Potential Role of Student Preferences For Isolated Versus Integrated Form-Focused Instruction in Perception of Grammar E-Tivities at Tertiary Level

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Abstract

Within the sociocultural theory [1], often associated with the application of e-learning 2.0 in language instruction, learning is seen as arising from the interaction of an individual with his/her social and cultural context, as an individual and social process in which meaning is created and mediated by language, physical artefacts and technological tools. These theoretical concepts can also provide a backdrop to instructional approaches to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) grammar [2]. In this paper we investigate students' perception of online grammar activities (e-tivities) supported by Web 2.0 tools in a tertiary EFL course. As has been suggested in the literature, the effectiveness of acquisition of foreign language structures can be determined by various factors including learner variables and type of instruction [3]. Similarly, some of the research foci related to learners' evaluation of digital collaborative writing tools are their perception of collaborative written activities and their attitudes toward the role of grammar in EFL instruction [4]. The empirical study in this paper aims to establish the role of students' individual preferences for two types of form-focused instruction (FFI) – conceptualized in [5] as the isolated and integrated FFI – on their perception of grammar e-tivities in the EFL course. The criterion variables in the study are student evaluation of: (a) three aspects of grammar e-tivities; (b) the online tool (wiki) used for collaborative writing in grammar e-tivities and (c) the learning diary as a reflective activity. In the correlation analysis of data collected via the survey after the performance of e-tivities statistically significant relationships and higher correlation coefficients were obtained between all criterion variables on the one hand and the students' self-reported preference for the isolated FFI on the other, while no significant correlations were established between the criterion variables and students' self-reported preferences for the integrated FFI. In other words, students that are more likely to engage with explicit grammar rules and structures in their EFL learning also more favourably assessed the type of form-focused e-tivities in this study, which in terms of design were closer to the concept of isolated FFI.

Keywords: *EFL grammar, form-focused instruction, e-tivities, learner beliefs, reflection*

1 Form-focused instruction and the role of the learner

In current SLA (Second Language Acquisition) literature there is a consensus about the value of teaching grammar for the development of communicative competence. However, no universal agreement or evidence exists as to how much grammar should be included in foreign language instruction, or what the most effective instructional method involving grammar is [6]. In SLA the concept of form-focused instruction or *FFI* implies some kind of intervention into the learning process on the part of the instructor, for example, by means of presenting grammar rules or giving corrective feedback. In case of direct pedagogical intervention, we talk about *explicit* grammar instruction, while indirect pedagogical intervention is a characteristic of *implicit* grammar instruction [7].

On the other hand, it has been established that, regardless of the teaching method, various individual learner characteristics can determine the success of grammar instruction [3]. The adequacy of an instructional approach involving grammar can also depend on the goals of EFL instruction in a particular setting. For example, more grammar focus would be justified with young adult learners at a relatively higher level of linguistic competence studying English for professional purposes at a college to support their professional writing skills [3].

The learner variables that are in the focus of this paper are learners' *perceptions* of the pedagogical environment (also including the instructional approach or activities) and learner *beliefs and preferences*. According to [8], learner beliefs denote "what learners think about themselves, about the learning situation, and about the target community", and are a more "pervasive" and "overarching" concept than learner perceptions, which are related to "specific experiences", and can refer to learner perception of themselves, and the perceptions of the learning situation. The importance of assessing

learner perceptions and beliefs in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) programmes is seen in the fact that instructors' and students' views on grammar and its practical use for language skills development are often incongruent [9].

In this paper, learner beliefs refer to learner preferences for two types of FFI. The dichotomy between "integrated" and "isolated" FFI [5] is related to the existing constructs of, respectively, implicit and explicit instruction, but builds on those constructs by integrating them with a learner perspective on each of the two instructional types. In *isolated FFI* discrete grammar input is provided prior to a communicative activity or after it (as feedback) and, although separate from the communicative part of instruction is "anchored" to its communicative purpose [10], [5]. On the other hand, in *integrated FFI* learners' "attention to form is drawn during the communicative activity", at moment at which a particular grammar issue arises [5].

In SLA research a possible connection between higher language proficiency and the preference for integrated FFI was established in [10]. Another study revealed the correlations between students' preference for integrated FFI and the development of their oral skills, as well as between students' preference for isolated FFI and their grammar test achievement [11].

When learner perceptions are concerned, there is a vast body of research on the perception of the use of ICT for language learning in a hybrid/online setting regarding the use of technology as well as the pedagogical aspects of hybrid/online instruction. For example, benefits and challenges of using Web 2.0 tools in EFL instruction are comprised in several metastudies including [12]. Learner perception variables in this study are related to e-tivity design and implementation, wiki as the online tool used for collaborative writing, and learners' experience with keeping a learning diary.

In the FFI in this study, students were assigned out-of-class grammar e-tivities (online collaborative activities) performed during the semester. The e-tivities involved describing a selected advanced grammar topic; creation of a visual artefact (mind map, concept map, cartoon etc.) representing the described advanced grammar topic using selected Web 2.0 tools; and publication of the grammar article in a class wiki accessible to all students in the EFL course.

2. Aim of the study

Based on theoretical considerations above, the empirical study in this paper aims to establish the role of students' beliefs as a psychological variable manifested as their individual preferences for two types of grammar instruction – conceptualized in [5] as *isolated* and *integrated* FFI, respectively – on their perception of online grammar activities in a hybrid EFL course. The following **research questions** were therefore defined:

• *RQ1:* Is there a relationship between the students' preferences for isolated vs. integrated FFI and their overall perception of three aspects of conducted grammar e-tivities?

• *RQ2:* Is there a relationship between the students' preferences for isolated vs. integrated FFI and their overall perception of the use of wiki as the collaborative writing tool used for e-tivities?

• *RQ3:* Is there a relationship between the students' preferences for isolated vs. integrated FFI and their perception of the use of learning diary as a reflective activity accompanying the grammar e-tivity?

Given the overall task design and content of the conducted grammar e-tivities, briefly outlined in the previous section, it was hypothesized that students' quantitative assessment of: grammar e-tivities (RQ1), use of the wiki for the performance of e-tivities (RQ2), and writing learning diary entries to reflect on the creation of articles on the assigned grammar topics (RQ3) would be more favourable among students that prefer isolated FFI.

3. Method

This paper reports the results of an empirical study of the respective relations between the students' preferences for isolated vs. integrated form-focused instruction (FFI), on the one hand, and (a) their overall perception of three aspects of conducted grammar e-tivities, (b) their overall perception of the use of wiki as the collaborative writing tool in the performance of grammar e-tivities, and (c) their perception of the use of the learning diary (the reflective activity), on the other. This research is placed within the practical educational environment of teaching *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) at the university level of a specific undergraduate course with the use of (1) form-focused instruction (FFI), (2) grammar related online pedagogical activities (e-tivities), (3) learning diary as a reflective activity, and (4) wiki technology as the platform for collaborative writing (students' description of various advanced grammar topics) and publishing of multimedia artifacts (mind maps, concept maps, cartoons, etc.) representing the described topics created by means of several Web 2.0 tools. After performing the grammar e-tivities, the students' experiences and evaluations were measured in a survey by means of related assessment scales.

3.1 Sample and procedure

The participants in this study were 89 undergraduate students (79.8% male and 20.2% female) who attended an EFL course at a college from the north-western part of Croatia. All of the students had average or above-average ICT skills since their study programme was in the field of information technology. After performing various online grammar activities with the use of a wiki system to publish the results of their assignments (i.e. short textual descriptions and multimedia representations of selected grammar topics created by means of different Web 2.0 tools) the students were given a survey with assessment scales related to the activities that they had performed. These surveys were developed based on the literature in the fields of EFL and e-learning. Internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) of the scales was 0.70 for the scale *Integrated form-focused instruction* and above 0.80 for all the other scales used for data collection in this research. For data analysis correlation *(Pearson correlation coefficient)* was calculated according to research questions *(RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3)*.

3.2 Instruments

For the **assessment of *isolated vs. integrated form-focused instruction (FFI)*** two separate scales developed by [5] were used (consisting of 9 items each; in translating the scales, the wording of several items was slightly modified to fit the context of the study in this paper):
- Sample items for *Isolated form-focused instruction* are "I prefer to examine a grammar rule before I see its application in the text" and "I like learning grammar by seeing the explanation first, and doing practice exercises afterwards".
- Sample items for *Integrated form-focused instruction* are "I prefer lessons that focus on communication and teach grammar only when necessary" and "I believe my grammar will improve quickly if I communicate using English".

For the **assessment of grammar online activities with a wiki system (e-tivities)** the following scales mostly adapted from [13], [14], [15] were used related to three different aspects of e-tivity performance:
- Assessment of e-tivity *content* (6 items); sample items were "The content of e-tivity was well structured and organized into logical components" and "The content was appropriate for the learner's level of proficiency".
- Assessment of e-tivity *implementation* (7 items); sample items were "The instructions for performance of the assigned e-tivities (including examples) were clear and understandable" and "The technical support during the performance of e-tivities was available and effective".
- Assessment of *interaction among participants during e-tivity performance* (7 items); sample items were "Because of their participation in e-tivities the students were more engaged in mutual interactions" and "E-activities required various interactional patterns: teacher-student, student-teacher to the teacher, student-student".

The sample items for the scale *Assessment of learning diaries* (reflection activity accompanying grammar e-tivities; 9 items) created by the authors of this paper were "Writing diary entries on the written grammar e-tivity made me think about how to perform the given e-tivity as best as I can" and "Writing diary entries on the written grammar e-tivity motivated me to apply my previously acquired experience in completing the given task".

The scale *Assessment of the use of a wiki for grammar e-tivities* consisted of 9 items (mainly created by the authors of the paper, with some items adapted from [13]; two sample items from this scale are "I believe that the wiki system is an adequate tool for teaching the English language having in mind the content (elaboration of grammatical topics) of the assigned e-tivities in this course" and "The way in which the wiki system was used in this course contributed to the creation of a dynamic and organized learning environment".

4. Results and discussion

The statistical method used for the analysis of quantitative data from the survey was correlation analysis (Pearson correlation coefficient).

4.1. Correlation between students' preferences for integrated vs. isolated FFI and their assessment of the attributes of collaborative grammar e-tivities

The data presented in Table 1 consists of correlation coefficients between the variables *Isolated form-focused instruction* and *Students' preferences for integrated form-focused instruction*, on the one side, and *Assessment of e-tivity content*, *Assessment of e-tivity implementation*, and *Assessment of interaction*, on the other. Moderate and statistically significant positive correlations were found between the three attributes of

online learning activities (e-tivities) and *Students' preferences for isolated form-focused instruction (FFI)*. However, no significant correlation was found between the three attributes of grammar e-tivities and *Students' preferences for integrated form-focused instruction (FFI).* It must be noted that *Isolated FFI* is focused on more explicit or direct grammar input (e.g. explanation and demonstration of grammar rules) before exposure to relevant learning content (text) or practical exercises. Likewise, in most of the e-tivities in FFI in this paper students were predominantly engaged in (a) analyzing and summarizing grammatical rules in the form of wiki articles using metalanguage as well as (b) visualization and thematization of those rules on concrete examples. On the other side, *Integrated FFI* refers to the use of language and learning of grammar rules through more natural practical speaking or writing activities without an overt focus on grammar. This may at least partly explain the very low and statistically insignificant correlations between *Integrated form-focused instruction (FFI)* and the three attributes of grammar e-tivities.

Table 1. Correlation (*Pearson correlation coefficient)* between students' preferences for two approaches to FFI and particular aspects of grammar e-tivities (N=89; level of statistical significance $p<.05^*$; $p<.01^{**}$)

	E-tivity content	E-tivity implementation	E-tivity interaction
Isolated FFI	.472[**]	.418[**]	.311[**]
Integrated FFI	.153	.131	.181

4.2. Correlation between students' preferences for integrated vs. isolated FFI and their assessment the use of a wiki for grammar e-tivities

Correlation coefficients in Table 2 reveal a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between *Isolated form-focused instruction (FFI)* and *students' evaluation of the use of a wiki for grammar e-tivities* for online learning. This could indicate that the adequate use of a wiki system can have beneficial effects on organizing and presenting language learning activities that are focused on explicit grammar rules (i.e. isolated FFI). However, since the correlation between *Integrated form-focused instruction (FFI)* and *students' evaluation of the use of a wiki for grammar e-tivities* for online learning was very low and statistically insignificant, the same beneficial effect was not established for the more communication-oriented language learning tasks.

Table 2. Correlation (*Pearson correlation coefficient)* between students' preferences for two approaches to FFI and the assessment of the wiki tool used for the performance of e-tivities (N=88; level of statistical significance $p<.05^*$; $p<.01^{**}$)

	Assessment of wiki
Isolated FFI	.454[**]
Integrated FFI	.074

4.3. Correlation between students' preferences for integrated vs. isolated FFI and their assessment of the use of learning diaries as a reflection activity

Similarly to the correlation coefficients in Table 2, the data presented in Table 3 reveal a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between *Isolated form-focused instruction (FFI)* and *students' evaluation of the use of learning diaries as a reflection activity.* This uncovered relation can be explained by the fact that learning diaries (i.e. learning journals) promote a cognitive focus on the learning tasks that are being carried out and assist self-regulatory behaviors that can improve students' performance on those tasks. It is interesting to note that an additional analysis of the wording of the items of the assessment scale to measure Isolated form-focused instruction revealed that some of them required respondents to reflect on the learning tasks associated with grammar rules (like the e-tivities in the case of our research), while the analysis of the wording of the items of the assessment scale to evaluate the use of a wiki for grammar e-tivities revealed that most of them also contained *reflection* but on the use of the e-tivities for similar purpose. According to the data presented in Table 3 there was no statistically significant correlation between *Integrated form-focused instruction (FFI)* and *students' evaluation of the use of learning diaries as a reflection task.*

Table 3. Correlation (*Pearson correlation coefficient)* between students' preferences for two approaches to FFI and the assessment of learning diaries (reflection activity accompanying grammar e-tivities) (N=77; level of statistical significance $p<.05^*$; $p<.01^{**}$)

	Assessment of learning diaries as a reflection activity
Isolated FFI	.466[**]
Integrated FFI	.143

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed additional light on the importance of learner beliefs (in particular, preferences for two different approaches to FFI) for the assessment of grammar e-tivities conducted in a hybrid EFL course at the tertiary level. With regards to the three research questions, moderate and statistically significant correlations were obtained for the assessment of e-tivities, wiki as the online tool and the learning diary as a reflective activity on the one hand and students' preference for isolated FFI on the other. By contrast, no significant correlations were obtained between the criterion variables and students' preference for integrated FFI. In other words, the hypothesized relationship between the preference for isolated FFI and the particular approach to e-tivity design and implementation (grammar e-tivities) in this study was confirmed. In this respect, this study represents a contribution to the body of research dealing with the role of learner variables in the assessment of FFI in hybrid EFL grammar instruction. However, to be able to more fully account for the effectiveness of any specific approach to FFI, further research would be required that may include examining the interdependence between positive assessment of FFI pertaining to each of the two instructional types and the actual gains in grammar competence; research on students' preferences for the two instructional types extended to other types of grammar tasks (e.g. communication-oriented tasks closer to integrated FFI) or other online tools to support them; possible changes in learners' beliefs and preferences regarding the learning situation over the course of time; correspondence between the learners' and teachers' preferences for the two types of FFI in a concrete pedagogical setting, and others.

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