, (Ozkan & Kesen, 2009) conducted an empirical study of the types of grammar at the ELT Department of Cukurova University with 50 participants studying at preparatory classes. The dependent variable was the number of grammatical or correct items over the forms gained out of pre-test, post-test and delayed post test. This study also agrees with Fotos (2002) since the implicit group had better performance than the explicit group of the study. They could not find explicit

teaching of grammar effective. Thus this study set out to narrow down the concept of instruction and examine the impact of explicit instruction of conjunction on the Iranian EFL Learners' writing skill. Regarding the purpose of the study, the following research question was asked:

Does explicit instruction improve using cohesive ties (conjunctions) of EFL learners' writing skill?

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to find the effect of independent variable, instruction of three types of conjunctions, and the dependent variable i.e. cohesion in the Iranian EFL learners' written performance.

3.1. Subjects

The participants for this study were 40 Iranian EFL learners majoring in English Language Teaching and participating in writing composition course, with an age range of 18-30. Students were chosen after assigning a preliminary English Test (PET) and a writing task (pre-test) for having homogeneous groups. The researcher randomly assigned them as the experimental and the control group.

3.2. Instrumentation

Different instruments used in the present study involve a preliminary English Test (PET) and two argumentative writing tasks in the pre-test and the post-test. Model essays were used in different forms. Normal Model essays for the control group and the same model essays in the form of cloze tests for the experimental group were used. In order to teach the selected conjunctions the researcher used Azabdaftari's (2002) book. The samples of selected conjunctions are presented in Appendix.

3.3. Procedure

The aim of this study was to examine the effects of a process oriented program, focused on the teaching of three types of conjunctions (coordinating, correlative and Transitional) on Iranian EFL learners' ability to produce coherent and well-organized texts. The researcher used a quasi-experimental research design with a sample of forty Iranian college learners from Payame Noor university-Tabriz Branch, who were passing writing essay courses. After assessing the groups' homogeneity by using a PET test (those who got 60 or more out of 100 were chosen) and a writing task as a pre-test, the researcher randomly assigned them as the experimental and control groups. Teacher as the researcher followed a presentation, practice and production (PPP) approach for the experimental group. The treatment was an eight session process oriented program focused on teaching conjunctions. The researcher as the teacher explained about the different usage of conjunctions for the experimental group. Furthermore, this group received a model essay in the form of cloze test (conjunctions were omitted). Students should complete the cloze tests by using

conjunctions. Then they had access to a completed form of those cloze tests and they should summarize the texts and try to use these conjunctions in their writing. Bachman (1982, p. 61-70) reported that certain types of cloze tests, such as the selective deletion cloze, can be used to investigate a subject's knowledge of written discourse items such as context cohesion, syntax and strategic textual comprehension. Anderson (1979) adds that cloze testing correlates more closely with grammar tests than with reading tests, and according to Bowen *et al.* (1985, p. 376), the selective deletion cloze is ideal for testing vocabulary and grammar.

Control group did not get any explicit instruction about using conjunctions or any cloze tests. They just received the same model essays and summarized them. In the post-test, both groups wrote about the same writing task. For measuring the cohesive ties density-the researcher used Halliday and Hassan's (1976) approach-the mean number of conjunctions per T-unit- in the pre-test and post-test. The researcher used t-test for comparing the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test.

4. Results

In this section, the results of t-test for proficiency test between two groups, Pearson Correlation for showing the inter-rater reliability between the scores of two raters, t-test for showing the results of pre-test and post-test scores will be presented. Finally, the researcher will discuss the results.

Table 1 represents the result of the t-test for proficiency test (PET) between two groups; there has not been a significant difference in scores for control group (M =69.80,

SD = 5.87) and experimental group (M=68.95, SD = 5.25), $t(38) = .482, P > .05$. So, two groups at the beginning of the research are homogeneous.

Table 1. Independent sample t-test for proficiency test (PET).

Pre-test	N	Mean	t	F	df
Control group	20	69.80 (5.87)	.482	.199	38
Experimental group	20	68.95 (5.25)	.482		37.543

Note: $p = .658$. The adjusted Standard Deviation is shown in parentheses below the means

The computed Pearson correlation coefficient for pre-test is ($r = .917, p = .000$) and for the post-test is ($r = .901, p = .000$), which indicates that there is a high positive relationship between the scores rated by Rater 1 and Rater 2 in both pre-test and post-test for control and experimental groups.

The descriptive statistics of comparing the cohesive density between two groups in the pre-test and post-test are shown in Table2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of comparing the cohesive density between two groups in the pre-test and post-test.

group	N	mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre control	20	.6100	.08980	.02008
experimental	20	.6245	.09714	.02172
Post control	20	.6365	.11953	.02673
experimental	20	1.3865	.38556	.08621

Table 3. Independent sample t-test of comparing the cohesive density for the pre-test.

	Levene's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for equality of means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. error differences
Pre Equal variance assumed	1.223	.276	-.152	38	.880	-.0045	.02958
Equal variance not assumed			-.152	37.767	.880	-.0045	.02958

Table 4. Independent sample t-test of comparing the cohesive density for the post-test.

	Levene's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for equality of means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. error differences
Post Equal variance assumed	29.855	.000	-8.309	38	.000	-.7500	.09026
Equal variance not assumed			-8.309	22.619	.000	-.7500	.09026

As Table 2, 3 and 4 show, scores in the pre-test for the control group are (M =.61, SD =.089) and experimental group (M=.62, SD =.097), $t(38) = -.152, P > .05$. The mean score shows that the quality of using conjunctions between two groups in the pre-test were the same. In the post-test, scores for control group (M =.63, SD =.11) and experimental

group (M=1.38, SD = .38), $t(38) = -8.30, P = .000$.

The results show that there is a significant difference between two groups in the post-test. In the post-test, the experimental group outperforms the control group in using conjunctions correctly.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the theoretical rationale of formal instruction and on empirical evidence from previous studies (Alanen, 1995; Nazari, 2013; Nunan, 1991; Ozkan & Kesen, 2009; Rahimpour & Salimi, 2010; Robinson, 1995; Williams & Evans, 1998), it can be concluded that instruction, which provide explicit instructions of grammar rules ,especially simple rules involving transparent form-function relations, proves beneficial to adult learners' writing skill. The research findings revealed that the experimental group which received formal instruction and completed a model essay in the form of cloze tests outperformed the control group which just received model essays. It can be concluded that If the learners' purpose is to promote their writing skill, teaching the overall structure and grammatical features of the written text seems inevitable in helping learners achieving this goal. Formal instruction and using cloze test would make certain parts of the texts perceptually salient. Consequently, the subjects who received them would have closer attention directed to the grammatical features (conjunctions). The subjects in the experimental group who received formal instruction (M=1.38) outperformed the control group (M=.63) who did not receive any formal instruction. Better performance on the post-test after completing the cloze test and having access to the correct completed form of those cloze tests and summarizing the passages revealed that the subjects were producing more conjunctions in their writing. This finding supports the previous studies (e.g. Nazari, 2013; Nunan, 1991; Rahimpour, & Salimi, 2010;) that reported positive effects of formal instruction of grammatical features. It can be assumed that subjects' interlanguage might be affected by the formal instruction and started to change from one stage to another. In other words, it refers to developmental changes of subjects' interlanguage (e.g. Selinker 1972). Some subjects showed changes in their interlanguage where they moved from a particular stage to another (i.e. from the pretest to posttest). To make this point clearer some subjects in this study showed the ability to use the target form starting from few use of conjunctions in the pretest and then slowly tried to use more conjunctions in the post test. On the other hand, other subjects in the control group showed no developmental changes, it suggested that those subjects might not have developed their interlanguage and still remained at the early stages of it (i.e. at their pretest stages). These findings oppose those of (Fotos ,2002; Ozkan, Y & Kesen, A., 2009) which did not find formal instruction effective. The findings can suggest that formal instruction can be an effective method and could be used for enhancing salience of language features that may prove difficult for L2 learners. The implications from the research findings can be applied to practical sides of English language teaching and material development. Teachers who have a challenging role of conducting the classroom activities and learners who are involved in the process of learning how to write will reap the benefits of this study. Conjunctions are the most important parts of discourse which can facilitate of both comprehension and production of language data. However, unfortunately, most

teachers are unaware of their importance in the process of foreign language learning. It is hoped that the outcome of the following research would motivate Iranian teachers to corporate formal instruction of cohesive ties (conjunctions) to the process of language teaching, especially teaching writing skill. This study was tested only a short-term over the period of two months. Long-term effects of the variables under investigation should be examined as long-lasting effects of explicit instruction. Thus, we need to do another research that document long -term effects of explicit instruction on the developing written performance.

Appendix

Pre-test

Write about this topic.

Write at least 250 words.

Television has had a significant effect on the culture of different societies. Do you agree or disagree?

Sample Cloze Test for the Experimental Group

Complete the answer by filling the gaps with a word or phrase from the box below.

Also	because	For instance	
Secondly	Finally	In conclusion	since
such as	while	On the other hand	
A further point is that		For Example	The first is that

In recent years the vast expansion of information and communications technology has made teleworking much more practical. Although in many cases office workers could be made geographically independent by using modems, faxes and cell phones, few companies or employees take full advantage of this possibility.

There are a number of strong arguments in favor of allowing workers to work from home. Firstly costs for employers would be reduced businesses would require less office space, which is often situated in the center of large cities., worker's lives would be improved in a variety of ways., they would not need to travel to get to work, which would give them more free time.

....., they could combine their work with their family life, which is a major advantage if they are parents of young children or they have old people to look after., traveling to a centralized workplace also has a number of points in its favor. many employees would miss the social aspect of work seeing colleagues and meeting customers. employers would need to be able to trust their workers to work at a high standard and finish their work on time, supervising teleworkers is even more complicated than supervising workers in the same office.

....., working from home might inhibit teamwork

and creative work and so perhaps so only really suitable for people doing routine office work.

....., I believe that many workers welcome the opportunity to go out to work, others would find the chance to work from home very convenient. Where possible, I think workers should be offered the choice, but not forced to work from home unless they wish to.

Completed form of the Cloze Test for the Experimental Group

In recent years the vast expansion of information and communications technology has made teleworking much more practical. Although in many cases office workers could be made geographically independent by using modems, faxes and cell phones, few companies or employees take full advantage of this possibility.

There are a number of strong arguments in favor of allowing workers to work from home. Firstly costs for employers would be reduced because businesses would require less office space, which is often situated in the center of large cities. Secondly, worker's lives would be improved in a variety of ways. For example, they would not need to travel to get to work, which would give them more free time.

Also, they could combine their work with their family life, which is a major advantage if they are parents of young children or they have old people to look after. On the other hand, traveling to a centralized workplace also has a number of points in its favor. The first is that many employees would miss the social aspect of work such as seeing colleagues and meeting customers. A further point is that employers would need to be able to trust their workers to work at a high standard and finish their work on time, since supervising teleworkers is even more complicated than supervising workers in the same office.

Finally, working from home might inhibit teamwork and creative work and so perhaps so only really suitable for people doing routine office work.

In conclusion, I believe that while many workers welcome the opportunity to go out to work, others would find the chance to work from home very convenient. Where possible, I think workers should be offered the choice, but not forced to work from home unless they wish to.

Sample of an Unenhanced Text for the Control Group

In recent years the vast expansion of information and communications technology has made teleworking much more practical. Although in many cases office workers could be made geographically independent by using modems, faxes and cell phones, few companies or employees take full advantage of this possibility.

There are a number of strong arguments in favor of allowing workers to work from home. Firstly costs for employers would be reduced because businesses would require less office space, which is often situated in the center of large cities. Secondly, worker's lives would be improved in a variety of ways. For example, they would not need to

travel to get to work, which would give them more free time.

Also, they could combine their work with their family life, which is a major advantage if they are parents of young children or they have old people to look after. On the other hand, traveling to a centralized workplace also has a number of points in its favor. The first is that many employees would miss the social aspect of work such as seeing colleagues and meeting customers. A further point is that employers would need to be able to trust their workers to work at a high standard and finish their work on time, since supervising teleworkers is even more complicated than supervising workers in the same office.

Finally, working from home might inhibit teamwork and creative work and so perhaps so only really suitable for people doing routine office work.

In conclusion, I believe that while many workers welcome the opportunity to go out to work, others would find the chance to work from home very convenient. Where possible, I think workers should be offered the choice, but not forced to work from home unless they wish to.

Post-test

Write about this topic.

Write at least 250 words.

Computer has changed our lives completely. Do you agree or disagree?

Conjunctions Mentioned in This Study

1. Coordinating conjunctions: They are words, or units larger than words which join words, phrases or clauses. They consist of (and-so-for-or-but-yet). They might be used to join independent clauses, dependant clauses, two words, phrases or prepositional phrases.

2. Correlative Conjunctions: They are link words that consist of two parts and are used to give emphasis to the combinations of two structures that are balanced. (Either or –neither nor, not only but also, both...and)

3. Transitional Conjunctions:

They introduce the dependent clause which provides more information about the independent clause.

a) Give additional information (furthermore, moreover, what is more, besides, in addition to, also)

b) Show contrast (however, nevertheless, in contrast)

c) Express consequences (therefore, as a result, thus, as a consequence)

d) Clarify or explain the meaning (for instance, for example)

e) Show time sequence (then, later on, afterwards, etc)

f) Intensify the meaning (indeed, in fact, actually, as a matter of)

g) Change the subject of the discussion (by the way, so far, etc)

h) Sum up (to sum up, in short, briefly, to conclude, etc)

j) List a series of points (firstly, secondly, next, etc)

k) Show the relationship between the first and second sentences (equally, similarly, likewise, in the same way, etc)

l) Express cause/reason (due to/because of the fact – in view of something, with regard to, etc)

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