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The Impact of Discourse-Based Grammar Teaching on Writing Skill of Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

English as a foreign language learners encounter various problems in writing skill. One of the reasons for this may be that they are taught grammar only at sentence-level and not at discourse level (Celce, Murcia & Y.Wonho, 2014). Having knowledge of grammar at sentence level is crucial but not sufficient. In this respect, the present study attempts to cast a new glance at teaching grammar in EFL context using discourse-based grammar teaching approach and evaluates its impact on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing skill. In order to determine the effect of discourse-based grammar (independent variable) on the EFL learners' writing performance (dependent variable), 50 upper intermediate English language learners were selected randomly from 2 English language institutes in Iran. All subjects were pretested for their homogeneity. Then, they were assigned into 2 groups. The experimental group was treated with discourse-based grammar teaching for 10 sessions, two sessions each week; and the control group received just the traditional grammar instruction. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was run to probe the research question. The findings indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups on the score ($F_{(1, 41)} = 41.79, p = .000 < .05$, partial eta squared = .499 representing a large effect size). Additionally, there was a significant difference between the two groups' means on the posttest of writing while controlling for the possible effects of the pretest. The adjusted mean of the scores for the experimental and control groups were 16.08 and 13.88, respectively. Therefore, it is concluded that the treatment on experimental group caused significant improvement in their writing ability.

Keywords: *Discourse, EFL Learners, Writing Skill, Discourse-Based Grammar Teaching, Authentic Materials*

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1. Introduction

In foreign language teaching, one of the hotly debated issues has been teaching grammar. Different researchers advocated different methods of grammar instruction. Traditional method of grammar teaching, form-focused instruction, meaning-focused instruction and teaching grammatical items through tasks, all have had their pros and cons. As is true in many areas of language teaching, the teaching of grammar is fraught with controversy (Larsen Freeman, 2001). In traditional methods, the aim of grammar

teaching was to provide learners with knowledge of grammar or grammatical competence which was assumed to be the key to successful language learning and language use. Traditional approaches to grammar teaching reflected a view of language that considered the sentence and sentence grammar as forming the building blocks of language (McCarthy, 2001). Form-focused instruction is an umbrella term for any planned or incidental instructional activities that induce learners to pay attention to linguistic forms within the



communicative setting (Ellis, 2002). In form-focused instruction, both teachers and peers assist learners who are perceived to have difficulties in production or comprehension of some grammatical forms in L2. A distinct feature of form-focused instruction is that it presents language as a communicative mechanism. This is contrary to the traditional methods that are either non-communicative or teacher-centered. Meaning-based instruction does not pay attention to the discrete parts of language but lays emphasis on communicative language in real life.

Most recent approaches to language teaching such as text-based teaching and content-based teaching put emphasis on the role of grammatical knowledge in performing tasks, in developing texts and in understanding content and information. As Richards (2015: 262) says, “language teaching today draws on the findings of corpus linguistics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis and acknowledges interrelationships between grammatical and lexical knowledge”.

2. Literature Review

Literature review has indicated that teaching of grammar in EFL context has undergone great changes. There are a lot of studies on different approaches to grammar teaching, but there has been no general consensus concerning its role as an important component in ELT. Researchers such as Krashen (1982) and Prabhu (1987) do not advocate the direct instruction of grammatical forms and structures. Some other researchers such as Long (1991, & 2000), and Rivers (1991), have written articles in favor of the explicit and direct teaching of forms. Still others including Schmidt (2001), Ellis (2002), Doughty (2003), and Williams (2005) endorse teaching forms through tasks in which learners put emphasis on meaning. These researchers proposed three approaches to teaching grammar and its role as an important component in ELT: that is, focus on forms or traditional methods; focus-on meaning approach; teaching forms through tasks.

2.1 Traditional Method of Teaching Grammar

In traditional method, grammar was usually presented out of context in isolated sentences. Learners were expected to internalize the rules through mechanical drills or exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and transformation. As Nunan

(1998) points out these exercises were developed to provide formal, declarative mastery for the learners without being able to develop procedural skills, using the language for communication effectively. In traditional method of teaching grammar, the main focus was on the form not function. During the heydays of traditional methods, the focus was clearly on form and accuracy, and learning a language basically meant learning its grammar (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Traditionally, teachers used to follow deductive approach in which they wrote grammatical items on the board and gave a long explanation about them in isolation and in the long run, they wrote some examples illustrating the grammatical items. In other words, as Long (1991) maintains in traditional approach, focus revolves around forms in isolation.

2.2 Meaning-Focused Instruction

Krashen (1982) claims that conscious knowledge of grammatical rules even well-learned, well-practiced, may not lead to acquisition. He argues that even competent second language performers have conscious control of very few rules, if any. To espouse his claim, Krashen cited Prabhu's five-year procedural or communicational teaching project (1979-1984). The thrust of the project was that: ‘Form is best learnt when learners' attention is on meaning’. His initiative work commenced a new and courageous attempt in teaching language without any conscious focus on forms. The proponents of this approach for teaching language forms contend that ELT should be largely concerned with providing learners with communicative opportunities in the form of tasks or activities for practicing the language. Figure 1: below summarizes the basic tenets of the approaches.

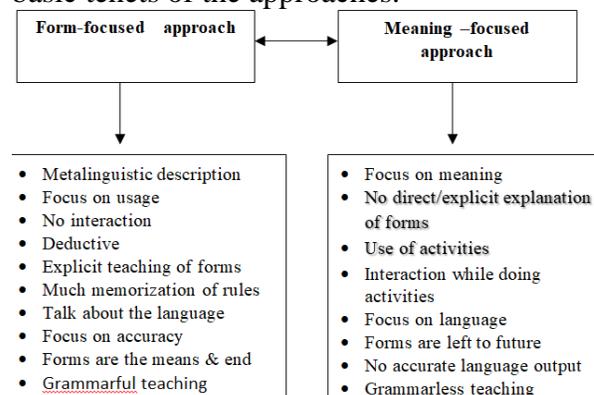


Figure 1: Two extreme approaches for teaching language forms (M. Ismail Abu-Rahmah, 2009)

2.3 Teaching forms through tasks

The dilemma of whether to teach grammar or not has been resolved. As Thornbury (1999) asserts the question now

is not “should we teach grammar?” the problem is how to teach it effectively. The general consensus is now on the necessity of form-focused tasks that are designed to draw learners’ attention to grammatical features of the target language (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Williams, 2005) and that foreign language learners need opportunities to communicate, which enables them to obtain comprehensible input and to be in conditions needed for developing strategic competence. It is the task-based language teaching which tries to integrate the teaching of grammar with providing opportunities to communicate (Fotos & Ellis, 1991).

Studies conducted on pair/group work, which is a characteristic of a task-based approach, demonstrate that learners interact, negotiate meaning and use longer sentences most of the time. In teaching forms through tasks, consciousness-raising tasks and the noticing hypothesis play a central role.

Ellis (2001) asserts that consciousness-raising tasks are designed to draw learners’ attention to a particular linguistic feature through a range of inductive and deductive procedures. He adds “without any focus on forms or consciousness raising...formal accuracy is an unlikely result” and stresses that awareness of how some linguistic feature works is the outcome of a CR task (cited in Abu-Rahmah & S.Daif-Allah, 2009). Ellis (2002) believes that through carefully designed consciousness-raising activities, learners will develop an explicit knowledge of the grammar of the language that facilitates their ability to communicate.

Schmidt (1995) maintains that for better second language development, learners have to notice the linguistic features in the input. Noticing induces an awareness of the target language features and this awareness in time brings about the acquisition of these features. Eckerth (2008,p.12) states that “if L2 learners have explicit knowledge of a certain feature of the L2, they are more likely to notice its occurrence in the input they receive” and adds that the process of noticing accelerates the implicit knowledge of language features, which, in turn, helps second language acquisition (cited in Abu-Rahmah & S.Daif-Allah, 2009). To sum up, noticing is so important that is described as “the gate to subsequent learning” (Batstone, 1994, p.100).

2.4 The Rational for Discourse-Based Approach

With the advent of communicative approach in 1980s, a need for more

communicative tasks increased. Communication requires both grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. To answer this general need, researchers, educationalists and materials developers focused on providing authentic materials and on factors which contribute to the ability of using language. This approach focused on discourse as the basic unit of analysis instead of sentence and took into consideration the prime importance of context in which the discourse took place. The urge of integrating discourse into language teaching was supported by three premises of discourse view towards language use which were endorsed by J. M. Cots (1996) including communicative competence; context, language variation and real data; and negotiation of intentions and interpretation. The first premise deals with principles of Hyme’s communicative competence which refers to both linguistic accuracy and social appropriateness. That is, it involves knowing not only how to produce grammatically well-formed sentences but also how to use them appropriately in real situation. The second premise deals with the fact that language has different functions in different contexts. It requires the real instances of language use, in which the full potential of language can be appreciated by looking at its social effects. Finally, the third premise is based on the notion that communication is not a simple transfer of pre-existing meanings: rather, meanings are created through the negotiation of intentions and interpretations.

2.5 Discourse-Based Grammar Teaching

The new trend in language teaching has influenced grammar teaching as well. Recent pedagogy for grammar teaching advocates a discourse-based approach where grammar instruction is supported by the provision of L2 discourse containing multiple instances of instructed form (Nassaji, H., Fotos, 2011). It seems that there is a need to have sentences in combination which is the main concern of discourse approach which refers to using language in context.

Discourse-based approach to language teaching was suggested by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005). They hold the view that:

Discourse-based approach allows for target language engagement that focuses on meaning and real communication. Such real communication can, of course, be carried out in speech or in writing with a variety of communicative goals. Learners of different



age group and different levels of language proficiency should have, according to such an approach, many opportunities for natural exposure to the target during the course of study, as well as many opportunities to use the language for meaningful purposes (p. 734).

Discourse-based approach takes into accounts not only linguistic function of language but also the sociocultural and pragmatic ones. In fact, it puts emphasis on both forms and pragmatics. The discourse-based approach is grounded on two views: the first one is the view that grammar should not be seen as an autonomous system to be learned but rather as a system that closely interacts with meaning, social function, and context it is used. The second view is that language should be taught as communication and for communication. To put it another way, learners should be taught to attain effective communication. Grammatical competence, which is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning, is one component of the communicative competence which has other components: sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001). All of these components are interrelated; they cannot be developed in isolation and “an increase in one component interacts with other components to produce a corresponding increase in overall communicative competence” (Larsen-Freeman, 2001: 17).

Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) claim discourse-based grammar teaching enables learners to be competent users of a language by providing a model which focuses on meaning and real communication and also integrate the recent trend on focus on form within communicative language teaching. Discourse-based grammar teaching has provided language teachers with a myriad of interesting insights into the meaning and use of structures (Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

2.6 The Relationship between Grammar and Writing

That grammar has a significant and real effect on all four skills of language learning is gradually recognized, although its impact on all language skills is not the same. The benefits of grammar on teaching and developing writing skills have been better accepted. Writing that contains grammatical errors is difficult to read and

understand. Its effect on other skills cannot be ignored. Communication calls for a certain degree of grammatical competence. Communicative proficiency requires knowledge and application of grammar and use of appropriate vocabulary of the language to convey meanings in a socially acceptable way. That is, linguistic accuracy plus social appropriateness. When a message is relayed with the correct grammar, it is easier to understand the purpose and meaning of that message. English as a foreign language is not acquired naturally; instruction and learning are important. While it is argued that learners employ different strategies to acquire grammar rules, it cannot be denied that if one hopes to acquire and use English language accurately and fluently, grammar learning will be necessary. Grammarians talk about the researchers whose research findings revealed that learners who received grammar instructions made marked progress in comparison to those who tried to pick up the language naturally.

2.7 Previous Studies

G. Collins & J. Norris' (2017) study on the effect of presenting grammar within the context of reading and writing on written language performance revealed that teaching grammar in context yielded improvements in written grammar following a very short period of instruction. They conducted an experiment using a traditional grammar instruction in which grammar lessons were presented separately from reading and writing activities and embedded grammar instruction in which grammar was taught within authentic contexts of reading and writing. Following six weeks of instruction, the posttest was given to both groups and its findings revealed that embedded grammar instruction group outperformed the traditional grammar instruction group in sentence combining ability, but no statistically significant differences were observed between the groups in use of contextual conventions (i.e. punctuation and capitalization). Their study provided evidence for the efficacy of teaching language using meaningful texts as the instructional medium.

M. Elkouti's (2017) study on the role of Discourse-Based Approaches in English Language Teaching in Algeria demonstrated that discourse-based approaches were effective in teaching English in both general and specific settings. Their reliance on discourse analysis and pragmatics facilitated

the discourse production and interpretation. Besides, they stressed the importance of context and prior knowledge in comprehending both spoken and written discourse, favoring authentic language.

Nur Amin's (2009) study has been conducted to determine the effectiveness of teaching grammar in context to reduce grammatical errors in students' writing. The general question to answer was, "Do the students taught by teaching grammar in context make less grammatical errors in writing than those who are taught by teaching grammar conventionally?" The results of his study showed that the students taught grammar in context made less grammatical errors in writing than those who were taught grammar conventionally.

Richard Andrews (2004) conducted an experiment in which he wanted to know the effect of grammar teaching in English on 5–16-year-olds' accuracy and quality in written composition. His research revealed that the teaching of syntax (as part of a traditional or transformational/generative approach to teaching grammar) appeared to have no influence on either the accuracy or quality of written language development for 5–16-year-olds while teaching of sentence-combining proved to have a more positive effect on writing quality and accuracy.

Since there is a paucity of study on discourse-based grammar instruction, this study intended to focus on discourse-based grammar teaching in Iranian EFL context and its impact on EFL learners' writing performance. To this end, the following research question and hypothesis were considered.

2.8 Research Question and Hypothesis

Do the upper-intermediate learners, taught through discourse-based grammar teaching, outperform those who are receiving traditional grammar instruction in Iranian EFL context in writing?

H0. There is no significant difference between discourse-based grammar teaching and traditional grammar instruction in promoting Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In order to investigate the impact of discourse-based grammar teaching on writing performance of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners, a quasi-experimental design was used. Its independent variable was discourse-based grammar teaching and the dependent variable of the study was the EFL upper

intermediate learners' writing performance. To this end, 50 upper intermediate English language learners were selected randomly from 2 English language Institutes in Iran. All subjects were pretested for their homogeneity. The students were assigned into 2 groups randomly. The experimental group was treated with discourse-based grammar teaching for 10 sessions, two sessions each week, and the control group just received the traditional grammar instruction; that is, decontextualized grammar teaching.

3.2 Participants

The focus of the study was to determine the role of discourse-based grammar teaching on writing performance of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. To this end, a total of 50 upper-intermediate EFL learners were randomly selected. The justification for choosing upper-intermediate EFL learners comes from the fact that they require sufficient linguistic and discursal knowledge to cope with the meaning resources at the local and global levels of texts (Lotfipour- Saedi, 2006; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000, and Grabe and Stoller, 2002 cited in Aidinlou, N. 2011). They were pretested. In pretest, two topics were given to the subjects and asked to write a composition choosing one of the topics. A standard rubric was employed by two raters on the basis of the subjects' adherence to the content, organization, cohesion, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Then inter-rater reliability of the two sets of scores was calculated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation which showed that there was a significant relationship between the two sets of scores; that is (.913) which is a high correlation.

Further analysis revealed that there was a positive relationship between the scores of raters; that is, the subjects who received a high score from the first rater received a high score from the second rater as well. The subjects, being 15-17 years old, comprising both male and female, before exposing to the treatment were assigned into 2 groups randomly. A chance procedure, tossing a coin, was used to decide which group gets which treatment. The groups were statistically equivalent before treatment. There were 25 learners in each group. Having got ascertained of the homogeneity of the groups, the researcher treated the experimental group with discourse-based grammar teaching for 10 sessions, two sessions each week; each session lasted 90 minutes and the control

group just received the traditional grammar instruction; that is, decontextualized grammar teaching for 10 sessions. The same teacher taught both classes.

In the long run, in order to find out the impact of discourse-based grammar teaching on writing performance of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners, a post-test was administered to both groups. The measuring instrument, similar to pretest, consisted of writing a composition based on the assigned topics. Participants' writings at each phase of the study were evaluated and scored by two raters for the matter of inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater reliability of the two sets of scores was calculated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation which showed that there was a significant relationship between the two sets of scores in both control and experimental groups. That is .836 and .842 respectively. Finally, the results of the pre-test and post-test were analyzed through the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

3.3 Procedure

This study intended to take the learners beyond the sentence-level and made them familiar with the contextualized use of grammar. In discourse-based grammar teaching, the teacher taught grammar rules derived from authentic written materials, based on the subjects' level of proficiency and their needs, such as newspaper article, magazine, an extract from a book, a letter or story; that is, teaching grammar in context, a unit of language longer than a single sentence since one of the key tenets of a discourse based approach is- "that no single set of linguistic features will be appropriate for all students" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 584).

In order to answer the research question, the researchers used modified version of Mohamed Abu-Ramah's pedagogical discourse-based model for teaching grammar. The model, shown in Figure: 2 below, made use of the principles of the consciousness-raising tasks and Schmidt's noticing hypothesis and entailed three elements: authentic texts chosen on the bases of the learners' needs and their level of proficiency for communicative contextualization, communicative purpose and McEldowny's (1992b) "clustering".

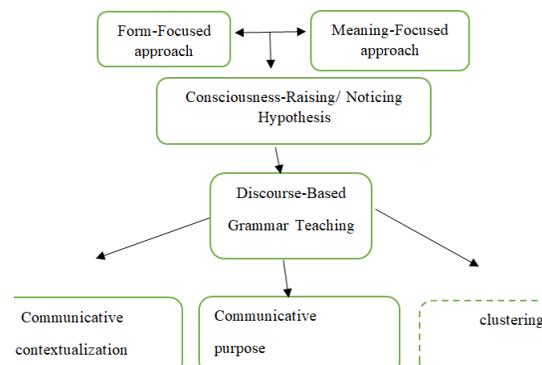


Figure 2: proposed model of Discourse-Based Grammar Teaching

Communicative contextualization is a necessary principle which means that we should teach a grammatical form in authentic context depending on the needs and proficiency level of the learners.

The second feature of the proposed model is communicative purpose. It means that language functions are divided into three broad communicative purposes (McEldowney, 1992b: 30). They are narrative, instruction and description. Description is divided into sequenced description (natural process and man-controlled process), and non-sequenced description (free-standing and embedded). The following are some examples illustrating these broad communicative purposes:

1. Narrative: "Yesterday Hamed woke up at six o'clock. He washed and prayed. Then, he had breakfast with his family. He was happy because it was the weekend."
2. Instruction: "To make a kite get some string, a hard paper and two sticks. Tie the two sticks together...."
3. Description of a natural process: "In the nitrogen cycle the plants get their nitrogen from the soil and change it into proteins. Animals eat the plants and their bodies extract the energy from the proteins."
4. Description of a man-controlled process: "Milk is brought from the farm. Next, it is boiled and pasteurized. Finally, it is bottled and distributed to the super and supermarkets." (McEldowney, 1992, cited in Ramah & S. Daif-Allah, 2009).

After categorizing the communicative purpose of language functions, basic simple forms frequently used with each communicative purpose can be established. For example, the present simple is assigned to natural process and free-standing description; the passive form is assigned to the man-controlled process, and the non-finite stem (imperative form) is assigned to instruction.

The third feature of the proposed model is clustering which means that after teaching the basic grammatical form, the other grammatical forms that can cluster around the basic one to express other minor language functions will be focused on such as sequence markers, prepositional phrases (time & place), pronouns and question words: when, where, what, etc. (McEldowney, 1992).

3.4 Practical Steps to Apply Discourse-Based Grammar Teaching

Discourse-based teaching grammar model involved teaching grammar through the following stages: the first stage was exposing the learners to the authentic materials illustrating the pattern that the teacher intended to teach (ideally 2 or 3 examples). Different types of text genres were used to present different grammatical rules. This stage was followed by consciousness-raising and noticing activities in which different strategies were used to draw the learners' attention to the specific forms. This was done through highlighting techniques, e.g. color coding, bold facing and underlying in written input (Lyster, 2011). Nassaji & Fotos (2011) claim that textual enhancement (underlying, italicizing, capitalizing) was used to help students to notice forms they may not be aware of. However, this was not adequate and required coupling with questions that motivated the learner to analyze the function of the highlighted items in text. Richards J. & R. Reppen (2014) acknowledge that this kind of activity raises awareness of the target forms and their use and also involves the learners in the process of discovery. The third step was teaching grammar in "clusters" where appropriate, rather than systematically isolating one structure at a time. It means that along the basic grammatical items, the other grammatical forms that can cluster around the basic ones to express other minor language functions were focused on. The fourth stage was asking questions to elicit the pattern from the learners and writing them on the board. The next stage was to employ various techniques such as pictures, demonstration in case of action verbs, to show the meaning of the form for general comprehension of the text. That is, the teacher asked the learners to read the text, and then he gave some sentences taken from the text to be unscrambled. The sixth stage was to provide activities that permitted the learners to express themselves using the newly taught grammatical form in writing and evaluate

and correct each other's writing. Finally, the instructor asked students to write a well-organized paragraph about their own life using the newly taught pattern as a homework assignment. In this way learners were given opportunities to discover form-meaning-use associations that are not always apparent in sentence-level presentation.

To clarify the point, an authentic text that provided salient tokens of the grammatical form that the teacher intended to present to the learners was given. For example:

Hi Sue!

How are you? I hope you're fine. Guess what? **I'm going to** sing in the mixed chorus this year. **I'll have** practice sessions on Wednesday evening, and **we'll prepare** pieces for several concerts and events during the year. **We'll even travel** to Washington for a choral competition. **It'll be** fun. What's new with you?

Best, Sally (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999)

In order to illustrate how discourse-based grammar teaching facilitates learners' writing, partial list of grammar rules that are context-sensitive were dealt with at both discourse level and sentence level in this study. That is: tense-aspect-modality choice, reference, subordinate clauses (full and reduced), passive versus active voice, use of marked construction types (wh-clefts & it-clefts) and choice of logical connectors.

Then, a post-test identical to the pretest was administered. The pre-test and post-test included two topics to write composition using the given topics. A standard rubric was used to correct the papers.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

The present study aimed to determine the effect of discourse-based grammar teaching on upper-intermediate EFL Iranian learners' writing performance. The practical phase of this study began with examining the homogeneity of the participants, followed by administering a pretest and posttest. Using the data collected in the participant selection phase and the post-treatment phase, the researcher conducted a series of pertinent calculations and statistical routines whose results were presented in this chapter. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed. The data and reports pertinent to all these analyses were presented in the following sections.

3.5.1 Pre-Experimental Phase

In order to select the participants of the study, the researcher used a PET test. However, prior to the selection phase, the PET test was piloted to make sure that it



could be used confidently for this screening and the internal consistency of the PET scores gained from the participants in the piloting phase was estimated through using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is .757.

As the writing section of the test was scored by the two raters, it was needed to make sure that inter-rater reliability index for this rater is acceptable. Accordingly, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was run among the two sets of writing scores for the initial 30 subjects. The results of the analysis reported in Table 4.3, it was concluded that there was a significant and positive correlation between the two sets of writing scores, $r = .757, n = 25, p < .01$, indicating a high level of inter-rater reliability between the two raters.

3.5.2 Using the Piloted PET Test to Examine Initial Homogeneity

After the piloting phase, PET was administered to 50 participants in control and experimental groups. The results obtained are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of PET Scores for the Two Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.	Skewness	Std. Error
		m	m		Deviation		
Experimental	25	37.00	70.00	52.1800	9.33952	.269	.464
Control	25	39.00	72.00	52.6200	9.71605	.519	.464
Valid N (list wise)	25						

Based on the values reported in the Table, the skewness ratio values for both distributions ($.269/.464 = .58; .519/.464 = 1.12$) fell within the range of -1.96 and $+1.96$. This point provides support for the normality of distribution for the scores (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Moreover, the mean scores of the two groups were very close to each other. In order to make sure that the slight difference was not significant, an independent samples t-test was run.

Table 2: Independent t-test: PET by Two Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
PET	Equal variances assumed	.022	.882	-.163	48	.871	-.44000	2.69539	-5.85945	4.97945
	Equal variances not assumed			-.163	47.925	.871	-.44000	2.69539	-5.85967	4.97967

Initially, it was needed to check the assumption of homogeneity of variances. As reported in the table 2, this assumption was met (*Levene's* $F = .022, p = .882$). The obtained results indicated that there was no statistically significant differences between the mean score of the two groups'

participants on the language proficiency test, PET, ($t(48) = .16, p = .87 > .05$). Based on the obtained results, it was concluded that the participants in the two groups did share the same level of ability in language proficiency; thus, they were considered homogenous.

3.5.3 Experimental Phase

After making sure that the two groups were homogenous in terms of language proficiency, the experimental phase initiated. Two pretests and posttests administered to the participants of both groups in this phase.

3.5.4 Administration of Writing Tests

As a dependent variable of the study, the participants' writing ability was measured both before and after the treatment to see if the independent variable, i.e., discourse-based grammar teaching, has any effect on it. The writing test was scored based on a pre-determined rubric by two raters. Before relying on the results of the scoring, the researcher ran a test to see if he and the other rater are consistent in rating the writing performances of the participants with regards to this specific test. As the results ($r = .79, p = .000$) were satisfying, the researcher rest assured that the scores can be relied on. Tables 4.3 and 4.4 present the writing scores of the two groups in pretest and posttest.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Writing Pretest Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.	Skewness	Std. Error
		m	m		Deviation		
Experimental	25	10.00	17.50	13.5200	1.94979	-.211	.464
Control	25	11.00	15.00	13.3000	1.20761	-.297	.464
Valid N (list wise)	25						

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Writing Posttest Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.	Skewness	Std. Error
		m	m		Deviation		
Experimental	22	14.50	18.00	16.1136	.96278	.174	.491
Control	23	11.00	16.00	13.8478	1.31801	-.437	.481
Valid N (list wise)	22						

As it is evident from Table 4, the scores of the two groups in both pretest ($-.211/.464 = -.45; -.297/.464 = -.64$) and posttest ($.174/.491 = .35; -.437/.481 = -.91$) of writing showed skewness ratios within the legitimate range of ± 1.96 . This proved the normality of distributions for each sets of scores. Furthermore, looking into the number of participants in pretest and posttest, it is evident that three participants in the experimental group and two participants in the control group missed the posttest.

3.5.5 Preliminary Analysis

Considering the nature of the data and research question in the present study, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was run to probe the research question posed in this study. There are a number of assumptions which apply to all parametric tests. The status of these general assumptions and the test-specific assumptions were dealt with before answering the research questions. These assumptions, according to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), are: Linearity, Homogeneity of regression slopes, and Equality of variance. The analysis showed that these assumptions were met. There was a clearly linear relationship between the dependent variable and the covariates for both experimental and control groups and there was no indication of a curvilinear relationship. Therefore, the assumption of linearity was not violated. This procedure was followed by checking the homogeneity of regression slopes which was probed through the non-significant interaction between the covariate and the independent variable. The Sig. value for the interaction between treatment type and pretest ($F_{(1, 41)} = 1.07, p = .31 > .05$) was above the .05 cut-off value. Therefore, the interaction was not statistically significant, indicating that the assumption was not violated. Finally, the assumption of equality of variance was checked through running the Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances. The assumption of equality of variance was not violated as the Sig. value ($p = .54$) is smaller than the .05 cut-off value. This result indicates that the variance was desirably equal for the test. Having the three assumptions checked, the researcher was made sure that running ANCOVA is legitimized.

3.5.6 Answering the Research Question

After checking the preliminary assumptions, the ANCOVA tests were run in order to answer the research question raised in this study.

The Research Question

Do the upper-intermediate learners taught through discourse-based grammar teaching outperform those who are receiving traditional grammar instruction in Iranian EFL context in writing?

The main results of the ANCOVA test run to answer the research question were presented in Table 5. This test will indicate whether the two groups are significantly different in terms of writing performance (the scores when controlling for the impact of pretest scores).

Table 5: The ANCOVA Test Results for the Control and Experimental Groups' Writing Scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	60.992 ^a	2	30.496	23.537	.000	.528
Intercept	104.999	1	104.999	81.038	.000	.659
Wr.Pretest	3.265	1	3.265	2.520	.120	.057
Group	54.150	1	54.150	41.793	.000	.499
Error	54.419	42	1.296			
Total	10180.500	45				
Corrected Total	115.411	44				

a. R Squared = .528 (Adjusted R Squared = .506)

As reported in Table 5, after adjusting the posttest scores for the possible effects of the pretest, there was a significant difference between the two groups on the scores ($F_{(1, 41)} = 41.79, p = .000 < .05$, partial eta squared = .499 representing a large effect size). It was also concluded that there was a significant difference between the two groups' means on the posttest of writing while controlling for the possible effects of the pretest. Table 6 presents the adjusted mean report on writing achievement scores for each group. Here, the effect of the pretest scores has been statistically removed.

Table 6: The Adjusted Marginal Means on Writing Achievement Scores

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experimenta				
1	16.084 ^a	.243	15.593	16.575
Control	13.876 ^a	.238	13.396	14.357

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Wr. Pretest = 13.3889.

The results indicated that the effects of pretest scores were controlled, the mean of the scores for the experimental and control groups are 16.08 and 13.88, respectively. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment on experimental group caused significant improvement in their writing. In other words, the null hypothesis, which stated "There is no significant difference between discourse-based grammar teaching and traditional grammar instruction in promoting Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing", was rejected.

4. Discussion of the Findings

The study set out to examine whether discourse-based grammar teaching impacts beneficially upon the Iranian upper-intermediate learners' writing performance. In particular, the aim of this study was to determine how teaching grammar in authentic context enables EFL learners to overcome the difficulty they encounter when engaged in writing. Considering the purpose, the following research question was



formulated. The research question was to determine whether the upper-intermediate learners taught through discourse-based grammar teaching outperform in writing those who are receiving traditional grammar instruction in Iranian EFL context? The result of the descriptive statistics revealed that the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in pretest were close to each other; that is 13.52 and 13.30 respectively. However, the mean score of the experimental and control groups in posttest, (16.11, 13.84 respectively) showed significant difference between the groups. In other words, as tables 4.4 and 4.5-statistics of writing pretest scores and posttest scores-show there is a statistically difference between them. Considering the nature of the data and research question of the present study, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was also run to probe the research question posed.

The main results of the ANCOVA test run to answer the research question presented in table 5 indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups on the score ($F_{(1, 41)} = 41.79, p = .000 < .05$, partial eta squared = .499 representing a large effect size). It was also concluded that there was a significant difference between the two groups' means on the posttest of writing while controlling for the possible effects of the pretest. The adjusted mean of the scores for the experimental and control groups are 16.08 and 13.88, respectively. Therefore, it was concluded that the treatment on experimental group caused significant improvement in their writing. In other words, the null hypothesis, which stated "*There is no significant difference between discourse-based grammar teaching and traditional grammar instruction in promoting Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing*", was rejected.

The results of the study are in line with the findings of Nur Amin's (2009) study on the effectiveness of teaching grammar in context to reduce grammatical errors in students' writing. The results of his study showed that the students taught grammar in context made less grammatical errors in writing than those who were taught grammar conventionally. Moreover, the results are consistent with the findings of G. Collins & J. Norris' (2017) study on the effect of presenting grammar within the context of reading and writing on written language performance which revealed that teaching

grammar in context yielded improvements in written grammar following a very short period of instruction.

As with the findings of M. Elkouti's (2017) study on the role of Discourse-Based Approaches in English Language Teaching in Algeria which revealed that discourse-based approaches were effective in teaching English in both general and specific settings.

Andrews et al's (2006) analytical descriptive study on the results of two international systematic research reviews which focused on different aspects of teaching grammar to improve the quality and accuracy of (5-16) year olds' writing in English showed that there was little evidence to indicate that the teaching of formal grammar was effective; and that teaching sentence combining has a more positive effect.

Celce-Murcia & Y.Wonho (2014) claim that when EFL learners are writing they face a lot of problems. One of the causes is that they have been taught grammar at the sentence-level not at the discourse level. The present study demonstrated that when grammar was taught in authentic context, and when it was taught for communicative purpose, not as an autonomous system, it improved EFL learners' writing performance more than those who received traditional grammar instruction, i.e. grammar at sentence-level.

The study demonstrated that focusing on form only does not work, it seems that there is a need to have sentences in combination which is the main concern of discourse approach. As Nunan (1998) points out presenting grammar out of context in isolated sentences provide formal, declarative mastery for learners without being able to develop procedural skills, using the language for communication effectively. Recent pedagogy for grammar teaching also advocates a discourse-based approach where grammar instruction is supported by the provision of L2 discourse containing multiple instances of instructed form (Nassaji, H., Fotos, 2011). Discourse plays a central role in teaching language communicatively. Immersing discourse into language teaching provides a wide range of resources for both language teachers and language learners. It incorporates real language use which is beneficial for communicative language use.

As Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2001) state, in order to make sure that young learners use language in meaningful ways

we must remember to combine form and context. For example learners can tell about personal experiences in order to use verbs in the past tense or they can talk about their plans to use future tense verb forms and future time expressions.

5. Conclusion

In this study, the impact of two grammar teaching methods on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing performance was investigated: the discourse-based grammar teaching (teaching grammar rules derived from authentic written materials) and traditional method of teaching grammar (teaching grammar out of context). To this end, a quasi-experimental design was used in which the experimental group treated with discourse-based grammar teaching for 10 sessions and the control group just received the traditional grammar instruction. A partial list of grammar rules that are context-sensitive was dealt with in this study. Data analysis revealed that the treatment on experimental group caused significant improvement in their writing. The result also indicated that traditional grammar instruction which highly put emphasis on the learning and categorizing of forms in decontextualized activities did not meet the learners' need in writing activities. Learners found it extremely difficult to retrieve the accurate and appropriate forms while engaged in writing activity. On the contrary, discourse-based grammar instruction in which attention to grammatical forms happen in the authentic context met the learners' requirements while writing. This study provided evidence for the efficacy of teaching grammar using authentic context as the instructional medium.

It is assumed that the findings of this study has important pedagogical implications for both materials developers and language teachers and contribute to solving educational problems, especially learners' writing problems.

One of the limitations of the present study was related to the target of the study which covered a partial list of context-sensitive rules. Another limitation was related to its length. That is, it was short and lasted 10 sessions. Proficiency level of the participants was also of its limitation. Consequently, it is recommended that future investigations with similar arrangements of the subjects be conducted in other contexts and on other populations with different levels of writing ability, age ranges, and gender aimed at identifying the effect of

grammar on writing ability. In order to validate the findings of this study, it is highly recommended that the study be reduplicated with larger populations of subjects.

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