

E-Learning: Key Factor to Improve Structural Ability of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract: Computers and internet play an increasingly important role in the lives of L2 learners around the world. This study investigated the efficacy of integrating web-based language learning into the teaching of grammar to pre-intermediate Iranian EFL students. Technology-enhanced language learning is considered as a recent trend in the changing world of information technology. The researchers examined grammar achievement of two groups of male and female students: control (24) and experimental (16). Through 21 sessions of instruction, students in experimental group were provided with 11 grammar courses as well as tasks through the www.eenet.ir. Students in control group followed the conventional program. A test of grammar, an IT Questionnaire, and a researchers-made achievement test of grammar (posttest) were employed as the instruments of the study. Results indicated that the participants in experimental group improved significantly in achieving grammar tasks. The findings of this research supported the fact that online tasks and web-based language learning can motivate learners to participate in the online ELT programs. This study provides pedagogical implications for integrating web-based learning as effective learning techniques.

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1. Introduction

There exists an opinion In English language teaching (ELT), that successful learning is influenced by appropriate method of teaching. For most learners grammar is considered as the most important skill to master in order to ensure success in learning L2. It seems that with strengthened grammar skill, English learners tend to make greater progress in other areas of language learning. Grammar should be an active process to involve learners to use it in real contexts. Meanwhile, computers and the internet play an increasingly important role in the life of L2 learners around the world. Levy (1997) points out that "the Internet has entered our classrooms faster than books, television, computer, the telephone, or any other technology for information and communication" (p. 311). With the increased use of computer, it seems necessary to train language learners how to learn grammar online.

This study investigates integrating e-learning tasks into the conventional techniques of teaching English grammar and examines the probable effects of such integration on Iranian EFL pre-intermediate learners' test performances.

2. Review of the Literature

The past few decades have witnessed a shift in focus from teaching to learning, from the teachers to the learners. Individualized learning requires first and foremost, respect for an accommodation of

individual backgrounds and learning styles (Liu and Huo, 2007). In concrete terms, as they believe, it gives the learner some control in material selection and the pace of progress. Computer is considered as a perfect candidate for individualized instruction because, unlike humans, it has infinite resources of patience and can teach on a one-to-one basis at a pace dictated by the individual's capabilities. In reality, this kind of differentiated instruction is beyond the teacher's reach, especially in a large, multi-level conventional classroom. However, with the aid of computer, this aim is more readily realized.

Electronic learning or e-learning is the delivery of educational content via any electronic media, including "the internet, intranet, extranet, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV, CD-Rom, interactive CD, and computer-based training" (Jones 1986, p.170). E-learning is distributed in many different forms of educational programs including online courses, web enhanced learning and distance education. Chang (2007) stresses that electronic texts introduce new supports as well as new challenges which can have great impacts on an individual's ability to comprehend what s/he reads. Meanwhile, Tastle et al (2005) focuses on electronic learning as an effective vehicle for the delivery of educational content to learners.

The virtual classroom allows for different methods of learning and a high degree of interaction through collaborative software. Online education, as

Jones and Fortescue (1987) maintain, can range between a synchronous independent training via online courses, to distance learning in which students connect to synchronous training at the same time via two-way satellite or audio/video conferencing with an instructor in real-time. Course content can be altered to gear the individual's career needs and goals. They add that this technology has recently begun to evolve by "shifting its focus towards providing an environment that facilitates broad based content creation, sharing, reuse, and distribution" (p. 242).

2.1. The Internet and Language Learning

The role of technology in second language learning has increased dramatically throughout the world over the past decade. These technologies, as Gill (2006) believes, include such elements as "the use of Power Point, email exchanges, web based activities, and synchronous and asynchronous communication (through the use of threaded discussion boards, live chat, and virtual communities)" (p. 19). Such a new environment can be incorporated to EFL/ESL classrooms to achieve more stimulating course materials, attempt more variety of learning styles, access more authentic materials, and promote online communication in target language.

González-Bueno (1998) emphasized that one of the most important "social effects of computer-mediated communication is a high degree of participation over face-to-face communication" (p. 59). Besides, according to Rozgiene et al. (2008), there are certainly some learners who welcome a higher degree of freedom in their learning process. As they strongly believe, since learners are naturally anxious and eager to work in the new technology-enhanced language learning environment, they can benefit from a couple of strategies such as regular feedback, autonomy development, learning styles awareness, and sharing experience and interaction with others. As Motallebzadeh and Amirabadi (2011) maintain, employing e-learning tasks can be a practical approach for teaching language skills such as writing "provided that they are familiar with the basics of IT" (p. 538).

As mentioned previously, this quasi-experimental study aims to shed light on the effect employing e-learning on grammar learning of Iranian EFL learners by addressing the following research question:

Q1. Do E-learning tasks have any significant effects on the grammar ability of the Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners?

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research problem, the following null hypothesis was developed:

H01. E-learning tasks have no significant effects on the grammar ability of the Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were pre-intermediate adult EFL Iranian students enrolled in an English course at a language institution, Mashhad, Iran. The male and female participants ($N = 40$, 11 males and 29 females), aged 18 to 35. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: experimental group ($N = 16$, 6 males and 10 females) and control group ($N = 24$, 5 males and 19 females).

3.2. Instrumentation

To collect the required data, several instruments were employed in this study:

(a) *Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test*. In order to make sure that all participants were homogeneous and truly at the same level of language proficiency, the Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test, version C (IPOPT/C) developed by Lesley et al. (2005) was administered. This test had three main sections including listening section (20 items), reading comprehension section (20 items), and language use sections (30 items). Based on the scoring guideline of the very test, participants were supposed to gain between 18 and 23 out of 70 to be considered as lower intermediate. It is worth mentioning that the language use section of this instrument was taken as the study pretest.

(b) *Information Technology (IT) Inventory*. Since the treatment in experimental group included grammar tasks through emails, the researchers had to determine the participants' degree of familiarity with the Internet. To serve this purpose, participants in experimental group were asked to fill out an IT inventory. This inventory consisted of three sections with the total number of 58 items. To avoid any misunderstanding, the questionnaire was presented in participants' first language, Persian. Motallebzadeh and Ghaemi (2009) reported a relatively high reliability for the Persian version as ($r = .75$).

(c) *Researchers-made Posttest*. To measure degree of achievement during the course, a 50-item grammar posttest was employed. This test consisted of three different sections: the first section including 30 items was exactly the language use section of IPOPT/C which was administered again at the end of the course in order to measure the progress of the participants' structural ability. The second section of this instrument included 20 items selected from the

grammar tasks practiced throughout the course. The researcher-made section of this test were piloted with 25 participants of the same level and an internal consistency of ($\alpha = .82$) was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha.

3.3. Procedure

The treatment lasted ten weeks, three sessions per week. To ensure the homogeneity of the groups at the outset of the study, 56 participants took IPOPT/C. The participants proved to be in pre-intermediate level ($N = 40$) were asked to take an IT inventory before the treatment begins. The purpose of this phase was to select IT literate participants for experimental group. Finally, control ($N = 24$) and experimental ($N = 16$) groups were formed. The same grammar tasks were practiced for the two groups. Before the study begins, the participants in experimental group were briefed on the study format and their role in the e-learning program.

During the course, one session per week was assigned to grammar tasks. The participants in experimental group attended two sessions and were asked to go for grammar class online. Each student in experimental group was given a user name and a password to log into the study website (www.eenet.ir). To download the course materials on grammar tasks, leave a message or post a question, they were free to go online anytime they wished. There were several quizzes available for the participants for self-assessment. There was also a part for the participants to leave a message for each other or update their own personal profile.

Throughout the course, ten grammar lessons were introduced in the study website. The researchers checked the course website every other night to reply messages, answer questions, or add more sample tasks when needed. At the end of the course the study posttest was administered to all participants in both groups. As mentioned in the instrumentation, the test included 50 items assessing the participants' structural ability practiced throughout the course.

4. Results and Discussions

Having collected the required data based on the above mentioned data collection instruments and procedures, the researchers analyzed the data and tested the hypothesis formulated for the present study.

4.1. Results for Test of Homogeneity

To check the homogeneity of the total participants ($N=56$), the Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test, version C (IPOPT/C) was administered. As mentioned in the instrumentation section, those who obtained scores 18 to 23 were selected as the study participants ($N=40$). Since the

participants had already registered for particular week days, the researchers came with unequal groups: control ($N=24$) and experimental ($N=16$).

Meanwhile, to compare the participants' level of language proficiency at the beginning of the study in experimental and control groups, an independent-sample t-test was conducted. (see Table 1).

Table 1. Results of T-Test Analysis for IPOPT/C (Homogenizing Test)

Groups	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Cont.	24	25.30	3.64	.35	38	.72
Exp.	16	24.93	2.58			

As the results of Table 1 show, there is no statistically significant difference [$t (38) = .35, p = .72$ (two-tailed)] between control ($M = 25.30, SD = 3.64$) and experimental ($M = 24.93, SD = 2.58$) groups with regard to language proficiency which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

4.2. Results for Test of Structure (Posttest)

To compare participants' performances in the study pretest and posttest in both control and experimental groups, the researchers conducted a t-test analysis for the participants' scores in the test of structure. This test, as mentioned in the instrumentation section, included 50 items. Table 2 shows the results for this analysis.

Table 2. Results of T-Test Analysis for Test of Structure (Posttest)

Groups	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Cont.	24	27.40	2.20	-2.53	38	.01
Exp.	16	32.15	2.59			

As the results of Table 2 indicate, participants in experimental (e-learning) group ($M = 32.15, SD = 2.59$) significantly outperformed [$t (38) = -2.53, p = .01$ (two-tailed)] those in control group ($M = 27.40, SD = 2.0$) in the test of structure.

4. Conclusions

As the results of this study indicated, the participants in experimental group (web-based learning) outperformed those in control group in the achievement of grammatical component of the course. This means that employing an online language learning program can be effective in enhancing opportunities for the Iranian EFL learners to achieve structural knowledge. In addition, like

similar researches on technology enhanced language learning (TELL) conducted by Motallebzadeh and Babaee (2011), Volle (2005), Gonglewski et al. (2001), and Li (2000), it seems that this novel experience has been effective in accomplishing its intended goal of providing more opportunities for Iranian pre-intermediate learners to practice grammar tasks.

Besides, the findings of this study can provide background for blended programs in which traditional face to face classes and web-enhanced programs are held side by side. However, it is clear that learners who are not familiar with such a novel environment need more time to adapt themselves. Since online courses have become quite common among school and university students, the results of this research suggest that other language skills can also be practiced through online environment. Finally, due to the findings of this study, it can be concluded that IT literacy is a prerequisite for any online program; in other words, professional net-users seem to benefit more effectively from the web-based language programs.

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