

# The Effect of Consciousness-Raising Tasks on Iranian Elementary EFL Learners' Syntax Acquisition

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## Abstract

This study was carried out to examine the effect of consciousness-raising tasks on the syntax acquisition of Iranian elementary EFL learners. To this end, a Cambridge Key English Test (KET) was administered to 85 elementary level learners at a Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. From among these learners, 60 homogeneous subjects were selected and divided into control group and experimental group. Before starting the treatment, a pretest was administered to both groups and t-test results showed no significant difference in their information about the grammatical structures under study. Then, the control group learned these structures traditionally whereas the experimental group worked on a sequence of consciousness-raising tasks. At the end, all subjects in both groups were post tested to check the progress they made after receiving the treatment. The results of the analysis of data showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the posttest.

**Keywords:** Consciousness-raising, Consciousness-raising task, Syntax

## 1. Introduction

Along the history of second language teaching, the role of grammar has been an issue of controversy. According to Richards (2002, cited in Mukminatien, 2008), it has even been the most controversial. Thornburry (1999) asserts that in fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate. Roughly, the debate has brought about an extreme split of attitudes, namely, those who hold that grammar should receive a central attention in language teaching and those who hold that grammar should not be taught at all. The former is reflected in Grammar Translation Method and Cognitive Code Learning and the latter is applied in Natural Approach and deep end or strong version of Communicative Language Teaching (Mukminatien, 2008). The other methods fall on somewhere in between. However, as Richards (2002, cited in Mukminatien, 2008) says, in recent years grammar teaching has regained its rightful place in the language teaching, and recent understanding about the controversy has come to an agreement that the debate is not on whether grammatical competence is important but rather on how to teach grammar. In other words, one of the challenges facing teachers of foreign and second language is finding appropriate format for teaching target language grammar within the current communicative methodology. The place of grammar in communicative language teaching frequently gives rise to differing positions and heated debates. Therefore, the challenge is for foreign language and second language teachers to find ways of developing the required grammatical accuracy and the ability to communicate at the same time, without sacrificing one or the other.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

The question of whether or not grammar should be taught has been persistently debated in the fields of language pedagogy and second language acquisition (Mohamed, 2004). Nassaji and Fotos (2004) argue that this focus has been motivated in part by debates in the field of cognitive psychology over the role of explicit versus implicit language learning and whether such learning occurs through conscious manipulation of information or primarily through unconscious processes when people are exposed to language input. They continue that theoretically, the debate was represented by Krashen's (1982) distinction between conscious learning and unconscious acquisition of language. It was claimed that language should be acquired through natural exposure, not learned through formal instruction. Krashen (1982) suggests that teaching grammar results in "learned" knowledge, which is only available for monitoring utterances that learners produce using their "acquired" knowledge, and, as such, is of very limited value. He recommends instead that teachers concentrate on providing lots of comprehensible input so that learners can acquire a second language naturally like children acquiring their mother tongue. Ellis (1997) states that although this is an attractive proposal, particularly for teachers who do not like grammar, but it has several problems. One is that students are often convinced that 'learning' grammar is of value to them and therefore, expect the teacher to teach grammar. Another more serious problem is that learners do not seem to master the grammar of a second language even when they get plenty of comprehensible input. Studies of learners in immersion classrooms (e.g. Swain 1985) have shown that even after ample exposure to the target language learners continue to make a lot of grammatical errors (Ellis, 2003). Furthermore, White (1987) argues that some grammatical structures cannot be

acquired just through input and may require some direct instruction. Disenchantment with this, and a growing concern about accuracy in learners' language, has resulted in a reassertion of the role of grammar in syllabus design and the content of lessons, and even in giving explicit attention to grammatical forms and rules (Hedge, 2000).

### *2.1 Consciousness-Raising (C-R)*

C-R, like many innovations in the field of second language pedagogy, originated from dissatisfaction with ideas that preceded it. The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards and Schmidt, 2002) provides us with a comprehensive definition of C-R:

... in teaching, techniques that encourage learners to pay attention to language form in the belief that an awareness of form will contribute indirectly to language acquisition. Techniques include having students infer grammatical rules from examples, compare differences between two or more different ways of saying something, observe differences between a learner's use of a grammar item and its use by native speakers. A consciousness-raising approach is contrasted with traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar (e.g. drilling, sentence practice, sentence combining), in which the goal is to establish a rule or instill a grammatical pattern directly. (p.109)

C-R constitutes an approach to grammar teaching which is compatible with current thinking about how learners acquire L2 grammar. It also constitutes an approach that accords with progressive views about education as a process of discovery learning through problem-solving (Ellis, cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002). In accordance with the general principle that what learners can find out for themselves is better remembered than what they are simply told, allowing the learners to take responsibility for discovering the underlying patterns of the target language favorably affects retention (Ellis, 2003). In the C-R approach, Ellis asserts that, the emphasis is not on explicit rule-giving and immediate practice, but instead on drawing learners' attention to formal features of linguistic forms, with the goal of delayed, versus immediate, mastery. According to him, in important ways C-R approach goes directly counter to many traditional educational ideas: it puts more responsibility on learners' shoulders, removes the central role of the teacher in the classroom, and makes no promises regarding when or whether the learners will master the content. C-R can be seen as guided problem solving. Learners are encouraged to notice particular features of the language, to draw conclusions from what they notice, and to organize their view of language in the light of the conclusions they have drawn.

As Ellis (2002, p.168) states: "C-R involves an attempt to equip the learner with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature, to develop declarative rather than procedural knowledge of it". It involves a focus on a specific form of the language, which is highlighted in a variety of ways. When teaching grammar through CR teachers do not teach any grammatical rules directly, rather they provide information in the form of data, which contains the form to be focused upon. From this data students are encouraged to engage in cognitive activities, which allow the students to create rules about the language for

themselves, bringing the language to a conscious level. He believes that C-R does not directly lead to implicit knowledge, which is intuitive and procedural and is used in face-to-face real conversation. Rather, C-R develops explicit knowledge of grammatical features, which, subsequently, helps learners to acquire implicit knowledge.

## 2.2 C-R Tasks

Current second language acquisition theories view grammar learning as best accomplished when learners are primarily focused on meaning rather than form, as Krashen has argued (Ellis, 1997). However, contrary to Krashen's position, these theories also claim that some attention to form is necessary for learning to take place. In addition, investigators such as Skehan (1998) and Tomasello (1998) have presented findings indicating that learners are limited language processors who cannot process target language input for both meaning and form at the same time (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). When they are focused on meaning they are unable to attend simultaneously to form and, conversely, when they are focused on form, their ability to understand or make themselves understood suffers (Ellis, 1997). In other words, it is necessary for learners to notice target forms in input; otherwise they process input for meaning only and do not attend to specific forms, and consequently fail to process and acquire them. For this reason, they need meaning-based tasks that also allow them the opportunity to process language as form. It means that they are first required to process a text for meaning and then, afterward, to attend to how a particular grammatical form is used in the text (Ellis, 2003).

As Ellis (2003) stipulates, tasks enjoy great attention and popularity in current SLA research and language pedagogy and the study of tasks brings together SLA and language pedagogy. Formal instruction and communicative language teaching can be integrated through the use of grammar tasks designed to promote communication about grammar. According to Ellis (1997) a C-R task is a pedagogic activity with certain specifications. He (1991, cited in Ellis, 2010) defines a C-R Task as 'a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property or properties of the target language' (P. 6). Ellis differentiates CR tasks from other form-focused activities by stating that CR tasks deemphasize learner production, and are not intended to lead to correct use of the targeted feature in spontaneous language use directly following task performance. Instead, he argues, the aim of CR tasks is to construct a conscious representation of the target feature, with production of that feature kept to a minimum.

Ellis (cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) explains that C-R tasks can be inductive or deductive. In the case of the former, the learner is presented with data and is expected to come up with the explicit rule that underlies the data. In the case of the latter, the learner is taught a rule which is then used to carry out some task. He notes that it is not clear which type results in the more efficient learning of explicit knowledge, probably both will prove useful. Ellis (cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 168) states that C-R activities have the following characteristics:

- 1) There is an attempt to *isolate* a specific linguistic feature for focused attention.

- 2) The learners are provided with *data* which illustrate the targeted feature and they may also be supplied with an *explicit rule* describing or explaining the feature.
- 3) The learners are expected to utilize *intellectual effort* to understand the targeted feature.
- 4) Misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of the grammatical structure by the learners leads to *clarification* in the form of further data and description or explanation.
- 5) Learners may be required (although this is not obligatory) to, articulate the rule describing the grammatical structure.

According to Ellis (2003) “a C-R task consists of (1) data containing exemplars of the targeted feature and (2) instructions requiring the learners to operate on the data in some way” (p. 163). He lists the different data options and types of operation that are possible. Data options include authentic vs. contrived, oral vs. written, and gap vs. non-gap, and types of operations include identification, for example, learners underline the target structure in the data, judgment, i.e. they respond to the correctness or appropriateness of the data, and sorting, i.e. they classify the data by sorting it into defined categories (Ellis, 2003). He also suggests that by permuting data options and types of operations, a considerable variety of C-R tasks can be designed.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were sixty male and female elementary level learners who aged from 14 to 26 on average. They were learning English as a foreign language at a Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. In order to have homogeneous subjects in terms of language proficiency, a language proficiency test (KET) was administered to 85 learners and the mean score was calculated. Sixty learners whose scores were one standard deviation (1SD) above and below the mean were chosen as the main subjects for the study. Then, they were assigned randomly to two groups as control group and experimental group. There were 30 learners in each group.

#### 3.2 Instrumentation

In order to carry out this study, the following instruments were used:

##### 3.2.1 Cambridge Key English Test (KET)

A Cambridge Key English Test developed in 2009 was used to determine the learners' level of proficiency. It is the first level of Cambridge ESOL Exams set at level A2 of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework for modern languages. Key English Test is based on language used in real life situations and covers the four skills- reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Unfortunately, due to practicality issues of the test administration, the researcher had to use a modified version of this test. The modified version of KET administered to the subjects of this study included 85 items and tested learners' three skills of

reading, writing, and listening. This test was first piloted with 30 similar learners to determine item characteristics, i.e. item facility, item discrimination, and choice distribution. The reliability of the test was calculated through KR-21 formula which turned out to be 0.89. The time allocation of this test was 1 hour and 40 minutes.

### 3.2.2 A Teacher-made Test

A teacher-made grammar test consists of 40 multiple-choice items was administered as both pretest and posttest in this study. For preparing this test eight grammatical structures of the third four units of Interchange Third Edition Intro Student's Book (Richards, 2005) were used. This test was first piloted with 30 similar learners to determine item characteristics i.e., item facility, item discrimination, and choice distribution. The reliability of the test was estimated using KR-21 formula which turned out to be 0.86. At last poor items were discarded and 35 items were chosen out of 40 items. A time allocation of 20 minutes was also estimated for the final version of the teacher-made test. This test as pretest was conducted at the beginning of the treatment to make sure that the participants had the same familiarity with the aimed grammatical structures in the study. It was also used as posttest at the end of the treatment to measure the learners' syntax acquisition in both control and experimental groups.

### 3.2.1 Consciousness-raising Tasks

The third instrument used in this study was consciousness-raising tasks that were prepared by the researchers. These tasks were developed based on consciousness-raising sequence presented in Impact Grammar (Ellis, 1997, p. 3) in which the sequence of tasks are as follow:

- 1) **Attending task:** Students read/ listen to a text that they process for meaning.
- 2) **Noticing task:** Students read/ listen to the same text, which is now gapped, and fill in the missing words.
- 3) **Analysis task:** Students discover how the target structure works by analyzing the data provided by the text.
- 4) **Checking task:** Students complete an activity to check if they have understood how the target structure works.
- 5) **Production task:** Students are given the opportunity to try out or experiment with the target structure by producing their own sentences.

The texts used for these tasks were eight conversations of the third four units of Interchange Third Edition Intro Student's Book (Richards, 2005). These conversations were based on the aimed grammatical structures of the study. They contained examples of correct usage of the target structures which were bolded and underlined by the researchers to enable learners to attend to the aimed features.



### *3.3 Procedure*

After ensuring the homogeneity of subjects, the treatment was given during eight sessions, each session 30 minutes. In control group, subjects were taught grammatical structures deductively. They were provided with researchers' clear explanation of the rules. Then, they moved into the application of the rules through doing exercises in their books. In experimental group, instead of giving explicit explanation about the target structures, the researchers employed a sequence of C-R tasks to make the learners to discover how the aimed grammatical structures work. Learners in this group were provided with all the explanations and clarifications they needed before, and during the task completion, and they were given enough time to complete the tasks. Learners began by reading a text (conversation) that contains examples of new grammatical structures. They first processed the text for meaning. Then they were asked to read the same text which was gapped and fill in the blanks using the correct form of the words in parenthesis. During the “attending” and “noticing” tasks, implicit approaches like input flooding and typographical input enhancement were used as an implicit focus on form technique in order to enable learners to notice certain grammatical features. Next, learners were encouraged and helped to determine grammar rules from evidence presented and arrive at an explicit understanding of the rule. This provided a basis for an error identification task, where they could check if they have understood the rule clearly. In this way, learners were asked to use their explicit knowledge of new grammatical structure to identify and correct errors of de-contextualized sentences in “checking” task. Finally, there was an opportunity for the learners to try to use the correct grammatical structure in their own sentences. The aim of this task was to encourage learners to experiment with the target structure, not its mastery.

In order to measure the amount of progress the learners made, all the learners in both control and experimental groups took part in posttest. Since the time interval between the pretest and posttest was long enough, the same teacher-made test was used as both pretest and posttest and the scores obtained from these tests were interpreted and statistically analyzed.

## **4. Results**

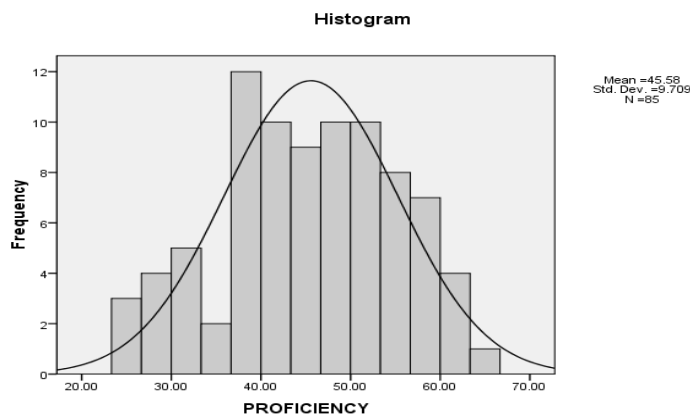
### *4.1 Proficiency Test*

In order to assess the participants' level of proficiency, a Cambridge Key English Test (KET) was administered to 85 learners at the beginning of the study. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the proficiency test.

Table1. Descriptive statistics for proficiency test

N of Participants	85
Mean	45.5765
Median	45.0000
Mode	45.00
Std. Deviation	9.70932
Variance	94.271
Skewness	-.178
Std. Error of Skewness	.261
Normality Check	-.68
Kurtosis	-.609
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.517
Normality Check	-1.17

The ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are within the range of +/- 1.96, i.e. the students' scores on the proficiency test do not deviate significantly from the normal distribution (Histogram 1).



Histogram 1. Proficiency test

#### 4.2 Pretest

Out of the 85 learners who took part in the proficiency test, 60 learners who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the main subjects of the study. They were divided into two groups, 30 subjects as the control group, and 30 subjects as the experimental group. Then, a teacher-made test consists of 35 items was conducted to determine whether the experimental and the control groups had the same familiarity with the target language structures before the treatment.

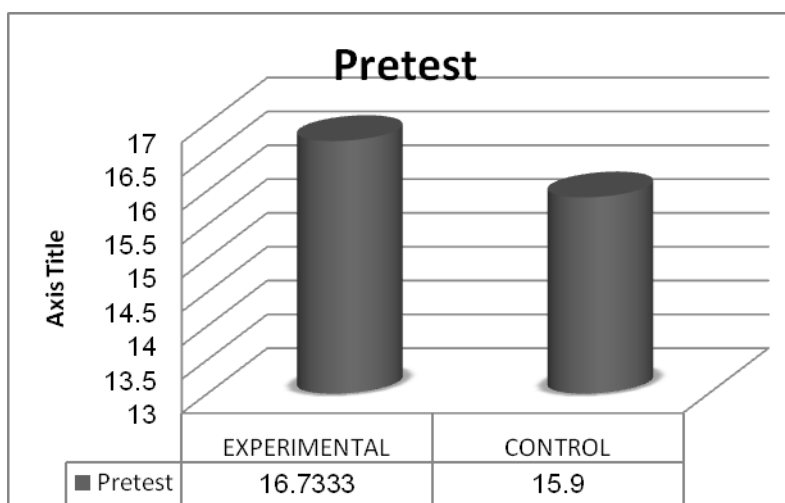


As displayed in Table 2, the mean scores for the experimental and control groups on the pretest are 16.73 and 15.90.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics pretest by groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	16.7333	5.40072	.98603
Control	30	15.9000	5.80933	1.06063

Graph 1 displays the mean scores of the two groups on the pretest.



Graph 1. Pretest by groups

An independent t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the pretest. The t-observed value was .57 (Table 3).

Table 3. Independent-test pretest by 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
Equal variances assumed	.159	.692	.575	58	.567	.83333	1.44817	-2.06550	3.73217

Equal variances not assumed			.575	57.694	.567	.83333	1.44817	-2.06583	3.73249
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Based on these results it can be concluded that the experimental and control groups were homogenous in terms of the syntax knowledge prior to the administration of the consciousness raising task to the former group.

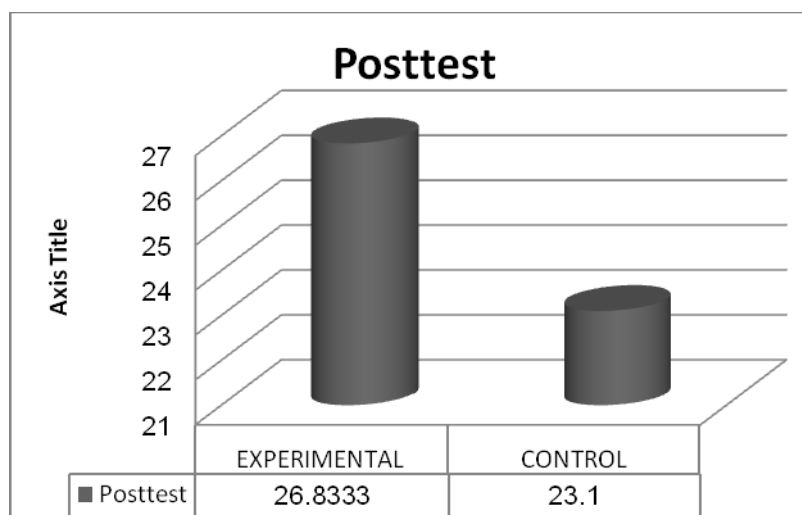
#### 4.3 Posttest

After eight sessions of treatment, the learners in both experimental and control groups were tested to check their progress. The same statistical procedure was used on the raw scores of the posttest to examine the difference between the two groups' performance. As displayed in Table 4, the mean scores for the experimental and control groups on the posttest are 26.83 and 23.10.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics posttest by groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	26.8333	3.82445	.69825
Control	30	23.1000	4.55881	.83232

Graph 2 displays the mean scores of the two groups on the posttest.



Graph 2. Posttest by groups

An independent t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the posttest. The t-observed value was 3.43 (Table 5).

Table 5. Independent t-test posttest by 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
Equal variances assumed	2.136	.149	3.436	58	.001	3.73333	1.08642	1.55863	5.90804
Equal variances not assumed			3.436	56.298	.001	3.73333	1.08642	1.55723	5.90944

Based on these results it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the posttest. In other words, the experimental group performed substantially better than the control group on the posttest.

## 5. Discussions

The present study was motivated by theoretical considerations concerning the effectiveness of consciousness-raising tasks in developing Iranian EFL learners' syntactic knowledge. Treatment group performance was compared to that of a control group on the pretest and posttest. The data obtained from pretest proved that there was no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group at the outset of the experiment. Moreover, mean scores of both groups determined that both groups were equivalent in their command of the target structures.

The results obtained from posttest indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the posttest. The experimental group, with a mean equal to 26.83, outperformed the control group on the posttest whose mean was 23.1. This proved that treatment did make a lot of differences on experimental group's performance on the posttest.

Accordingly, the null hypothesis of the study that consciousness-raising tasks do not have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' syntax acquisition was rejected. Thus, it can be

concluded that consciousness-raising tasks are effective learning tools that can be used in the language classroom to make learners aware of form where explicit instruction is necessary.

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of previous studies by Schmidt (1990; 1993; 1995), Ellis (1990; 1994; 1997; 2002; 2010), Fotos (1994), Sharwood Smith (1981), and Rutherford (1987) who have all investigated the merits of promoting learners' consciousness of grammatical form. Their studies show that activities that promote conscious attention to the target structures of a foreign language foster students' acquisition of these structures. Also, it has been noted how learning can be more effective if learners are given the opportunity to reflect and analyze the structures before rushing to produce them. Moreover, Bourke (1996) points out that C-R tasks cater to the natural tendency of learners to want to try to work things out, they encourage learners to deal with uncertainty, and that encourage learner autonomy, and not least, learners find them enjoyable. In other words, learners are eager to do C-R tasks because these tasks constitute a kind of puzzle which when solved enable learners to discover how a linguistic feature works.

## 6. Conclusions

The experimental results of this study support the use of consciousness-raising tasks. Learners that were taught the grammatical structures through the use of C-R tasks did better on the posttest than those who learned the same material without the benefit of the treatment. The post-test mean scores of the control and experimental groups were compared through implementing an independent t-test to determine if the difference between the means was statistically significant. The comparison between the mean scores of both groups on the posttest showed that the experimental group's mean was significantly higher than that of the control group. Therefore, it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the posttest.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be suggested that including C-R tasks into a communicative language teaching curriculum may provide the much-needed proportion of form-focused activities that will assist in producing language learners who are both fluent and accurate in the use of the English language. C-R approaches may have many more applications apart from developing a greater awareness of target grammar which could trigger further implications for developments in second language learning theories and pedagogical practices.

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