The Effect of Using Active Learning Strategies on Secondary EFL Learners' Grammar Achievement

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Abstract This study aimed at investigating the effect of using active learning strategies on Saudi 1st secondary EFL learners' grammar achievement. The researcher adopted the quasi-experimental approach. The sample of the study consisted of (45) male learners of King Abdullah Secondary School, Najran, Saudi Arabia. The participants were distributed into two groups. One of the groups represented the control group of (22) students; and the other represented the experimental one of (23) students. The active learning strategies were used in teaching the experimental group, while the traditional grammar teaching method was used with the control one. A 20-item grammar test was designed to be used as a pre and post- test. The data analysis of the post-test grammar scores revealed that there were statistically significant differences between mean scores of the experimental and the control group favoring the experimental group; that is to say, the experimental group outperformed the control group. Thus, the implementation of the active learning strategies proved to have a positive effect on Saudi 1st secondary EFL learners' grammar achievement.

Keywords: active learning, grammar achievement, EFL context

1. Introduction

For many people learning a language is synonymous with explicitly learning its grammar [1]. Grammar refers to the collection of rules, which are used to create words and sentences [2]. Fromkin, Rodman [3] define grammar as the knowledge speakers have about the units and rules of their language. Since grammar has been described as the regular system of rules that we use to weave sounds into the meaningful units with which we express our thoughts and ideas, creating language, it has come to be the "skeleton" of language. It means that it is not possible to teach a language without taking into consideration its grammatical structures [4]. Teaching grammar in an EFL setting helps learners to be able to express their own ideas in real situations in language that is as correct, meaningful and appropriate as possible. Moreover, Mart [5] stated that teaching grammar in an EFL context will give learners opportunities to see how grammatical structures function in sentences which will facilitate their understanding of the language. Grammar has been seen to be a problem and to stand in the way of helping EFL learners to communicate fluently. The role of grammar instruction in an ESL/EFL context has been for decades a major issue for students and teachers alike. The hard fact that most teachers face is that learners often find it difficult to make flexible use of the rules of grammar taught in the classroom. They may know the rules perfectly, but are incapable of applying them in their own use of the language. Both teachers and students invariably face serious difficulties with regard to EFL grammar instruction [6].

Grammatical difficulties have so far become one of problems encountered by the students in learning English as a foreign language. Belmekki and Kebiri [7] asserts that EFL learners may show some difficulties in some areas including grammar for instance. The issue is that learners of English feel confused with too much details about English prepositions, articles and mainly tenses. Widianingsih and Gulö [8] point out that the major kinds of errors made by the EFL/ESL students are related to plural markers, articles, verbs, and tenses. There has always been a debate about the most effective way of teaching grammar for EFL learners and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information. Thus, some researchers argue that using various learning strategies in teaching grammar is influential in grammar achievement as they facilitate the learning process and make it more controlled, enjoyable and effective for learners [9,10]. On the other hand, The conventional methods of teaching EFL do not teach learners how to think in English. They can't stop cross-translation in learner's head. That's why the majority of EFL students demonstrate the inability to effectively use English outside the classroom, despite many years of instruction. In active learning, the ability to think in

English is formed subconsciously while the innate habit of cross-translation is turned off automatically. Active learning also introduces student-centered lessons, and ensures more effective results [11].

Since there has been given greater emphasis to learners and learning rather than teachers and teaching. Active learning strategies are among the most effective learning strategies that encourage students to be positive in the educational situation and can be used to teach English language skills as well as grammar. This study is expected to have theoretical and practical importance to help the pertinent parties such as textbook designers, supervisors, teachers, and students with better guidance for utilizing and employing active learning strategies that could benefit teaching and learning process in EFL contexts.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

For most Saudi secondary EFL learners, grammar can be a very hard subject and some face a difficulty in improving their learning of English grammar within the traditional way of learning. They need more practice for developing it. The EFL teachers follow the traditional approaches of teaching grammar in the classrooms which are either inductive or deductive. They may not be conscious of the disadvantages of them and difficulties which are serious and may thus hinder students' learning of English grammar, and do not choose teaching methods that would result in fewer difficulties and problems to their learners. Several studies have shown that Students' weak performance in English grammar was attributed to not employing strategies take into consideration promoting students' active participation in knowledge construction processes. In search for effective strategies of teaching grammar in an EFL context communicatively, the present study was conducted to identify if the active learning strategies used in this study are effective in improving grammar achievement of secondary EFL learners.

1.2. Research Questions:

Accordingly, the present study discussed the following research main question:
- Does using active learning strategies have any effect on Saudi Secondary EFL learners' grammar achievement?

1.3. Research hypotheses:

Based on the research main question, the researcher hypothesizes the following hypothesis:
- There are statistically significant differences at ($á ≤ 0.05$) level between the mean scores of experimental group and control group in post-test regarding their grammar achievement in favor of the experimental group.

2. Literature Review

Active learning is based on a theory of learning called constructivism, which emphasizes the fact that learners construct or build their own understanding. The theory of social constructivism, which is often referred to as "student-centered instruction", says that learning happens primarily through social interaction with others, such as a teacher or a learner's peers [12,13]. The philosophy behind the Active Learning approach is that, if given the opportunity to learn from his own active exploration and examination, the child will achieve skills that become a part of his personality and are natural for him to use in interaction with others and for fulfillment of his own needs [14]. Active learning has been defined by Prince [15] as any type of instructional method which engages students in their learning process and requires meaningful (relevant, authentic) learning activities as well as requiring students to think about what they are doing (metacognition) [16]. Kamegai and Croker [17] defined active learning, as a multi-dimensional concept comprised of six themes: active, interactive, cognitively engaging, emotionally involving, individualized, and independent learning. The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching [18] at the University of Michigan defines active learning as, "a process whereby students engage in activities, such as reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content."

Articles by Charles Bonwell, James Eison, and other professional educators familiar with active learning research attribute some benefits to active learning; It emphasizes student-centered learning. It creates greater student interest and motivation than traditional lecture. It promotes greater academic achievement (breadth and depth); students learn to think about a subject/topic. It also allows students to practice important skills, such as collaboration, through pair and group work and contributes to more favorable attitudes toward learning [19]. Some studies argue that Active learning is one of the useful strategies for EFL teachers and an effective teaching technique. Gholami, Moghaddam [20] assert that active learning strategies should be encouraged and reinforced not only in all EFL classes by teachers, but also at every level of education. Salhi and Hamada [21] indicates that there are various active learning strategies and techniques that can be used to achieve the educational aims and help the teacher in creating a successful atmosphere in EFL classrooms to encourage independent learning. Momani, Asiri [22] point out that using active learning strategies have a positive effect on teaching English and developing students' performance. The notion that the classroom is no longer a teacher centered classroom but a student centered classroom is a significant change in the way knowledge is transferred to the student.

In addition, a number of previous studies have conducted on the active learning in EFL classrooms. For instance, Mulatu & Bezabih (2018) [29] conducted a study on teachers' perceptions and practices of active learning in EFL classrooms. Their findings revealed that most of the respondents have perceived active learning positively. Unina & Bearing (2016) [30] conducted a study to explore the use of brainstorming activities to promote speaking engagement in the ESL classroom, and their findings revealed that brainstorming contributes to the increase in students' motivation, confidence, and participation as reflected by the positive students' behavior during classroom observations. Shaaruddin & Mohamad (2017) [28] conducted a study to identify the effectiveness of

active learning strategies used in curriculum and pedagogy course employed by a group of undergraduate TESL student and their findings demonstrated the effectiveness of the three commonly used strategies associated with active learning strategies in this study. According to Alves [23], It is uncontroversial to say that active learning has long been an integral part of TESOL/TEFL training and overall pedagogy. The term "Active Learning" is embedded in ESL/EFL teacher training and is a regular part of their classrooms, though that specific term is not often used by TESOL/TEFL instructors.

The review of literature has shown that active learning will encourage students' engagement in EFL classrooms and can contribute to the increase in students' motivation, confidence, and participation. Several previous studies have proved that students in active learning classrooms have a lower rate of failure, and perform better on assessments than students in a traditional ones. Using active learning in EFL teaching is one of the strategies which have been investigated at different levels by many researchers. Some studies were conducted to investigate the effect of using active learning or to identify the impact of using some of active learning strategies with other related variables. The remarkable issue that the researcher observed in the previous studies is the consistent results since most of them indicate that active learning strategies have a significant, positive impact on developing students' language learning. This study may differ from the other studies as it focus on a mixture of active learning strategies include brainstorming, cooperative learning, role playing and exploring their effectiveness on secondary EFL learners' grammar achievement in Saudi schools.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of (45) students belonging to King Abdullah Secondary School in Najran region in Saudi Arabia. The sample of the study has been chosen randomly and divided into two groups; the experimental group, which includes 23 students, and the control group which includes 22 students. All students were informed of the study and signed consent forms before the education proceed.

3.2. Materials

"Mega Goal 2", published by McGraw-Hill Education, was assigned to be covered for 1st Secondary stage students. Units 3-5 were taught during the experiment.

3.3. Instruments

This study aims at getting the required data through the following instrument:
- Pre-test and post-test
- Grammar achievement test was designed to evaluate students' grammar proficiency before and

after the treatment. The test items were selected from student's textbook and workbook named "Mega Goal 2". The Pre-test and post-test consisting of a 20-item grammar test was administered on the content of 3 selected units covered in the duration of the study.

3.4. Procedures

- The quasi- experimental approach design was used for data collection in the present study; pretest and posttest of two equivalent groups were used [24,25].
- A pre-test was given to students of both the experimental group and the control one before conducting the experiment.
- The students in control group received ordinary classroom instruction in each session.
- The three strategies of active learning: brainstorming, cooperative learning, role playing were used in teaching the experimental group.
- Both Groups received eight 45-minute session over a period of eight weeks.
- After the treatment, the post-test was given to the participants of each group.
- The results were analyzed and discussed.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the SPSS program. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to describe the information obtained from the results of pre-test and post-test administered to participants during this study. Therefore, the mean and standard deviation of the scores of each group were calculated. An independent samples t-test was used to measure the statistical differences in means between the experimental and the control groups.

4. Results

To answer the research main question, first a grammar achievement test was run among the participants of the two groups to determine the homogeneity of the participants. Table 1 shows the results of this test.

Table 1 shows that there were no statistically significant differences at (0.05) level between the experimental and the control groups in the results of the students' achievement in English grammar in pre-test. Thus, both groups were approximately homogeneous before implementing the experiment.

Table 2 reveals that there was a significant difference between the two groups in post-test at (.05) level. The result of the statistical analysis of the post-test scores shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group. The results also shows that the effect size, as shown in Table 2, is large and this reflects the effectiveness of active learning strategies on improving Saudi 1st secondary EFL learners' grammar achievement.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-test of the Control and Experimental Groups in Pre-Test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Control	22	4.41	2.085	-1.459-	43	.152	-1.330-
Experimental	23	5.74	3.756				

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-test of the Control and Experimental Groups in Post-Test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Effect size (Eta Squared)
Control	22	10.23	2.181	-5.472-	43	.000	-3.599-	.410
Experimental	23	13.83	2.229					

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the effect of using active learning strategies on Saudi 1st secondary EFL learners' grammar achievement. The findings of the study indicated that the use of active learning strategies are effective in improving EFL learners' grammar achievement. The results emerging from the present study are in line with the research findings of Momani, Asiri [22] which revealed that using active learning strategies have a positive effect on teaching English and developing students' performance. The findings support Jones and Palmer [26] who asserted that active learning is among effective teaching methods and practices in EFL teaching. The results are also in agreement with the research findings of Gholami, Moghaddam [20] who claimed that active learning is one of the useful strategies for EFL teachers and an effective teaching technique. The findings of this research also support those of Salhi and Hamada [21] who reported that there are various active learning strategies and techniques that can be used to achieve the educational aims and help the teacher in creating a successful atmosphere in EFL classrooms to encourage independent learning. The findings are consistent with the findings of Er, ALTUNAY [27] which demonstrated that the effect of active learning on foreign language self-concept was found to be insignificant.

6. Conclusion

This study provided an empirical evidence to argue that active learning strategies is an effective approach for teaching English grammar to EFL learners. The results of this research can be considered as an indication that active learning strategies tested in this study can be effective solutions to student's lack of engagement and motivation in English classes. The experimental group that underwent active learning strategies was active participants in the educational process and more cooperative with others. In general, the use of active learning activities increased learners' motivation towards learning English grammar through passing experiences related to real problems in their lives, increased interaction within the classroom and developed EFL learners' grammar achievement.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that EFL teachers should avoid teacher-centered classes and encourage student-centered classes through designing and implementing active learning tasks for improving EFL Learners' Grammar Achievement and encouraging their participation. Such tasks may include jigsaw discussions, think-pair-share exercises, hands-on activities, brief writing and discussion assignments, problem solving tasks,

information gathering and synthesis, and question generation, among others. Additionally, EFL supervisors should conduct training programs to provide EFL teachers with practical models of how to practice and employ active learning strategies in EFL grammar instruction contexts. Furthermore, EFL textbook designers should also develop books in which active learning tasks are included to help learners perceive the grammatical structures of the language effectively.

Further studies should be carried out to explore the effectiveness of other active learning strategies in developing EFL skills and concepts, as the current study was limited to three strategies: brainstorming, cooperative learning, role playing. Future research may also take into account the actual difficulties of learners and teachers with regard to English grammar instruction and discuss ways of overcoming them.

Statements on Open Data and Conflict Of Interest

a. Data can be accessed by contacting the authors.
c. No conflict of interest declared.

Acknowledgments

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