# USING GROUP READING INSTRUCTION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO EXPLICIT GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION TO TEACH ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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## Abstract

Throughout the history of English Language Teaching, teaching grammar has been one of the most important concepts. Different approaches, methods and techniques have been put forward regarding different ways of teaching grammar. Discovery learning and integrating grammar teaching with reading are among these ways through which English grammar can be taught. This study was conducted to test the effectiveness of a group reading instruction technique as an alternative to the traditional application of explicit teaching at a private university in Turkey. The study was carried out as an experimental research study by covering 64 Turkish EFL students in 2 different classes. The students were first-year university students who took a general English course (A1-Elementary level) as part of their curriculum. In the study, one of these classes (33) took part as the control group while the other class (31) took part as the experiment group. The control group was taught present simple tense by using traditional explicit teaching instruction (20 minutes) while the experiment group was taught the same topic by using a group reading activity which involved discovery learning, peer-interaction and teacher guidance (20 minutes). The effectiveness of these different teaching techniques was analyzed by applying a pre-test (20 questions including fill in the blanks, multiple choice, sentence formation questions and a cloze test) to determine the students' background knowledge regarding the topic and a post-test (20 questions including fill in the blanks, multiple choice, sentence formation questions and a cloze test) to determine the improvement in their knowledge regarding the topic before and after the application of each instructional technique. Though there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the pre-test, the results indicated that the experiment group produced a significantly better learning outcome than the control group from the pre-test to the post-test.

**Keywords:** group reading, explicit instruction, teaching grammar, discovery learning, peer-interaction, teacher guidance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of language teaching, teaching grammar has been one of the most important topics in the field. There have been many trends in grammar teaching and many methods, approaches and techniques have been put forward by researchers.

In recent years, discovery learning has gained much importance in teaching grammar. In discovery learning the students are free to work in a learning environment (Mayer, 2004). Discovery learning has been given great importance because it provides learners with an opportunity to develop an understanding of the

patterned quality of the target language and to improve their learning process (Bernardini, 2002). As a result of such advantages, discovery learning has become a widely applied grammar learning and teaching style in many English learning environments.

Another important trend has been the use of collaboration and interaction in grammar teaching. Allwright (1984) states that in order lessons to be meaningful, classroom interaction should be facilitated and managed by the teacher and the students. Similarly, Canagarajah (1999) states that classroom interaction helps learners' fluency development, communicative competence and language usage in different contexts. These points suggest that that learning through classroom interaction and collaboration should be emphasized in teaching English.

In addition to these trends in language teaching, using reading to make students acquire grammar structures has also been a popular practice among EFL-ESL professionals. McQuillan (1994) states that students prefer reading over grammar as a learning process. Reading passages provide students an opportunity to discover the language and this situation increases their level of awareness about their own learning process. Thus, the students get more engaged and active in their own learning process.

When the positive approaches to the trends listed above are considered, it can be concluded that incorporating these approaches in an instructional method can create positive results for English learners in terms of discovering and internalizing grammar structures. Starting from the ideas mentioned above, this study tries to analyze the effects of a grammar teaching instruction which incorporates discovery learning, group interaction and reading and the effectiveness of this teaching technique in terms of pre-intermediate university students.

## 2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

According to Beaver (1968) reading is not only about identifying words or phonetic symbols but also about grammatical process. Alderson (1993) stated that there is a strong relationship between target language grammatical knowledge and reading skills. Both target language grammatical knowledge and reading skills facilitate the learning process and improve one another (Alderson, 1993).

Group and pair interaction is accepted as a positive factor in language teaching. In their study Ferrer, Sánchez-López, Soriano-Ayala and Nievas-Cazorla (2013) found that grouping formats improve learning in a language learning environment. Furthermore, as the group number decreases, student-student and teacher-student interaction increase and this situation improves the language learning which depends heavily on getting feedback and interaction (Ferrer et al., 2013). Matienzo (2015) also found that the smaller the groups get in a language learning environment, the more effective the teaching becomes. By increasing the interaction among the students in small groups or in pairs and between the teacher and the students, it is possible to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The positive effects of collaborative learning have caught great attention in recent years. Li (2011) found that a socially and pedagogically supported collaborative learning environment promotes students' creativity and thinking. Lin-feng (2007) also stated that cooperative learning improves the students learning efficiency and their team spirit by making students learn from each other.

Strategy development has also been accepted as a positive factor in language teaching and learning. In their study about the development of meta-cognition and self-strategy development in reading, Roohani and Asiabani (2015) found that strategy development had positive effects on students' meta-cognition and language learning. Similarly, by making the students collaborate and interact with each other during a reading session, the students can develop strategies to discover the grammar structures both with the teacher and with their partners. This can provide students with an opportunity to improve their meta-cognition and understanding about unknown grammar structures.

Starting from the research mentioned in the introduction and the literature review, the research question of the study is stated below:

1) Will students who receive group reading instruction produce a significantly better learning outcome than students who receive explicit grammar instruction in terms of learning a target grammar topic?

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The effect of group reading activities on students' grammar learning was analyzed in this study. The study had an experimental design with a pre-test and a post-test, involving an experiment group and a control group. The experiment group received group reading activities related to the grammar structures while the

control group was taught by explicit grammar instruction. Both instructions were carried out by the same teacher (an English instructor who had no relationship with the research) who followed fixed lesson plans in order to avoid extraneous factors from affecting the data. Before the application of group reading instruction and explicit instruction, a pre-test was conducted with the groups to determine students' grammatical knowledge about the target grammar topic. After the application of both instructional methods, post-tests were applied to test the effectiveness of each instruction. The results of the pre-test and the post-test scores of the control group and the experiment group were compared in order to analyze the effectiveness of both instructions.

## 3.1 Setting

The study was conducted at a private university in Konya, Turkey. The university has students from different social and cultural backgrounds.

Regarding the physical conditions, the university has good facilities. The English instructors can use projectors in the classes, that's why the operator instructor used the board and the projector to teach grammar explicitly. In terms of the group reading activity, no material was used except for print-outs. The classes were big enough to hold 50 students and they had movable desks and chairs. That's why no problems were encountered in case of any seating arrangements.

## 3.2 Participants

Participants of the study were 64 freshmen who were taking an Elementary level English as a foreign language course as part of their curriculum in two different classes. At the beginning of the study, 72 students took the pre-test. The students who got over 80 points on the pre-test (3 students in the control group and 5 students in the experiment group) were not involved in the study with the concern that they were already quite familiar with the target grammar topic. Among these 64 students, 31 comprised the experiment group while the other 33 comprised the control group. The 2 participant groups in the study were selected randomly among 6 freshmen groups (with similar English levels) taking the Elementary level English course. The 2 groups were also randomly assigned as the control group and the experiment group. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 20. The nationality of the participants was Turkish and the students had Turkish as their native language.

## 3.3 Materials and Procedure

The materials that were used with the control group include the white board, the projector and the pre-tests and the post-tests. The materials that were used with the experiment group involved a reading passage which was specially designed for a group reading activity and implicit learning and the same pre-tests and post-tests. The materials and the procedure of the study were implemented according to written plans in both classrooms and apart from the activities listed below, no other instructional method was applied during the sessions.

First of all, at the beginning of the study the pre-test was implemented to determine the students' current knowledge about the grammar topic which was going to be taught. The pre-test involved multiple choice, fill in the blanks, cloze test and sentence formation questions about Present Simple. Following the pre-test, explicit instruction was carried out with the control group. The rules and usages of present simple were explained explicitly and the questions of the participants regarding present simple were answered by the teacher. After the implementation of explicit teaching, the-post test was conducted to test the effectiveness of the instruction.

The only difference between the control group and the experiment group was the instructional method. The experiment group received a group reading activity rather than explicit instruction. At the beginning of the instruction, the same pre-test was implemented to determine the current knowledge of the participants about present simple. After the implementation of the pre-test, a group reading activity was carried out with the experiment group. The participants read the reading passage and they were asked to list the structure of present simple by discussing with their group (3-4 students each) while they were reading the passage. The teacher provided feedback whenever necessary. Following the implementation of the instruction, the post-test was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the instruction.

## 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

As mentioned before, the study uses two means of data collection; the pretest and the posttest. The pretest was applied before the application of the instructions in order to check the students' knowledge about the

target topic which was taught during the instructions. Finally, the post-test was applied after the instructions were carried out to check the effectiveness of the instructional methods. The data was collected anonymously by assigning numbers to each participant. After the implementation of the tests and applications, the data was entered into SPSS and analyzed through it.

# 4. RESULTS

First of all, the results of the study were analyzed descriptively (see Table 1). The participants in the control group scored a minimum of 35 and a maximum of 80 in the pre-test with a mean of 60.75 and a standard deviation of 12.99. The pre-test scores of the control group had a skewness of -.336 and a kurtosis of -.900. On the other hand, the participants in the experiment group scored a minimum of 35 and a maximum of 80 in the pre-test with a mean of 61.61 and a standard deviation of 13.5. The pre-test scores of the experiment group had a skewness of -.432 and a kurtosis of -1.003. The participants in the control group scored a minimum of 35 and a maximum of 85 in the post-test with a mean of 62.12 and a standard deviation of 14.30. The post-test scores of the control group had a skewness of -.312 and a kurtosis of -.815. In contrast with this, the participants in the experiment group scored a minimum of 60 and a maximum of 100 in the post-test with a mean of 82.09 and a standard deviation of 10.54. The post-test scores of the experiment group had a skewness of -.164 and a kurtosis of -.642.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

| Group | | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Control group (n=33) | Pre-test | 35,00 | 80,00 | 60,75 | 12,99 | -,336 | -,900 |
| | Post-test | 35,00 | 85,00 | 62,12 | 14,30 | -,312 | -,815 |
| Experiment group (n=31) | Pre-test | 35,00 | 80,00 | 61,61 | 13,50 | -,432 | -1,003 |
| | Post-test | 60,00 | 100,00 | 82,09 | 10,54 | -,164 | -,642 |

Following the descriptive statistics, the test results were analyzed in terms of normality by using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test. According to the normality test, the pre-test scores of the control group were normally distributed ($p = .084$). The normality test further revealed that the pre-test scores of the control group were normally distributed ($p = .066$) Kolmogorov Smirnov normality test also indicated that the post-test results of the control group and the experiment group were normally distributed ($p > .200$).

The pre-test of the study was conducted in order to understand whether there was a significant difference between the students' background knowledge regarding the target grammar topic. An independent samples t-test was carried out to check whether there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the control group and the experiment group on the t-test. According to the Levene's test for equality of variances, there was no significant variance between the mean scores of the control group and the experiment group on the pre-test ($p = .680$). The results of the independent samples t-test showed that there was no significant mean difference (-.85) between the mean scores of the control group (60.75) and the experiment group (61.61) on the pre-test ($t (62) = -.25$, $p = .797$)

In order to understand whether there was a significant interaction between the instruction type and test time, a 2 x 2 repeated measures ANOVA was carried out. According to the Levene's test for equality of variances, there were no significant difference between the variances of the control group and the experiment group in the pre-test ($p = .680$) and the post-test ($p = 0.62$). The results of the ANOVA revealed that there was a significant interaction between the test time and the instruction type ($F (1, 62) = 67.32$, $p < 0.0001$). The results further indicated that there was a significant main effect of test-time on the test scores of the participants ($F (1,62) = 83.24$, $p < 0.0001$). Moreover, the results showed that there was a significant main effect of instruction type on the test scores of the participants ($F (1,62) = 11.89$, $p =0.001$).

Following the ANOVA, the simple main effects of test time were analyzed within each instruction type. The results revealed that the test scores of the control group did not increase significantly from the pre-test (M = 60.75) to the post-test (M = 60.12), ($F (1,62) = .7$, $p = .404$). The results further revealed that the test scores of the experiment group increased significantly from the pre-test (61.61) to the post-test (82.09), ($F (1,62) = 149.85$, $p < 0.0001$).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The research question of the study (Will students who receive group reading instruction produce a significantly better learning outcome than students who receive explicit grammar instruction in terms of learning a target grammar topic?) was answered positively by the findings of the study. The findings suggest that the two participant groups (the control group and the experiment group) did not have a statistically significant difference on the pre-test. According to this, it can be concluded that the two participant groups had similar knowledge regarding the target grammar topic, present simple. The findings also show that the participants in the experiment group, who received a group reading activity to learn present simple tense, improved their scores significantly better while the participants who received an explicit grammar instruction did not. As a result, it can be concluded that group reading instruction provided a better learning process when compared to explicit grammar instruction in this study.

The findings of the study corroborate the ideas and findings of Beaver (1968) and Alderson (1993), which stated that there was a strong relationship between grammar and reading. According to the findings of the study, group reading led to a significantly better improvement in terms of learning a target grammar topic when compared to explicit grammar instruction. It can be inferred from the findings of the study that reading provides a better opportunity to understand and acquire a target grammar topic when compared to explicit teaching.

The results of the study also support the ideas and findings of Ferrer el al. (2013) and Matienzo (2015), which stated that group interaction promoted language learning and the ideas of Li (2011) and Lin-feng (2007), which stated that co-operative learning improves students' learning efficiency. The participants in the experiment group who had interactions and collaboration both with the teacher and with each other in small groups scored significantly better than the participants in the control group who only had interactions with the teacher. The co-operation and interaction between the participants in the experiment group also provided these participants an opportunity to share their strategies and develop new strategies to comprehend grammar structures through a reading text. As a results, the results confirm the ideas and findings of Roohani and Asiabani (2015) as well.

## 6. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study was subject to some limitations. One of them was the scope of the participants. The participants of the study were elementary level university students aged 18-20. A future study can investigate the effects of group reading on the grammar learning of students from different proficiency levels or different age groups. By doing this, more information can be provided about group reading activities in terms of teaching and learning English grammar.

Another issue was the target grammar topic and the testing of this target grammar topic of the applications. Present simple tense was used as the target grammar topic of the research. A future study may also analyze the effects of group reading and explicit grammar instruction by using other target grammar topics. The pre-test and the post-test used in this study was designed by the researcher. Each test involved 20 questions (multiple choice, fill in the blanks, cloze test and sentence formation questions). More comprehensive tests can be used or developed as part of a future research to test the effectiveness of the applications in a more thoroughly.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The present study set out to test whether group reading instruction was significantly more effective than explicit grammar instruction to teach English grammar. To do this, a control group and an experiment group of elementary level Turkish EFL learners were analyzed through a pre-test and a post test. The control group received explicit grammar instruction. On the other hand, the experiment group received group reading instruction. The results of the study revealed that group reading instruction provided a significantly better learning outcome regarding the target grammar topic, present simple, for Turkish EFL learners.

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