The role of grammar courses in students' writing products: a case study in Düzce University[1]

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Abstract

In Turkey, English is taught in all state schools beginning in the second grade of the primary schools and continuing in the higher education. This huge amount of time period spent on language teaching is expected to be seen in students' proficiency levels and in the way they can use English. The products in which they can reflect their levels of English perceptibly are their compositions, which can also be used as learning tools for learners (Raimes, 1983). While writing, learners do not only transfer the ideas in their minds, they also try to gain accuracy by using their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. While teaching English, following a skill-based approach in language programs has been a common practice for a long time. Those programs may sometimes include the teaching of vocabulary and grammar as separate courses. In the university where this research study was conducted, English preparatory year is optional, and there are ten-hour-a-week reading-writing, ten-hour-a-week listening-speaking and four-hour-a-week grammar courses in an academic year. In this skill-based program, grammar is thought to be an essential element to help students improve their productive skills in a more accurate manner. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to reveal what kind of a role grammar courses have on the students' writings. As this study was designed as a case study, one class was chosen to be studied on, and their writing portfolios were gathered and each assignment from the beginning until the end of the 2017/2018 academic year was analyzed. The data were collected by analyzing the grammar components of students' writings and a comparison was made in order to see whether there was a match between the order of grammar topics covered and the use of them in the writing products.

Key words: English preparatory year, grammar, teaching English, writing.

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Öz

Türkiyede, İngilizce öğretimi ilkokul 2.sınıfta başlayıp yüksek öğrenimde devam etmektedir. Dil öğretimine harcanan bu fazla zamanın, öğrencilerin yeterlilik düzeyine ve İngilizceyi kullanabilme becerilerine yansıması beklenmektedir. Öğrencilerin İngilizce seviyelerini, somut olarak yansıtabilecekleri ürünler; öğrenciler için öğrenme aracı olarak da kullanılabilen kendi

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kompozisyonlarıdır (Raimes, 1983). Öğrenciler yazarken sadece akıllarındaki fikirleri transfer etmezler, ayrıca dilbilgisi ve kelime bilgilerini de kullanarak doğruluk kazanmaya çalışırlar. İngilizce öğretirken beceri temelli yaklaşım kullanımı uzun zamandır yaygın olan bir uygulamadır. Bu programlarda bazen kelime ve dilbilgisi öğretimi ayrı dersler olarak mevcut olabilir. Bu çalışmanın yapıldığı üniversitede, İngilizce hazırlık sınıfı seçmelidir ve bir akademik yılda haftada on saatlik okuma-yazma, on saatlik dinleme-konuşma ve dört saatlik dilbilgisi dersleri vardır. Beceri-temelli bu programda, dilbilgisi, öğrencilerin daha hatasız bir şekilde üretken becerilerini geliştirmelerine yardımcı olan esas unsur olarak düşünülmektedir. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışmanın temel amacı dilbilgisi derslerinin öğrencilerin yazıları üzerinde nasıl bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktır. Bu çalışma vaka incelemesi olarak tasarlandığı için, üzerinde çalışılmak üzere bir sınıf seçilmiştir ve bu sınıftaki öğrencilerin yazma portfolyoları bir araya getirilerek 2017/2018 akademik yılının başından sonuna kadar verilen her bir ödev analiz edilmiştir. Veriler öğrencilerin yazılarındaki dilbilgisi unsurları analiz edilerek toplanmıştır ve işlenen dilbilgisi konuları ve bu konuların yazma çalışmalarındaki kullanımı arasında bir eşleşme olup olmadığını görmek için bir kıyaslama yapılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İngilizce hazırlık sınıfı, dilbilgisi, İngilizce öğretimi, yazma.

Introduction

English teaching in Turkey starts in the second grade of the primary school and continues in higher education. According to the weekly schedules of state schools declared by Turkish Ministry of Education-Board of Education and Discipline (2018), in the second, third, and fourth grades of primary schools, students have a two-hour-a-week English course, in the fifth and sixth grades of secondary school they have a three-hour-a-week English course, in the seventh and eighth grades of secondary school they have a four-hour-a-week English course, and the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades of high school there is a four-hour-a-week English course. Also in higher education, all students are exposed to English at least for two hours in their first grade at the university. If the elective English courses are considered too, it can be said that there is a huge amount of time spent on language teaching. Because of this time period spent to teach English, it is expected that the learners gain the language mastery.

While teaching English, every institution follows a different program. In higher education, English courses are compulsory in the first grade generally and they have a two-hour-a-week main course. In preparatory school, however, a skill-based approach has been practiced for a long time. In these programs, teaching is heavily based on four language skills and it sometimes includes vocabulary and grammar teaching as separate courses. In the university where this research study was carried out, English preparatory year is optional, and there are ten-hour-a-week reading-writing, ten-hour-a-week listening-speaking and four-hour-a-week grammar courses in an academic year. In this skill-based program, grammar is considered to be a necessary tool to provide students to improve their productive skills. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether there is an effect of grammar courses on students' writings.

There has been great interest in grammar teaching as stated in the following explanation:

> No area of second and foreign (L2) language learning has been the subject of as much empirical and practical interest as grammar teaching (Borgs&Burns, 2008, p.456).

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Although there isn't a decrease in these grammar studies, the emphasis has changed in time. According to Long (1988, 1991), there are two types of grammar instruction which are 'focus on form' and 'focus on forms'. The first one indicates:

> overtly drawing students' attention to linguistic elements as they rise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication (Long, 1991, p. 45).

"Focus on forms", on the other hand, is the traditional teaching of grammar structures in separate lessons. In the university this study was conducted, the grammar course book covers the grammar topics in separate units as suggested in the focus on forms type instruction, and the schedule of the grammar courses are organized according to the flow in the book. The only material used by teachers and students is that grammar reference book, and teachers teach each grammar topic in a week. There is one revision week before the mid-term examinations.

While designing the curriculum for the English preparatory school where this study was carried out, the rationale behind including four-hour-a-week grammar course was to help students write more accurate and meaningful paragraphs and essays. Some teachers had previously mentioned that some students could not write well as they did not have the knowledge of some grammar structures that they felt the need to use for transmitting their ideas into a paper. However, some teachers found out that spending effort to teach grammatical structures in a separate grammar course might not work well as they could not see a variety of structures in their students' writing, and this issue created the basis of this work. This study was conducted by working on a sample (one class) in order to understand how the students in that class transferred their grammar knowledge into their writings. In the next part, some studies will be presented to learn about how grammar teaching and language transfer have been dealt with in various settings.

Literature review

The role of grammar in foreign language teaching has always been a controversial issue. We, as teachers, often ask what method is the best to teach grammar. In the early days of grammar teaching , in Grammar-Translation Method students needed to translate whole texts word by word and memorize grammatical rules and vocabulary lists. Therefore, students may write sentences that are grammatically correct but they're not seen as meaningful or 'acceptable' by most native speakers (Howatt, 1984). In the 1940s and 50s the audio-lingual method became popular. Teaching grammar was helping students gain language habits through different drills and pattern practices (Brown, 1994). However, there were problems with this method as it didn't focus on

> the intentions, thinking, conscious planning and internal processes of the learner (Stern, 1984, p.305).

In the 1970s and 80s the Communicative Approach appeared. In this approach, the real focus was on meaning rather than form as it was believed that it was meaning which was the key in language acquisition and development. Ellis (1994) stated that much of the communicative language teaching focused on meaning only. The question today's teachers often ask is whether it's needed to get back to grammar teaching. If so, how should it be?

Grammar teaching methods used in classes are usually a matter of discussion. Some teachers believe that grammar is the focus subject of language and learners should be presented with explicit grammar courses. Others, on the other hand, believe that knowing only grammar isn't enough for language

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mastery, and it also causes learners to be unsuccessful. Therefore, they think that grammar should be taught implicitly.

> Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it (Ellis, 2006, p.84).

Including grammar courses in curricula or teaching grammar through skills brings the attention to the results. A question occurs in teachers' or researchers' mind, which is "How can we know that our students have some grammar knowledge?" A number of studies have been conducted to see the results of grammar teaching and they mostly focused on students' writings as writing products can be accepted as the most tangible data which will serve for the evidence of grammar knowledge. This has led to another question which is about the transfer of grammar knowledge into the writing skill. Researchers and teachers have been trying to find out how their students used their grammar knowledge to write more accurately.

One of the studies about that transfer was conducted by Mekala, Ponmani, and Shabitha (2016) in order to examine to what extent the learners were able to transfer the knowledge of grammar into their writing. According to the study, the learners' ability to transfer the gained grammar knowledge was important for the outcome of grammar learning. The results of the study showed that learners who had received Form-Focused instruction were able to transfer the grammar knowledge into their written discourse. In other words, form-focused instruction could help the learners transfer their learned grammar knowledge into their L2 writing. Additionally, there was a decrease in the number of the errors in learners' writings.

Another study from Li- Li Lin about the grammar role in writing focused on the limitations of grammar in writing improvement. The study revealed that effective grammar instruction could assist students to use the knowledge they learned as they wrote. The findings showed that there were three reasons why learners failed in the transferring the acquired grammar knowledge into writing, which were lack of interest, being neglectful, and irrelevant grammar knowledge. According to Noguchi (1991), there were three probable reasons which led to the failure in grammar instruction:

> 1. Formal grammar, being uninteresting or too difficult, is not adequately learned by students
>
> 2. Formal grammar, even if adequately learned, is not transferred to writing situation
>
> 3. Formal grammar, even if adequately learned, is not transferable to writing situation (Noguchi, 1991, p.4).

Rather than the problems hindering the successful transfer, some researchers suggested useful ways to help students write more grammatically-correct paragraphs or essays. For instance, Hillocks (1986) found that when grammar was taught separately from writing instruction, it was unable to improve students' writing competence. In another research study carried out by Jessop, Spada, Suzuki, Tomita and Valeo (2014), the effects of two types of form- focused grammar instructions were compared and also their possible contributions to the development of different types of second language knowledge were investigated. The results of the study revealed that there was an important progress for both of the groups and also the learners had a similar performance in the Isolated and Integrated Form- Focused instruction classes.

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Myhill, Jones, Lines and Watson (2011) examined whether grammar instruction improved students' writing competence. The statistical results showed that there was a significant positive effect of grammar teaching on writing. However, it was implied that this was mostly because of more able writers. The study also indicated that teacher and teacher knowledge were significant factors in the success of grammar instruction.

In Bateman and Zidonis' (1966) study; the focus was on sentence production in writing, and the researchers investigated the role of the transformational rules of a generative grammar in the students' writing. Despite the fact that there weren't convincing results, the researchers signified a relationship between:

> a knowledge of generative grammar and an ability to produce well-formed sentences of greater structural complexity (Bateman&Zidanis, 1966, p. 39).

Methodology

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to reveal what kind of a role grammar courses have on the students' writing products. Therefore, this study is conducted to give answers to the following questions:

> 1. Is there a match between the order of grammar topics covered in grammar courses and the use of those structures by students in their writings? How does this match occur?
>
> 2. Is there a match between the suggested grammar topics in the writing book and the use of those structures by students in their writings? How does this match occur?

Research design

The research design selected for this study was qualitative because qualitative studies create the opportunities for the researchers to observe and work on the issues "from the inside" (Flick, 2007). The case study was selected in order to reveal the results of a type of teaching approach implemented in a curriculum in a real school environment as Yin (1994) points out:

> Case studies are preferred when how or why questions are being posed.
>
> ....when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 1994, p.305).

There are different types of case studies, and this study can be titled as single-case study as it worked on only one class within one program. Single case studies are sometimes planned or accepted as the conduct of a pilot case that is the first of a multiple-case study (Yin, 1994). In this case, the writing products of one class were used to observe the effect of grammar courses and it can be accepted as the first stage of another study in which the products of all classes will be worked on.

The Sampling and Participants

As mentioned in the previous parts, this case study was conducted in a school of foreign languages of a state university in Turkey, and the writing products of a class were chosen as documents to reach clear findings. The writing products of only one class were included in the research as it was the only class where students kept their products in their writing portfolios from the beginning until the end of the 2017/2018 academic year. 12 students' portfolios (who showed full participation) were used in order to

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see whether students were able to use the structures they studied in their grammar courses and the ones selected as the target structures in the reading-writing book. In order to protect the identity of the students, each student was given a code using the initial of the word "student" followed by numbers 1-12. Therefore, the participants of this case study were coded as S1, S1, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, and S12.

Data collection and analysis

Documentation is one of the sources of evidence used in a case study. Yin (1994) proposes that there are some strengths and weaknesses of using documents. According to Yin (1994), documents are stable, unobtrusive, exact, and have broad coverage, which can be listed as the strengths. Documents are stable so they can be reviewed again and again during research. They are already available and they are not created during the study or as a result of the case study. In other words, they are away from researchers' subjectivity. Documents also include exact names, details as they are the participants' own products. Documents are generally created in a long span of time and in various settings.

The writing portfolios of 12 students were used as the source of evidence in this case study. There were twenty-one writing products, including either paragraphs or essays, in the students' portfolios. A list of the grammar topics in the grammar course for each week and the target structures covered in the grammar parts of the reading-writing book was made. This list was used in order to see whether students used those structures in each week's writing products.

In a case study, three principles are important for validity and reliability, which are using multiple sources of evidence, creating a case study database, and maintaining a chain of evidence. Hence, in this study, students' all writing products created at different times (from the beginning of the academic year until the end-as a chain) and in different types were included in order to provide variety in terms of sources of evidence. These sources were studied on by the researchers so as to come up with rich findings. This study was firstly planned as a pilot study of multiple-case studies and the database was started to be produced in order to get more valid and reliable findings. Additionally, Creswell (2012) states different strategies can be used to validate your findings and one of them is member checking. Similar to Creswell, Patton (2002) mentions Denzin (1978) who makes a significant contribution to our understanding of triangulation by identifying four types of triangulation, which are data triangulation (using different data sources), investigator triangulation (involving different researchers and evaluators), theory triangulation (different perspectives to analyze a single set of data), and methodological triangulation (using a variety of methods). Therefore, in this study, data triangulation was firstly used by collecting data from different individuals. Additionally, another type of triangulation, which is investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1978) or auditing in Creswell's (2012) words, was used as both researchers were responsible for reading, checking, and reporting on the findings. Therefore, the accuracy of the findings was validated. Finally, the type of data the researchers studied on was not open to interpretation as the students' writings and the structures they used were tangible. For that reason, it is important to state that there was not a researcher bias on the analysis of the findings.

Findings

In the four-hour-a-week grammar course, one topic for each week was studied in the same flow as presented in the grammar reference book. No change was made as it was thought to be the best flow to be in the curriculum as the topics were organized from the simpler ones to the more complex ones. In

the reading-writing course, students were supposed to write each week's writing assignment given at the end of each unit in the reading-writing book. After the evaluation process, the products were put into their writing portfolios. Additionally, the reading-writing book included a grammar section which presented the target structure to be used in that week's writings. The following two sub-sections will show whether participants used those structures while writing or not.

The match between the grammar topics in the grammar course and students' writings

When participant students' writing products were studied on, the general idea occurred was that there was no meaningful match between the grammar topics covered in the grammar course and the use of them in the writings. Table 1 presents the list of grammar topics covered in the four-hour-a-week grammar course and the number and the percentage of the students used those structures for every week.

Table 1: The findings regarding the first research question

Topics in Grammar Course	Total Work	The Number of Students who used the structure	%
Present tense	10	10	100
Future forms	3	0	0
The present perfect	9	0	0
The present perfect continuous	7	0	0
The past perfect- past perfect continuous	9	0	0
Modals of possibility	11	3	27,2
Passive sentences part 1	10	2	20
Passive sentences part 2	10	0	0
Conjunction 1	9	9	100
Gerunds and infinitives	7	2	28,5
Indefinite and definite articles	8	8	100
Conjunctions 2	12	10	83,3
Relative clauses with subject relative pronouns	9	2	22,2
Relative clauses with object relative pronouns	10	2	20
Real conditionals, unreal conditionals and wishes	11	7	63,6

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Past unreal conditionals and past wishes	9	1	11,1
Noun clauses	9	7	77,7
Reported speech	7	0	0
Conjunctions 3	4	4	100

As seen in the Table 1 above, there was a meaningful match (higher than 50%) in the week when topics of *"the simple present tense, conjunctions, indefinite and definite articles, noun clauses, and conditionals"* were studied. The simple present tense, definite and indefinite articles, and conjunctions can be accepted as the basic components of English language grammar and a basic writing product cannot be composed without using these structures. From this finding, it can be concluded that students used the basic structures of grammar to transfer their ideas into their writings. On the other hand, noun clauses and conditionals, which can be categorized as more complex structures, were used by more than six students out of twelve, and this finding is quite surprising in that there was no use of other complex structures as passive voice or relative clauses. However, it was easier to understand why students used conditional sentences as there was the need to use it. In that week, the same structures were studied in the grammar part of reading-writing book, the topic of the writing assignment required students to explain what they were going to do in some occasions (What would you do if ......?). In the light of these findings, the need for further studies emerged as there have been no meaningful matches and it is important to discover the underlying reasons.

The match between the grammar topics in the reading-writing book and students' writings

Similar to the findings presented above, there was no clear match between the target grammar structures presented in the reading-writing book and the use of these structures by the participant students. Table 2 below shows the list of the grammar topics presented as the target structures in the reading-writing book together with the number and percentage of the participants used these target structure for each week.

Table 2: The findings regarding the second research question

Grammar Topics in RW Book	Total Work	The Number of Students who used the structure	% %
Possessive and descriptive adjectives	10	Pos.Adj.- 4	40
		Des.Adj- 10	100
Comparative forms	3	3	100
Imperatives	9	4	44,4
Too much- too many- too+ adj.	7	1	14,2
Time clauses in the present tense	9	1	11,1
Future forms	11	11	100

In order to- infinitive	10	1	10
Comparison with adverbs	10	0	0
Future time clauses	9	3	33,3
Because and even though	7	3	42,8
a-an-the articles	8	8	100
May – might- could future possibility	12	0	0
Modals- semi modals	9	2	22,2
Gerunds- infinitives	10	6	60
Past unreal conditions	11	0	0
Simple past- present perfect- present perfect continuous	9	6	66,6
Conjunctions- contrast	9	3	33,3
Direct- indirect speech	7	0	0
Phrasal verbs	4	1	25

As seen in Table 2 above, out of nineteen different topics, participant students were able to use three target structures, which were the topics of "descriptive adjectives, future forms, and the simple past, the present perfect, the present perfect continuous tense". As mentioned previously in this part, these structures are among the basic ones and in these weeks the writing assignments' topics required students to use them as they were supposed to describe their ideal partner, write their predictions about their future lives, and narrate an anecdote from their lives. For the other weeks, although the grammar structures can be labelled as not complex, there was no meaningful match. Although the reading-writing book was written by the experts in their fields, they selected the target structures to help students write more accurately and meaningfully, the reasons why students did not use those structures in each week are waiting to be found out. In the light of these findings, it can be concluded that students are more tentative to use the target structures when they feel the real need. Therefore, further studies should be conducted to reveal how it is possible to create the situations in which the students will feel the real need.

In order to see the whole case from a different perspective, using numbers is helpful. Out of 164 papers, the grammar topics studied in the grammar courses were seen in the 67 writing products of the participant students, and the target grammar structures presented in the reading-writing book were seen in 66 products. This finding reveals that most of the participant students failed to use the grammar structures they were studying throughout the academic year, which shows that students fail to transfer their grammar knowledge into their writing skills in the school where this study was conducted.

Discussion

While there are numerous discussions about different ways of grammar teaching, and the search for finding the best way is going on, the educationalists are trying to find ways to help students transfer

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their grammar knowledge into their writing skills. That transfer is considered as a crucial need as gaining accuracy is one of the main goals of teaching English. However, it is not so easy to make this transfer real as there are a lot of factors playing role in this process.

As this study only focused on whether this transfer occurred in that specific case, further studies need to be conducted in order to understand the issue. First of all, all the classes in an academic year or in a longer period of time should be included in another research study, and by this way it will be possible to turn this case study into multiple-case studies. Secondly, it is important to find out the underlying reasons why this transfer does not occur. In the future, more detailed research studies can be conducted, during which students' and teachers' opinions can be captured about the issue so that it will be possible to reveal the factors from the insiders' perspectives.

Ormrod (1998) listed some factors which are highly influential in the language transfer. One of the factors is instruction time and in this study the allocated time for grammar courses was four hours in a week. It is important to find out whether four-hour-a-week course is sufficient enough to teach main principles, present the target structures, and do drilling exercises to show students how to use those structures. However, the opportunities to practice by using the target structures may be too low in number as the schedule is full with a lot of topics waiting to be presented. Therefore, planning ahead and allocating sufficient time for the target structures identified according to the needs of the students rather than piling up the curriculum with various grammar topics that students may never get the chance to use.

Another recommendation is that it is important to remember the effect of corrective feedback to our students. Perhaps, one of the factors that prevent the participant students in this study from using the target structures is that teachers never warn them or require them to use those structures. Even when students use them by making mistakes, that issue might not catch attention of the teachers as the general tendency of the teachers in the school where this study was conducted to focus on paragraph/essay structure and content. Students do not lose too many points when they make grammar mistakes or when they do not use the target structures. They do not gain more points when they use them correctly, as well. It has been known for ages that when mistakes are not corrected in the right time and way, they become fossilized. Mistakes can be used as learning tools in many cases, and it raises students' awareness of accuracy. When students try to be more accurate, they may look for the ways to transfer their ideas in their minds into their writing by using more complex structures, which will make their writings richer in content and more meaningful. That's why, it is mainly the teachers' responsibility to help their students to make language transfer possible by opening new ways of access.

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