

COMPARISON OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IMPROVEMENT AMONG SELECTED FRESHMEN IN UNIVERSITAS ADVENT INDONESIA (UNAI)

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Abstract:

This study compared the improvement in English proficiency of freshmen who undertook the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently (Group A) with that of freshmen who had marginally better English proficiency scores and undertook the English I class only (Group B). The paired samples t-test on the gain scores resulted in a t-observed value of 2.604 at a significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, thus the conclusion that Group A achieved better improvement in English language proficiency than Group B.

Key words: comparison, English proficiency improvement, freshmen

INTRODUCTION

The place of grammar instruction and vocabulary has always been a central aspect in the second/foreign language curriculum despite strong debates in teaching methods reliant on a structural syllabus. It is also one of the more difficult aspects of language to teach. Ellis (1991) as cited in Hinkel and Fotos (2002:47-51) summarizes the findings of empirical research and the effects of grammar instruction in academic setting as follows:

1. Formal instruction helps to promote more rapid L2 acquisition and also contributes to higher levels of ultimate achievement. (Long, 1988)
2. There are psycholinguistics constraints which govern whether attempts to teach learners specific grammatical rules result in their acquisition. Formal instruction may succeed if the learners have reached a stage in the developmental sequence that enables them to process the target structure. (Pienemann, 1984)
3. Formal instruction directed at relatively simple grammatical rules (such as plural or copula be) will be successful in developing implicit knowledge, as such forms do not require the mastery of complex processing operations. (Pica, 1983; Pienemann, 1984)
4. Formal instruction is effective in developing explicit knowledge of grammatical features.
5. Formal instruction may work best in promoting acquisition when it is linked with opportunities for natural communication. (Spada, 1985)

Universitas Advent Indonesia (UNAI) requires all students who do not major in English Language Teaching to take 12 credits of English language courses during their course of study in UNAI. The curriculum begins with English I where the focus is grammar instruction in the first semester and ends with English for Specific Purposes in the fifth and sixth semesters. Starting from the academic year 2006,2007, however, UNAI has added Remedial English as a requisite for freshmen students who have very poor English proficiency. The English Entrance Exam (E3) administered by the English Department to all freshmen

measures the English proficiency and further determines if a student is required to take Remedial English and English I classes concurrently in the first semester or qualified to register for the grammar instruction course in the English I class only. To qualify for the English I class only without having to take the Remedial English class as well in the first semester, a freshmen needs to reach a minimum score of 350 points from a total of 677 points on the E3 test.

The aim of this study is to compare the difference in improvement in English language proficiency of freshmen who undertook the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently and those who undertook the English I class only during the first semester of the academic year 2008/2009 and to answer the statement of the problem, i.e. "Do freshmen who take the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently in the first semester have better improvement in English language proficiency compared to those who take the English I class only?"

This study involves the freshmen of LTNAI in the academic year 2008/2009. The data gathered is limited to the scores of the English Entrance Exam (E3) which constitute the pretest and posttest. Variables such as different teaching methods, study habits and motivation of the participants, and the length of exposure of participants to various academic and non-academic programs in English on and off campus, are not controlled in the study.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Sample

The participants of this study were LTNAI freshmen between the ages of 17 and 27 who undertook the English I class (grammar instruction course) under the researcher during the first semester of the academic year 2009/2009. There were 73 students who took the English I class. The sample of the research were 44 students, 22 of whom undertook the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently (Group A) and another 22 who undertook the English I class only (Group B).

With respect to participants of Group A, their scores ranged from 297 to 347 while the scores of Group B participants ranged from 350 to 373. The study material of the Remedial English class was communicative grammar lessons which focused on understanding and practicing the use of correct grammar in various aspects of daily life while the study material of the English I class focused on grammar rules and exercises in an academic test setting, specifically the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Instrument of Research

The instrument of research used in this study was the English Entrance Exam (E3) designed by the English Department of LINA I to measure the English proficiency of all freshmen.

The E3 was divided into 3 sections with a total number of 150 multiple choice questions; the first section comprised of 50 questions which focused on listening comprehension skills; the second section consisted of 40 questions which focused on structure and written expression; and the third section contained a total of 60 questions, of which 30 were vocabulary-related problems and another 30 were reading comprehension problems.

The testing time for the E3 was two hours. The same instrument was also used as the posttest instrument to measure the English proficiency of the freshmen after attending the Remedial English and/or English I classes for one semester.

Data Collection

The scores of the freshmen who took the E3 test in August 2008 following their enrollment in LINA I were used as the scores for the pretest. Following this test, all participants had two hours per week for one whole semester of grammar instruction in the English I class. During this time, they undertook tests, quizzes, mid-semester and final semester examinations. However, 22 of the participants also undertook the Remedial English class and thus had an extra two hours per week of English grammar practice and instruction or a total of four hours per week of grammar practice and instruction. A posttest was administered in December 2008, i.e. at the end of the semester after the participants had completed the English I class and/or Remedial English class.

Data Analysis Procedure

The researcher used the paired samples t-test on the gain scores of the participants to determine if there was any significant difference in improvement in the English proficiency of Group A participants with that of Group B participants. The expectation was that Group A participants would have better improvement than Group B participants.

The null hypothesis of this study is that $H_0: \mu_A \leq \mu_B$, where the improvement in English proficiency of those taking the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently (Group A) is less than or equal to that of participants taking the English I class only (Group B). The alternative hypothesis, however is: $H_a: \mu_a > \mu_s$, where the improvement in English proficiency of those taking Remedial English and English I classes concurrently (Group A) is higher than that of participants taking the English I class only (Group B).

Data of Test Results

Table 2

Maximum Score, Minimum Score, Average Mean Score and
Standard Deviation of Group A and Group B

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With respect to the pretest scores, the mean score of Group A was 330.23 with a standard deviation of 14.63 while that of Group B was 363.18 with a standard deviation of 7.88. From the posttest scores, the mean score of Group A was 393.27 with a standard deviation of 25.93 and the mean score of Group B was 405.45 with a standard deviation of 17.96. It should be noted, however, that the difference between the mean score of Groups A and B in the posttest was smaller than that of the pretest although the mean scores of both groups showed an increment.

To determine the increase in proficiency of both groups after studying English grammar in the assigned classes for one semester, the researcher calculated the gain scores of the posttest of both groups. The mean gain of Group A was 0.1803 with a standard deviation of 0.0843 while the mean gain of Group B was 0.1339 with a standard deviation of 0.0649. According to the normalized gain category, the gain scores of both groups are classified as low.

The test for normality of the pretest and posttest data of Groups A and B used the Chi-Square test (χ^2) with the test criteria that if χ^2 -counted $<$ χ^2 -table at a significance level of $\alpha =$

0.05, then the data of the pretest and posttest were normally distributed. Table 3 shows the result of the normality test of pretest data for Groups A and B while Table 4 shows the result of the normality test of posttest data for both groups.

Table 3

Result of Normality Test of Pretest Data for Group A and Group B

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Note: df = degree of freedom

Table 4

Result of Normality Test of Posttest Data for Group A and Group B

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Note: df = degree of freedom

As the pretest and posttest data of both Groups A and B were normally distributed, the researcher further compared the mean gain by using the paired samples t-test to answer the question, "Do freshmen who take the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently in the first semester have better improvement in English proficiency compared to those who take the English I class only?"

The paired samples t-test uses the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ with the hypotheses that if $t_{\text{observed}} \sim t_{\text{table}}$ then H_0 or the null hypothesis is accepted; however, if $t_{\text{observed}} > t_{\text{table}}$, then

H_a or the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Table 5 shows the paired samples statistics while Table 6 shows the result of the paired samples t-test.

Table 5

Paired Samples Statistics

Mean I				
	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Mean
Pair 1	Group A Gain	0.180273	221	0.0842704
		0.0179665		
	Group B Gain	0.133918	22	0.0648658
		0.0138294		

Table 6

Paired Samples T-test

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	
Mean	df	T-		
observed		T-table		
Group A Gain-				
Group B	0.0463545	0.0834795	0.0177979	21
	2.604	1.721		

Pursuant to the foregoing, the mean gain of Group A to Group B has a t_{observed} value of 2.604 at a significance level $\alpha = 0.05$. The t_{observed} value is greater than the t_{table} value of

1.721. Therefore, it may be concluded that the improvement in English language proficiency of Group A is higher than that of Group B.

CONCLUSION

The statistical analysis confirms the research hypothesis that there is a significant difference in English language proficiency achievement between freshmen who take the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently and those who take the English I class only in the first semester, whereby such improvement is significantly higher for freshmen who take the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently.

The above result agrees with prior studies that indicate that learners who receive explicit grammar instruction improve their other language skills as well: Mariano-Hendriks (2007); Yim (1998); Alderson (1993) cited in Yim (1998:35); Shiatsu and Weir (2007); and Rodriguez (2002).

Grammar instruction, then, should remain an integral part of UNAI's curriculum as it assists students in improving their English language proficiency. UNAI should also continue to impose the Remedial English class on freshmen who do not achieve the minimum required score on the English Entrance exam administered at the beginning of the semester. However, there is an indication that the Remedial English class should be taken separately and not concurrently with the English I class due to the result of the normalized gained scores of the freshmen who took the Remedial English and English I classes concurrently in the first semester of the academic year 2008/2009, where a low gain was recorded. Furthermore, considering that the study material of Remedial English is communicative grammar lessons, total focus on communicative grammar learning for one full semester by students who have poor English proficiency would be very beneficial.

Additionally, the researcher also noted that the normalized gain score for freshmen who took the English I class only showed a low gain as well. This may be an indication that the syllabus for this class which focuses on grammar instruction and where direct and explicit grammar instruction is carried out, should be reviewed and adapted as appropriate to further assist students who have a "borderline" understanding of English grammar.

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