THE EFFECT OF TELLING SHORT STORIES ON LEARNING GRAMMAR AMONG EFL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN IRAN

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ABSTRACT
The role of storytelling in the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures has not clearly been discovered, but it is claimed that it is one of the most effective techniques for conveying information in a compelling and memorable way. There are many reasons to tell stories in our classes as they can give relief from the routine and stimulate the mind, they are a great motivator for teachers as well as for students, they can also foster understanding and acceptance of the foreign language and culture. This study aims at investigating the effect of teacher's telling short stories on the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures of the Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. The sample of the study consisted of 30 female intermediate students who were randomly chosen from one of the public high schools in Isfahan and assigned into experimental and control groups, 15 in each. Grammatical point that was related to conditional sentence (type III) was taught traditionally in the control group; however, in the experimental group, it was taught by telling short story. Data of the study were collected via a pre-posttest design for equivalent groups. The tests were identical and consisted of 15 multiple choice items. The analysis of the collected data through applying t-test revealed that telling story has a positive effect on learning grammar structures but the experimental group didn’t outperform the control group significantly on the measure. In other words, there wasn’t a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures.

KEY WORDS: Telling short stories, Learning grammar, Iranian EFL learners

INTRODUCTION
Teachers have been debating on what is the best method for teaching grammar for generations. Many people, including language teachers, hear the word "grammar" and think of a fixed set of word forms and rules of usage. They associate "good" grammar with the prestige forms of the language, such as those used in writing and in formal oral presentations, and "bad" or "no"
grammar with the language used in everyday conversation or used by speakers of nonprestige forms.

Language teachers who adopt this definition focus on grammar as a set of forms and rules. They teach grammar by explaining the forms and rules and then drilling students on them. This results in bored, disaffected students who can produce correct forms on exercises and tests, but consistently make errors when they try to use the language in context.

Other language teachers, influenced by recent theoretical work on the difference between language learning and language acquisition, tend not to teach grammar at all. Believing that children acquire their first language without overt grammar instruction, they expect students to learn their second language the same way. They assume that students will absorb grammar rules as they hear, read, and use the language in communication activities. This approach does not allow students to use one of the major tools they have as learners: their active understanding of what grammar is and how it works in the language they already know.

The communicative competence model balances these extremes. The model recognizes that overt grammar instruction helps students acquire the language more efficiently, but it incorporates grammar teaching and learning into the larger context of teaching students to use the language. Instructors using this model teach students the grammar they need to know to accomplish defined communication tasks.

So, in order to make a grammar lesson effective, beneficial, and interesting a teacher should use some new and fascinating techniques in the classroom. Since the meaning is an important device in teaching grammar, it is important to contextualize any grammar point (Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988).

Story telling seems to be one of the most enchanting and culturally rich resources that can easily be used in language classrooms. Stories offer a change from routine classroom activities. They are precious resources to develop students’ abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They can also be used to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, and pronunciation. As stated by Lo and Fai Li (1998:8), learning English through stories also provides a non-threatening atmosphere for students, who usually are tense when speaking English in a formal classroom setting.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Storytelling is almost as old as language itself. In fact, some cultures still use spoken stories to pass on information to younger generations because the language is not written down. Storytelling is also not just for children; it covers the entire age range of the population and covers all aspects of life. Stories also give new insights into the target culture. They are the means through which cultural themes are presented effectively. Since they provide authentic texts, they are motivating. According to Hill (2001:29) “There are many advantages of using stories in the classroom through using contemporary popular stories, which are already familiar to teenagers, the teacher can meet the challenges of the teenage needs in the classroom. Since stories are motivating, in many forms they may constitute a powerful subculture with their own rituals.”
Pederson (1995) considers storytelling as the original form of teaching and states that there are still societies in which it is the only form of teaching. He mentions that although some attempts have been made to imitate or update it, like the electronic storytelling of television, live oral storytelling will never go out of fashion and a simple narrative will always be the cornerstone of the art of teaching.

Brian Ellis (1997) in his article “Why Tell Stories” believes that storytelling is the perfect embodiment of whole language pedagogy and it teaches higher level of thinking skills, addresses the needs of students with different learning styles, provides opportunity for cooperative learning and building social skills and most importantly storytelling has been shown to build intrinsic motivation and self-esteem, even in the students who are labeled hard to reach.

Deacon and Murphy’s Deep Impact Storytelling (2001) discuss why giving a course depth through storytelling is important. They describe ways to help teachers deepen the impact of storytelling through language and thinking activities that include shadowing, summarizing, student retelling, action logging, and newslettering. They share one "split" story and student reactions to it as a way of exemplifying the ideas provided.

The study by Hui-Ling Huang on The Effects of Storytelling on EFL Young Learners’ Reading Comprehension and Word Recall (2006) has indicated the necessity of teacher intervention in EFL reading; the teacher’s story interpretation through contextualized storytelling as a multi-sensory approach could result in perceptible benefits in young learners’ reading comprehension. The teacher is thus encouraged to incorporate storytelling in teaching and experience the magic of this ancient art in modern language classrooms, even though it may place some extra burden on the teaching preparation. Despite the effective framework of storytelling for vocabulary learning, the findings of this study on word recall did not support the theoretical assumption.

According to Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm (1998), teachers are increasingly being provided with an array of creative storytelling materials and ideas for second language learning. They discuss benefits which include enhanced student enjoyment, lower affective filters, authentic and enriched language input, and more inclusionary, collaborative classrooms. Stories appear to enable students to draw upon their own experiences and to organize information in personalized ways, thus better comprehending and retaining information and concepts.

In terms of grammar learning, storytelling may serve as a steppingstone to the learning of syntax as it demonstrates grammatical and syntactic features in meaningful context. As Mallan (1991) points out, storytelling demonstrates a varied use of tense and linking devices in organizing ideas. With a deliberate design of learning activities, the teacher can draw learners’ attention to specific linguistic features in the story presentation (Taylor, 2000; Wajnryb, 2003).

**The Importance of Teaching Grammar**

Grammar is central to the teaching and learning of languages. Grammar explains the types of words and word groups that make up sentences in any language and makes it possible for us to talk about language. In fact, grammar is the way in which sentences are structured and the
language is formatted, so while studying correct grammar may be a bit boring, it really is worth the time and effort. If we don’t know the rules of grammar, then we will never be able to communicate clearly and effectively in English language. People associate grammar with errors and correctness. With the use of incorrect grammar sentences can become meaningless and their message is unclear. So, knowing about grammar helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise. Grammar can be part of literature discussions, when we and our students closely read the sentences in poetry and stories. And knowing about grammar means finding out that all languages and all dialects follow grammatical patterns.

Grammar teaching has often been regarded as a structure based formal activity. But it no longer has much credibility when we believe the precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (Skehan,1996). After the integration of several sources and techniques, which are mainly based on communicative activities, the teaching of grammar gained a new insight. In communicative tasks, the learners comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language while their attention is basically on meaning rather than form (Nunan,1989). Swan (1998) suggests that we should consider the needs of the students in teaching grammar. Furthermore, he states that the principles of comprehensibility and acceptibility should be considered.

The importance of story telling
By stories, we mean the incidents or events in the news or on TV, stories about people and things our students know and care about. One of the best opportunities to use stories is, lessons on the supposedly dry subject of grammar (as well as punctuation and usage). A story provides a realistic context for presenting grammar points and holds and focuses students’ attention in a way that no other technique can. Stories can be used for both eliciting and illustrating grammar points. The former employs inductive reasoning, while the latter requires deductive thought, and it is useful to include both approaches in lesson planning. In addition, a well-told story is the perfect context for a structure-discourse match, but the technique can also be used effectively for a structure-social factor match. However, when teachers include grammar stories in their lessons, students have a better understanding of real world and grammar lessons are not so boring for them .(Baker & Green,1977)

There are many reasons why we want to tell stories in our classes. Stories provide students with opportunities to listen to language in context rather than in bits and pieces. Stories also introduce new vocabulary and language forms within rich networks of associations. Equally important, stories can have a deep impact on a person’s construction of knowledge and self. However, storytelling consists of more than just telling stories. It may include not only creating a story but also the use of pictures, acting, singing, story writing and so forth.

According to Chambers(1970) there are a number of ways in which storytelling can enhance intercultural understanding and communication. Stories can…

- allow children to explore their own cultural roots
- allow children to experience diverse cultures
- enable children to empathize with unfamiliar people/places/situations
Integrative Grammar Teaching

Integrative grammar teaching combines a form-based with a meaning-based focus. Spada and Lightbown (1993:205) have also argued "that form focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative interaction can contribute positively to second language development in both the short and long term". Thus, integration of form and meaning is becoming increasingly important in current research. Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1997:14) call it "a turning point" in communicative language teaching, in which "explicit, direct elements are gaining significance in teaching communicative abilities and skills". Of course, depending on the students and their particular needs, either form or meaning can be emphasized. But in having various students with different needs in the same group, or having various needs in the same students, an integrative grammar teaching approach creates optimal conditions for learning for everyone in the classroom. Musumeci (1997) mentions the idea of connecting form and meaning in grammar teaching as a developing trend in reference to the proficiency oriented curriculum. She points out that students should be able to learn explicit grammar rules as well as have a chance to practice them in communication in the authentic or simulation tasks. Interestingly, Musumeci advocates giving students a chance to look at the language on a sentence level to see how certain grammatical rules are applied.

Integrative grammar teaching, which presupposes students' interaction while learning, can be viewed as a cognitive process of learning an L2 that reflects the sociocultural theory proposed by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978). In talking about the development of a child's brain and his socialization, Vygotsky argues that there is a strong relationship between learning and cognitive development, in which cognition develops as a result of social interaction and sharing the responsibility with a parent or a more competent person. From an early age, children look to their parents for clues to acceptable social behavior. This brings us to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) in which there are two main stages of an individual's development. The first stage is what a child or learner can do by himself; the second stage is his potential, what he can accomplish with the help of another, more competent person. The distance between two points is called the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky also introduces the notion of a mediator - a person who helps students to accomplish what they cannot do by themselves.
According to Appel and Lantolf (1994) and Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995), the role of the mediator in teaching an L2 is placed on an L2 teacher, whose task is to direct students in the right direction and help them reach the second stage in the ZPD.

Similar to Vygotsky's theory is the often-criticized Krashen's (1981, 1985) Input Hypothesis, also well-known as the "i +1" hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, \( i \) represents students' current level of L2 proficiency, and \( +1 \) is level of the linguistic form or function beyond the present students' level. Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development are basically describing the same cognitive process of social interaction in students' development. For Krashen, optimal input should be comprehensible, i.e. focused on the meaning and not on the form. In this study, students will be focusing on the form, but actively, through communicative, meaning-based, exploratory assignments. Even though well-criticized for lack of empirical evidence (Faerch & Kasper, 1986; Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1987, etc.), the significant contribution of the Input Hypothesis to the field of applied linguistics is that it shows how teachers can focus on the actual level of students, adjusting the complexity of the material so that learners will be able to reach what initially was beyond their level.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
Teaching grammar is now the most challenging task that any Iranian teacher may face in her/his daily classroom. Many do not wish to teach grammar explicitly but they are aware that students need an understanding of the rules to achieve fluency as well as accuracy. Unfortunately, many students leaving schools and entering universities do not have adequate English proficiency to excel in their studies. One possible solution is integrated approach to grammar teaching where there is a focus on the form but the activity is meaning based.

The primary purpose of this study, then, is to determine whether story telling activities is effective or help comprehension of grammar. Among many factors attributed to the listener, language proficiency and teaching grammar through context are two factors under investigation in this research, the extent to which story-telling activities affect the improvement of learner grammar is also examined in this study.

The technique that is going to be used is teaching grammar using story telling activities. In any case, by this method of teaching grammar, we can challenge students and stimulate their interests by letting them choose favorite stories and that is in itself, a major success to breaking the traditional view of grammar classes as dull and boring.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
This study is an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Does using storytelling for teaching grammar have any significant effect on the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures by Iranian EFL learners?
2. Is there a significant difference between teaching grammar traditionally and teaching grammar through storytelling with regard to their influence on the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures by Iranian EFL learners?

**METHODOLOGY**

**Subjects**
The participants in this study were 30 Iranian under-intermediate EFL learners (based on Nelson Solution Test), aged 17-18, studying in the fourth grade in one of the high schools in Isfahan and were homogenous with regard to their English proficiency level. The sample included female participants with the same native language, that is, Farsi. The learners participated voluntarily and then were randomly assigned into the two groups (one experimental and one control) involved in the study (15 students each).

**Instruments**
In order to answer the questions of the study, for the main experiment, a story containing some grammatical points related to conditional sentence (type III) were chosen, then the teacher wanted the students to answer the questions that were at the end of the passage. The story was chosen according to the length and difficulty level. Also, a pre-test and an identical post-test including 15 item-multiple choice test was selected and administered to two groups. It should be mentioned that the grammatical point (conditional sentence type III) was taught to the control group based on the exercises of their textbook.

**Procedure**
In the first place the students were divided into two group of experimental and control, 15 each. Then a pre-test of the grammar test was conducted immediately before starting the experiment to both groups to evaluate the subjects’ ability in grammar. The researcher developed a 15-item-multiple choice test on conditional sentences (type 1, 2, 3) and the modal verbs usage that only 5 of them tested conditional sentence type 3. Test items had 4 choices only one of which was correct. In scoring, (1) point for each correct answer and (0) for each wrong answer was allotted.

The treatment consisted of two levels: the method of telling short story and the traditional method alone. The experimental group undertook the first level of the treatment and the control group undertook the second level. For the main experiment, a story which contains some grammatical points related to conditional sentence (type 3) was chosen (the learners were taught conditional sentences type 1 & 2 in grade two), then the teacher taught new vocabulary from the story, told the story and wanted the students to answer the questions that were at the end of the passage. The answer of all of the questions related to conditional sentence. Traditional teaching was conducted to the control group. It means that after introducing the grammatical point, examples and patterns related to that point is read and some exercises were done.

To be sure of the efficiency of the treatment, the researcher administered a post-test, an achievement test, both to the experimental and the control group about two weeks after the
treatment. The post-test was identical to the pre-test as it had the same type of items, number, and structure.

RESULTS
The purpose of this study is to find out the impact of using storytelling as a teaching strategy on EFL learners’ grammar acquisition and to investigate if there is significant difference in students’ achievements between traditional method and storytelling method of grammar teaching. The data were collected through a pretest-treatment-posttest design for equivalent groups and analyzed via the statistical package SPSS.

To determine if there are any significant differences in the students’ achievements between the means of the two groups (experimental and control) on the pre- test, the researcher used the pre-test for the two groups so as to emphasize homogeneity between them. And an independent-samples t test was carried out to compare the two groups. Table 1 shows the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Computed T</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table (1) shows that there is no significant difference between experimental group and control group on the pre- test, because the computed T (1.42) is smaller than the critical T (2.131), so we accept the null hypothesis (Ho) that there is no significant difference between the means of the two groups. This result can be represented in the following diagram. (Figure 1)

To answer the first question of the study and determine if there are any significant differences in the students’ achievements between pre and post tests among the experimental group due to storytelling strategy, the researcher used the paired samples t- test. Table 2 shows the results:
Table 2: The paired samples t-test to show the differences between pre-test and post-test results among the experimental group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Computed T</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>-2.68</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table (3) shows that there are significant differences between the pre-test and the post-test among the students of the experimental group in favour of the post test, because the computed T (-2.68) is bigger than the critical T (1.96) at α=0.05, so we reject the null hypothesis (Ho) that there is no significant difference between the means of measurement (pre-test and post-test). This indicates that using storytelling in English language instruction to the intermediate students has a positive effect on students' acquisition of grammatical rules. This result can be represented in the following diagram. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: The differences between the means of pre-test and post-test for the experimental group

Then the researcher used the paired samples t-test to discover if there are any significant differences in the students' achievements between pre and post tests among the control group due to traditional method. Table 3 shows the results:

Table 3: The paired samples t-test to show the differences between pre-test and post-test results among the control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Computed T</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-3.27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table (3) shows that the computed T (-3.27) is bigger than the critical T (2.94) at α=0.01, so there are significant differences between the pre-test and the post-test among the students of the control group in favour of the post-test and the null hypothesis (Ho) that there is no significant difference
between the means of measurement (pre-test and post-test) is rejected. This result can be represented in the following diagram. (Figure 3)

![Figure 3: The differences between the means of pre-test and post-test for the control group](image)

To answer the second question of the study and determine if there are any significant differences in the students’ achievements between the means of the two groups (experimental and control) due to using storytelling method as shown by the post-test, the researcher used the independent samples t-test. Table 4 shows the result:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Computed T</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>experimental</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 4 shows, there is not statistically significant difference between experimental group and control group on the post-test, since the computed T (0.11) is smaller than the critical T (2.131) the, so we accept the null hypothesis (Ho) that there is no significant difference between the means of the two groups. This result can be represented in the following diagram. (Figure 4)
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
This study set out to investigate two research questions: (1) whether teaching grammar through storytelling have any significant effect on the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures by Iranian high school EFL learners; and (2) whether there is a significant difference between teaching grammar traditionally and teaching grammar by using storytelling with regard to the influence they exert on the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures by Iranian high school EFL learners. The findings revealed that using storytelling had a positive impact on the acquisition of the grammatical rules, as suggested by the post-test results. Moreover, the findings indicated that teaching grammar using storytelling was not significantly different with regard to the influence they exerted on the acquisition of the grammatical rules and structures by Iranian high school EFL learners. Of course, this is true according to the results of this study. It seems that the students in higher levels benefit less than lower level proficiency level because, according to Thanajaro (2000) they have the ability to organize new information and helping methods have little additional effect on them. Moreover, since the low proficient learners do not have enough experience with the new language they are learning, they need to be helped in whatever way possible.

Although the results of this study did not turn out to be as expected, it is evident that storytelling is one of the most basic ways of sharing knowledge, of making sense of experiences, and of seeing oneself in relation to others. In the classroom, storytelling is an important activity with strong links to literacy. As professional storyteller Jeff Gere (2001) points out, “Storytelling can encourage students to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten a student’s ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner.” In our fast-paced, media-driven world, storytelling can be a nurturing way to remind children that spoken words are powerful, that listening is important, and that clear communication between people is an art.
Every study, evidently, has some shortcomings imposed on it because of some limitations. This research is no exception. To support the results obtained through this study, there are some suggestions made for further studies in order to complement the findings of this study. They are as follows:

1. The participants in this study were intermediate learners. Some other studies can be conducted with participants of other proficiency levels, that is, elementary, lower-advanced, and advanced, to find out whether or not the same results will be obtained.

2. The focus of attention in this study was teaching grammar. Other studies can be carried on in the areas of reading and writing and find out how the participants react in those structures.

3. The material used in this study was a short story that was suitable for the intermediate level. In other studies of this kind we can use some complicated and longer passages can be used to see if the groups will still respond in the same way or differently regarding their proficiency level, because with longer text, the situation may be different.

4. The participants of this study were monolingual speaker of Persian; in other studies researchers can employ bilingual participants and understand whether or not the same results will be obtained. The rational for this is that since bilinguals’ cognitive ability is higher than monolinguals (Bialystok, 1992; Romaine, 1989), they may or may not benefit more from such activities.

REFERENCES


