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EFFECT OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION ON THE GRAMMAR ACQUISITION OF PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS*

Abstract

Due to the accuracy-based central examinations and multiple-choice tests employed in Turkey, student teachers are seen to lack abilities to make interpretations and apply their grammatical knowledge in different contexts. Thus, this study aims to find out the effect of explicit instruction on the grammar acquisition of 1st year student teachers via Contextual Grammar Course in an ELT Department at a state university in Turkey. This is a quantitative study where midterm and final grammar scores of 101 student teachers were compared. The students were exposed to a different source for learning contextual grammar, made presentations, completed 395 online activities and their coursebook exercises were checked by the instructor every week. The study took place in the fall term of 2017-2018 academic year for 14 weeks. The results revealed that explicit instruction contributed to the grammatical consciousness of the student teachers and in general their final scores increased compared to their midterm scores. The parts taken from student papers where students completed passages with gaps by choosing among the alternatives or without alternatives and paraphrased the sentences with the given words shed light upon the participants' weakest areas. In light of the findings it can be said that student teachers in ELT departments in Turkish context could benefit from a contextual course with various activities and tasks to enlarge their applied grammatical competencies.

Keywords: explicit instruction, grammatical competence, contextual grammar, pre-service teacher education.

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DOĞRUDAN ÖĞRETİMİN İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMENİ ADAYLARININ DİL BİLGİSİ EDİNİMİ ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİSİ

Özet

Türkiye'de uygulanan doğruluk temelli merkezi sınavlar ve çoktan seçmeli testler nedeniyle, öğretmen adaylarının farklı bağlamlarda yorumlama ve dilbilgisel bilgilerini uygulama becerilerinden yoksun oldukları görülmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın amacı, bir devlet üniversitesindeki İngilizce Öğretmenliği Bölümü'ndeki 1. sınıf öğretmen adaylarının Bağlamsal Dilbilgisi dersinde aldıkları doğrudan öğretimin dilbilgisi edinimleri üzerindeki etkisini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, 101 öğretmen adayının ara sınav ve final gramer puanlarının karşılaştırıldığı nicel bir çalışmadır. Öğrenciler, bağlamsal dilbilgisi öğrenmek üzere sunumlar yaptılar, 395 çevrimiçi aktiviteyi tamamladılar, farklı bir ders kaynağını kullandılar ve ders kitaplarındaki ödevler her hafta eğitmen tarafından kontrol edildi. Çalışma, 2017-2018 akademik yılı sonbahar döneminde 14 hafta boyunca gerçekleştirilmiştir. Sonuçlar, doğrudan öğretimin, öğretmen adaylarının dilbilgisel bilincine katkıda bulunduğunu ve genel olarak puanlarının, ara sınav puanlarına göre arttığını ortaya koymuştur. Öğrencinin, alternatifler arasından seçim yaparak ya da alternatifleri bulunmayan boşluklarla metinleri tamamladığı ve verilen sözlerle cümleleri tekrar ifade ettiği bölümler öğrenci kâğıtlarından alınan kısımlarla katılımcıların en zayıf alanlarına ışık tutmaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular ışığında, İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak okutulduğu Türkiye bağlamında İngilizce öğretmeni adaylarının, uygulamalı dilbilgisel yetkinliklerini genişletmek için çeşitli etkinlik ve görevlerle birlikte bağlamsal bir dersten yararlanabileceği söylenebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: doğrudan öğretim, dilbilgisel yetkinlik, bağlamsal dilbilgisi, hizmet öncesi öğretmen eğitimi.

1. Introduction

Acquisition of English grammar continues to be a hot issue in some EFL countries where students may have limited access to input and do not receive grammatical rules in context. Regarded among the stakeholders, competencies of student teachers are of great importance for their own linguistic skills and future career. Their grammar acquisition is thought to affect their whole academic life since grammar is the backbone of a language.

Regarded among the stakeholders, competencies of student teachers are of great importance for their own linguistic skills and future career. Their grammatical competence is thought to affect their whole academic life since grammar is the backbone of a language.

Due to the accuracy-based high-stake examinations and multiple-choice tests applied in Turkey, English teacher candidates may lack abilities to make interpretations, fail to apply their grammatical knowledge in different contexts or transfer their grammatical knowledge to other language skills, which may be regarded among the consequences of multiple-choice testing (Roediger & Marsh, 2005).

Teachers' beliefs and practices regarding grammar teaching may display differences. Three EFL teachers in Turkey were examined. In light of the contrasting expectations between teachers, students, and curriculum, the influence of core and peripheral beliefs on classroom practices is emphasized (Phipps & Borg, 2009).

Lee (2011) stresses the division between ESL and EFL contexts since each has its distinctive features in various conditions and learners may not have sufficient involvement in correction process.

Gaining grammatical competence continues to be a hot issue in some EFL countries where students may have limited access to input, lack feedback or not receive grammatical rules in a context. Corrective feedback can be considered as a means of input for students to process language (Sung & Tsai, 2014).

2. Review of Literature

Embedded grammar teaching is needed to improve student writing and metalinguistic understanding (Debra A. Myhill, Susan M. Jones, Helen Lines & Annabel Watson, 2012). With a mixed-method research design and with a sample of 744 students in 31 schools in the south-west and the Midlands of England, they held student and teacher interviews and made observations. The findings showed that embedded grammar teaching and teacher linguistic subject knowledge (LSK) enhanced students' writing skills and metalinguistic learning, and explicitness as well as the use of discussion were favoured by the teachers.

Jones, Myhill and Bailey (2013) pointed out the potential benefits of theorised grammar understanding as a meaning-making resource for developing writing skills of students. The participants were 32 English teachers and 855 students in 32 different mixed comprehensive schools in the South-West and the Midlands regions of England. It was a mixed-methods approach including a randomised controlled trial and a complementary qualitative study. In sum, controlled writing activities can help learners to apply their theoretical knowledge in different sentences and contexts.

31 teachers in English secondary schools were interviewed and it was concluded that teachers' explicit awareness of how grammar teaching could reveal different meanings in writing is of great importance (Watson, 2015).

As for young learners, contextualised grammar could have an effect on 11-year-old children's writing skills when used for small group teaching (Mitchell, Ainsworth, Buckley, et al., 2016). Therefore, contextual grammar teaching can be used for learners with different ages and language levels.

Aim of the study

Due to the increasing importance of grammar teaching and lack of studies in ELF contexts, this study aimed to find out the effect of a contextual grammar course on the grammatical competence of 1st year student teachers via Contextual Grammar Course in an ELT Department at a state university in Turkey.

3. Methodology

The study took place in the fall term of 2017-2018 academic year for 14 weeks and 9 units were covered including nouns, possessives, pronouns; articles, demonstratives and quantifiers; prepositions; adjectives and adverbs; tenses; future forms; modal verbs; conditionals, subjunctives and the unreal past. The students were grouped to prepare powerpoint slides so that each student made a unit presentation. This is a descriptive study where the midterm and final grammar scores and answers of 101 student teachers were compared.

3.1 Case Study

It is a case study, the case being the student teachers studied. It is a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is a single instance of a class of

objects or entities in the context in which it occurs (Nunan, 1992; 79, as cited in Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

3.2 Action research

The present study can be regarded as an action research since the study was carried out by practitioner (classroom teacher). Actions research aims to change things (Nunan, 1992). It is evaluative and reflective (Burns, 1999). Thus, it has become one of the most effective research methods to produce L2 teaching practices (McKay, 2006). Since the researcher aimed to develop the notion of “context” among English teacher candidates, she preferred action research.

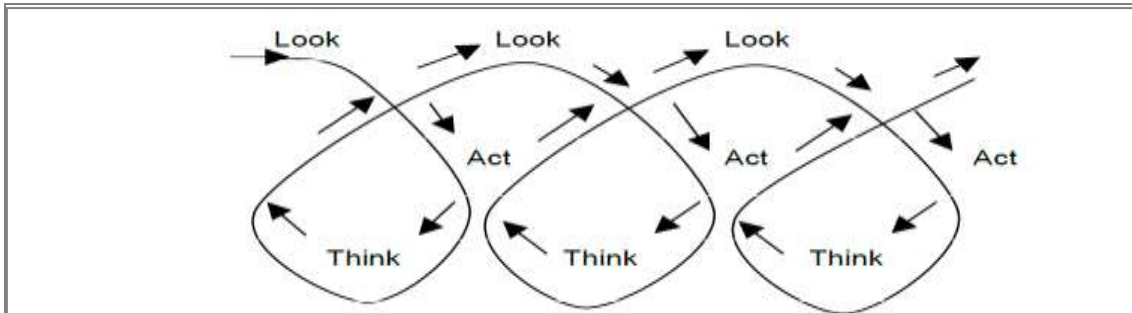


Figure 1: Action research helix (adopted from Hine, 2013: 154)

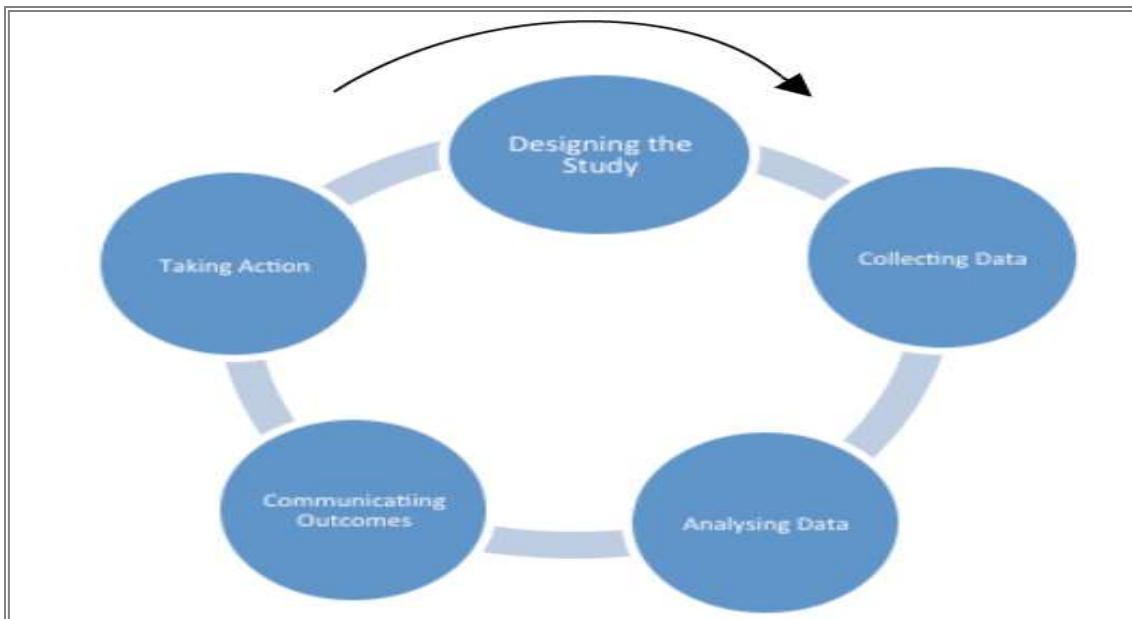


Figure 2: Action research cycle (adopted from Hine, 2013: 154)

Despite some problems such as time limitations, inadequate research competencies or lack of motivation, ELT practitioners can improve their research skills and better their teaching practices (Yuan & Burns, 2016).

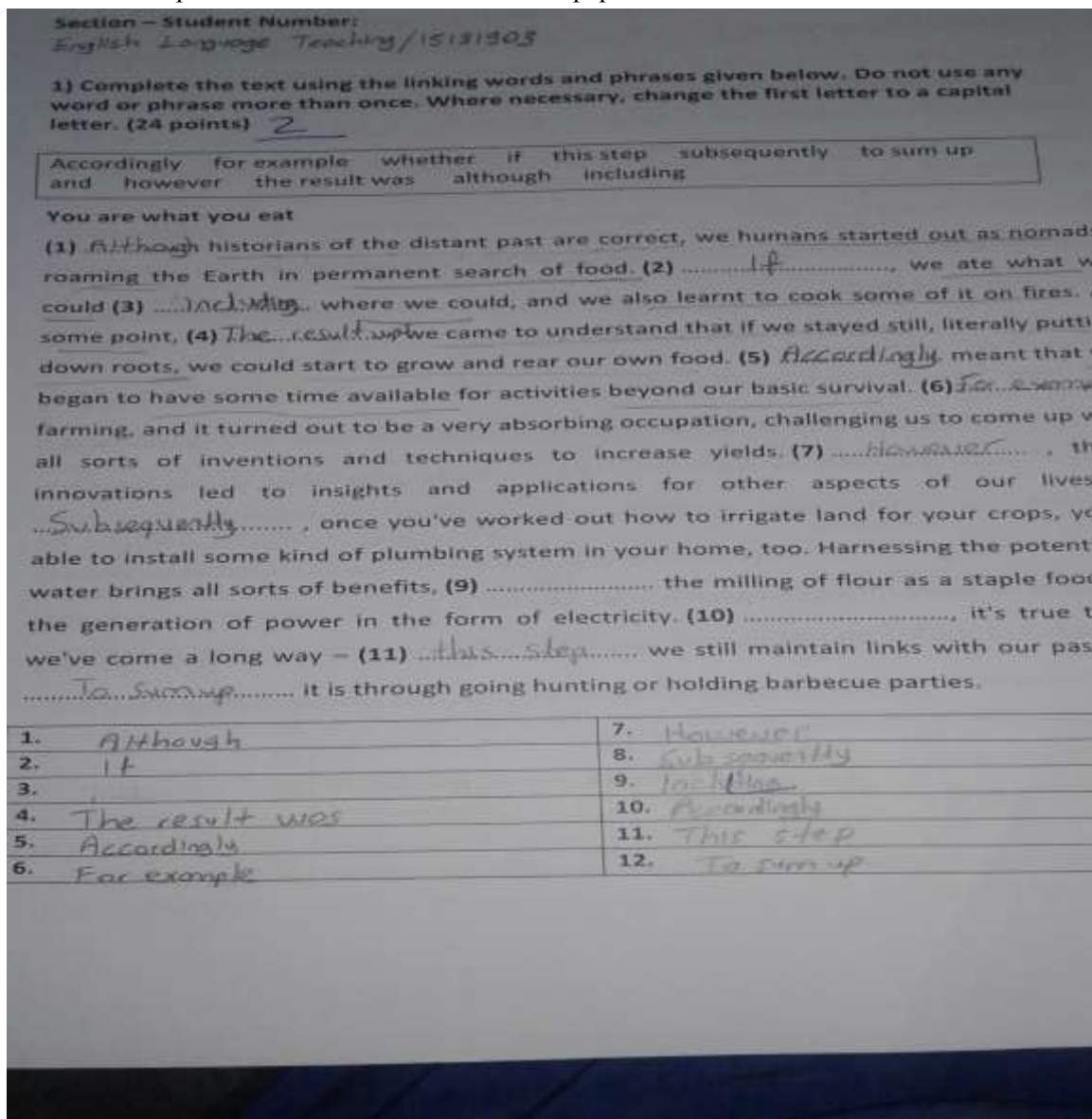
3.3 Application

The students were provided with a different source (My Grammar Lab-Advanced- C1/C2) for learning contextual grammar, made presentations, completed 395 online activities and 197 coursebook exercises which were checked and scored by the researcher every week. Each

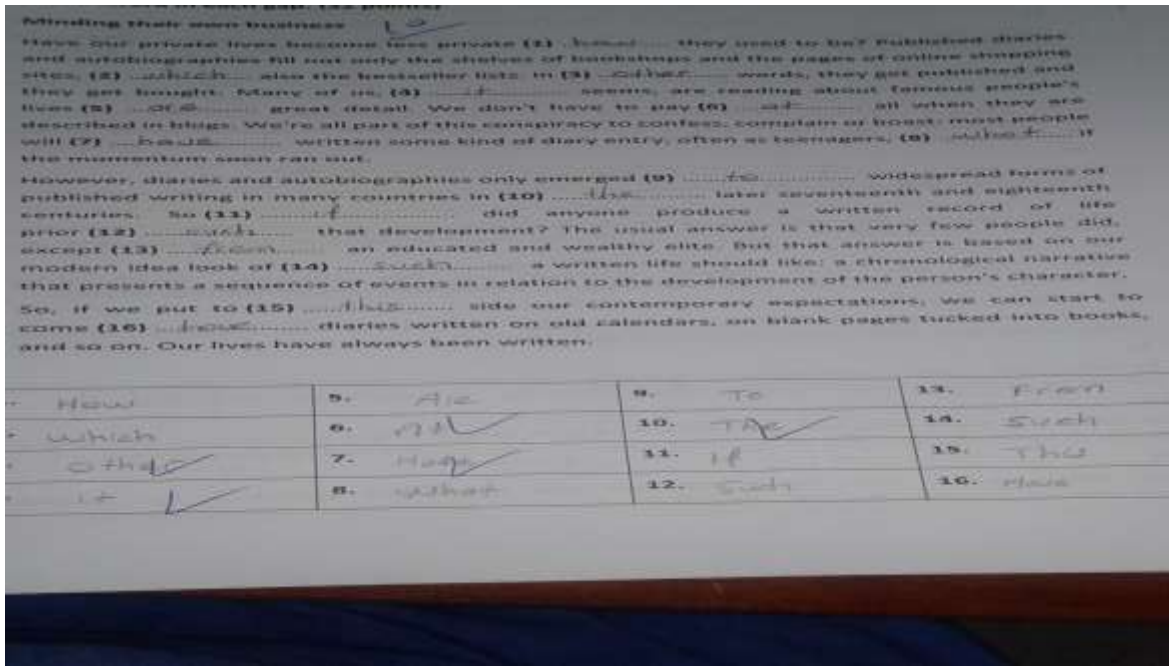
student work (coursebook exercises, online activities, unit presentation, midterm paper and final paper) was graded with a different percentage in order to have multiple ways of evaluation.

The coursebook activities included various exercises such as listen and complete, labelling-identification, gap filling, finding mistakes, matching, rewriting, cloze tests, grammaticality judgement tests, error correction, multiple choice tests and controlled writing activities. The questions of midterm and final examinations were in parallel with the coursebook exercises and online activities so the questions were formed with Grammar for IELTS and CAE practices provided online for instructors by My English Lab.

Below is a sample taken from a student's midterm paper.



Below is a sample taken from a student's final paper. It is seen that s/he increased his/her score.



4. Findings

According to Table 1, there were 38 students in Section 1 in the midterm exam and their mean score was 43,487; there were 34 students in Section 2 in the midterm exam and their mean score was 41,611; finally, there were 33 students in Section 3 in the midterm exam and their mean score was 40,108. There were 105 students and the general mean score of the participant students was 41,735 for the midterm examination.

As to the final examination, there were 36 students in Section 1 in the midterm exam and their mean score was 57,897; there were 33 students in Section 2 in the midterm exam and their mean score was 61,861; finally, there were 32 students in Section 3 in the midterm exam and their mean score was 58,513. There were 101 students and the general mean score of the participant students was 59,423 for the final examination.

Table 1. Participant scores

Examination Type	Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	General Mean Score
Midterm	43,487 (n=38)	41,611 (n=34)	40,108 (n=33)	41,735
Final	57,897 (n=36)	61,861 (n=33)	58,513 (n=32)	59,423
Mean Scores	50,692	51,736	49,310	50,579

The results revealed that the contextual grammar course contributed to the grammatical consciousness and metalinguistic awareness of the student teachers and in general their final scores increased compared to their midterm scores. The mean score of the students increased from 41,735 to 59,423 in the final examination. However, there were not significant differences among the sections in terms of their scores in that the general mean score of Section 1 was 50,692, while that of Section 2 was 51,736, and finally that of Section 3 was 49,310. This detail shows the homogeneity of the population.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The presented study attempted to display the effect of a contextual grammar course for the first year students of ELT and their awareness of context in the midterm and final examinations. The samples taken from the student papers shed light upon the participants' interlanguage development. What they can or cannot do could reveal important messages to the teacher (Farrokhi, 2005; Ellis, 2009).

In light of the findings, it can be said that student teachers in ELT departments in Turkish context should be exposed to a contextual grammar course with various online and coursebook activities and be evaluated with various tasks to enlarge their applied grammatical competencies.

The participants seemed more in need of guidance to understand the rationale behind the activities and exercises in the initial stages but they should be informed about learning to learn and guided appropriately to gain autonomy in their first year. In order to sustain their initial motivation to learn and teach English, student teachers need to learn what context means and work out how grammar creates or changes meaning in different contexts. If they are exposed to various activities and come across different discourses from the beginning, they can form a comprehensive teacher identity and add to it throughout their teaching career when they become in-service teachers.

Since English teachers are first learners of English and then become teachers of English, they must first develop their own linguistic competency in order to teach their future students. If teachers themselves lack grammatical knowledge or contextual awareness, they may fail to decode the encoded meaning in different contexts and may feel insufficient when confronted with student questions. For this purpose, student teachers in ELT Departments should be provided with contextual grammar exercises and activities to acquire the underlying and unseen rules of the language so that they can transfer the grammatical rules and hidden or implied meanings to their future students.

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