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An Investigation of the Improvement Level of Some Iraqi EFL College Learners' Writing Sub-Skills and its Relationships to Computer-Assisted Language Learning of English Syntax

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abstract

The present study aims at investigating the improvement level of three writing sub-skills: language use, organisation and content, and the relationships between this improvement level and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) of English syntax. The population of the study is college students from whom a sample of (103) subjects is randomly chosen from Fourth Stage, English Department, College of Education for Human Sciences, Al Muthanna University in the academic year (2015-2016).

The present study adopted the one-group pretest-posttest experimental design. The duration of the experiment takes six weeks to implement the Computer-Assisted Language Learning of English syntax programme as well as the pre and post administrations of English syntax tests and writing tests. An English syntax Computer-Assisted Language Learning programme is designed by the researcher beforehand representing the material of the study.

The main questions of the research are turned into six hypotheses to be tested. Statistically, the researcher uses the T-test for non-independent samples and the Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation to test the hypotheses. The results of the study refer to the fact that the three investigated writing sub-skills are improved. However, this improvement does not relate to the Computer-Assisted Language Learning of syntax rules.

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Introduction

Hannounah (2008) states that the word 'syntax' is derived from a Greek word meaning setting out together or arrangement. She adds that syntax studies the ways in which words are arranged together in order to make larger units. She also adds that Syntax deals with the study of the structure and ordering of components within a sentence and the constituents of sentences (constituent is a word used to refer to a component part of a sentence). For this reason, syntactic analysis of a sentence is sometimes referred to as 'constituent analysis'.

Syntax can be defined as the scientific study of the rules or patterns governing the way words are combined to form sentences in a language. Other linguists provide various definitions of syntax. For instance, Hasting (2007) argues that syntax is the sentence structure that is arbitrated by formal rules. Monaghan (2008) defined syntax as the disposing of words in their right case, gender, number, person, mood, tense and place in a sentence. Another perspective of the identity of syntax was explained by Moravcsik (2007). She argued that syntax is a comparison between two types of requirements: the requirements of meaning and the requirements of sound form. Each type of requirements entails vastly versatile characteristics.

Being a main branch of grammar, syntax has an explicit significance in evaluating the overall language proficiency. Samani and Lotfi (2011) emphasize the importance of syntax in terms of some notions. They first explain the syntactic process of "merger" which views language to have an infinite number of sentences. This process, they argued, allows words, phrases, and clauses to form sentence structures and leads to the formation of grammatical sentences in all languages. Also, they discuss an important aspect of syntactic structures that is the "empty category" referring to its importance in forming 'wh-questions'. Harlaar (2009) emphasizes the importance of syntax in learning to read referring to many longitudinal studies that concluded that syntactic performance in earl stages of language learning predicts reading performance. Butler (2008) asserts the importance of syntax for reading skill. He states that reading rate decreases at clause boundaries, therefore, such boundaries are important for sound reading. Moreover, he emphasizes the fact that sentences can be parsed without understanding their meaning in cases where unfamiliar words are embedded in a normal syntactic structure. Also, he points out that there is vigorous debate about the detailed operation of syntactic parsing in language comprehension.

Felser and Clahsen (2007) explain how foreign language learners comprehend language in real time. They investigate grammatical processing in foreign and second language learners using experimental psycholinguistic techniques and comparing different populations.

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Among their sample is a group of adult foreign language learners. Syntax is one of the language domains they investigated. The results of their study reveal that foreign language learners relies on non-structural information in parsing ambiguous sentences. In addition, adult foreign language learners appeared to be less efficient in using prosodic cues to interpretation. The researchers justified these results by arguing that foreign language learning processing mechanisms available to mature native speakers may only be partially accessible to language learners. Accordingly, it was stated that the reached results of the study were mere hypotheses that were in need of further testing.

Rider and Sigelman (2012) are against teaching syntax by repetition and imitation whether for adult language or young learners. They argue that these techniques alone cannot count for the learning of syntactic rules. They investigated how humans acquire syntactic knowledge without depending on what they have learned.

Horverak (2012) argues that explicit syntax teaching is highly related to writing practices in meaningful contexts. She made a study aiming at finding out whether knowledge of syntax is a useful tool for Norwegian students to improve their English writing skills. There was a significant improvement in the students' writing during the six weeks she taught them. this experience encouraged her to conduct a research project in order to document that giving clear instruction and teaching grammar are useful strategies when teaching a foreign language.

Locke (2011) presents different points of view about the relationship between explicit syntax teaching and writing enhancement. He believes that the research work that had been done on this topic is characterized by polarized and ideologically driven debates rather than debates that tended to reveal more about the issue itself. Andrews et al. (2005) reaches the result that there was no clear evidence to counter the belief that teaching grammar has virtually no effect on writing skill quality or accuracy of (5 – 16 years) olds. Modern studies in education advocate employing Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL).

In this context, Meurers and Amaral (2012) explores the motivation and prerequisites for successful integration of Intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning (ICALL) tools into recent Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (FLTL) practices. They concentrate on two aspects that they found to be important for effective intelligent computer-assisted language learning (ICALL) systems development and use: (1) "the relationship between activity design and restrictions needed to make natural language processing tractable and reliable", and (2) "pedagogical considerations and the effect of activity design choices on the integration of Intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning (ICALL) systems into Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (FLTL)".

Furthermore, Jones (2010) explains Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) tools and strategies after the Internet age. He discusses how language professionals are moving us down this path and he pointed out how grammar is integrated into task-based activities through Intelligent computer-assisted language learning (ICALL).

Additionally, Martinez et al. (2010) explains an educational tool that they designed to be used in compiler and language processing courses. This tool allows generating and visualizing syntax trees and their construction process. The main advantages of that tool are represented in the fact that it was designed to be as independent from the parser generator as possible. This tool allows students to visualize the behaviour of parsers they developed, and it has an interface designed to easily handle huge syntax tress. Also, Martinez et al. (2010) explains two satisfactory preliminary evaluations from the usability and educational points of view.

Garrett (2008) is very interested in present uses of technology to facilitate the teaching and assessment of second or foreign languages. She explains the changes that had taken place over the last (19) years regarding such selected topics as the relationship between pedagogy, theory and technology, physical infrastructure, efficacy, copyright interests, categories of softwares (e.g. tutorial, authentic materials engagement, communication, uses of technology), and evaluation. Moreover, she explored the most challenging issues encountering Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) scholarship and practice today, that is, new demands in language education, the need to rethink, grammar instruction, online language learning, social computing, language teacher training and professional development, and Computer-Assisted Language Learning research. She concluded that new initiatives are highly needed to promote the use of technology for research on Computer-Assisted Language Learning and for facilitating second or foreign language learning and acquisition, such as support for institutional language centers, streamlining of the work of professional organisations dedicated to Computer-Assisted Language Learning and the establishment of a national Computer-Assisted Language Learning center.

Otto and Pusack (2010) makes a comparison between two main types of Computer-Assisted Language Learning softwares: simple templates software and complex authoring environments software. The simple templates software refers to easy-to-use predefined forms into which content is typed. The complex authoring environments software encompasses flexible but harder-to-use systems, requiring advanced skills and a great deal of time and resources. This research also explains the issue of authoring choices that range from generic tools (productivity software, course management systems, general-purpose authoring systems) to authoring templates and course are authoring (management systems

specifically for foreign languages). In addition, a number of barriers to using Computer-Assisted Language Learning in foreign language teaching are addressed. Otto and Pusack's research is very useful in setting the theoretical framework for handling the present computer-assisted language learning (CALL) syntax programme.

Zapata and Sagarra (2009) investigate the influences of a software workbook on the attitudes of (245) foreign language Spanish learners towards this technological instrument. The treatment process consists of four hours of classroom instruction and one set of online homework per week, during two consecutive semesters. Learners' attitudes towards the software workbook ware measured by means of a survey administered after eight months of exposure to the software workbook. The qualitative data of the survey are compared to quantitative data from two different language assessment tests. The results of these tests indicate a significant increase in grammar scores. Learners' perceptions about the software workbook are positive. There was an emphasis on software advantages in terms of accessibility to the material, user-friendliness, and continuous error feedback. Additionally, most learners praised the usefulness of the software workbook for language learning, particularly in the areas of grammar, vocabulary learning. Despite learners' mostly positive attitudes, the survey also reveals some negative aspects of the use of the software workbook, such as the amount of time required for completing the software exercises. . Sierra et al. (2010) proposes a language-driven approach for the high-level design of interactive applications architected according to the model-view-controller pattern. This approach is especially well-suited for applications that incorporate contents with sophisticated structures, and whose interactive behaviour is driven by these structures. The resulting designs are amenable to support quick prototyping, exploration and early discovery of application features, systematic implementation using standard web-based technologies, and rational collaboration processes between domain experts and developers during production and maintenance. This approach serves as a theoretical framework for designing and implementing the programme used in the present study.

Aims of the Study

The present study aims at investigating the development of some Iraqi EFL learners' writing sub-skills: language use, organisation and content, and the relationship between this development and the Computer-Assisted Language Learning of English syntax.

Significance of the Study

There is a theoretical as well as a practical need for the present research work. Theoretically, this study is an episode in the researcher's endeavor to investigate the influences of using computer-assisted language learning (CALL) on teaching and learning grammar.

The researcher starts in (2016) designing a remedial software Computer-Assisted Language Learning programme to develop EFL learners' grammar (See Naeem and El-Banna, 2015. One of the recommendations of their study in (2015) is to examine the effectiveness of Computer-Assisted Language Learning programmes in general in developing the various language sub-skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Completing this research line, the present study concentrated on exploring the potential relationship between a branch of grammar: syntax and language use, organisation and content: three sub-skills of writing. Therefore, carrying out this study could develop the body of knowledge related to the present topic of interest. Practically, the current study could be beneficial to many education scholars for the results achieved by this study could help language programme designers and course planners identify the basic academic pillars upon which they should build their educational and academic products. In addition, instructors and lecturers who teach writing skills courses could make use of the results of the present study in developing certain writing sub-skills by linking them to syntax. Consequently, EFL learners might utilize the results of this study for achieving progress in their self-development of sub-skills of writing.

Hypotheses of the Study

In order to find out whether learning syntax through computer programmes relates to developing certain writing sub-skills: language use, organisation and content, the following null hypotheses are formulated to be tested:

1-There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores on language use.

2-There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores on organisation.

3-There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores on content.

4-There is no relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English syntax and language use.

5-There is no relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English syntax and organisation.

6-There is no relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English syntax and content.

Methodology

The present study adopts an experimental design: One-Group Pretest-Posttest Design. In this design, the subjects for this study constituted one experimental group that is tested on syntax and writing before the experiment. During the experiment, the group availed itself of the Computer-Assisted Language Learning programme for grammar improvement. After the experiment, the same group is posttested on both syntax and writing once again.

In respect of the study variables, the formal teaching of syntax through a Computer-Assisted Language Learning programme represented the independent variable, whereas writing sub-skills

branching off into language use, organisation and content delineated the dependent variables. These three writing sub-skills are deliberately examined because they are closely related to syntax rules by nature.

Sample of the Study

To carry out the experiment, a study sample of (103) subjects is selected. They are (94) females and (9) males representing all the students listed in the Fourth year, English Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, the academic year (2015-2016). Concerning their psychological and sociological characteristics, the subjects are about (20 to 21) years old. They have studied English for about (11) years. According to the College of Education for Human Sciences, they have been studying two explicit courses on grammar and writing per year: an Essay Course and a Grammar Course. Implicitly, the subjects of the study have been exposed to an implicit teaching of syntactic rules and writing conventions in other courses such as novel, drama and language exercises. The sample is selected intentionally from the Fourth Stage prospective college instructors, for students at this level are supposed to have reached advanced competencies in syntax and writing skills.

Materials and Tools

The computer-assisted language learning programme that is used by the participants of the study to learn English syntax represented the material of this research. Executing this programme takes six weeks during the second semester of the academic year (2015-2016) including the administration of the pretest and the posttest. After the preliminary session in which the pretest had been administered, a session was devoted to an introduction to syntax and the basic terms that relate to it. The programme then tackles three main topics in syntax; each in a separate session: Word Order, Object Placement and Adverb Placement. A concluding session was held to administer the posttest. Word Order, is manipulated in five slides: three slides for the rules, one slide for the exercises and one slide for the model answers. Object Placement is manipulated in eight slides: three slides for the rules, three slides for the exercises and two slides for the model answers. Adverb Placement is manipulated in four slides: two slides for the rules, one slide for the exercises and one slide for the model answers.

In terms of methodology, the Computer-Assisted Language Learning Programme employs a number of teaching methods during the three sessions. Each session includes a warm up phase followed by rule presentation. In the Word Order session, the inductive method and cooperative learning activities are utilized to warm students up. The deductive method is then used to explain the rules. In the Objective Placement session, brainstorming was employed as a warm up activity whereas the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model of audiolingualism was used for rule explanation. Brainstorming was also used in the warm up phase of the Adverb

Placement session. Afterwards, the analytic inductive approach was used to convey the grammatical rules.

Three tools are used for collecting data in the current study: a writing test, a syntax test and the ESL Composition Profile. The first two tools are designed by the researchers in a former study (Naeem and El-Banna, 2015). As for the third tool, it is designed and published by Jacobs et al.'s (1984). The writing test consists of a guided-essay question on 'How to make good use of time?'. A list of eight instructions is given to the participants of the study before administering the test. These instructions include a definite length and structure of the required essay. In respect of the English syntax test, it contains forty questions of a multiple choice format. A special answer sheet is designed by the researcher in order to facilitate the correction process by a typical pierced answer key. The ESL Composition Profile is used as a criterion to evaluate the writing samples submitted by the participants of the study. In this profile, each writing sub-skill is divided into levels of performance. (A) of scores is decided to each performance level according to a list of criteria.

Tests of Administrations and Scoring

A pretest is administered on English syntax and the identified writing sub-skills in 2015. The English syntax test is a computerized test. The time limit of the English syntax test is also computerized in the light of the test optimum time limit identified in a previous study (Naeem and El-Banna, 2015). Accordingly, each item in the English syntax test remained for a half minute on the screen of the computer. The English syntax test includes fort items in a multiple choice format. The scoring of the English syntax test is achieved objectively by an answer key. As for the writing test, it is a guided essay writing test that identified precisely the length and structure of the required composition. A list of eight instructions is delivered to the participants of the study before providing the features of the piece of writing. No time limit was identified; alternatively, the amount of writing is approximately bordered by the required format. Scoring the writing test done by two raters so as to achieve objectively. Both raters carried out their work according to precise criteria included in the ESL Composition Profile designed by Jacobs et al. (1984).

Results

The present study includes six null hypotheses. The first three hypotheses explores the potential development that had occurred in three writing sub-skills: language use, organisation and content after treatment by computer-assisted language learning programme. Meanwhile, the last three hypotheses examines the relationship between English syntax and the three examined writing sub-skills. For the first three hypotheses, the aim is to measure the difference between the pretest and the posttest scores on the three investigated writing sub-skills so as to determine whether an improvement had taken place on any of the writing sub-skills. Therefore,

the T-Test for non-independent samples is employed (Spatz, 2012). Since the objective of the of the last three hypotheses is to discover effective relationships between the variables under investigation, Karl Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Raw Score Formula (Sheskin, 2008) is used to analyse the achieved data statistically.

Hypothesis (1)

There is no significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores on Language Use.

Adopting the formula the T-Test for non-independent samples, the following results were achieved:

Table (1): T-Test for Language Use

The Mean of the Differences	The Sum of the Difference Between the Scores	The Sum of the Squared Difference Scores	*N*	*t*	*df*
1.056	108	303.14	102	6.20 *	104

Significant at the (0.01) level (The critical value of *t* is 2.62)

The achieved results refers to the fact that the calculated value of *t* equals (6.20). this value is greater than the critical value at the (0.01) level of significance with a degree of freedom of (102) which equals (2.62). Accordingly, it is deduced that the first hypothesis which supports that there is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores on Language Use is refused.

Hypothesis (2)

There is no significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores on Organisation.

This hypothesis is tested statistically using the T-Test fo non-independent samples. This process renders the following values:

Table (2): T-Test for Organisation

The Mean of the Differences	The Sum of the Difference Between the Scores	The Sum of the Squared Difference Scores	*N*	*t*	*df*
0.843	83	260.01	101	5.346 *	102

Significant at the (0.01) level (The critical value of *t* is 2.61)

The statistical analysis of data reveals that the calculated t is (5.346 *). After checking the statistical tables, it is found that this calculated value is greater than the critical one that equals (2.61) at the level of (0.01) which shows significance when the degree of freedom is (102). To analyse these results, one can conclude that the second hypothesis that proposed that there is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores on organisation is refused, and an alternative (One) is accepted.

Hypothesis (3)

There is no significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores on Content.

The third writing sub-skill: Content, is tested by this hypothesis following the same technique used with the first two hypotheses. The following table presents the achieved results after the statistical analysis of data:

Table (3): T-Test for Content

The Mean of the Differences	The Sum of the Difference Between the Scores	The Sum of the Squared Difference Scores	*N*	*t*	*df*
2.537	260.6	1316.2	102	7.356	102

Significant at the (0.01) level (The critical value of *t* is 2. 62)

Utilizing the T-Test for non-independent samples, the calculated t is (7.356). This value is found to be greater than the critical one that equals (2.63) at the (0.01) level of significance with a degree of freedom is (102). Consequently, the third null hypothesis which suggests that there is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores on Content is refused, and an alternative (One) is accepted.

Hypothesis (4)

There is no relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English syntax and language use.

Depending on the results achieved by the statistical analysis of Hypothesis (1), the researcher formulates Hypothesis (4) so as to investigate the relationship between computer-assisted language learning of English syntax and language use. Therefore, Karl Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Raw Score Formula is put into effect to test this hypothesis. The following results are achieved:

Table (4): Correlation Coefficient Between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English Syntax and Language Use

N	ΣX	ΣY	ΣX²	ΣY²	ΣXY	r
102	3186	710	99442	5072	22062	0.003

The statistical analysis of data revealed that the Correlation Coefficient *r* was very closer to zero. According to the estimates of Correlation Coefficients set by Jackson (2012), the value of *r* in this analysis reveals an almost no relationship between the variables. Thus, Hypothesis (4) that suggested there is no relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English syntax and language use is accepted.

Hypothesis (5)

There is no relationship between computer-assisted language learning (CALL) English syntax and organisation.

Hypothesis (5) investigates the relationship between teaching English

syntax through computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and the improvement of the writing organisation sub-skill. The same statistical analysis technique used in Hypothesis (4) is adopted in Hypothesis (5). The following results are achieved:

Table (5): Correlation Coefficient Between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English Syntax and Organisation

N	ΣX	ΣY	ΣX²	ΣY²	ΣXY	r
101	3267	716	99552	5266	22433	0.002

The results revealed that the Correlation Coefficient r was very closer to zero. This analytical value of r indicates an almost no relationship between the variables. Hence, the fifth null hypothesis that proposed there is no relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English syntax and organisation is accepted.

Hypothesis (6)

There is no relationship between computer-assisted language learning (CALL) English syntax and content.

Expanding the significance of the results achieved by testing null Hypothesis (3), the present hypothesis tried to find out whether there was a relationship between the improvement of content as a writing sub-skill and the formal teaching of English syntax using Computer-Assisted Language Learning. To achieve this objective, the Correlation Coefficient was calculated:

Table (6): Correlation Coefficient Between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English Syntax and Content

N	ΣX	ΣY	ΣX²	ΣY²	ΣXY	r
102	3187	1051	99552	11633	32675	0.123

The results achieved by the statistical analysis reveals that the Correlation Coefficient *r* was less than (0.29). According to the estimates of Correlation Coefficient set by Jackson (2012), this analytical value indicates a weak relationship between the variables. Accordingly, the sixth null hypothesis that suggested there is no relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning English syntax and content is partially accepted.

Conclusion

The present study is an attempt to investigate the improvement of three writing sub-skills: language use, organisation and content and the relationship between computer-assisted language learning (CALL) of English syntax and this improvement. The results of the study reveal the fact that although there is an improvement in English college learners' language use, organisation and content of writing, no relationship between this improvement and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) of English syntax is explored. More researches should be done in this area of interest so as to ascertain the actual reasons behind learners' failure in transferring the theoretical knowledge they attain in one linguistic skill to another.

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إن الاسئلة الرئيسية للبحث كانت قد ظهرت في شكل ست فرضيات من أجل اخضاعها للاختبار. إحصائيا، فأن الباحث قد استخدم اختبار النماذج الغير مستقبل T-Test و اختبار ارتباط بيرسون من اجل اختبار الفرضيات. لقد أشارت نتائج الدراسية إلى أن المهارات الفرعية الثلاث للكتابة الخاضعة للبحث قد تحسنّت مع أن هذا التحسّن لم يرتبط مع ببرنامج تعلّم اللغة بمساندة الحاسوب لعلم التراكيب الإنكليزيّة.

هيلاري لتعكس الصفات الإيجابية لها و السلبية للغير ، وبالتالي فإنه يساعدها في التعبير عن إيديولوجيتها.

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المستخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى البحث في مستوى تحسّن ثلاث مهارات فرعيّة في الكتابة: استخدام اللغة، التنظيم و المحتوى، و العلاقة بين مستوى التحسن هذا و تعلّم اللغة بمساندة الحاسوب لعلم التراكيب الإنكليزيّة. إن مجتمع الدراسة هو الطلبة الجامعيون و منهم تم عشوائيّا اختيار عيّنة الدراسة و التي تألّفت من (103) مشترك من طلبة المرحلة الرابعة، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كليّة التربية للعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة المثنى.

إن الدراسة الحاليّة قد تبنّت التصميم التجريبي للمجموعة الواحدة للاختبار القبلي و الاختبار البعدي، و قد استغرقت فترة التجربة ستة اسابيع من أجل إكمال برنامج تعلّم اللغة بمساندة الحاسوب لعلم التراكيب الإنكليزيّة بالإضافة إلى اجراءات اختبارات علم التراكيب الإنكليزية و اختبارات الكتابة، والذي كان قد صمّم من قبل الباحث مسبقا ليمثل مادة الدراسة الحاليّة.