

**LEARNING GRAMMAR IN THE CONTEXT OF WRITING:
A CASE STUDY ON STUDENTS' BELIEFS**

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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of enabling students to apply grammar rules in context, the focus of teaching and learning English grammar still relies on isolated sentence structures and word formation. However, the significance of grammar goes beyond forms; it should also include meanings and uses (Ellis, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to make a shift from a traditional grammar teaching methodology to an integrated grammar-writing one, in which grammar is taught in context. This study investigates how previous learning experiences at high schools affected students' ability to write grammatically by examining students' reflections on a grammar-writing integration course at the university level. Participants were six, first-year English major students who took an advanced grammar course. Qualitative data consisted of email interviews, students' writing, and a face-to-face group interview. The analyses revealed that students' English background heavily influenced their current performance, but did not constrain students' development. Although the grammar-writing integration approach had some limitations, the participants acknowledged that their understandings of English grammar rules and usage had been greatly enhanced through practicing writing. The findings from this study suggest that English teachers and learners should consider the exposure to writing for improving and developing students' grammar competence.

Key words: English grammar; grammar-writing integration; writing context

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Statement of the problem

The introduction of the IELTS exam in the curriculum for English majors at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Law aims to help students develop their language skills through one of the most recognized English Language proficiency tests worldwide. Advanced grammar is one of the compulsory courses that students are required to accomplish. This exam-driven grammar course aims to help students develop their grammar knowledge and practice using grammar in various contexts. To achieve this aim, the use of writing in context is introduced in grammar lessons instead of the traditional teaching approach.

The traditional teaching of grammar, which is called formal grammar, puts language together in particular ways with little or no attention to meaning in contexts and usage. Contrariwise, functional grammar sees language as social interaction, and searches for explanations for why one language rather than another is appropriate for a certain communicative purpose in a certain context. (Knapp & Watkins, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2001). According to Ellis (2006), delivering grammar lessons in the traditional methods of drill-like practice and explicit explanations does not give students opportunities to be exposed to implicit knowledge needed for communicating fluently as well as accurately.

One of the crucial propositions of the teaching/learning model, according to Knapp and Watkins (2007), is that students' writing is the resource they should learn grammar through. Regarding teaching and learning grammar in writing contexts, some investigations have been conducted to fill the lacuna in research on writing and grammar correlations (Dean, 2001; Harmer, 1987; Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2012; Weaver, 1996). Nonetheless, there have been few studies of whether creating a connection between IELTS writing and advanced grammar learning, at least in the Vietnam context.

1.2. Purposes of the study

The purposes of the study were to examine how students' schooling backgrounds and English proficiencies influenced their performance in the advanced grammar course as well as discover students' perspectives on using IELTS writing tasks as contexts to learn grammar. In particular, the study sought to find out whether learning grammar in the context of writing is

effective in improving students' grammar learning achievement, and the difficulties that students encounter when dealing with this kind of grammar instruction.

1.3. Research questions

To achieve the purposes of the research, this study seeks the answers to the following questions:

1. How do previous experiences with learning English affect students' writing performances in the advanced grammar course?
2. What are students' views on the effectiveness of learning grammar through writing?
3. What are the difficulties students have encountered when learning grammar through writing skills?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Grammar and grammaring

Grammar is described as the way of combining particular texts, and language users utilize grammar knowledge for text production. A knowledge of grammar steers the use of language from unconscious to conscious control and selection of suitable texts (Knapp & Watkins, 2007). According to Swan (2002), carefully teaching selected grammar rules has two advantages including comprehensibility and acceptability. Stated differently, not knowing how to build and apply specific grammar structures constrains communication. Furthermore, learners are in need of achieving a high level of grammatical accuracy, especially for further examinations and authority's acceptance. The ability to produce correct spoken and written language is the key element of communicative competence. Because the matter of grammar is far beyond form, teaching grammar is not simply giving rules to students (Larsen-Freeman, 2014).

Larsen-Freeman (2014) uses the term "grammaring" to regard grammar as an area of language. In other words, grammaring is a skill, together with listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and learners need practice to develop this skill. Teaching grammar aims to help students construct their writing correctly, as well as use the language eloquently and appropriately. Similarly, Savage, Bitterlin and Price (2010) affirm that grammar can be considered as a master skill which is essential to promote the development of English competence.

2.2. Contextualised grammar teaching

Language is considered in context; the context in which language occurs decides how the grammar operates (Nunan, 1991). In line with Nunan's (1991) view of language and grammar, Giovanelli (2015) uses the word "usage-based" to talk about language, which means learners learn by using the target language for real purposes. Language must be embedded with contexts and motivations for communication and meaning negotiation. In discussing grammar and language teaching, Giovanelli (2015) moves the way of delivering grammar lessons from repeated exercises and drills activities to richer and interacting tasks that provide resources for not only reflective but also analytical work on both language nature and functions.

Zuidema (2012) emphasize that the knowledge of grammatical rules does not prepare students for real-life communication. At the same time, having poor grammar knowledge limits language users' ability to communicate effectively. Grammar teaching must encourage learners - as readers and writers - to explore the language in meaningful texts. "If reading and writing are two sides of the same coin, then grammar study is one way in which these two types of language study can be connected" (Zuidema, 2012, p. 64). Teaching grammar approach needs to make sure that students have the ability to link grammar forms with meanings in communication; grammar lessons, therefore, must be delivered together with communicative tasks (Ellis, 2006).

2.3. Grammar-writing connections

The relationship between writing and grammar is so powerful that many other researchers have studied the question further using different methods. According to Harmer (1987), written grammar exercises can be disciplined-based writing in the beginning, and later, with freer written tasks designed for practicing a particular grammar rule. Although writing activities can be challenging, giving students chances to correct their grammar usage will help them improve.

Nonetheless, instructing grammar points on students' written work cannot always be applied to students of all levels. Jones et al. (2012), in their study on the impact of grammar teaching on students' writing performance, reveal that contextualized grammar teaching benefited students in developing their writing skills. However, there were differences between less-able writers and those with a better understanding of selecting

grammatical structures to make their writing better. The intervention of grammar in teaching writing in the study conducted by Jones et al. (2012) was less beneficial for struggling students.

Despite the research evidence above showing the differences in students' proficiency level that affect their learning, some studies show the effectiveness of writing in assisting students to learn grammar better. Writing and grammar are impossible to separate; with in-context grammar, students practice using grammar concepts in their writing performance. Grammar instruction must be aligned with writing tasks. Furthermore, grammar practice may consist of analyzing the relationships between written elements and the whole students' work. By doing this, students are able to write by using grammar conventionally and efficaciously (Weaver, 1996).

Dean (2001) helped students to show significant development in grammar by getting them to write. The process begins with getting students familiar with the sentences they found and imitated, making them aware of the language learnt and helping them build up sentences. The results of Dean's study demonstrated that the students make a great improvement in writing and grammar in a way they know how to apply and understand the structures they constructed. Nevertheless, Weaver (1996) states that utilizing writing as a context to teach grammar does not ensure students will learn and apply the rules forever. Students may subsequently need instruction on how to apply grammar concepts they learnt.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Design of the study

Given its exploratory nature, this study adopted a case study approach. The purpose of employing a case study approach is to help researchers understand the insight and delineate the study from the individual's perspective (Abbuhl & Mackey, 2017). In this study, several cases were examined simultaneously in order to compare the differences and similarities between students' perceptions, as well as give insight into the cases. By examining multiple cases in qualitative research, the way divergent circumstances affect different groups is analyzed (Abbuhl & Mackey, 2017; Creswell, 2012).

3.2. Participants

The sample group of the study consisted of six first-year English major students at the faculty of legal languages, Ho Chi Minh city university of Law. The researcher used extreme case sampling to select participants for the study. This form of purposeful sampling helps researchers examine cases that demonstrate differential or extreme characteristics such as cases causing troubles or illuminating understandings. By employing extreme case sampling, individuals that have been given recognition for their achievements or outlier characteristics are studied (Creswell, 2012). The researcher selected the participants based on the results of the pre-test, students' writing performance during and at the end of the course. The pre-test given at the beginning of the course was taken from Oxford Practice Grammar Diagnostic Test. This test was to discover students' initial knowledge of grammar, and some problems with grammar rules they might encounter. The participants included two students with high achievements (HA), two average achievers (AA), and two students with low range ratings (LA).

3.3. Research instruments

Instruments of this study included email interviews, students' writing, and a face-to-face group interview.

3.3.1. Interviews

To answer the first research question, the email interview was conducted with the participants individually. Five questions in the email interview were to answer research question one regarding students' schooling background. The research participants were asked to discuss their perspectives on writing and grammar in a face-to-face group interview. The interview questions were adapted from Neuman (2014); some changes were made to be appropriate to collect data related to the study matter. In this part, questions one to four were to explore students' attitudes towards language, especially in learning grammar and writing. Questions five to ten were to explore students' viewpoints about learning grammar through writing; what they expected to achieve and what they improved after the course. Questions eleven to fourteen were to seek the difficulties students encounter during the course, and whether they think the approach is appropriate for them. The thematic approach was applied to analyse and report the interview data. A thematic analysis entails discussions on major patterns, which is supported by

using quotes and details (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2012).

3.3.2. Documents

Documents represent a valuable source for text-type data in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). In this study, the researcher collected students' writing to examine the participants' writing ability and how grammar was used in their writing. The written work from the students helped to reinforce their answers during the two interview phrases. The assignments were adopted from the IELTS practice tests; students either wrote full essays or some sentences with the given topics. The assignments were graded based on the marking criterion of grammar only. In particular, students' writing was examined to check whether they use correct grammar, punctuation, and a variety of sentence structures. Other writing components like task achievement, coherence and cohesion, and vocabulary were tolerated in students' written work.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Interview results

4.1.1. Students' background information and impacts of their prior experiences on their learning

Six students selected to participate in the study had different English language proficiency and learning experiences. Although all participants lived in a non-English speaking environment, the opportunities for using English were different. HA1 and HA2 had considerable opportunities to use English outside classroom situations. They participated in many extracurricular activities and competitions with different roles. Other students did not have many opportunities to practice English. In the AA1 and LA1 cases, since they lived in the urban and suburban areas, they had more chances to attend some English-related activities after school. AA2 and LA2, who lived in rural areas, did not attend any activities before they studied at the university.

The differences in the way students learnt grammar at high school also impinged on their opportunities for language development. Four out of six cases revealed that they only learnt the grammar rules, and practiced by doing many exercises mostly in multiple-choice questions, sentence transformations, gap filling. They had no or few opportunities to apply

grammar points that they learnt into writing. On the other hand, HA1 and HA2 engaged in tasks that helped them apply what they learnt. While AA2, LA1, LA2 did not learn much about writing at high school, HA1, HA2, and AA1 had chances to be exposed to those skills. Moreover, the latter reported that their experience with the IELTS test helped them develop their language and be more confident with courses at the university.

Students' English background partly affected their performance in the grammar course. The disadvantages of learning conditions, especially the lack of learning writing skills appropriately, did not wholly constrain students' language development. In AA2's case, despite a lack of writing practice, she showed great efforts in writing with the given grammar rules.

4.1.2. Students' attitude towards grammar and writing skills

When asking participants their feelings about grammar learning, some students expressed positive views about grammar learning. Some stated that they did not like grammar at first, since it was all about rules, something that had to be learnt by heart. After realizing the importance of grammar and how grammar was applied in spoken and written communication, their opinion on grammar has changed. Others had a neutral feeling for this fifth skill; they stated that they learn grammar as a tool to help them improve other communication skills.

(HA1) I used to believe that grammar was a set of rules which I had to learn by heart. As I started to write, I understood how to use the rules in different contexts. Grammar helped me improve my writing in terms of content and accuracy.

Regarding writing skills, both high achievers loved writing skills because they could express their thoughts and ideas through writing. Two average achievers also gave positive views on this productive skill. However, they believed their motivation to write depended a lot on the teacher in charge, as well as the difficulty level of the tasks given. The low achievers did not like writing skills. Because they started learning how to write at the university, this productive skill was a real challenge.

4.1.3. Students' perception on learning grammar with writing skills.

Replying to what students thought about how they would learn and practice grammar before taking the advanced grammar course, students

expected they would learn grammar with the same method as they experienced at high school. They expressed that they felt surprised when they had to write a lot to practice a grammar point, not doing multiple-choice types of tasks anymore.

(LA2) I thought that I would learn the same way as when I was in high school but at an advanced level; I never thought that I had to write a lot.

When asked “How much have you learnt about English grammar and usage from the use of writing context?”, students mentioned that they learnt more about the use of a grammar point, but learnt fewer structures during the course. HA1 learnt English unconsciously before entering high school. Later, when she wrote, she started trying to use different grammar structures. By writing, she remembered grammar mistakes and avoided those mistakes in the future. HA1 emphasized that multiple-choice exercises assessed the recognition of grammar points, while the writing exercises assessed how she could apply the rules. In HA2’s case, she learnt more grammar points by doing multiple-choice question tasks and fewer grammar structures by learning through writing. Nevertheless, writing helped HA2 apply what she learnt, and know how to use what she learnt in context. With writing, she could control what grammar she wanted to use to express her idea better. Agreeing with HA2, LA2 said she learnt fewer grammar points, but she could deeply understand the rules and their application.

In terms of students’ feedback preferences, all participants agreed that the lecturers must give constructive feedback on their writing. Feedback such as leaving question marks on their mistakes or giving open questions made students confused since they did not know why they made those mistakes and how to answer or correct them, especially when they were learning grammar. In the case of two low achievers, feedback could demotivate students despite the importance of teacher comments. Besides pointing out the mistakes, all the research participants wanted the lecturer to compliment them on their written work. Those compliments would help them feel more motivated because their efforts were rewarded.

(HA1) I prefer teachers’ feedback with both good and bad points in my writing. Positive feedback will help motivate students, while negative feedback helps students know what we need to improve.

(AA1) I do not like the feedback like underlining the mistakes, giving exclamation marks, and question marks. When receiving my writing with these symbols, I do not know what my mistakes are, whether they

are about word choice, structure, plagiarism, or ideas. It is better if the teacher can give some suggestions or point out what the mistakes are; students, therefore, will know what structures are appropriated in that context and what students need to improve.

Discussing the roles of writing in helping students practice grammar, the participants emphasized that this approach created an environment to help them apply what they learnt. After drafting and redrafting, students understood the structures better; they knew which grammar points were appropriate for a specific writing context, and how to use the given structures to express their ideas. Consequently, they could avoid frequently made mistakes.

(HA1) Writing is an environment to practice grammar. Improving writing skills means improving grammar and vice versa.

(AA1) One who wants to be an expert on grammar must write a lot. I must write to know the mistakes I frequently make and improve those mistakes.

L (LA1)earning grammar through writing is like stepping to a whole new level.

Regarding the most useful and valuable things students have learnt in the course, the participants expressed that they had more opportunities to learn and practice grammar structures. During the course, students worked on many different writing tasks, from analyzing sample written work to compose their writing. The purposes of these activities in and out of class helped students implicit grammar points used in different writing so that they could achieve the objectives of the grammar lessons. They knew how to apply grammatical points into different contexts, how to write grammatically correct to express their ideas. The participants also reported that this grammar-writing integrated course not only helped students with grammar but also enhanced their writing skills.

(HA2) I have learnt to control my writing in a better way, and always think carefully about what structures I need to use in my writing.

(AA2) I am acquainted with more grammar structures. When I started learning grammar this way, I was very confused. Then, I know how to use the structures in my writing and make my writing become better

4.1.4. Students' views on the difficulties of learning grammar through writing

The surveyed students posited that students at all levels could learn grammar in the context of writing. This approach was appropriate not only for those who were already good at writing or grammar, but also helpful for the beginners of English.

In terms of whether teachers' expectations had impacts on the way they wrote, the participants reported that teachers' expectation affected their writing both positively and negatively.

(HA1) In a limited time, I just can produce a piece of writing at a certain level. Thinking about what the teacher requires for the task. That affected the diversity of grammar use and my ideas for my writing as well.

(HA2) Teacher's expectations for grammar impinge my thinking on a particular topic as well as my creativity and writing style.

(AA2) Teacher's expectations may create motivation to help me perform better. On the other hand, this put me under pressure because I'm afraid that I cannot meet all the requirements.

(LA1) There are two sides to the problem; one is that I have more motivation to learn and spend more time on writing. On the contrary, I always have to make sure that I have to create the best performance that makes me nervous and leads to not-so-good results.

Regarding difficulties students faced when writing using particular grammar rules in a controlled topic, students expressed that this affected the way they write in order to meet the task requirements. When students tried to write with the required structure, they might have to change their ideas. When students attempted to follow their ideas on the topic, they might forget to use the grammar points required.

(HA2) I think my creativity is limited when I have to write with given structures. I have to put my ideas to fit a mould, think about how to write to meet the grammar requirements of the task. This sometimes may break the flow of ideas as well as the coherence and cohesion of my writing.

(AA1) Writing with controlled structures is quite challenging for me because I cannot develop my ideas. In other words, this strictly controls the way I write, and I cannot build diversity in my writing.

(AA2) I get stuck in given structures so that I cannot present my ideas as well as what I have learnt. My sentences may not have a connection that causes difficulties for the readers. However, in this way, I know when I should use those grammar points, in which context.

(LA2) Writing with a controlled structure impinge on the coherence and cohesion and the way I choose the vocabulary for my writing.

4.2. Students' writing

The results of students' writing showed that there was a wide gap between students regarding writing skills in general and the use of grammar in their writing in particular. Overall, high achievers had good control of grammar and mechanics used; they could write grammatically correct with just a few errors without impeding communication. Average achievers showed their great efforts in writing with correct grammar, although there were mistakes regarding punctuation and the choice of tenses. Low achievers, on the other hand, needed to practice more. The low achievers made mistakes in writing simple sentences; they chose incorrect tenses, putting words in the wrong order, and inappropriately using passive voice in their writing.

Moreover, the findings from students' work showed that they had some improvements in terms of grammatical accuracy. When comparing the participants' written work at the very beginning of the course and their final assignment, students could write better. They knew how to use grammar points more effectively in different writing topics.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Students' backgrounds affect their learning at the university.

Despite learning English in different environments, students, more or less, had a similar experience with grammar learning; they all learnt grammar with conventional pedagogy by doing lots of grammar exercises with the purpose of passing the university entrance exam. When comparing students' writing at the beginning and the end of the course, the study revealed that schooling backgrounds were the main obstacle that constrained students' achievement. However, those who attempted to practice more, gained better results and improved their language skills better.

5.2. The effectiveness of learning grammar through writing

The findings of the study reveal that students believed writing in context helped them learn grammar better although they learn fewer structures during the course. This idea is similar to Ellis's (2006) findings that the focus on grammar teaching should be on form, meanings, as well as uses of various grammatical structures. Moreover, the grammar taught should emphasize structures that are considered to be difficult to learners rather than teach all grammar rules. Grammar features chosen for teaching must be based on what students need and should be able to do (Hinkel, 2016).

The idea of giving constructive feedback on students' writing performance corresponds with Ellis's (2006) assertion. A mixture of explicit and implicit feedback should be given to students. Hinkel (2016) concludes that not all mistakes in grammar are created equal; the errors are different regarding the level of severity, the frequency, type, context, or effects. Moreover, Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) claim that correcting all mistakes students made is impossible; teachers, therefore, need to set priorities for correcting students' mistakes. One of the priorities is to immediately correct the errors in the grammar points that students are learning.

In terms of the role of writing in learning grammar, students stated that writing helped them learn by doing. Therefore, writing is better than speaking in developing students' grammar learning achievement. This idea is similar to Leech's (2000) study that the role of grammar is lesser in spoken communication compared to written communication (as cited in Hinkel, 2016). According to Fathman and Whalley (1990), the attention to grammar and grammar feedback in students' writing shows considerable improvements regarding grammar accuracy in particular and writing quality overall. The location of errors identified by the teacher helps students correct their grammar mistakes. The results also correspond with the findings of Johns (1997), that grammatical accuracy is a vital element in the assessment of nonnative speakers' writing.

Although the study did not find out the differences between students who learn grammar conventionally and learn grammar with writing, students did improve their grammatical range and accuracy throughout their written work. Students' writing performance also revealed that grammar-writing pedagogy helped teachers know whether students deeply understand what they learnt and apply that knowledge in communicative tasks, compared to the traditional teaching approach. Moreover, the result reconfirms Hinkel's

(2002) statement that students often lack the establishment of the connection between grammar knowledge and writing.

5.3. Difficulties in teaching grammar through writing

The study results revealed that students believed everyone could learn grammar through writing. The findings come in line with Ellis's (2006) assertion that grammar is best taught to intermediate level students, who have some ability to use the target language. For beginners, grammar can be taught through corrective feedback when they start to have the ability to use the language productively. The participants also expressed that teachers' requirements and control of grammar in their writing affected their work regarding the ideas and grammar used. This belief, however, does not correspond with Fathman and Whalley's (1990) conclusion that the content of writing is not negatively affected when students focus on grammar.

6. CONCLUSION

The research contributes to the method of teaching grammar by listening to the voices of the students. The value of this case study research is in foregrounding English-major students' experiences, generating insights into how they feel about the effectiveness of writing context in enhancing and developing their grammatical range as well as some difficulties they have encountered during the course. Furthermore, the role of writing in developing students' grammar learning achievement can shed the light on finding effective ways to teach and learn grammar.

The limitation of this study is the research context. The research is conducted in a university advanced grammar class focusing on enhancing students' grammar knowledge to use in academic contexts. The study results might not be the same in other grammar courses with different objectives or types of students at lower proficiency levels.

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