

Is it possible to improve writing without writing practice?



Rahim SARI holds a Ph.D. degree in ELT from Middle East Technical University. He has taught in various military institutions. His main areas of interest are second language acquisition, Comprehension Approach, learning theories and course design. He currently holds the chair in the Department of Foreign Languages at Işıklar Air Force High School, Bursa, TURKEY.

Rahim Sari, PhD.

Absract

The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that an input-based classroom environment with emphasis on receptive skills will inevitably lead to language development, which questions the validity of the integrated-skills approach (Krashen and Mason 2004) A study was conducted to compare the productive skills development of students under an input-based form of instruction and those under an integrated-skills approach. The experimental group did not take part in any writing activities. The control group, however, used the standard course books of an integrated-skills approach with emphasis on grammar, writing and speaking activities. The experimental group scored better on one of two writing tests, with no difference on the other, a speaking test and a C-Test. These results challenge the idea of placing equal emphasis on four skills from the very beginning of instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The Comprehension Approach asserts that language acquisition will take place as a result of emphasis on receptive skills (Krashen 2004, Mason & Krashen 1997). The ability to produce language is hypothesized to be the product of language acquisition; and is expected to develop naturally; thus the acquirer is let free to speak whenever he or she is ready.

The common integrated-skills approach in ELT, however, still maintains that it is necessary to focus equally on productive and receptive skills in order for productive skills to develop. An experimental research study was conducted to compare the productive skills development of students under an input-based form of instruction and those under an integrated-skills approach.

PROCEDURE

Subjects

Subjects were 40 students, ages 14-15, attending the preparatory class of a state boarding high school in Turkey. Preparatory classes in high schools or universities follow an intensive English language teaching program of about 20 to 30 hours a week.

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The subjects were divided into control and experimental groups, each with 20 students. The subjects in both groups had studied English for three years. Although they all had similar educational background, a pretest was also administered to assure similar entry levels in English. The subjects had low levels of English with a modest knowledge of vocabulary and grammar in English.

Treatment

Each week, both groups took 22 class hours of main course English, six class hours of skills (mainly reading) and one hour of watching videos. Each class hour being 50 minutes, the total amount of time allotted for English lessons was about 24 hours weekly. The skills teachers were different from the main course teachers. They followed the same syllabus in both groups with the exception that the reading teacher in the experimental group was asked and persuaded to spare no time for writing in the experimental class. The study covered 28 weeks of instruction. All of the students in the school except for the experimental group followed the teaching method in the course books based on an integrated skills approach.

As for the language learning activities outside of class, the students in the school were given 10 compulsory (scheduled) study hours distributed evenly from Sunday evening to Friday morning. The students could find opportunity to study for extra hours often during the weekends.

During the 29 class hours of weekly English lessons, the students in the control group had approximately 11 hours of grammar instruction, four hours of listening and eight hours of writing activities in the classroom each week. The remaining time was spent for other book-based activities (Table 1). The listening activities were usually in the form of listening to recordings of the written material in the course books. Students in the control group reported that they spent nearly 10 hours on grammar, two hours on listening and six hours on writing outside of class every week. The students in this group were reported to have done only about 50 pages of free voluntary reading from the graded readers during the whole treatment.

The experimental group followed a totally different path. The teacher of the experimental group modified the course schedule so as to focus mainly on input provision and comprehension. He separated the grammar activity sections embedded in the course books from the input and comprehension-based activities and gave only a minimum amount of grammar instruction in the form of short separate sessions. The instructor modified the syllabus and supplemented the course material in such a way so that all of the activities become input-based (Krashen 1989). The students in the experimental group were made aware of the underlying principles of the comprehension approach and were encouraged to do a lot of extensive listening and reading activity after classes. However, due to the restrictions and limitations in the school setting it was difficult to do listening activities outside the class and the students focused more on reading than listening.

Each week, the experimental group had approximately three hours of grammar and 14 hours of listening activity in class. The grammar session was not in the form of inductive learning but direct explanation of the grammar points to be met in the course book materials during the day. Pop-up short grammar explanation was also given whenever it would be helpful to make the input comprehensible. Instead of forcing students to do grammar exercises the researcher preferred to give more example sentences of the grammar point. They received no writing instruction whatsoever. Students in the experimental group were not required to answer questions in the writing section of the formative tests that all the students had to take regularly every week. Every week the experimental group teacher dedicated at least six class hours to sustained silent reading (SSR) activity. The rest of the class time was spent for role-play, homework check activities, and quizzes as required by the course books.

As for the activities outside of classes the students in the experimental group were reported to have spent three hours on grammar, four hours on listening and no time for writing outside of class. The students were actually required to spend no time for writing outside the classes. The group was, however, encouraged to do a lot of free voluntary reading outside class. The students were not required to do book reports or summaries. They just regularly recorded how many pages they read in a class diary. It was seen that they had read more than 3000 pages throughout the year.

The experimental group did not have any formal or informal writing instruction in class nor did they do writing activities as homework. Table 1 summarizes the difference in treatment between the two groups.

Table 1: Average amount of activities during and after classes

ACTIVITIES		Control Group	Exp. Group
During classes (29 class hours)	Grammar (<i>class hours per week</i>)	11	3
	Listening (<i>class hours per week</i>)	4	14
	Writing (<i>class hours per week</i>)	8	0
	SSR (<i>class hours per week</i>)	0	6
	Other book-based activities	6	6
Outside of classes	Grammar (<i>hours per week</i>)	10	3
	Listening (<i>hours per week</i>)	2	4
	Writing (<i>hours per week</i>)	6	0
	Extensive Reading (<i>approximate number of pages per week</i>)	1.7	107
	(<i>total number of pages during treatment</i>)	50	3000

As seen in Table 1, the experimental group teacher modified the course book activities by dedicating 16 more class hours to input based activities than the usual syllabus in the school. His was committed to the principle that language acquisition could only take place with the activities that trigger the language acquisition device and that production is a natural outcome of it, not the cause. The experimental group's awareness of the approach to be followed in their class and their commitment to it showed itself in the amount of outside voluntary reading and listening they did.

Measures

One speaking test, two writing tests, and a C-test were given to both groups at the end of the study, the results of which are given in Table 2.

The speaking test consisted of a warm up session and a picture story. Each student was allowed to choose a picture from among several and was asked to talk about it as long as he could. Each student talk was videotaped

and the tape was viewed and scored by two scorers, who reached agreement on the students' score. The scorers evaluated the students' performance in terms of accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, content (sentence length and message complexity), and fluency.

The first writing test contained three writing questions adopted from the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET). In the first question, students were required to fill in a hotel reservation form and write a note to a friend about the arrangements they made. The second question presented a problem at the station and the students were to write a message to a friend. The third one was again a narrative. The students were asked to write a letter to a friend in their country before their arrival.

The second writing test, which was given one week after the first one, asked students to describe a story displayed in a series of pictures. All writing tests were evaluated by two independent raters. The picture story test was evaluated with respect to the sub-skills of spelling, organization, content, mechanics, and vocabulary.

The C-test, considered a measure of overall general language ability, is a kind of cloze test in which the second half of every second word is deleted. The C-test used in the study involved 100 words to be completed in a story paragraph. Neither the experimental nor the control groups had taken an exam of this kind before.

Results

The experimental group scored significantly better than the control group on the speaking test, the PET writing test, and the C-Test and scored equally well on the picture story writing test (Table 2).

Table 2: Speaking, Writing and C-test Results

Measure		mean	sd	t	p	d
Speaking	Experimental	16.6	2.64	4.82	.00001*	1.53
	Control	12.75	2.4			
Writing 1 (PET)	Experimental	34.3	5.84	1.77	0.043*	0.56
	Control	30.2	8.54			
Writing 2 (Pict. Story)	Experimental	15.4	4.81	-0.314	0.38	-0.1
	Control	15.85	4.23			
C-Test	Experimental	67.65	8.33	3.64	0.001*	1.14
	Control	57.05	10.03			

N = 20 in all cases.

One-tail test of significance used in all cases.

*statistically significant

d = effect size

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that writing accuracy as well as other aspects of language competence improve without writing practice, a result that questions the validity of spending a great deal of time in writing activities. The results also suggest that it may be reasonable to focus heavily on listening and reading activities and invest less time in writing activities.

This study focused only on writing accuracy. There is good evidence that writing serves purposes other than language acquisition: writing not only helps us communicate with others, but can also help us solve problems and stimulate cognitive development (Krashen, 2004). The kind of writing activity that does this, however, is probably not the same as writing activities typically done in foreign and second language classrooms.

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