İNGİLİZCENİN YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRETİLDİĞİ SINIFLARDA DİLİBLİGİSİ ÖĞRETİMİNDE ZAMAN DAĞILMININ ROLÜ

Öz

Bireylerin ikinci bir dili nasıl edindikleri sorunsalı akla ikincil olarak bu dillerin nasıl öğretilmesi gerektiği sorusunu getirir. Farklı becerileri öğretmek için çok sayıda teknik ve yöntem vardır. Özellikle dilbilgisi öğretiminde hangi tekniklerin kullanılması gerektiği hala tartışma konusudur. Şunu da belirtmek gerekip ki; öğretim tekniğleri kadar zaman dağılımı da öğretim sürecinde önemli bir pay sahibidir. Bu çalışmanın amacı normal ve yoğunlaştırılmış dilbilgisi öğretim programlarının İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği sınıflara olan etkisini analiz etmektedir. Çalışmanın uygulanması aynı seviyedeki 60 öğrenci üzerinde yapılmıştır. 30 ar kişilik ikı grup halindeki öğrencilere iki farklı program uygulanmıştır ve her iki grupta da aynı öğretmen aynı konu aynı teknikleri kullanarak öğretmeyi amaçlamıştır. Uygulamanın sonucunda sonuçları görmek adına öğrencilere bir yeterlilik testi uygulanmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Dil, öğretim, gramer, zaman
THE ROLE OF TIME DISTRIBUTION IN GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION FOR EFL CLASSES

Abstract

The question of how learners acquire a second language (SLA) also brings another question of how to teach that second language. Several techniques and methods have been used to teach different skills. Grammar teaching is in the centre of the debates in terms of methods of teaching. As well as the teaching methods, time is an important factor during teaching process. The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of intensive and regular programs (in terms of class hours) of grammar teaching in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. 60 students in the same level (pre-intermediate) but from two different groups (30 students for each) are taken into consideration. The same grammar subjects are taught to each group by the same instructor by using the same methods but in different periods. At the end of the study a proficiency test is applied to the students in order to see the results.

Keywords: Language, teaching, grammar, time

INTRODUCTION

Grammar teaching and the role of grammar in EFL have always been one of the most disputable topics in language teaching. It has always been questioned if it is necessary or not. Many scholars have totally different answers for this question. Rutherford (1987) states that grammar is “a necessary component of any language teaching program” (p.9). Also Ur (1996) mentions that: “grammar does not only affect how units of language are combined in order to ‘look right’; it also affects their meaning” (p.76). But as well as the scholars who praise the usage of grammar in language teaching there are also others who think that it is not crucial. In 2004, Nassaji and Fotos referred those scholars and said that they asserted grammar teaching unnecessary and they even claimed that it can cause problems in language acquisition.

However, the focus on grammar in language teaching has not been completely denied in language teaching process. For example in Turkey, grammar teaching is an inseparable part of language teaching and learning. In this study, the focus is not on its necessity or ways of teaching grammar but on time factor in grammar teaching.

The importance of time is rooted from the idea that practice is needed in order to acquire a skill. It is called “power law of practice” (Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981) in cognitive psychology. It simply implies that the more time devoted to a skill the more you become accurate and competent. As it is mentioned above time is an important factor in the process of teaching and learning in the second language learning (SLA). There are several research in cognitive psychology to see the role of time on teaching and learning process. Most of them resulted that if the subject is given in certain sequences rather than the ones given in massed time. Dempster (1996) referred it as ‘spacing effect’. Serrano (2011) made a study on the effects of time factor and practice in SLA. His study is on the effect of the distribution of
instructional hours on L2 learning in a classroom context while considering the students’ initial proficiency level. Current study is similar to his empirical study but rather than focusing on all skills, it is focused on grammar in a relatively shorter period than his.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cognitive psychology has a strong link with the language learning and acquisition. Several studies have been held in order to find the relation between time and learning. Most scholars in the area of cognitive psychology think in order for a skill to be acquired, a big amount of practice is needed. But the question is, how should this amount of practice be distributed?

Acquisition of skills has dealt with in the area of cognitive psychology. Carlson (2003) states that “a skill refers to an acquired ability that has improved as a consequence of practice” (p.36). Here, it can be concluded that a skill does not necessarily have to be mental, it can also be physical. And as it is widely known, in order to develop a skill physically, one has to do practice. Carlson (1997) this time gives the meaning of skill as a “repeated performance of the same (or closely similar) routines” (p.51). By saying this he does not intend to mean that practice is a cognitive-free process. But the definition is not clear enough. Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, (2012) defines a theory called Skill Acquisition Theory. It is not just a theory of the development of language, rather it is a general theory of learning ranging from cognitive to psychomotor skills. There are a number of theories for language acquisition that are related to skill acquisition models in cognitive psychology. Chapelle (2009) states that “these theories fall under the category of general human learning, i.e., it focuses “on language learning as a process of human learning”. It means that learning or acquiring a second language is accepted similar to learning a skill like riding a bicycle. So, practice has a crucial role in the learning process. Speelman (2005) thought skill acquisition as a different type of learning and he added “skilled behaviors can become routinized and even automatic under some conditions” (p.26). One of the most important theories is Anderson’s ACT-R skill acquisition theory (Anderson, 1993; Anderson et al., 2004), it theorizes that in order to make a performance in a given skill automatic, the knowledge needed to perform such skill has to go through several stages. This model has not been directly applied to the study of foreign language learning, but it is accepted as effective in the areas related to language learning. It also refers the roles of explicit and implicit learning. It further claims that adults learn something generally by explicit processes and after certain amount of practice they can convert them into implicit processes. Richards & Schmidt (2010), define declarative knowledge as knowing the facts, concepts and ideas consciously. Procedural knowledge, on the other hand, to know something unconsciously. In other words procedural knowledge is generally implicit that processes the explicit knowledge through practice.

At this point it is needed to answer another question: Is grammar a skill in language acquisition or learning process? Van Patten (2010) answers that question by saying: “Grammar as the formal properties of language is not a skill to be acquired; it is knowledge (as implicit mental representations) that is tapped during linguistic performance” (p.12). It means that all the other skills like reading, speaking and listening include grammar as a declarative knowledge inside. The development of skills is directly related to grammar, with automatization suggesting some kind of fluency (DeKeyser, 1997).
To sum up; the more you practice the more your language proficiency develops. However, the amount and distribution of practice has also great importance. The following section of the study will focus on the role of time distribution of practice in foreign language learning.

In SLA most studies have suggested that intensive or in other words massed instruction works better than distributed ones. But in cognitive psychology the case is just the opposite. This situations make scholars think of the reasons of this difference.

On of the reasons can be that in most of the research in the field of cognitive psychology (Toppino & Gracen, 1985; Underwood & Ekstrand, 1967 and Underwood, 1961;) has came to a conclusion that distributed instruction and practice can cause problems in retention. Because in cognitive psychology generally the experiments are done on memorizing. However, in second of foreign language learning especially the ones done in a classroom the participants do not have to memorize rather they internalize the rules or subjects. So, it is important to internalize and analyze the structures rather than call back them instantly. For example as the current study is related to grammar teaching, to memorize the rules cannot work, participants can remember the rules given to them but it is important to internalize and process them. This phenomenon can be explained by spacing effect which indicates that learning becomes better when it is distributed over time. So it is better to do give spaces in teaching and learning process rather than massed ones. It was first used by Hermann Ebbinghaus in 1885 in his book Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology.

Despite the fact that spacing effect is seen useful in SLA or EFL studies it is seen failed in retention of instant repetitions. There are two main theories related to spacing effect are used in order to explain it better. One of them is Encoding Variability theory and it claims that there is great deal of encoding variability when repetitions are spaced than when they are massed and that encoding variability is positively related to both recall and apparent frequency. (Leicht & Overton,1987)

And the other is Deficient processing theory (Hintzman, 1976; Jacoby, 1978), and it assumes that the subsequent items are given insufficient processing because of the fact that first ones is too closer. But if an item is presented when a certain period passed the first presentation loses its effectiveness.

There have been studies in order to see the effects of massed and regular types of courses. For example in 2002 Childers & Tomasello held a study which focused on a selected grammatical structure and vocabulary to show the role of spacing effect. In another study DeKeyser (2007) carried out a research to show the differences between the practice of vocabulary and grammatical structures which are called components and skills. As one can assume, the regular practice of grammar and vocabulary is effective than the skills. Because the items learned in grammar needs much more processing than skills.

It is also another factor which should be highlighted is the time of the test applied to see the results of the experiments. Most studies that are done to investigate difference between regular and massed instruction, the test are done right after the course or program. So it is inevitable to see the positive results of massed practice in such a testing style as the learners’ knowledge is too fresh. But it is questionable that in what sense that type of a test is reliable.

Foreign language teaching classes and programs are generally designed in regular schedules like 20 hours a week, 4 hours per day. But there are also some massed programmed courses, and
these ones are generally organized in order to achieve a particular test or take a license. For example in Turkey there are some EFL courses which lasts only 2 months in order to take a specific grade from YDS (a test required to be an academician or for some other jobs). But this kind of courses’ teaching programs are not designed to make permanent teaching, they are just for saving the day.

The research done on children and adults also can give different results. Because memory capacities, learning styles and concentration period have great difference. Especially young children’s memories are dynamical and so they can forget quicker than adults. (Fagen & Rovee-Collier. 1983) However they are faster in terms of learning too. From the studies done on this subject Ebbinghaus, 1964, made a research concentrated on memory and learning, the study has concluded that to distribute learning process through time is more effective than the massed one. However in another different research in 2004 by Netten & Germain, has came to a conclusion that traditional L2 or foreign language classes which are designed as scheduled hours per day and week are less effective than massed instruction classes.

The proficiency level of the L2 learners also affect the results. Most of the studies done on time distribution have focused on the levels of beginning and intermediate. In the current study the learners’ level is pre-intermediate. But there are still other studies that examines the other proficiency levels. (Gardner, Smythe, &Brunet 1977)

The study has concluded that learners whose proficiency level in the beginning is lower, get higher improvement. The results of the studies done in cognitive psychology and L2 teaching may seem to contradict with each other but we should keep in mind that each study has its own characteristics and even the learning style of the learners can cause huge differences.

For in the studies done in cognitive psychology the items are given immediately after and after it causes negative results. And also in most of L2 classes there is no continuous instruction of the same items. Some grammar structures or vocabulary patterns may given again time to time but it does not necessarily follow the same sequence.

To sum up; the studies made both in L2 and SLA and cognitive psychology cannot come to a certain decision in terms of choosing the best time distribution of practice and instruction. It is also be stated that the difference between learning acquisition should be taken into consideration. In acquisition internalizing the items is much more important than in learning. As Paradis (1994) states that a certain time of unconscious exposure to authentic language is crucial for acquisition process and so the learners need to be exposed to a language longer.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The aim of this study is to examine if the distribution of the hours of L2 instruction is related to learners’ L2 gains in terms of grammar. It will also be tested that if the results of the post-test will change when it is applied two weeks after the instruction period of intensive group. The following questions will be asked in order to guide the current study:

1. When the number of hours of instruction is held constant, does the distribution of such hours (manifested in regular and intensive English courses) have any effect on the learning of certain grammatical structures?
2. Does the timing of post-test applied at the end of the period have any influence on the results?
Considering the research as mentioned in the review of literature part of the study it can be foreseen that in terms of grammar teaching regular courses will be more effective. And for the results of tests that will be applied in different times (one will be applied right after the massed instruction and the same will be applied two weeks later again) there will be differences in terms of results as the period between two tests can cause forgetting.

**METHOD**

**Programs and Participants**

In the current study there are two groups and two different programs will be applied to these groups as regular and massed (intensive). In the regular group there are 4 hours of grammar courses in every week and it will last 3 weeks. The hours are distributed as two hours for two days in a week. In the other group 12 hours of grammar instruction will be given in one week as 2 hours for four days and 4 hours for the other day. The instructor (also the author), the methods and techniques are totally the same in two groups. Moreover the examples used during the course are also the same. Both regular and intensive groups take the same post-test after the instruction program. The intensive group takes the same test for two times in order to determine the difference of the results between the one applied at the end of the week that the massed instruction has finished and at the end of the 3 weeks. The grammatical structure ‘Relative Clauses’ is chosen for the item. As it needs a good deal of practice and it requires not only memorizing but also internalizing in order to apply it.

There are 20 students in each group. The ages of them are 18-19 and all of them are in the compulsory preparatory classes at 19 Mays University. Their proficiency levels are also the same, as they are both pre-intermediate.

**Procedure and Instruments**

For both groups the same data collection procedure was applied. Data was collected by a proficiency test composed of multiple choice questions, fill in the gaps exercises and sentence completion. A pre-test was not applied because the levels of the groups were determined by a test at the beginning of the semester and their scores were nearly the same. The study conducted for 3 weeks. The instruction period of the intensive teaching group is just the first week. The regular group’s instruction period lasts 3 weeks. Post-test was applied at the end of the first week to the intensive teaching group, and at the end of the 3 weeks period the test was applied them again in order to compare and contrast the results. For the regular group the post-test was applied only once. The content of the test was directly measures the proficiency in using relative clauses.

**Data Analysis**

In this study the proficiency test has been designed by the researcher. To show the differences of the scores of group A (intensive group) and group B (regular group) T-test was applied. And also in another table again T-test is applied in order to see the difference of the scores between the test which were applied to the intensive group right after the course and two weeks later. Statistical techniques such as mean, standard deviation, frequencies, percentage, and T-tests were used to analyze the statistical data. ‘SPSS 15.0’ data analysis program was used to make the calculations. To conduct statistical analyses, the threshold for significance was accepted as \( p < 0.001 \), so discussions and comments on the findings of the study were shaped in accordance with this significance threshold.
Table 1. The comparison of Group A and Group B’s scores of “Proficiency Test”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Deviation</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group A</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32.54</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>-5.549</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group B</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>43.76</td>
<td>9.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p <.001

The results of the t-test applied for each group test scores show that the significance level is .000 (p<.001). As it appears within the significance threshold, it can be said that there is a statistically significant difference between the intensive and regular groups. It can be concluded that the teaching and learning of grammar through regular courses seems more effective than intensive courses.

Table 2. The comparison of the first and second application of the test applied to intensive group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Deviation</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First test</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39.78</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>-3.309</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second test</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32.54</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p <.001

As it has been mentioned above the post-test has been applied twice to the intensive group. One right after the one-week massed instruction and the other at the end of the three weeks period, two weeks after the instruction. The results as shown in Table-2 reveals that in intensive teaching practices, the taught items can be forgotten in time. It is also important to mention that students are not informed about this second test. If they were informed they could try to memorize the questions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results shown in the tables in the previous parts of the study suggest that students instructed with a regular program made better in terms of grammar than those in an intensive program. The results are limited to grammatical items, so it is not possible to make a general comment. It is not also in line with Serrano’s study (2011) as it is concluded with the greater gains for intensive courses. In the conclusion part of his study Serrano states that: “In these programs the learners following intensive instruction not only have concentrated practice but also more practice than their peers receiving regular instruction.” But in this study it is assumed that this is not the case in terms of grammar. Because students in intensive classes do the practices right after the instruction so their knowledge is brand new but after a while they can forget, on the other hand in regular classes as practices are distributed over time it helps students to repeat and analyze their knowledge about the learned item which helps them to internalize better.
As a consequence, the current research has demonstrated that learning and teaching of grammar as a component of a foreign language are affected by distribution of time. Besides, it also shows that long intervals after a massed instruction of specific items lead students to forget. Future studies in this field can investigate the relationship between the time factor and other variables, such as teaching techniques, background of the students and motivation.

As mentioned throughout the study, it is limited only a particular groups’ classroom experiments of a particular structure so it can be applied and replicated by different researchers in different skills and with larger groups. It is a crucial field as it can guide to new program designs in language teaching.

REFERENCES


