

# GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION FOR GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE

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## Abstract:

This paper is based on a study which investigated the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction. The instruction was set in the context of teaching students to write literature reviews. A pre-test and a post-test were carried out to ascertain whether there was improvement in the students' command of verb tenses after a lesson where the students were given instruction on the different tenses that are used in literature reviews. The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that explicit grammar instruction is most effective for students who are least grammatically competent.

## INTRODUCTION

In the course of teaching students to write the literature review for their academic assignments, the researcher found that her students' writing was riddled with grammatical errors. In order to attempt to improve the students' writing within a short time, the researcher identified one aspect of grammar that they are weak in and to focus on giving them instruction on it.

There has not been significant research evidence to suggest that grammar instruction can improve students' writing (Krashen, 1984; Weaver, 1996). However, even Krashen, who is well-known for advocating natural language acquisition as opposed to formal language learning, has not recommended total abandonment of grammar instruction because this instruction may be necessary to "fill in the gaps left by acquisition" (Krashen, 1984: 35). Indeed, there is research evidence that the communicative language classroom, with its focus on meaning rather than form, has not been successful in producing grammatically competent language users (Ellis, 1997).

In making decisions on grammar instruction, it may be advisable for teachers to consider whether their students are intellectually ready for grammar instruction and whether the type of performance expected of the students require a high degree of grammatical accuracy. For instance, adults would be more intellectually ready than children for grammar instruction, and those who are required to write formally are more in need of grammar instruction than those who are learning the language for social purposes (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

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The issue of what aspects of grammar to teach has been addressed by both Krashen and Weaver; Krashen suggested the teaching of “straightforward rules” (1984:35) while Weaver suggested that “we teach a minimum of grammar for maximum bene-fits” (1996: 18). As to how the grammar instruction is to be provided, Krashen recommend-ed that it be “a small part of teaching students to write” (1984: 35). Indeed, research has suggested that it might be more effective to teach grammar in the context of writing than to teach it as a separate subject (Weaver, 1996).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to ascertain whether verb tenses used in context of writing up literature reviews could be effectively taught. The findings of this study have practical implications for other instructors in similar contexts.

### METHOD

10 post-graduate students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) participated in this study. They were asked to do a pre-instruction test in which they had to fill in the blanks of a sample literature review with the correct verb form. There were 10 blanks and beside each blank was the base form of the missing verb in parentheses.

The students were then taught to differentiate the use of verb tenses according to whether the citations are information prominent, weak author prominent, general statements, or author prominent. They were also taught that the reviewer’s attitude towards the findings reported is reflected in the verb tenses used.

Pages 51, 52, 53, 55 and 56 of the book *Writing Up Research: Experimental Research Report Writing for Students of English* (Weissberg & Buker, 1990) were used as instructional material. After one session of explicit grammar instruction on the tenses used in writing the literature review, the students were asked to do a post-instruction test which is identical to the pre-instruction test.

Scores of the pre and post-tests were recorded for analysis. In order to determine the effect of the grammar instruction described above, the difference between the pre- and post-test scores for each student who participated in this study was calculated. T-tests were performed to determine whether the difference between the pre- and post-test results was significant enough to suggest that the instruction had been effective.

### FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the pre- and post-test scores, and the difference between the scores for each student who participated in this study. Also shown are the means and standard deviations. The table shows that, collectively, there was a positive difference in the pre- and post-test scores.

In order to determine whether the positive difference was significant, a t-test was performed at the 0.05 level of significance. According to the results of the t-test, the difference was not significant, which means that this study could not claim that explicit grammar instruction given was effective.

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Test Scores, and Differences in Scores

Student	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score	Difference in Score
1	4	8	+4
2	5	10	+5
3	7	9	+1
4	6	7	-1
5	6	6	0
6	6	8	+2
7	6	7	+1
8	6	7	+1
9	7	6	-1
10	7		-1
Total	61	5	13
<b>Mean</b>	<b>.17</b>	<b>.5</b>	<b>1.3</b>
<b>S.D.</b>	<b>.21</b>	<b>5.61</b>	<b>3.79</b>

However, closer examination of the data revealed that there are noticeable differences in scores among the students who had the lowest pre-test scores. The two weakest students' post-test scores were double that of their pre-test scores. A t-test was then performed on the differences in scores of the two students who started off as being the least grammatically competent, that is, those who scored 5 and below in the pre-test.

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations calculated on the scores of the two weakest students. The second t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores.

Table 2: Weak Students' Pre- and Post-Test Scores, and Difference in Scores

Student	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score	Difference in Score
1	4	8	+4
2	5	10	+5
Total	9	18	+9
<b>Mean</b>	<b>.59</b>		<b>4.5</b>
<b>S.D.</b>	<b>.52</b>		<b>0.5</b>

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The findings suggest that grammar instruction may be most effective for students whose command of the tenses was weakest. Therefore, it can be concluded from the results of this study that students who have low grammatical competence are the ones who are most likely to benefit from explicit grammar instruction.

### DISCUSSION

It is hoped that the positive findings of this study would encourage other instructors to incorporate explicit grammar instruction in their classrooms and at the same time evaluate the effectiveness of such instruction in their respective classrooms. However, they would need to look at their own students' work to determine which particular rule of grammar to focus on.

Those who are teaching students to write literature reviews can replicate this study with the same instructional material as that used in this study to get additional evidence regarding the advantage of explicit grammar instruction. Once it is established that explicit grammar instruction has significant positive effects, another possible line of research is to compare the effectiveness of different instructional materials for grammar instruction.

The limitation of this study was that it could not provide evidence of positive long-term effect of explicit grammar instruction. Further research should be done to investigate the durability of such instruction by getting the students to take the test again at some time after the instruction has taken place.

### REFERENCES

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