

Does Grammar Instruction Make a Difference: Evidence from AAU

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Abstract: This is a report of an exploration into the state of the linguistic ability of first year students. Use of verb forms (tense and agreement) as an element of grammar in the English language is investigated through a short pre- and post-course test. The test yielded information on the performance of the students before and after attending the College English course at Addis Ababa University (AAU). The results show a significant difference in the performance of the students. In other words, the students performed significantly better on the post-test at the end of the semester than they did on the pre-test. Thus, it appears that the finding of the study has a reassuring implication on the teaching/learning of College English.

Introduction

The Department of Foreign Languages and Literature offers English language skills development courses to Addis Ababa University students during their first three semesters of their stay at the University. This study is based on the course offered during the first semester of the first year, namely College English (FLEN 101)**.

Unlike the preceding textbooks, for this course, the current course book is based on a different understanding of "what it means to 'know' a language" (Baker, 1989:7). It is compiled in such a way that it puts "... emphasis on what is done with language" (Ibid.). Thus, the course book focuses on using English for academic purposes. The aim of the course is to assist students improve their use of English - their language skills and study practices.

More specifically, while the development of language skills includes the students' abilities in listening, speaking, reading, writing, learning vocabulary, grammar, etc., the development of study practices comprises reading, understanding and criticising real academic texts, taking lecture notes, writing academic essays, etc. (College

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** This course is no longer offered in the manner described in this study as there has been curricular revision immediately after the data generation for this study.

English, 1996: 3). Again, this study is concerned with the treatment of grammar in the course book for this first course.

The grammar parts in each of the units of the course book are limited to awareness raising summaries (notes) and very few tasks for practice in the use of grammar points. On the average, the grammar parts take up six of twenty-three pages per unit, the range being three of thirteen to seven of twenty-eight pages. This situation appears to cause concern and worry among the students and their teachers. The students, noticeably more frequently when mid and final examinations are approaching, consult their teachers with many questions, and seek advice on how best to prepare for the examinations. Also some teachers, apart from expressing doubts about their response (advice) to the students when examinations are only a few weeks away, often wonder whether enough is done in the course for the students to develop adequate accuracy. Furthermore, people who express concerns about the decline in the use of the English language of our students and graduates often cite instances of difficulties in language accuracy. For example, it is not uncommon to hear complaints that our students fail to distinguish the use of 'is/was'.

Objective

Given the new departure in the teaching/learning of the English language and the scepticism over the adequacy of the language accuracy of our students, I set out to explore the following questions:

1. Do freshman students learn grammar as they go through the course?
2. Does this gain in learning reflect in the average performance of the students on a grammar test at the end of the course?

Description of the Grammar Lessons

What follows is a description of the grammar sections in the first three units of the course book. While these are the minimum requirements of coverage, there are also four other units that teachers are encouraged to choose from to cover additional unit(s) provided that there is time. It is very often the case that four units are covered in a semester.

Unit 1: There are four short tasks in unit one, i.e., on three of thirteen pages. These tasks require students to define grammar, decide whether the given utterances are acceptable or not (with reasons), identify differences in meaning in sets of utterances, react to a written piece by a high school student, and reflect on their attitudes to fluency, accuracy, feedback and correction. They are then required to discuss their answers (reactions) to the tasks in their respective groups, with their instructor, and in one case (task 4) report their group findings to the whole class. From this, the students are expected to appreciate that the definition of grammar includes more than form (rules) of language; that it is used to convey meanings in ways that are appropriate to the situation, and that grammar can facilitate or obstruct meaning depending on how it is used.

Unit 2: This unit deals with relative clauses and the priority of information in a sentence, and the grammar of giving warnings and advice. These are presented in four tasks, and they take up seven pages of the twenty-seven page unit.

The first task is devoted to the development of grammar awareness, i.e., of relative clauses. For this purpose, four sample sentences (with relative clauses) are given together with five questions aimed at helping students discover the form and function of relative clauses. For example, one typical question reads: What rule for use can you make up about how commas are used in a relative clause to indicate the priority of information in a sentence? Notice that the sample sentences are taken from a radio broadcast on an AIDS victim in Uganda. This exercise is followed by a one-page summary of notes/explanations and examples.

The second task, using the grammar, requires students to use relative clauses at sentence then paragraph levels. Students show their awareness of the form of relative clauses by taking down a dictation of sentences taken from the talk, editing sentences, and by completing parallel sentences to given ones. At the paragraph level, first students listen again to the radio talk and make detailed notes on the AIDS patient like a doctor making medical notes. They then use the notes to write a paragraph. This paragraph is further used as a model to write another paragraph from a given set of notes. Two more exercises (but optional and for weaker classes) involve completing sentences with information from the talk, then matching the

sentences to write a connected descriptive paragraph; and finally, they use this paragraph as a model to complete another descriptive paragraph.

The third task deals with the development of awareness of the grammar of giving warning and advice. The students are provided with five statements to study and rank order them from tentative advice to strong warning, and discuss the reasons for their decisions. This is followed by the fourth task, using the grammar, which requires students to complete educational advertisements designed to warn people of the dangers of AIDS and advise them to change their sexual habits. This completion exercise is based on (as source material) the information students find in the reading passage on AIDS, in which the writer shows concern that people need more education about the dangers of AIDS.

Unit 3: In this unit, active and passive constructions, degree of frequency of events (adverbial expressions) and time clauses are revised in the content of descriptive writing. Again, these are presented in four tasks on seven pages of the twenty-eight page unit.

In the first task, students answer ten questions following two examples. The examples and the questions are based on a listening text about some aspects of the traditional kinship system of the Gurage people. In the course of answering the questions, the students practise active and passive constructions as well as using adverbial expressions. In addition, they edit errors in verb forms in five other sentences.

In the second task, students analyse how choosing active or passive forms affects meaning based on a three-paragraph reading passage about traditional Konso villages. The students pick out and list the active and passive verbs in separate columns. They then identify and write the subjects against the active verbs and the agents against the passive verbs. They also work out from the text and write the reason for the author's choice of using one or the other of the constructions in a third column. In addition, they complete six statements that summarise the main distinctions between using the two constructions. Lastly, they are provided with a one-page grammar summary. Thus, the students are expected to develop their

awareness of the distinctions between the uses of the two constructions in academic descriptive writing.

Two more tasks (the third and fourth) are devoted to the study and practice in using time clauses for descriptive writing. In the third task, students answer five questions following two examples. Again, the examples and the questions are based on the listening text as in the first task. They also edit errors in verb forms in five other sentences. In the fourth task, the students complete a paragraph about 'marriage among the Ari' by choosing completions from a given list of jumbled notes, and by changing the verbs in brackets to the most appropriate tense. Then, using this paragraph as a model, the students are required to write a similar paragraph describing the sequence of events in preparing for a cultural event that they are familiar with. Finally, a very short 'grammar summary' on time clauses is provided.

These last two tasks, including the short summary, are meant to show and give practice to the students on another feature of academic writing.

Overall: In the **Instructor's Manual**, it is stated that

The primary goal of College English is to help students to improve how they use English - their language skills and study practices - rather than just to help them to improve their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and comprehension. There is thus a shift of focus from learning about English to using English (1996:1).

The aims of the course are to help learners develop their confidence and abilities in academic practices, and their overall learning styles so as to help them enhance their learning potential in addition to developing their language skills. The ultimate goal is therefore to assist learners to think about their own best ways of studying other subjects in English (Ibid.).

The classroom situation is made as conducive as possible to experiment with and learn English. In this connection, Richard-Amato (1988: 28 & 29) refers to two authors who stress the importance of the classroom:

Wagner-Cough and Hatch (1975) argue that ... the classroom is more than just one more environment in which acquisition occurs. It can be a place that is especially conducive to acquisition. They feel that for beginners up to the intermediate level, the classroom can potentially be more effective than the outside world for acquiring a second language. They remind us that it is often difficult for students to get comprehensible input from a world that is not aware of their need for it.

Individual, pair, group and whole class work and discussion constitute the classroom scenario, i.e., the classroom situation is interactive and student-centred. Tasks and activities move from oral work through listening and reading to writing, i.e., they are skills-based and integrated. Self and/or peer assessments of task completions accompany and some times are followed by teacher assessments. Students are encouraged to work with other students and thereby learn from fellow students, rather than depend only on the teachers. The role of the teacher is to facilitate, guide and participate in the tasks, and not lecturing on the rules of grammar, for example. Thus, the role of the English teacher and the English classroom scenario tend to contrast with the classroom delivery of other subjects; and this the students find perplexing as they themselves admit at times.

Procedure

The Test: A twenty-item test of grammar was used for this study. The students were required to decide on the most appropriate form of the verb 'to be' in terms of tense and agreement. The format of the test is fill-in the blank, which is to some extent open-ended or a free-response format. The following example is an illustration of the content and format of the test: There _____ fewer rainy days last kiremt than there usually are. The students are expected to write 'were' in the blank space as the most appropriate form of the verb 'to be' in this sentence context.

The Subjects: Two sections (groups) in the Extension Programme were involved in this study. There were a total of forty-seven students from the Departments of Geography (22) and History (25) in these two sections.

Test Administration: The same test was administered twice to the same students in the two sections. The pre-test was administered during the first period (contact hour) of the first semester, whereas the post-test was administered during the last period of the same semester. The results of those students who had scores for both the pre- and post-test were used for analysis. The total number of students in the two sections was actually fifty-nine (29 + 30). However, twelve students were not in class to take the test once or twice. Thus, the data (47 cases) was then subjected to a paired t-test analysis.

Results

In this section, the central tendency, the dispersion of scores, the reliability of the test, and the results of the t-test analysis are reported, including comparisons of test scores and end-of-semester course grades.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (Geog + Hist = 47 cases)

	Pre-test	Post-test
Mode	11	14
Median	12	15
Average	12.21	14.60
Standard Deviation	3.24	3.77
Range	19 - 4 (15)	20 - 4 (16)
Reliability (K-R 21)	r = 0.64	r = 0.78

From the table, it can be seen that the sample of students have achieved higher scores in the post-test in all the three measures of central tendency. In other words, the most frequent score (Mode), the middle score (Median), and the average score for the sample are all greater in the post-test than in the pre-test. This suggests that the performance of the sample of freshman students has improved on the grammar test by the end of the course (first semester). A slightly higher variation in the abilities of the sample is also observed in the standard deviation and the range of

scores. While the reliability of the test in general is not as expected, some improvement is noticeable in the post-course test.

Table 2: Comparison of Performance on a Pre- and Post-test of Grammar

		Pre-test	Post-test
	N	47	47
Statistic	Sd.	3.24	3.77
	Av.	12.21	14.60
Calculated t		5.54*	
Tabulated t		2.704	

* $P < 0.01$, $df = 46$

Table two shows that the calculated t-value (5.54) is clearly greater than the tabulated t-value (2.704). Thus, the t-test analysis indicates a significant ($P < 0.01$) mean difference between pre- and post-course scores on the same test, i.e., this difference is very unlikely to arise on account of chance alone. In fact, it is safe to claim that there is only one percent chance that the observed difference between the means belongs to the sampling distribution of chance differences between means that would occur by chance alone. This result, therefore, confirms that the performance of the sample of freshman students on the grammar test has improved meaningfully over the semester of the said course.

It is worth noting at this point that as it was not the objective of the study per se, no attempt has made to discern the variable(s) that account(s) for the positive gain observed in the English language performance of the sample of students. However, some reference can be made to the inductive process and the cognitive theory of language acquisition for a possible explanation of the positive gain in performance.

Brown (1994: 92) writes that:

Inductive and deductive reasoning are two polar aspects of the generalization process. In the case of inductive reasoning, one stores a number of specific instances and induces a general law or rule or conclusion that governs or subsumes the specific instances. Second language learning in the 'field' (outside the language classroom), for example, untutored language learning, involves a largely inductive process, in which learners must infer certain rules and meanings from all the data around them.

It may be the case, in our situation, that the other content subject classrooms, the term papers, the handouts, the seminars, the class tests, the library visits, the voluntary gatherings on campus, etc. all serve as data around our students, and that the language classroom provides for a forum where our students test hypotheses and induce general rules of the English language.

Moreover, Ellis (1994:347) writes that:

... a cognitive theory of language acquisition sees linguistic knowledge as no different in kind from other types of knowledge, and views the strategies responsible for its development as general in nature, related to and involved in other kinds of learning.

Here again, it may be the case that as our students learn other content subjects in English, they are also learning English, i.e., their linguistic knowledge develops together with their development in other types of knowledge.

Table 3: Comparison of test scores and end-of-semester course grades (N = 47)

	Cut off/Grades	No. of Students	%
Pre-test scores:	9 & below	7	14.89
	10 & above	40	85.11
Post-test scores:	10 & below	7	14.89
	11 & above	40	85.11
Course grades:	D & F	9	19.15
	A – C	38	80.85

In table three, test-score cut-off points, end-of-semester course grades, and the distribution of students in these are displayed for the benefit of comparison.

The end-of-semester course grades are derived from scores for speaking, listening and writing (as classroom evaluations), mid-semester and final examinations. The letter grades are determined as per the scale worked out for the whole of freshman students for the particular semester. These grades are the officially recognised earnings of the students for the course (College English). These are compared with cut-off points in the study test scores. The cut-off points in the scores for the study test are arrived at by subtracting the standard deviation from the average score ($\bar{x}$). The resulting decimals are rounded off differently for the pre- and post-test. In the pre-test, it is rounded up to the next highest whole number, whereas it is rounded down to the nearest whole number in the post-test. The reason for this was that the lower limit in the pre-test would signal a warning or a demand, and that the lower limit in the post-test represents a fifty percent minimum performance on the test.

Admittedly, the scores and the grades come from different sources (test contents). The scores come from a short test of grammar, which is only a sub-component of the mid-semester and final examinations. The grades represent performance on a combination of classroom evaluations (speaking, listening & writing) and mid and end-of-semester examinations which include skills (reading comprehension, writing, etc.) and language components (grammar and vocabulary, for example). Nevertheless, performance in the short test foreshadows (predicts) performance in the course as expressed by the grades in table three. For instance, nearly fifteen percent of the students' performance in the pre-test is found unsatisfactory and about

nineteen percent of these students earned Ds and Fs in the course. The same situation is observed when considering post-test scores and course grades. About 85 percent of the students had satisfactory and above in the pre- and post-test scores, whereas about 81 percent of them had passes or better (C and above) in course grades.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that the performance of the sample of freshman students significantly improved on the grammar test by the end of the course (first semester). Moreover, performance on the short grammar test approximated (predicted) the overall performance in the course (by the end of the semester) as expressed by the final and official grades awarded to the students.

Had it been the case that no meaningful improvement was observed and that no significant difference between the means was detected, then the new departure in the teaching/learning of English at Addis Ababa University would have caused serious concern and worry among all involved.

However, there is evidence of positive gain in the English language performance by the end of the course, albeit the confounding of variables. Students attend College English and other content subject classrooms, wherein they listen, read, write, ask and answer questions in English; and engage in activities in English in the library, in campus-wide communications and at voluntary gatherings on campus. Registering and attending College English heralds (signals) the demand for English, and all the other activities conducted in English in and outside the classrooms provide authentic contexts (learning inputs) for the use of English. Therefore, it may be that the positive gain in performance is attributed to the cumulative effect of all these and others like student efforts and learning strategies.

Finally, it appears that the finding of the study has a reassuring implication on the teaching/learning of College English at Addis Ababa University.

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