Relationship between Grammar Accuracy, Reading and Writing Performance among Malaysian ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Grammar is important in language acquisition and is defined as study or analysis of rules in the language (Huddleston & Geoffrey, 2002). Grammar knowledge is the elemental foundation for writing (Fearn & Farnan, 2007). Research studies have demonstrated that mere exposure to L2 grammar, reading comprehension, and formal written text is not the most effective means of attaining academic L2 proficiency (e.g., Hinkel, 2002; Laufer & Nation, 2001; Norris & Ortega, 2000). However, grammar instruction in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been a controversial issue since the onset of SLA research (Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2012). Therefore, this mixed-method research is undertaken to investigate several issues pertaining to the learning grammar-in-context. Specifically, the study aims to investigate the relationship between grammar accuracy, reading and writing performance among Malaysian ESL learners. The study also aims to investigate whether the regular use of contextualised grammar may improve or not the grammatical competence of the students. The participants of this study are Form 5 students from a secondary school in Peninsular Malaysia. Stratified random sampling procedure is used to select the subjects. A quasi-experimental research design is adopted to gauge learners’ performance in reading and writing among ESL learners in Malaysia. The measurement instruments comprise pre-test, post-test, multiple grammar treatments, observation and linguistic analysis. The data collected would be able to provide answers to: a) How does conscious learning of grammar affect the writing performance and grammar knowledge of learners; b) The type of grammatical errors learners make in their essays; c) The relationship between performance on grammatical test with essay writing test; and d) The relationship between the performance on SPM 1119/1 (guided and free writing) with SPM 1119/2 (Reading comprehension). This study was designed based on underlying theories of SLA, the constructivist learning theory, Descriptive Grammar theory, and Functional Theories of Grammar.

Keywords: Grammar, Descriptive grammar, grammar-in-context, contextualised grammar

Introduction

Historically, grammar was learnt as a discrete set of rigid rules to be memorized, practiced, and followed (Christy, n.d., p. 1). This type of grammar, which focuses on rules and drills, which is called also as the prescriptive grammar. Many students were taught grammar in a systematic way (Ayoob, 1999). Learners should find it interesting, fun and useful to learn grammar (Ayoob, 1999, p. 3). "In essence grammatically standard language was created so that people would learn the same language and be easier to govern. If people do not understand what you are saying, then their communication cannot be ruled" (Ayoob, 1999, p. 4). Isolated learning of skills wasn't working with learners, so the learning of grammar is abandoned altogether (Hoffman, 2006).

Another way of learning grammar to compare to prescriptive grammar learning was descriptive grammar learning (sometimes called transformational grammar), where grammar is matched to the purpose of the user (Christy, n.d.). This new type of grammar was less rigid, when it came to rules. The basic principle of the idea was that grammar is best learned in the context of reading, writing, and speaking (Hoffman, 2006).

Most people agree that grammar does need to be taught. Grammar is not something that is necessarily fun or exciting to learn, but learners can only learn to express themselves well using complete sentences. It is quite impossible to learn the rules or usage of grammar without being guided (Oldenburg, 2005). The learning of grammar is not just about errors and correctness but to help us to understand how to make meaningful, clear and precise sentences and paragraphs (Haussamen, n.d., p. 1).
Children develop an understanding of how language works in learning grammar and will subsequently be able to use the language effectively (Fellowes, 2007, p.1). Grammar is a language which makes it possible for everyone to convey something in a language (Haussamen, n.d., p. 1).

The learning of the eight parts of speech in isolation will not improve writing skills, but understanding grammar will give students more choices in their writing. Grammar must be functional for learning to arouse the interest in learning it. Learning how sentences are put together is essential to writing, and this may mean learning the parts of speech within that context (Kratzke, 2003).

**Contextualised Grammar**

Thus, there are, to date, no large-scale studies which investigate the benefits or otherwise of learning grammar in the context of writing, in which connections are forged for the student writer between the grammar under focus and the learning focus for the writing (Jones, Myhill & Bailey, 2013).

Research conducted since the early 1960s strongly suggests that the best way for learners to improve their command of grammar in writing and reading is to use their writing as the basis for discussing grammatical concepts. This means to learn the rules of grammar (e.g., punctuation, sentence variety), it is best to learn in the context of writing than to learn the properties separately (Chin, 2008).

The learning of grammar can improve learners’ reading and writing if they learn grammar “in context” (Goode, 2000; Sams, 2003; Sedgwick, 1989). The learning of grammar in writing rather than for writing should be taught so learners understand better how the language works, and function. Grammar in writing allows learners to understand about language when they write (Hillocks & Smith, 2006). Learners find it less difficult to master grammar if they learn through discovery rather than drill-and-practice (D’Eloia, 1987).

It is crucial to provide writing input in learning of grammar (Del VanPatten, 2003). The opportunities to deliver output from learners is important to gain fluency and accuracy (Guilloteau, n.d.). Learning to write as a process to ESL learners was first introduced by Vivian Zamel in 1976 (cited in Kroll, Long, & Richards 2003). The need to use grammatical conventions in various contexts is stressed by many researchers in order to control and use them correctly (Anderson, 2005).

The effective influence in learning of grammar specifically grammar conventions and mechanics , through writing were evidently shown by researchers such as Calkins (1994), Fu (2003), and Anderson (2005). Similarly, learner’s improvement in writing performance over a substantial period had dramatically shown when following the grammar-in-context approach (Graham & Perin, 2007, p.21). In the same vein, Weaver, et al. (2001) agreed that effective writing is a result of learning grammar in context because it allows learners to apply in mechanics and conventions ways and to be able to produce effective writing. Research shown that grammar is best to be understood and learned conceptually, inductive, discovery-based process rather than mechanically (Dean, 2008; Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005; Raub, 1880 as cited in Dean, 2008 ) which can be be provided and illustrated obviously in writing. The understanding of grammar through writing and reading needed to be learned in contextualised way in writing (Dean, 2008, p.75).

**Grammar learning in Malaysia Context**

English is no more an alien language to be used by many in many fields such as the international language of diplomacy, business, science, technology, banking, computing, medicine, aviation, engineering and tourism, thus a value added in determining the success of one’s career if one could master the language well. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for learners to have good command of English to enable them to venture and compete in these challenging fields (Carson, 2007).

It is a worrying scenario in Malaysia due to the deteriorating standard of English among Malaysian learners, especially those from suburban and rural areas. Though English is learnt as a second language after Bahasa Malaysia, other languages of different ethnic groups in the country are also widely used by respective communities. Interference of mother tongue language system in some ways contributes to wrong usage of English grammatical rules, morphology and syntax. Learners tend to refer to their fight language system when writing English using direct translation and depend on dictionary meanings to comprehend English text (Ambigapathy 2002). Hence, formal instruction in the classroom becomes the main means of learning English as opportunities for natural interaction and conversation of English is limited to these students (Arshad Abd. Samad & Hawanum Hussein, 2010).

Learners still are not able to achieve satisfactory level of English language gauge competency after having learning English in a formal environment for eleven years in the primary and secondary levels (Nor
Hashimah Jalaluddin, Norsimah Mat Awal, & Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008). This is especially true when it comes to writing and reading (Saadiyah Darus & Kaladevi Subramaniam, 2009) as grammatical inaccuracy in students’ written work has been an alarming problem that needs to be addressed (Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie & Arshad Abd. Samad, 2007).

From the students’ written work, it is found that tenses, one of the properties in grammar is among the most common errors (H. P. Lim, 1976; Saadiyah Darus & Khor, 2009; Vahdatinejad, 2008) and this has been a tough area to remedy (Saadiyah Darus & Kaladevi Subramaniam, 2009; Vijaya & Viswanath, 2010).

Applying correct grammatical rules in writing is also another issue among Malaysia ESL learners. A study done by Saadiyah Darus and Kaladevi (2009) which analysed 72 written essays by Form Four students in one semi-urban secondary school found that learners generally have problems in applying correct grammatical rules in their writings. This study was in agreement with two previous studies that identified common grammatical errors made by the students are Subject-Verb agreement and the wrong usage of singular and plural forms. The two common problem identified by researchers were the wrong application of verb tense, inappropriate word choice and prepositions among the learners. This study suggested that the ESL learners in the country have yet to master the basic grammatical structures even though they have gone through 10 years of learning English.

Another experimental study using Bahasa Malaysia in teaching writing promote better writing literacy among limited proficiency English learners was done and the results were interesting. Using experimental study, their research corroborated that the use of Bahasa Malaysia to generate ideas among limited proficiency English learners helped the learners to produce better quality essays in terms of overall score, content, language and organization. Another same result study done by Razianna Abdul Rahman (2005) confirmed that by using Bahasa Malaysia in an English class can make the learners learn English. In the study, it was found that the learners resorted in explaining an incomprehensible or difficult English passage using Bahasa Malaysia and the translation facilitated their comprehension of the English text (Siti Hamin Stapa & Abdul Hameed Abdul Majid, 2006).

In the focus of reading area, a study was done to examine the use of language learning strategies among Form Two students in the state of Johor. The result showed that the language learning strategies are still underutilized and underdeveloped among the participants and this poor use of learning strategies could account for the students’ weaknesses in reading English text. This study showed that 8.2 % of the participants reported that they rarely or never use contextual or the background knowledge to guess the contents in a reading passage and that they are highly dependent on Bahasa Malaysia to help them comprehend an English text (Nambiar, Ibrahim & Pramela, 2008).

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between grammar accuracy, reading and writing performance among the Malaysian ESL learners. Through this study, the exploration of the efficacy of contextualised grammar which presents both explicit grammar instruction and meaningful input allow learners to elaborate on, experiment with, and relate to the received knowledge.

This study is to make another move ahead to redress the contextualised grammar in improving reading and writing performance of learners in rural school. This is also to bring back the beneficial impact upon learners’ grammar knowledge using conscious learning of grammar in context. Since writing needs to use correct grammatical sentences, by using regular contextualised grammar in practice, learners will learn grammar in writing, not for writing.

This study is an attempt to gauge, with confidence the areas of what the students know (competence) and how to find out what they know (language testing) among the Form 5 students of L2 English in Malaysia.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was constructed based on principles derived from the theoretical perspectives of five major theoretical approaches, namely: functional theories of grammar, Universal Grammar, descriptive grammar approach, second language acquisition theories and constructivist learning theory.
From the chart above, the factors being to relate to the outcome, learners’ reading, writing performance and the accuracy of grammar. These three outcomes will mainly depend on the three big factors, which are grammar knowledge, essay writing and content analysis. Being having to get the results from the factors would give the answer to the question if there is relationship between grammar accuracy, reading and writing performance among Malaysian ESL learners.

The Study

Participants

250 volunteers, 116 males and 134 females, were recruited using the purposive sampling strategy. This technique is used as a type of sampling in which a particular setting, persons or events are intentionally chosen as the important information that they can provide cannot be gotten from other choices (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In this case, the participants were required to sign an informed consent form prior to the treatment as a proof of their agreement to take part in the research and were informed of their rights. The respondents were recruited from a suburban area - Penang and all participants were students with English language proficiency ranging from average to low level. They studied in Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seri Balik Pulau and scored between G to B that was between 10 marks to 75 marks in the recent trial examination preceding their standardised government examination.

Instruments

To carry out the study, three instruments were designed to collect the needed data. A participant’s information form was distributed once the participants were recruited. For the quantitative design, a pre-post test of reading comprehension and writing , two raters and a set of marking criteria were used while the qualitative design consisted of researcher’s journal.

Participants’ writings and reading comprehension at the pre-test phase of the study were evaluated and scored by two raters for the matter of inter-rater reliability. To estimate the inter-rater reliability of the tests, the correlation coefficients between the two raters were calculated. The result shown to have very high inter-rater reliability with an average of 0.913 which were found statistically significant at p<0.1 level of significance.

Treatment

The treatment for this study was divided into four sessions each month, 40 minutes per session. Each session was repeated with different category of learning content each month.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Type of Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>W1</td>
<td>Guided writing (S1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W2</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W3</td>
<td>Free writing (S3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W4</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>W1</td>
<td>Guided writing (S1-1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W2</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S2-1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W3</td>
<td>Free writing (S3-1) [one wk school break]</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W4</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S4-1)</td>
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<td>April</td>
<td>W1</td>
<td>Guided writing (S1-2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W2</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S2-2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W3</td>
<td>Free writing (S3-2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W4</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S4-2)</td>
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<td>May</td>
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<td>Mid-Year Exam</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>W1</td>
<td>Guided writing (S1-3) [mid year school break]</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W2</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S2-3) [mid year school break]</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W3</td>
<td>Free writing (S3-3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W4</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S4-3)</td>
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<td>July</td>
<td>W1</td>
<td>Guided writing (S1-4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W2</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S2-4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W3</td>
<td>Free writing (S3-4) [Raya break]</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W4</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S4-4)</td>
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<td>August</td>
<td>W1</td>
<td>Guided writing (S1-5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W2</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S2-5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W3</td>
<td>Free writing (S3-5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W4</td>
<td>Reading comprehension (S4-5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>September</td>
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<td>SPM Trial Exam</td>
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<td>November</td>
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<td>SPM</td>
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Figure 2

Data collection Procedures
Data Analysis Procedures

Test Scores for Quantitative Data

Once the test scripts are collected, they would be marked using the marking criteria that was described previously in Section (3.4.3). Then, the difference between the pre-test and post-test for both Score A and Score B would be calculated to detect of any improvement in the participants’ reading comprehension and writing in terms of the grammar accuracy made in their tests before and after the treatment. In addition, to ensure that there is a relationship between grammar accuracy, reading and writing performance, the real test scores would be collected from the mid-year, SPM Trial and SPM examinations.

To be sure that the marking of the pre- and post- tests were valid, an inter-rater reliability check would be carried out by comparing the scores awarded by the instructor and another teacher who is teaching the same level.

Inter-Rater Reliability for Quantitative Data

After all the sets of scripts are collected, extra copies were made from the test scripts to be given to another experienced Form 5 teacher to mark. After both the facilitator (Rater 1) and the teacher (Rater 2) have marked the scripts, the inter-rater reliability would be calculated using the Krippendorff alpha (∝) for all sets of test scripts. The suggested acceptance level for the alpha as stated by Krippendorff (2004), as cited by Taylor and Watkinson (2007), is to be above 0.7 to show reliability and validity of the marking.

Once the marks are obtained and the inter-rater reliability is established, the test scores would later be processed using PASW Statistic 18 to find out the significance level for Score A and Score B in determining the effectiveness of the treatment given.

Qualitative Data Analysis

For qualitative data analysis, two types of data are being looked into: the participants’ grammatical errors and the researcher’s journal. After the data collection of the participants’ errors, categorisation is done in order to code the type of errors made by the participants. As for the researcher’s journal, it is used to record observed improvement related to learners’ response during the sessions and all the journal entries are being compiled to be used for triangulation during the discussion of the result.

Triangulation

From this study, the different form of data source used to triangulate the participants’ scores and linguistic analysis of grammatical errors would be the researcher’s journal. The researcher would jot down her observation of the participants’ performance during the treatment sessions to keep track of what happened during the sessions. This is to see if the participants’ performance affect their test and exam results in the treatment given. The observations from the researcher is also to check against participants’ results and their performance during treatment sessions.

Figure 3 Triangulation process in the study
Conclusion

In Malaysia, English is accorded as a second language as stated in Article 152 in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin et al., 2008) and to be a part of globalisation, it is important that one is equipped with a good command of English in order to make it well in the global market. Besides, the ability to write in English is also considered one of the crucial skills required to insure one’s employment in the current job market (Siti Hamin Stapa, Tg Nor Rizan Tg Maastum, Rosniah Mustaffa, & Saadiyah Darus, 2008).

This paper is an effort to discover the improvement of English grammar accuracy. The treatment method in this study reveals information about learners’ needs, their strategies, factors which affect their productive knowledge and learning ability as well as knowledge of strategies that could facilitate diagnostic/prescriptive remediation for problem or weak learners. Different people learn a language in different ways (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer & Bjork, 2009). These are useful information important for curriculum design and teaching methodologies to attend to the needs of the learners individually.

With that in mind, this study hopes to seek an alternative learning method which can effectively help learners develop and master the skill in maintaining their consistency in using the correct tenses in their reading and writing. It is hoped that the learners could overcome this problem in time to enable them to score better grades in their SPM examination.

It is important to analyse the long unsolved issue being faced by the country in getting more capable English speakers with proper grammar. By looking at the latest Blueprint prepared by the government recently where English subject would be one of the compulsory pass subject by the year of 2016, it is an effort to fulfil the aspiration of the Ministry of Education that is to produce globally competitive citizens by enhancing their English language proficiency.

This study suggested two important issues regarding English grammar learning in Malaysia. First, Bahasa Malaysia has a strong influence over the learning of English. The interference of mother tongue language system in many ways contributes to wrong use of English grammatical rules, morphology and syntax. Learners especially from the average and low proficiency group tend to refer to their first language system when writing in English, use direct translation and depend on dictionary meanings to comprehend English text (Ambigapathy, 2002; Nambiar 2007).

Second, a strong emphasis is given on the learning of reading and writing skills and the mastering of grammatical rules. These items are then tested in the school examinations as well as in the national examinations (Razianna Abdul Rahman, 2005). Therefore, the learning of English is seen as learning a subject, focusing mainly in exam and this in another way to pressure learners instead of having fun learning the language.

The impact of the grammar-in-context method on ESL learners in Malaysia in their reading and writing performance will be explored in the current study. This application included explicit grammar instruction as well as contextual input. An in depth-review of the context were discussed to support the notion that contextualized grammar is effective and has a considerable impact on the reading and writing performance of ESL learners in Malaysia. This study will add to the presented literature and will help recognize the effectiveness of contextualized grammar instruction.

Reference


