



The Impact of Pedagogically-Designed Literary Texts on Learning English Grammar

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Introduction

Learning English grammar has been among the main objectives in English for a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) classes. Saengboon (2017) posits that grammar is so important that it can be used to index how much the students know of the English language. Also, numerous studies emphasize the significance of learning grammar to become proficient language users (Ansarian et al., 2016; Sapargul & Sartor, 2010; Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020). As Metom et al. (2013) have stated, grammar is among the most challenging linguistic features of English to master. They specifically point to understanding grammatical rules as the main challenge. In Iran, Mehrpour and Ghayour (2017) point to the rule-based instruction of grammar as the main problem. Explicit instruction, especially in Iran's official educational system, is based on the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and has made learning English boring and daunting (Garavand et al., 2021).

Some suggestions have been made and tested to make learning grammar meaningful such as using technology, language games, to name a few (Cam & Tran, 2017; Garavand et al., 2021). Ansarian and Teoh (2018) also posit that learning grammar can be made easier and more meaningful by using teaching techniques and course materials in which the learners show interest. Among the approaches to make the learning of grammar meaningful is using literary texts. Although there is meager literature on this matter, there are studies that support the idea that the learning content which can provoke critical thinking should be suitable for learning grammar (Wissinger & De La Paz, 2016), and literary texts are no exception. Khatib and Alizadeh (2012) posit that literary texts have more effect on the students' critical thinking skills than non-literary texts. Also, Hişmanoğlu (2005), an advocate of teaching English through literature, posits that pedagogically-designed literary texts, specifically intended at language learning and teaching, should be more suitable than ordinary literary-texts to learn a new language. Therefore, the researchers in the current study focused on the impact of pedagogically designed literary texts on undergraduate students' grammar knowledge. The main objective of this study, i.e., measuring the possible effects of pedagogically-designed literary texts on grammar knowledge of EFL learners, was formulated in the following null hypothesis:



H₀₁: Pedagogically-designed literary texts do not have any significant effects on learning English grammar.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

This study is based on Tasmanian's Integrative Model (2012) in dealing with literature in language classes. The model was developed in Australia and considers five perspectives for using the literary texts in language classes, i.e., the cultural heritage perspective, the language skills perspectives, the personal growth perspective, the functional perspective, and the critical literary perspective. This study is based on the functional perspective, which advocates analyzing the grammatical structures in the literary texts in terms of form, context, and register. This Tasmanian's Integrative Model has already been used in some studies (Tasmanian Curriculum: Rationale, 2012). For example, in a study on the impact of a literature-mediated English course using this model by Romero and Bobkina (2015), 55.5% of the learners agreed that their grammar was positively affected. To correctly implement the model, the guidelines for using Tasmanian's Integrative Model (Tasmanian Curriculum: Rationale, 2012) were used.

Historical Background

The use of literary texts in language classes is not new. Indeed, using literary texts in non-English speaking countries curriculum dates back to about 100 years ago (Stern, 1985). The Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which was a dominant language teaching method at the beginning of the 20th century, was based on appreciating literary texts and literature (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Not only were the literary texts used as "illustrations of the grammatical rules" (Duff & Maley, 1990, p. 3), but they could also prove the students' writing skills (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014). Since then, literature has been an integral part of many English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

According to Bobkina and Dominguez (2014), research on the relationship between language learning and literature can help form a paradigm for integrating culture in language classes. Extensive research on literature and language learning has even resulted in the Literature in Language Learning and Teaching Research Network of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (Tsang et al., 2020). Carroli (2008) advocates including literary texts in the language learning curriculum, believing that literary texts can increase the students' understanding of linguistic features of the texts. Also, their cross-cultural understanding of the target culture would be increased. Such ideas about the implementation of literary texts in language classes have resulted in their presence in many EFL/ESL curricula in the last forty years (Tsang et al., 2020).

Although literary texts are used to increase the students' deep learning (Bilal Anwar & Khan Rana, 2010), they can be frustrating. Indeed, extensive research on the use of literary texts has also revealed shortcomings. McKay (2001) believes that literary texts include vocabulary items and grammatical structures that are hard to understand. Elsewhere, Lima (2010, p. 186) asserts that "we may find ourselves in the quite uncomfortable position of having to acknowledge that some of our favorite works might cause considerable inconvenience to our language students." Such problems have led many teachers to think that integrating literary texts into language classes is unnecessary (Khatib et al., 2011). However, some scholars posit that standardized literary texts designed for language learning can overcome the shortcoming and be used in language classes (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Tevdovska, 2016). Such ideas about using the literary texts led the researchers in the current study to standardize the literary texts used in this study to measure their impact on undergraduate students' grammar knowledge.

Empirical Studies

Studies as old as the one conducted by Arthur (1968) advocate using literary texts and literature for language learning. However, Carter (2007) asserts that there are not enough studies on the impact of literary texts on learning English grammar. Therefore, this section was confined to only a few examples.

Some studies have discussed literature and literary texts in EFL/ESL classes to learn English grammar. Atmaca and Gunday (2016), for example, discussed the role of literary texts as course materials in language classes. They assumed that although it is not obligatory to use literary texts, they have features that can foster learning language skills. The literary texts are authentic, have a close alignment with culture, and link the English language to literature. Also, the grammatical structures of literary texts are useful for presenting examples of practical use for the students. Through using poems as course material in their study, they observed a significant impact on learning grammar. This is in line with the 'Language Approach' that uses literary texts in language classes by Carter and Long (1991). Carter and Long (1991) also define The Cultural Approach as an approach that aims at increasing cultural awareness, and The Personal Growth Approach as a personal development, and language awareness approach.

Sapargul and Sartor (2010) conducted a trans-cultural study on the impact of literature on grammar-translation techniques. They compared Turkmen and English literary texts. They borrowed techniques from the GTM method in teaching grammar and found the new approach very engaging for the students. They realized the positive effects of this approach on the EFL learners' knowledge of grammar and cultural awareness.

Sentürk and Kahraman (2020) used literary texts in short stories and measured their impact on learning grammar among Turkish EFL learners. They realized that short stories could improve the learners' knowledge of grammar and suggested adding more literary texts in the language learning curriculum.

Method

Research Design and Sampling

This is a confirmatory sequence mixed-methods research study in which the qualitative section results are used to confirm the quantitative section of the study. The study participants were 58 undergraduate students from Payame Noor University in Zabol, Iran. These participants were selected out of 90 students taking a general English course in the first semester of the year 2019-2020. Non-random convenience sampling was used as the participant selection approach, as the researchers did not have access to all undergraduate participants in the context of Iran.

The respondents for the study's qualitative section were 12 learners who took part in the experimental group. The researchers only interviewed 12 respondents as data was saturated, and there was no need for further interviews.

Instrumentation

Nelson language homogeneity test

The Nelson Language Homogeneity Test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was used to homogenize the students. The test is a grammar-based test with 50 multiple-choice items. Shahivand and Pazhakh (2012) consider this test a suitable measure of language proficiency for students who are at an intermediate level.

Grammar pretest and posttest

A grammar test including 30 multiple-choice items was designed by the researchers based on the grammatical structures of the course was used for data collection. The researchers initially looked for the control group course content, the book 'General English' by Alimohammadi and Khalili (2011). The twelve structures that were taught to the participants in the control group were targeted in the test. The researchers ensured that these structures existed in the experimental group's course content and used these structures in the pretest and posttest.

The test was sent to three experts along with an evaluation form. They were asked to rate the test based on relevance, consistency, representativeness, and the wording of the questions. Later, the test was piloted with 25 students, and Item analysis was run to check item discrimination (ID) ratios and item facility (IF). As the ratios fell between .33 and .66, the test's discriminative power and the level of difficulty were both approved.

Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview included two rather broad questions. The questions focused on the benefits and challenges of learning English grammar through pedagogically-designed literary texts. The two questions were:

- 1) In your opinion, what are the benefits of pedagogically-designed literary texts, if any, for learning English grammar?
- 2) In your opinion, what are the challenges of pedagogically-designed literary texts, if any, for learning English grammar?

Procedures

The study began by acquiring the students' consent. On the same day, the Nelson Language Proficiency Test was administered as a homogeneity test. Next, a researcher-made 30 item grammar test was administered to the participants as a pretest. The participants were divided into two groups (control vs. experimental) based on the pretest of grammar. The experimental group participants went through 16 sessions of practicing the standardized version of Margaret Atwood's novel, 'The Handmaid's Tale.' To standardize the text, the researchers selected 16 episodes of the story and replaced difficult vocabulary with easier ones. Also, some difficult structures were broken down into simpler ones. Each text included around 300 words and was practiced in one session.

Having read the text, the students were asked to identify the text's grammatical structures and prepare a list of them. This step was followed by implicit instruction on the grammatical structures. Next, the learners were asked to answer 10 grammar questions that followed each text. This procedure was followed for 16 sessions before conducting the grammar posttest. The participants in the control group did not experience the pedagogically-designed literary texts. Instead, they went through conventional instruction at Payame Noor University to learn English grammar. The lessons in the control group were based on explicit instruction on grammatical structures in a rule-based format.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Initially, ratios of skewness and kurtosis were checked for all tests. Table 1 shows the descriptive results.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Analysis of the Tests

		Homogeneity test	Pretest (both groups)	Posttest (both groups)
N	Valid	90	58	58
Mean		32.478	22.950	25.533
Skewness		-.085	-.131	.277
Std. Error of Skewness		.254	.309	.309
Kurtosis		-.577	.268	.510
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.503	.608	.608

As observed in Table 1, skewness and kurtosis ratios fall in the range of +/- 2.00 for all tests; thus, based on Field (2013), a normal distribution is assumed. The reliability of the results was checked using the Cronbach Alpha formula, which ranged between .71 and .79; thus, the results' reliability was assumed.

Using the homogeneity test results and considering 1 standard deviation above and below the mean score, 60 participants were selected to take part in the study. These participants were divided into two groups of 30 students. One participant in each group did not attend the posttest; thus, the study ended with 29 participants in each group. The participants' pretest scores were compared using independent samples t-test to make sure the difference between their scores is negligible. Table 2 shows the comparison of the pretest scores.

TABLE 2
Independent Samples t-test, Pretest of Grammar

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	<i>MD</i>	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
.379	.541	-.351	56	.727	-.166	.47517	-1.117	.784

As observed in Table 2, ($t(56) = -.351$, sig = .727, [-1.117, .784]), the difference between the two groups on the pretest of grammar is not significant; therefore, it can be assumed that both groups are statistically at the same level. Later the posttest scores of the groups were compared using the independent samples t-test. Table 3 shows the comparison of the scores on the grammar posttest.

TABLE 3
Independent Samples t-test, Posttest of Grammar

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	<i>MD</i>	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
.035	.853	5.249	56	.000	2.633	.501	1.629	3.637

As observed in Table 3, the difference in the participants' posttest scores was significant ($t(56) = 5.249$, sig = .000, [1.629, 3.637]). Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that pedagogically designed literary texts cannot affect undergraduate students' grammar in writing was rejected.

Qualitative Analysis

A thematic analysis was run using Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach. They suggest eight steps for successful content analysis. To correctly follow the steps, data was initially gathered through the semi-structured interview. Later, the data was transcribed, and two units of

analysis, i.e., benefits and challenges, were determined. Data was coded and categorized in these steps through the analysis, and the consistency of the data was checked. Later, inferences were made based on the extracted themes, and data were presented. Table 4 shows the results of QCA.

TABLE 4
Qualitative Content Analysis Results

N	Categories	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5	Theme 6
1	Benefits	Observing grammar in practical use	Getting familiar with literary texts	Gaining confidence in reading literature	Understanding literary concepts such as feminism	Learning vocabulary items	Enjoying the story
2	Challenges	Time-consuming (reading the texts many times)	Some parts were difficult- (higher than the learners' knowledge level).	Need more practice on grammar in the form of exercises			

As observed in Table 4, nine themes were extracted from the respondents' speech. The respondents' considered observing grammar in practical use, getting familiar with literary texts, gaining confidence in reading literature, understanding literary concepts such as feminism, learning vocabulary items, and enjoying the story as benefits of this approach. They also asserted that they need more time and exercises, and some parts of the texts were higher than their level.

Discussion

The pedagogically-designed literary texts used in this study showed a significant effect on learning English grammar among undergraduate students. In general, the respondents' perception regarding this approach was positive. These findings align with the existing consensus in the literature (Romero & Bobkina, 2015; Sapargul & Sartor, 2010; Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020). Romero and Bobkina (2015) believe that success in teaching grammar through literature depends on focusing on the texts' linguistic features. In the current study, the focus was given to the linguistic features by emphasizing them through repetitions in the text and providing grammar practice tests after reading the text. However, the qualitative results gained remind the readership that more attention should be given to the practice tests. The learners also believed that they needed more practice tests.

Sentürk and Kahraman (2020) believe that authenticity in the literary texts encourages the students to read them and provides them with real examples of grammatical use. Like the current study, and to see the impact of literature on grammar, they made use of short stories. In congruence with Sentürk and Kahraman (2020), a significant positive effect was observed in the current study. More importantly, both studies share the view that the learners' belief in reading literary texts was increased.

Sapargul and Sartor (2010) believe that using literary texts, per se, cannot guarantee positive effects. It depends on how the text is approached in the classroom. If the teachers conduct teacher-centered classes in which the grammatical rules are repeated, and the learners' are expected to memorize the rules, it is unlikely to see the effect. Indeed, educators should attempt to move from the GTM to a more communicative approach to learning. This issue was taken into account by the researchers in the current study. We attempted to assign activities that cause engagement with the text. Therefore, initially, we asked the participants to identify the grammatical structures in the text. Later, they were asked to personalize the structures by making sentences about their own lives and using grammatical structures.

Conclusion

We standardized the story “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood. We replaced difficult grammatical structures and vocabulary items with simpler ones to match the learner’s level through this process. We also focused on repetition of the grammatical structures to provide the learners with more examples. The pedagogically-designed literary texts, as observed in this study, could positively affect the learners’ knowledge of English grammar. Through qualitative analysis, we realized that the learners enjoyed reading English literature and believed in their ability to appreciate literary texts. They also got familiar with literary concepts. In general, the learners enjoyed learning grammar through this approach.

This study focused on pedagogically-designed literary texts and tested their impact on the learners’ grammar. Other studies should test this impact on other linguistic features of the language, such as vocabulary items, coherence and cohesion, and reading and writing fluency. Also, future researchers are encouraged to design classroom activities that encourage a communicative approach to learning grammar or any other linguistic feature through literature. Some participants welcomed the story selected in this study, yet others did not like the story, per se. Thus, we think future researchers should make sure the story is of interest to the learners level before beginning the course.

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