REVERTING TO FORM-FOCUSED GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION: EFFECTS ON GRAMMAR ACCURACY AND WRITING PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH

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Abstract:

To develop awareness of language structure is one of the main goals of second language learners (Bialystok, 1989). To achieve this goal, there has been a paradigm shift from form-focused to meaning-focused type of instruction over the years. However, some researchers have explored the effectiveness of switching back to form-focused grammar instruction (FFGI) to develop proficiency in a language. Motivated by this "pendulum-shift" to pedagogical grammar, the researcher investigated the effectiveness of FFGI and its relationship to writing. This study aimed to explore the effects of FFGI on grammar accuracy and writing proficiency. The study adopted a one-group pretest-posttest design. A standardized online writing test for was administered among the forty-two (42) college students enrolled in an English grammar course of a private university in Manila, Philippines. Afterwards, the participants were exposed to the intervention (FFGI). The findings revealed that there was a significant difference in the participants' pre- and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test. Conversely, there was no significant relationship between grammar accuracy and writing proficiency. It was concluded that FFGI can contribute to the improvement of grammar accuracy of students. However, knowledge of grammar rules does not automatically result in writing proficiency. Accordingly, this further implies explicit knowledge acquired from explicit instruction does not necessarily convert to implicit knowledge of real-life communicative writing tasks. Nonetheless, the teaching of grammar, regardless of whatever approach or methodology, will find its value and relevance in ESL contexts.

1.INTRODUCTION

One of the components in Savignon's (1976) communicative competence model is grammatical competence. It pertains to the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features of a language and to make use of these features to interpret and form sentences. An understanding of language and its structure is essential for communicative purposes. Clearly, it implies the importance of grammar in language learning and teaching.

The Philippine education system puts premium on the understanding of the English language structure in developing the communication skills, both oral and writing, of Filipino students as reflected in the curriculum of both basic and tertiary education. Even with the Enhanced Basic Education program (K to 12 curriculum), grammar lessons remain to be integral components of the English subject. In a larger scale, it recognizes the vital role that English plays in producing highly-skilled and globally-competitive citizens.

However, there are alarming realities that English quality is seriously deteriorating and that mastery of English among Filipinos is declining. Success is highly dependent on one's ability to communicate effectively in the second language since the inability to construct grammatically correct sentences impedes writing proficiency. By a common observation, Filipino students can no longer communicate well in the English language as evidenced by the decline in their proficiency. In a survey conducted in 2004, it was observed that the English proficiency of Filipino overseas workers, both skilled and unskilled, has likewise declined (Funtanilla, 2005). What is even alarming is the poor performance in English proficiency examinations even among teachers themselves (Melencio, 2007).

Certain efforts in language classess though seemed not to have translated into the results expected in terms of developing writing proficiency in the English language. Boniao (1995) as cited by Trinio (2011) said that "English proficiency has almost failed, even after ten years of English instruction; high school graduates are poorly prepared for college work." Ople (1995) actually claimed that a good number of college graduates cannot write good 4 sentences nor articulate themselves in English well. Indubitably, these alarming observations challenge English teachers to develop writing proficiency among students. English teachers face the greater responsibility of enhancing such skills to help students realize the goals and specific learning outcomes set by the English curriculum while dealing with the other factors affecting second language learning and teaching.

Some of these issues concern the current pedagogical practices that may have a contribution to students' low oral and writing examination results. Thus, it is timely to find out whether or not teachers are able to capitalize on the time used for grammar drills and exercises. It is worthy to investigate 5 whether such drills have aided or contributed to the development of English proficiency of the students who have been exposed to grammar instruction for a long period of time. More than the time spent in learning and understanding the structure of the English language, the manner in which grammar lessons are taught sparks interest in the researcher given that it is an important factor in the teaching-learning process. Consequently, it motivated the researcher to look into grammar teaching methodologies in order to develop English proficiency.

This study aimed to explore and assess the effectiveness of form-focused grammar instruction in developing writing proficiency of students. In essence, this study capitalized on FFGI as a tool in addressing difficulties specific to the declining writing proficiency in English of a group of Filipino students.

The focus of this study was the evaluation of the effectiveness of form-focused grammar instruction (FFGI) in developing writing proficiency in English of college students. Specifically, the study sought to address two research questions. First, *is there a significant difference in the study participants' pre and post test scores in the grammar accuracy test after going through form-focused grammar instruction?* Second, *is there a significant relationship between the students' grammar accuracy and English writing proficiency?* The next section provides a brief overview of the intervention, FFGI, used in this study.

FORM-FOCUSED GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

The history of second language teaching and learning has alternated between two opposite approaches - those that focused on analyzing the language, i.e., language usage (focus on forms) and those that focused on using the language, i.e., language use (focus on meaning) (Afshari, 2012). The focus on forms (FonFs) pertains to the systematic teaching of language structure and features while focus on form (FonF) refers to the instruction that focuses on the communicative tasks or activities with the language feature taught incidentally, that is, only when the need arises.

While the advent of these approaches has yielded some significant contributions to the field of second language teaching and learning, it has also posed a dilemma as to whether or not teachers should focus on form or meaning. Further, it has elicited several conflicting and various views and criticisms among linguists, teachers, and researchers. Moreover, it has paved the way for certain studies that attempted to determine which methodology is more effective in learning and teaching a second language.

The approach focusing on form has numerous definitions but to simplify, Spada has provided a nicely-worded definition: "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learner's attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (1997:73). In essence, it is not just confined to the language form per se since the other end of the continuum implies indirect reference to forms, learner's paying attention to specific linguistic features in input and the integration of forms into communicative tasks or grammar consciousness raising by Ellis. Accordingly, in this study, communicative activities were incorporated in speaking and writing tasks applying the rules of grammar. The form-focused was solely done during the delivery of instruction on grammar lessons.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a One-Group-Pretest-Posttest to answer the questions posed in this research. The pre-test and the post-test consisted of test in writing proficiency in English. Results from the writing proficiency test were collated and interpreted in light of the questions posed for this study. An explicit aspect of this study was the use of form-focused grammar instruction as an intervention emphasizing on the structure of the language rather than its meaning.

As regards the research participants, this study included forty-two (42) college students of a private non-sectarian university in Manila enrolled in an English grammar course as study participants. They were mostly from the College of Business Administration but were pursuing majors such as Customs Administration, Operations Management, and Accountancy. One participant was taking International Relations while another was majoring in Multimedia Arts. However, at the end of the term, there were only thirty-one (31) participants left due to attrition related to absences, course dropping, and unavailability of either the pre-test or the post-test results in writing.

2.1 Instruments

Purdue Online Writing Test

In order to assess the grammar accuracy and the writing proficiency of the participants, the researcher adopted the Purdue Writing Test, an online standardized test. This was chosen because it had already undergone validation as it was used in a study by Funtanilla (2005) and the test items are consistent with the grammar topics outlined in the course syllabus of the selected participants. The test consists of two sections: grammar and free writing. The grammar section consists of 60 items about basic grammar and proper use of the eight parts of speech. The free writing consists of five topics from which study participants can choose. These topics include the following: the importance of attending a college or university, a comparison between knowledge gained from experience and knowledge gained from books, the qualities of good neighbors, success as a result of hardwork, and parents as best teachers. In the free writing, the participants were instructed to choose one topic and write a short composition about it in at least three paragraphs. The objective part of the test was rated by the researcher while the free writing test was rated by the three faculty raters from the English department. They were the same raters who assessed the oral proficiency of the participants.

Writing Proficiency Scoring Rubric

To objectively assess the written outputs of the students, the researcher utilized Lee and Paulson's (1992) Evaluation Criteria for Compositions which was also used by Baetiong (2004) and recently by Envarga-Florece (2006) in their respective dissertations. The analytic marking scheme consists of five criteria arranged according to the assigned numerical score each of the criteria received. The criteria include content, organization, vocabulary, language, and mechanics. Among the writing rubrics, this was selected as it had undergone a series of validations having been used in two related studies. Likewise, the descriptors for each criterion are very detailed particularly for language and mechanics. This was also use by the same raters for oral proficiency.

Form-focused Grammar Instruction (FFGI) Lesson Plans

The researcher prepared twenty-five (25) sets of lesson plans for the entire semester based on the grammar topics outlined in the syllabus. Prior to the implementation, the lesson plans were submitted to the evaluators for their review and validation. Some of the evaluators' suggestions were considered in the revision and execution of the plan. The lesson proper usually began with motivational activity. Afterwards, the researcher discussed the lesson using form-focused instruction. Guided practice and individual practice followed the instruction. One of the key features of the plan was the reinforcement activities that always came in pairs – one for oral proficiency labelled as *Speak Up* and another for writing proficiency *Write Up.*

2.2 Data Collection Procedure

In obtaining the data needed for this study, a three-phase data collection approach was employed. This approach includes three phases namely pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. Each phase comprised of an activity for writing proficiency with corresponding data to be collected.

In the pre-intervention stage, the writing test was administered. Accordingly, the study participants took the Purdue Writing test consisting of 60 objective items on basic grammar and an essay part with five (5) topics. For the essay part of the pre-writing test, Lee and Paulson's (1992) Evaluation Criteria for Compositions was used in rating the participants' composition. The results gathered from the writing test served as baseline data for the study. Similarly, these provided insights as to what grammar lesson/s would be given more focus during the intervention.

In the intervention phase, the grammar lessons were implemented using form-focused grammar instruction using the validated learning plans. Data collection concluded with the administration of post-tests using the same set of tests during the pre-test stage of results to allow for reliable and uniform comparison by the end of the semester.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedure

In analyzing the data obtained for this study, the following statistical tools and techniques were used to ensure valid, scientific, and systematic presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data: weighted mean, frequency count and standard deviation.

In computing the participants' average scores in the tests, the weighted mean was used. In comparing two means from a single sample arranged in a before-after panel design, the tratio was the most appropriate statistical tool to employ (Weirs, 2007). Accordingly, in this study, the t-ratio is used to compare writing proficiency means from a single sample (a college class) arranged before and after the intervention (FFGI). Further, the parametric test (t-test) was used to determine whether or not the difference between the means was significant.

The analysis of the data was done consistently with the questions posed in this research. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were done on the data gathered from the pre and post-tests for writing proficiency results The first set of quantitative analysis was related to the first question which tried to determine the significant difference in the study participants' pre and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test. Accordingly, it compared the scores of the participants in the pre-test with their scores in the post-test to identify any improvement using paired sample t-test. Further analysis was done regarding the second question which attempted to establish the significant relationship between the students' grammar accuracy and writing proficiency in English.

Finally, the qualitative analysis was done on the sample writing compositions of the participants. The results from this qualitative analysis for written outputs were used to confirm quantitative findings for the second research question. In essence, the determination of the effectiveness of FFGI was based on the analysis of the success

indicators in this study. These success indicators include the grammar accuracy test scores and writing proficiency rating scores for the essay part of the writing test.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Grammar Accuracy before and after FFGI

To answer the first research question, *Is there a significant difference in the study participants' pre- and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test after going through form-focused grammar instruction?*, the standardized Purdue writing test was administered to the participants.

Table 1 shows the results of the study participants' pre and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test. The mean score of the participants in the pre-test is 34.39 and the standard deviation (SD) is 6.291. On the other hand, the mean score in the post-test is 36.13 and the SD is 6.874. This indicates an increase of 1.74 points.

Table 1
Pre-test and post test scores in the grammar accuracy test

Grammar Accuracy Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	t-value	*p*
Pre-test	34.39	6.291	1.13	-2.187	**0.037
Post-test	36.13	6.874	1.235		

Note: **=$p \leq 0.05$. N=31

To determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the study participants' pre and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test, a paired sample T-test was employed. Based on the Paired Sample T-test, the null hypothesis stating that there was no significant difference between the grammar pre-test and post-test scores was rejected because the p-value (p=.037) is less than 0.05. This means that the participants' pre- and post-test scores in the grammar accuracy test are significantly different in favor of the post-test scores. In fact, the grammar post-test score is higher as compared to the pre-test score. Thus, this means that the students' grammar accuracy score has improved after going through FFGI.

The improvement in grammar accuracy among the participants can be further interpreted in the light of its significance in the development of communicative competence. The term communicative competence refers to the speaker's capability to use a language with linguistic proficiency (Hymes, 1972, 1974). An important aspect of communicative competence is linguistic competence, also called grammar competence, which was defined by Canale (1983) and Canale and Swain (1980) as the learner's ability to use lexis, syntax, and structures accurately.

Grammar Accuracy and English Oral and Writing Proficiency

The second research question seeks to determine the significant relationship between the participants' grammar accuracy and English writing proficiency. Table 2 shows that the participants' grammar accuracy has an inverse relationship with English writing proficiency. The Pearson's correlation value is -.308. This value implies moderate inverse relationship which means that even if there was an improvement in grammar accuracy, it did not lead to an improvement in the participants' writing proficiency. However, after statistical treatment, the p-value is at 0.092 which is likewise greater than the set level 73 of significance (p=0.05). This shows that the relationship between grammar accuracy and English writing proficiency is also not significant as presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Relationship between the participants' grammar accuracy and English writing proficiency

	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed) p-value	Interpretation
Grammar Accuracy and Writing Proficiency	-0.308	0.092	Not Significant

Note: p>0.05. N=31

To further provide justification for the results indicated in Table 2, the researcher also analyzed the grammar accuracy tests of some study participants (coded as RT37, OK30, DA14, RM34, CH10, and PR32) and compared them with their writing proficiency tests for uniformity (Table 3). For instance, RM34 had a 5-point decrease in writing proficiency post-test despite the 10-point increase in grammar accuracy post-test. On the contrary, RT37, in spite of the 6-point decrease in grammar accuracy post-test, yielded a 22-point increase in the writing proficiency post-test. Similarly, OK30 had an 18-point increase in the writing proficiency test in spite of a 2-point decrease in grammar accuracy post-test.

Table 3

Participants' score in grammar accuracy and writing proficiency tests indicating inverse results

	GRAMMAR ACCURACY TEST			WRITING PROFICIENCY		
Participant Code	**Pre-Test**	**Post-Test**	**Variance**	**Pre-Test**	**Post-Test**	**Variance**
RT37	29	23	-6	42	64	22
OK30	28	26	-2	38	56	18
DA14	41	39	-2	54	53	-1
RM34	34	44	10	43	38	-5
CH10	34	40	6	57	56	-1
PR32	29	42	13	63	60	-3

The results indicating an improvement in writing proficiency test scores (study participants coded RT37 and OK 30 in Table 3) are consistent with the results of the study by Scott (1989) cited by Macaro and Masterman (2006). In his study, Scott taught two university-level French classes relative clauses and the subjunctive mood using, alternately, an explicit method or an implicit method, and tested them using aural and written gap-filling exercises. Post-test results suggested that both classes made more progress when taught explicitly, but only in the written exercises. Furthermore, it is in agreement with the findings of Lines and Myhill in 2012 wherein the group that received FFGI showed more examples of explicitly-75 taught language features being used independently and effectively in their written outputs. The effectiveness of FFGI in developing writing proficiency was also proven by Shokouhi and Alishahi (2009) in their studies where students had better gains in simple than complex grammatical elements in their final output in second language writing in two rhetorical modes of narration and exposition.

However, this contradicts the results drawn from the participants who did not make progress in their writing proficiency (participants coded RM34, CH10, and PR32 in Table 3) despite being exposed to FFGI. This observation is consistent with the results in Hayashi's study (2005) where students expressed their ideas in writing but still failed to come up with a composition that is free of grammar errors. Alaer (2012) also noted that the participants in her study did not improve their writing proficiency in correct target structures because their written compositions still had numerous errors in passive form construction and subject-verb agreement.

Hayashi (1994) used GCS or "general cognitive system" mechanism, which gradually develops with cognitive capacity, as an attempt to explain the occurrence of various grammar errors despite explicit instruction. According to him, learners do not immediately grasp the rules and meanings even if they are taught. This further means that they are not able to master the target structures right away; therefore, they are unable to use them in oral and writing tasks. Consequently, they need a certain silent period before they can internalize the rules and apply them. At the earlier stage of cognitive development, they understand core or unmarked properties (familiar and simple grammar rules). At the later stages, they recognize and comprehend periphery or marked properties (uncommon, complex, and abstract grammar rules).

4. CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to investigate the effects of FFGI on grammar accuracy and writing proficiency in English with the assumption that learners who are grammatically accurate are likely to write more accurately. Thus, in order to develop grammar accuracy, a form-focused grammar instruction as an intervention was implemented. The use of FFGI as an approach to develop grammar accuracy was grounded on the varied interface positions as knowledge base systems in acquiring and learning a language. Specifically, this study gave credence to strong interface position which claims that explicit knowledge (rules of grammar) becomes implicit knowledge through practice (Sharwood-Smith, 1981). In turn, this implicit knowledge aids in the use of language almost automatically or subconsciously during communicative situations. It is in the strong interface position that the role of explicit instruction in second language acquisition and learning such as FFGI is prominent and that considerable importance is attached to explicit instruction of the rules of grammar.

Based on the findings obtained in this study, the following conclusions were drawn:

First, form-focused grammar instruction contributes to the improvement of grammar accuracy of students. The explicit discussion of grammar rules and target structures, drills, repetitions and error correction aids in learning a language as also noted by Sheen (2003). The marked improvement in the participants' grammar accuracy score indicates their explicit knowledge of the target language. As explicit knowledge is mostly considered to be the starting point of second language proficiency (e.g., DeKeyser, 1998; O'Malley, Chamot, & Walker, 1987; Sharwood Smith, 1988), there is a direct relationship between teaching grammar and second language proficiency. Bialystok (1994) shares the same view that 85 learners of second language learners can utilize explicit information for developing analyzed linguistic knowledge. Based on the assumption that language is a structured knowledge system, Bialystok argues that one of the main goals of L2 learners is to develop awareness of the structure of language. As posited by

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Macaro (2006), the effectiveness of FFGI is not conclusive but the focus on grammar will be beneficial. Grammatical ability is highly correlated with second language (L2) proficiency. Students who learn grammar do not only focus on form but also grasp meanings when sentences are complicated. Further, students who have high grammatical ability can understand meanings and write well-organized compositions even though they still produce errors on those that were not explicitly taught. Thus, the teaching of grammar using form-focused instruction is still valuable in language classrooms.

Second, the knowledge of grammar rules does not automatically result in improved writing proficiency. In this study, there was no significant relationship found between grammar accuracy and writing proficiency. While it is true that the study participants improved in their grammar accuracy after going through FFGI, there were a number of instances when they were not able to apply the correct language forms as evident in the incorrect grammar structures in their written outputs. Despite being exposed to FFGI, the participants' outputs still reflected a number of errors related to tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, correct use of prepositions, pronoun-antecedent agreement, and parallelism. However, the persistence of these errors cannot be misconstrued as FFGI being an ineffective teaching methodology in developing students' proficiency in the language. Conversely, the improvement in grammar and writing proficiency cannot also be fully associated with FFGI being an effective approach to improve the students' 86 communicative ability. Because of sample size constraints and the interplay of other factors not accounted for in this study such as first language background, second language proficiency level, learning styles, structure complexity, and affective filter of the study participants, the results were not fully conclusive particularly regarding the relationship between the participants' grammar accuracy and writing proficiency in English after their exposure to FFGI. In this context, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of FFGI cannot be generalized. In order to address this weakness, the study may be replicated involving a bigger group and considering the previously stated factors affecting second language learning.

In summary, language proficiency is not solely affected by a particular kind of instruction. Explicit knowledge acquired from explicit instruction such as FFGI does not necessarily convert to implicit knowledge of real-life communicative functions particularly involving speaking and writing. Nonetheless, the teaching of grammar, regardless of whatever approach or methodology, will always find its niche and value in the domains of a language class.

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