

The impact of contrastive description of English complex sentences on reading comprehension of intermediate EFL learners

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Abstract-The field of second language learning is witnessing an increasing interest in the idea of reading comprehension. One of such new methods of teaching reading comprehension is called awareness-raising which is provided through contrastive description. Thus the present study was intended to investigate the effectiveness of awareness raising in Iranian EFL setting by comparing them with non-awareness raised one. To compare the effectiveness of the awareness raising through contrastive description and to have a homogeneous population of participants, a language proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was administered to 90 students as a pre-test and 60 male and female consisted of two gender each consisting of 30 whose proficiencies were between 34 and 78 (out of 90) were selected. While the experimental groups received awareness-raising on the English complex sentences (conditionals type 2&3s), through contrastive description, the control groups were not faced with such a treatment.

Key Words- Contrastive analysis, complex sentence, input enhancement, awareness-raising

1. INTRODUCTION

The present research aimed at probing the impact of contrastive description being delivered through awareness-raising on improvement of reading comprehension performance. Furthermore, it intended to examine whether AR differs in males and females (Zhang, & Wu, 2008). Contrastive analysis (CA) is a branch of applied linguistics, which deals with comparing and contrasting two languages in order to find out the similarities and differences between them. As Fisiak (1981, p.1) believes, contrastive analysis may be roughly defined as a sub-discipline of linguistics concerned with the comparison of two or more languages in order to determine both the differences and similarities between them (Marton 1981, p.147; Hayati 1998, p.2).

A complex sentence is like a simple sentence in that it consists of only one main clause. But unlike a simple sentence it has one or more subordinate clauses functioning as elements of the sentence (Zhang, & Wu, 2011b). Subordination is an asymmetrical relation: the sentence and its subordinate clauses are in a hypotactic relationship; that is, they form a hierarchy in which the subordinate clause is a constituent of the sentence as a whole (Quirk, 1985, p. 987).

Visual input or textual enhancement is an implicit means to draw learners' attention to form contained in the written input. This kind of input enhancement is achieved by increasing the perceptual salience of the target form via a combination of various formatting techniques (e.g. bolding, capitalizing, or underlining) which may sometimes be accompanied by an explicit mention to

learners to attend to the highlighted form (Izumi, 2002, p. 543-544).

Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that increased attention to form and lead to more learning (e.g. Robinson, 1995a; Leow, 1998). Wong (2003), for example, drew learners' attention to formal features of L2 input through 'textual enhancement' (TE). He investigated how TE as a form of input enhancement and increasing the comprehensibility of L2 input via 'simplified input'(SI) would affect adult L2 French learners' acquisition of French past participle agreement in relative clause construction, awareness and their subsequent learning of different grammatical features.

The concept of language awareness refers to a movement which aimed at creating curiosity about language in school children (particularly aged 10-14), and at integrating all the different areas of language teaching at school, and providing a good start for foreign language learning. In sum, its foremost aim is to provide a coherent framework for the different language experiences that school children are faced with at school.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Hawkins (1984, p. 4), the chief aim of language awareness in the curriculum of schools is to "challenge pupils to ask questions about language, which so many take for granted". He also argues that the concept of language awareness is a useful tool to bridge the gaps that exist between individual subjects concerned with language education, such as mother tongue, foreign language, ethnic minority language, Latin, etc.

Fisiak (1981) divides contrastive analysis into two types, theoretical and applied. He argues that, the theoretical contrastive studies give a comprehensive account of the differences and similarities between two or more languages. It provides an adequate model for their comparison, specify how and which elements are comparable, and defining such notions as congruence, equivalence, correspondence, etc.

Keshavarz (1993) introduces contrastive analysis, pedagogical CA, its psychological basis, pedagogical value and different versions of CA. He also elaborates on the techniques and procedures of CA, CA and linguistic models and criticisms and merits of CA. Fries (1945, as cited in Keshavarz (1993, p. 7), believes that the most effective materials (for foreign language teaching) are those that are based upon a scientifically description of the language of the learner'.

Ziahosseiny (1994, p. 12) believes that contrastive linguistics is claimed to be a useful device in foreign language teaching and an aid in error analysis. He argues that contrastive linguist is largely associated with language teaching, and this is the main reason that a large number of theoretical linguists neglect this area of research and consider it as an activity outside the confines of applied linguistics only in field such as translation and language typology.

Hayati (1998, p. 2) cites that contrastive analysis approach has clear implications for language teaching. If errors are produced because of difficulty, then the teacher should focus on the area of difficulty, and establish the right habits by intensive practice of pattern drills. The areas of potential difficulty are identifiable through the implementation of contrastive analysis. In fact, contrastive analysis is of great practical value in providing foundation materials for teaching syllabus and pedagogical grammar. More specifically, the following questions motivated the present study:

1. To what extent does contrastive description of complex sentences improve students' reading comprehension?
2. To what extent does contrastive description of complex sentences trigger any change in male and female learners' reading comprehension?

3.METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 90 male and female intermediate EFL students of the Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch whose major was teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). They were all native speakers of Persian and their ages ranged within 22 to 25. They had a four-credit course of English, meeting four hours, per week with a non-native speaker instructor. Having given a language proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) to them, 60 male and female consisted of two gender each consisting of 30 whose proficiencies were between 34 and 78 (out of 90) were selected. Those students (30 persons) whose proficiency levels were either too low (below 34) or too high (above 78) were not regarded as subjects of the study.

3.2. Instrumentation

In order to examine the research hypotheses of this study, two sets of tests (Pre-test (Nelson Cloze Test) and Post-test (Reading Comprehension) were prepared. A Nelson test of English language proficiency (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was administered to assess the participants' general knowledge of English (a sample of the test is available in appendix 1). This test with a total of 50 multiple-choice items comprised the following three main parts: A: structures (20 items), B: vocabulary (15 items), AND c: reading comprehension (15 items).

The post-test was a reading comprehension test which constitutes of 30 multiple choice questions on narrative reading comprehension passages. The reading passages were selected from *Intermediate Select Reading* (Lee & Gunderson, 2002). According to Lee and Gunderson (2002), *Intermediate Select Reading* is a series of reading texts for students of English in which passages serve as springboards for reading skills development, vocabulary building, language analysis, and thought-provoking discussion and writing.

3.3. Procedure

After the administration of the Nelson test to a population of 90 students of Islamic Azad university of Ahvaz, majoring in English, 60 male and female students were selected on the basis of their scores. As the study involved two variables of gender and method of teaching, the students of each gender were divided into two groups each with 15 students known as control and experimental. Afterwards, the participants were provided with a reading comprehension test constituting of 30 multiple choice questions on narrative reading comprehension passages. The reading passages were selected from the book *Select Reading*. Over a ten-week period in 1388-89 (2009-10) academic year of Iran, the students were divided into four groups (known as male and female's control and experimental groups). While, the control groups (CG) were not exposed to instruction concerning comprehending complex sentences, the experimental groups (EG) received contrastive instruction concerning comprehensibility of complex sentences in English and Persian, that is to say, the experimental group was given awareness through contrastive description of complex structures as followings:

Describing the most nonexistent (similarities and differences) and dominant complex features of the complicated sentences in both language (M & T), using italicized and high lightened form of the sentences in which leads to misconception, misapplication and finally facial and semantic subversion of such sentences in the mind of the language learners; likewise misapplication of past verbal form instead of present real and variability usage of conditional equivalences in Persian in the following examples:

Conditional (type 2)

Native sentence (English)

If you asked him, he would accept.

(Present form: Accurate**form)****Non- native (Persian equivalence)**Agar az oo darkhast mikardid, **mipaziroft**.

Misuse of past tense form by Iranian Language Learners:

If you asked him, he would accepted.

(Past form: Wrongly

used form of verb)

The above examples implies that Iranian language learners have mostly problem in learning conditional sentences (type 2), because of underlying description belonging to the past event in the whole sentence, what Comrie (1986, p. 94) have referred to as "*back-shifting of tense*" or "*the use of a morphologically past tense with present*."

Conditional (type 3)

Variability usage of conditional equivalences in Persian:

Past perfect in conditional sentences describes a hypothetical situation of the past time: take the following example:

If he had gone earlier, he would have caught the train.

The sentence implies that he did not go earlier. This is while, in Persian as indicated by Lambton (1971, p. 66), a hypothetical situation relating to the past can be expressed by a variety of patterns exemplified as follows:

1-Using the imperfect in both parts of the sentence, e.g,

Agar zoodtar miraft be Qatar **miresid**.

2-Using the past perfect in either of both parts of the sentence, e.g,

Agar zoodtar rafte bood, be Qatar resideh bood.

Agar zoodtar miraft, be Qatar reside bood.

Agar zoodtar rafte bood, be Qatar miresid.

It appears that while, in English there is only one distinct pattern related to unreal past conditions; there are nearly four choices in Persian. Interference problems in this area are not therefore unlikely.

In sum, overextension of the past form to replace past perfect in English erroneously, and variability usage in all the above mentioned Persian forms constitute ungrammatical English expressions and thus special learning problems for the Iranian students. In other words, the present result is in line with Chou's (2000) research, in which she found there was an inclination for many learners using the past form to substitute the past perfect. Chou suggested that this may be attributable to their wishes to simplify difficult grammatical rules. This is while the control groups were not exposed to such kind of description, and complex structures were not described contrastively in English and Persian. After instruction, a single test covering pedagogical materials of the study was administered to two groups. Statistical analysis of the participants' scores on the post-test indicated whether the contrastive description could have any positive effects on learning or not. It also proved the probable significant correlation between the learner's gender and teaching through contrastive description.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the beginning, the students' scores on pre-test were obtained, then descriptive statistics, mean, and standard deviation of each group were calculated. The following table shows the result of mean and standard deviation of the participant's pre-test.

Table 1. Comparison of the Pre-test and Post-test (Control and Experimental Groups)

Indexes	N	Median	%	Median	SD	Median	%	T
Experimental group	30	14.31	84	15.35	1.34	-1.4	1.5	%84
Control group	30	13.88	67	14.71	1.8	89	82	

As presented in Table 1, on one hand, the pre-tests mean and standard deviation of the experimental group in dependent variable equals 14.31 and %84, and in the control group 13.88 and %67 respectively. On the other hand, the achieved post-test median and standard deviation of experimental and control groups in dependent variable were 15.35 and 1.34 and 14.71 and 1.8 respectively. Moreover, T-test of the independent groups showed that there were no differences between both groups (E & C). ($P = \%42$ & $T = \%84$). In reality, the attained results do not support the first hypothesis and imply that training through contrastive descriptions about the English complex sentences did have significant impact on enhancement of reading comprehension of the students.

There was not a significant difference existed between the means of the female's experimental and control groups on both pre-test and post-test. The mean of experimental and control on pre-test equals -1.23 and 1.22 respectively. Moreover, the *t*-test shows no difference, from dependent point of view, between the experimental and control groups.

There was not a significant difference existed between the means of the male's experimental and control groups on both pre-test and post-test. The means are partly close to each other and the *t*-test of the dependent groups showed no difference between the both groups (experimental and control) in dependent variable. In other words, the rate of *T* (-1.2) and the level of *P* (%314) imply that, the experimental interference was not effective. To evaluate the effect of contrastive description of English complex sentences on experimental and control group on reading comprehension, the sample means of participants on post-test were compared. The result of the *t*-test for the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG) depicted significant effects of these variables on the reading comprehension performance of the sample population.

The descriptive analysis mentioned above answers the first and second hypotheses. In other words, there was a significant difference among the subjects' grades on the four post-tests as shown earlier in table 1. According to the attained results based on the post-tests, the perceived performances of the test-takers were higher than the pre-

test, tacitly implying that results of the testees on subjects' scores rejected the first null hypothesis at (.05) level of significance, which indicated that the difference among the means was significant.

The significant differences in the scores on the post-test between the both groups awareness raised group (experimental) and non-awareness raised group (control) suggest that awareness raising being provided through contrastive description should be an integral part of every class from the beginning of the semester, to have a noticeable and favorable effect on students' performance specifically those poorly grained readers (Gorjian, Alipour & Saffarian, 2012).

According to the results of the study, awareness raising administered through contrastive analysis helps the poor readers to enhance their perceptual understanding of the target complicated features by using various techniques such as bolding, capitalizing, underlining and highlighted form of reading comprehension texts, what, according to Izumi (2002, p. 543-544), integrates the attention and meaning together.

These findings of the present study are in line with Ellis (1997, p. 163) study that reported similar results. Generally speaking, the final results of the present study indicated that following usage of contrastive description, the scores of the experimental group on post-test (reading comprehension) concerning difficult complex sentences were significantly higher than the scores gained by the control (Zhang, Wu, Wei & Wang, 2011).

In conclusion, it seems that instruction of awareness-raising through contrastive analysis can affect comprehension of students at the intermediate level of English reading proficiency. Moreover, this study supports Ellis' recommendations (Ellis, 2002c), concerning usage of explicit knowledge and implies that we must use explicit knowledge rather than implicit knowledge in teaching complicated structures of the target language (Ellis, 1997, p. 164). Therefore, observance the sequence of easy to difficult, simple to complex and familiar to unfamiliar when teaching foreign language structures to EFL learners, must be taken into consideration.

5. CONCLUSION

The present was intended to investigate the significance of gains produced through awareness-raising performance compared with gains produced from traditional teacher-centered, deductive lessons (non-awareness raising one). In the case of beginners, awareness-raising is advantageous because it requires L1, non-verbal responses, or minimal L2 responses (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh, 2012). Thus, in the case of learners with low level of language ability, awareness-raising is preferred to production practice requiring the learners to produce the target language, which in turn may lead to their frustration (Gabrielatos, 1994, p. 7). Applying of awareness raising in the target language, in addition of raising the rate of learner's learning in all fields of second language learning especially reading comprehension, will provide opportunities for communicating in the target language (Ellis, 1997).

3) Awareness-raising requires learners to discover the rules of language. It is believed that an invitation to decipher for themselves is potentially more motivating to learners than simply giving them rules, and for this reason the students are likely to remember what they teach (Ellis, 1997). Ellis (1997, p. 30) believes that one of the most important advantages of such discovery-based awareness-raising is their learner-training function. In other words, by performing awareness-raising, learners develop the potentiality and skills needed to investigate and analyze language data automatically for them. Performing awareness-raising can lead to powerful insights about grammatical points being merged in English complex sentences that cannot be found in any description (Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo, 2011). That is, there is a great deal about grammar of a language that teachers do not know, while performing such approach by students can lead them to insights not found in any books (Ellis, 1997, p. 165).

6) The present study suggests that awareness-raising is a *useful pedagogical activity* to keep all the students involved and engaged. Therefore, awareness raising seems to be an *attractive pedagogic option* in grammar teaching because: (a) they have proved effective results compared to deductively-based approach in developing grammatical explicit knowledge in learners; (b) awareness raising has been supported by SLA theory; e.g. Ellis' (1997) model of second language acquisition. Furthermore, it is necessary to mention that as a useful tool, CA can be manipulated for the development of materials and teaching languages and the students of a foreign language can benefit from teaching through contrastive description. Moreover, teachers' contrastively-dominated descriptions of complex sentences can remove some of the learners' difficulties (both male and female that are proportionately at the same rate) in learning English as a foreign language (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012).

The contrastive descriptions of the complex sentences help our teacher in different ways. They are indicative of the problematic areas for learners at different levels of instruction. Thus, our teachers can place more emphasis on those areas to improve the rate of learning, and to provide more proper descriptions as well as exercises in order to enhance the student's linguistic competence and understanding about those complex structures.

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Vitae



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