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An appraisal of recurring grammar errors in Saudi premedical EFL learners' academic writing

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Abstract: The present research is a qualitative study investigating a potential relationship between explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners and the development of their writing skill. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach discourages explicit teaching of grammar at all levels as the theoretical premise in the approach is that learners are capable of imbibing grammar rules implicit in communication. However, adult EFL learners, taught English through CLT as an approach, are observed to make grammar errors in their writing, though they made progress in spoken English. In a qualitative study conducted with premedical students at a university in Saudi Arabia, the researchers find that explicit teaching of a few difficult-to-grasp grammar rules is required to improve learners' writing skill since academic writing requires an advanced knowledge of grammar. A comparative analysis of learners' writing samples and spoken English transcriptions showed that learners made numerous grammatical errors in their writings while the same group of learners made satisfactory progress in oral communication in English, despite making a few accent errors. The findings of the present research suggest that concerned EFL teachers need to make accommodations for grammar within communicative approach to explain certain grammar points explicitly, especially to adult learners, to take care of their writing skill, along with developing their communicative skills.

Keywords: communicative language teaching; English for medical studies; English for specific purpose; explicit grammar teaching; Saudi EFL environment; writing skill

1. Introduction

Writing appears to be a weak spot in Saudi EFL learners' language learning skills. Dexterity in the writing skill is extremely important for foreign language learners since, if they are mostly confined to their native land, which is likely the case for a large number of EFL learners, most of their communication in the foreign language in question will be in written form. Excellence in writing skill depends upon learners' mastery over the most significant component of sentence construction, i.e., grammar. In other words, in spoken language, a few slips here and there are pardonable, but as far as writing is concerned, even the slightest error of grammar is unforgivable there. For example, prospective job applicants hardly stand a chance to get interview letters if their cover letters or resumés display grammatical errors, or even punctuation errors. However, in present-day English teaching-learning scenario where language teaching is largely communication focussed, explicit grammar teaching is virtually scoffed at,

citing various reasons, such as grammar lessons being boring and tedious to learners draining their interest in language learning (Vega, 2021), grammar being too complex to be taught (Prabhu, 1987), grammar can only be acquired unconsciously (Krashen, 1982), and so on. The result of this teaching approach is that EFL learners being taught in non-native environments do succeed in developing speaking and listening skills in the target language, such as English, but quite often they ignore the development of writing and reading skills adequately since good writing relies on learners' knowledge of sentence construction. A preliminary examination of premedical students' writing samples at the researchers' university showed that learners made numerous grammatical errors even in small writeups, and there was a pattern in their errors, that is, mostly the errors could be categorized into six broad types—voice errors, subject-verb agreement errors, parts of speech errors, capitalization errors, article errors, and totally confusing syntax. Thus, keeping in mind the prevalent teaching approach and the lack of development in learners' writing skill, the question arises: is there a relationship between communicative language teaching as an approach and development of learners' writing skill?

A preliminary investigation of Saudi premedical EFL learners' writing samples reveals that the learners are able to communicate their ideas in English effectively, orally as well as in writing, but their written English is error-ridden. The number of students who fail to frame two consecutive sentences in English correctly, free of grammatical errors, is very high. The problem draws the researchers' introspection on the efficacy of the prevalent teaching approach at the university, i.e., communicative language teaching, to teach English using authentic materials but discouraging explicit teaching of grammar.

Communication-oriented EFL teaching approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching, stress upon teaching the learners how to communicate in the target language, and the goal of language classes in these approaches is to bring the students to the level where they can manage to grasp authentic input (Krashen, 2013), so that, from that level students can continue to make progress on their own. A fallout of the theory is that explicit grammar teaching has been sidelined in favour of implicit teaching so that communication is not hindered and the interest of learners in the learning process is maintained. However, the experience of the researchers with students at the university shows that though the communicative approach brings some success to adult EFL learners' communicative competence, their writing skill lacks development.

1.1. Research problem

The preliminary investigation of the writing samples of Saudi premedical EFL learners revealed that the learners commit numerous errors, mainly pertaining to grammar, in their writings. It appears that adult EFL learners fail to imbibe grammar rules implicit in communicative teaching approach tasks. The researchers surmise that the errors in learners' writings may be attributed to lack of explicit instructions in grammar to them since, compared to speech, writing depends more heavily upon advanced grammar knowledge. The potential relationship between explicit grammar instruction and writing skill development of adult EFL learners has been comparatively less explored, especially in recent studies in the area of foreign/second

language teaching/learning research, and therefore, there exists a research gap which the present study is a modest attempt to fill.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The primary objective of the present study is to explore the potential relationship between explicit grammar instruction and writing skill development of adult EFL learners at a Saudi university. The secondary, and a corollary to the primary, objective of the study is to examine a probable pattern in the recurring grammatical errors in Saudi EFL learners' academic writing. In the process of the study, Communicative Language Teaching theory will be closely reviewed, as the theory does not support explicit teaching of grammar to adult learners. Based on the research findings, the research objectives may be expanded to make an argument for inclusion of explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL learners.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Communicative language teaching

The conceptual foundations of CLT (Communicative language teaching) were laid down by the linguists Michael Halliday and Dell Hymes in 1970s, although in 1960s Noam Chomsky's ideas on competence, performance, and learners' innate grammar also helped shape the concepts leading to CLT theory (Littlewood, 1981). CLT stresses more upon developing communicative competence of learners and less upon their mastering the language structures (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, CLT has been prevalently employed as an approach to teach English for more than two decades (Alharbi, 2022). The main reason for the preference for CLT in Saudi Arabia is to enhance the communicative competence of learners, with particular emphasis on university students' communicative competence, to enable them to cope with the demands of the world language. Communicative competence may be defined as the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1997). Keeping in view the definition of communicative competence, the CLT as an approach to teach English is oriented towards enhancing learners' oral expressions in English dealing with their day-to-day communication needs. Teachers are instructed to use authentic materials, such as catalogues, sales reports, and so on, involving learners more in oral communication solving real-life situations. Explicit teaching of grammar is discouraged in the approach on the premise that learners imbibe grammar rules implicit in the communication tasks.

According to Krashen (2013), one of the most outspoken proponents of communicative approach, grammar should not be taught explicitly in second language classrooms. Krashen's belief is that explicit teaching of grammar does not help learners learn the second language, rather, if learners are exposed to the language that is comprehensible and use the language in a meaningful way, they will learn it and acquire communicative competence in it (Taylor, 1986; Wu, 2008; Zeng, 2004). However, Krashen does not rule out the advantages of teaching grammar, even explicitly, to adult learners (Krashen, 2013), and he also encourages teachers to leave grammar for students' homework through story-telling and reading (Krashen, 2013).

2.2. CLT and explicit teaching of grammar

The researchers' observation is that since adult EFL learners in non-native environments are not taught grammar explicitly, their writing skill suffers because writing skill heavily relies upon grammar knowledge. This is a serious academic issue, as syntactical errors in written documents are totally unacceptable. The issue draws strong criticism of communicative teaching approaches, such as CLT, which argue for the exclusion of explicit treatment of grammar in language classes (Vega, 2021). EFL teachers in non-native environments indirectly follow these instructions since the books prescribed in their institutions do not include explicit grammar lessons, rather the lessons in these books are based on authentic materials, such as ads, tickets, time-tables, flyers, catalogues, manuals, and so on. The suggestion is that explicit grammar instructions are not only boring to learners but also counterproductive (Krashen, 1982, 2013; Prabhu, 1987; Richards and Rodgers, 2014), whereas learners easily imbibe the grammatical forms embedded in authentic materials presented in a natural way.

Prabhu (1987) argues that grammar is too complex to be taught, therefore, grammar should not be included in language curricula. Krashen's (1982) claim is that grammar can only be acquired unconsciously through exposure to the target language, and that the consequences of teaching "hard" grammar rules are bad. Both these scholars believe that special attention should be given to the meaning, not to form. However, observational research in CLT classrooms, particularly those in which language form is sidelined in favour of meaning and implied grammar, shows that more often than not students fail to reach satisfactory levels of linguistic development and accuracy in many aspects of language (Harley and Swain, 1984; Pouresmaeil and Vali, 2023; Spada and Lightbown, 1989; VanPatten, 1990, 1996). If the findings from experimental research studies are of any indication, they say that the inclusion of form-focused instruction improves students' linguistic knowledge which they can use to hone language skills (Norris and Ortega, 2000; Spada, 1997). At the same time, some researchers (Truscott, 1996, 1999) argue that corrective feedback, in any form, must be rejected.

However, real-life teaching experiments using the communicative approach show that learners do pick general communicative forms in the target language and do manage with the spoken form of the language, but their writing skills hardly improve since they generally neglect learning correct grammar. Swan (1985) was the first scholar to point out this discrepancy in CLT approach, criticizing the approach for prioritizing 'function' (communication) over 'structure' (grammar) because such a prioritizing leaves serious gaps in learners' knowledge.

Criticism of CLT, based on similar concerns, comes from other prominent scholars, too. Brown (2000), for example, approves CLT as an approach but also suggests that for adult learners some grammar rules do prove beneficial in a communicative language course. His suggestions to teachers are that there is no need to go too deep into the structural terms, but they must rely on brief explanations on grammar problems. Lightbown and Spada (1990) are also concerned about loss of grammar knowledge among EFL learners for the overemphasis on communication. The researchers emphasize that language learners have to focus on form, otherwise

they will never improve their writing riddled with incorrect language structures. Long's (1991, 1998) point of view is also in line with the scholars cited above that explicit grammar instruction is required in language classes to enhance students' language proficiency. A large number of EFL learners from non-native environments seek higher education in English-speaking countries. For them it is essential to have a good command over English grammar even for admission in universities (Savage et al., 2010). These learners from non-native backgrounds will face difficulties in understanding the meaning of lectures, as well as in reading and writing academic articles, if they are weak in grammar (Savage et al., 2010). According to Crystal (2004), one can use the language in a meaningful way only if one is acutely aware of the working of grammar in the language. Even to grasp the differences in dialects in a language like English and to know of its varieties, it is essential to know its grammar (Crystal, 2004).

Thus, language educationists have begun arguing for the inclusion of explicit explanation of grammar rules to EFL learners. For instance, Vega (2021) argues for explicit as well as implicit teaching of grammar in language courses. The native speakers of English, any human language for that matter, do not need explicit instructions in grammar to acquire the language. Following that observation, some language learning theorists came up with the view that the same strategy can work equally well with second language learning, too. However, research in this area has shown that this particular view of language learning is flawed, especially as regards mastering the writing skill. In the absence of explicit instructions in fundamental syntactic structures in the foreign/second language, learners fail to learn proper sentence construction.

In Saudi Arabian academic contexts, it was Batawi (2006) who is credited to be the first researcher to investigate the challenges of CLT in Saudi Arabia classrooms. The other studies, for example, Abahussain (2016), Al Asmari (2015), Alharbi (2022), Almohideb (2019), and Farooq (2015) followed the suit. In Saudi Arabia, research studies on CLT are focussed not on its failure to accommodate explicit grammar teaching with language functions but on other structural challenges the teachers face in class, such as policy-related challenges like the exam system, overcrowded classes, lack of facilities to use CLT, and lack of in-house training programs for teachers (Alharbi, 2022). There are student-related challenges as well, such as low-level proficiency of students, their passive learning style, lack of motivation among learners to learn the target language, learner conformity to CLT (Wajid and Saleem, 2017), and lack of motivation to be paired with weaker peers during communicative activities (Alharbi, 2018; Alharbi, 2022).

So, in the backdrop of previous studies on explicit grammar instruction to EFL learners, the question is: should a teacher hope that adult learners in non-native EFL environments will acquire grammar forms in the long run, or is it better to teach them grammar explicitly so that they can learn to write better English? The present research showcases the impact of avoiding explicit grammar instructions to EFL learners in non-native environments, such as Saudi Arabian universities, where learners do develop the competence to present their ideas in English, but their written English has several syntactical errors, and sometimes they even produce absurd or meaningless sentences.

3. Research hypothesis

A review of related research literature and the insights from the preliminary investigation of students' writing samples has helped the researchers to formulate a working hypothesis that there is a potential relationship between explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and development of their writing skill.

3.1. Research questions

To test the efficacy of the stated working hypothesis, the present study has been designed to answer the following research questions:

- RQ 1: Does there exist a relationship between explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and development of their writing skill?
- RQ 2: Does there exist a pattern in the recurring grammatical errors in adult Saudi EFL learners' academic writing?
- RQ 3: What inferences can be drawn from the pattern, if there is found any, in the grammatical errors in adult Saudi EFL learners' academic writing?

3.2. Theoretical framework

A full-fledged contemporary theory making a strong case for explicit grammar teaching to adult EFL learners to develop their writing skill has not been developed as such. However, several researchers (e.g., Brown, 2000; Crystal, 2004; Frøisland et al., 2023; etc.) have argued for the inclusion of explicit grammar instruction in EFL courses for the development of oral as well as writing proficiency of adult learners. Insights from these researchers have been employed as theoretical guidelines to inform the process of the present research. At the same time, references have been made to the tenets of communicative approach to language teaching to make inferences about the potential relationship between explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and development of their writing skill, particularly Stephen Krashen's (1981, 2013) views on teaching of grammar in ESL classes, and Noam Chomsky's (1972, 1975) emphasis on the idea that learners' innate grammar competence is sufficient to learn a new language, so teaching of grammar explicitly is not required.

4. Research methodology

The present research is primarily a qualitative study; numerical figures are used occasionally only to support the qualitative analysis and interpretive comments. The research involves analysis of errors reported in participants' writing and speech and making inferences about a potential relationship between lack of explicit grammar instruction and weak development of participants' writing skill as reported in the error analysis. The study also involves a review of the tenets of CLT and making qualitative statements on the teaching approach.

4.1. Research design

The present research is designed to examine if there is a potential relationship between explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and development of their writing skill. The design of the research is based on

qualitative research approach that inductive inferences can be made from a regular pattern, especially to draw conclusions based on evidence and reasoning. To that end, the research design involves the following steps:

- Analysing error in participants' writing and speech
- Comparing the errors reported in participants' writing and speech
- Finding a pattern, if any, in the errors reported in participants' writing
- Making inferences about a potential relationship between participant's writing skill and explicit grammar instruction

If a pattern is noted in the errors reported in participant's writing samples, further associations between the error pattern and the potential reasons behind the errors may also be made.

4.2. Participants

Participants in the present study were thirty premedical undergraduate university students in the class who were enrolled to learn English in a mandatory subject of study, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for three trimesters. The present study was conducted in Trimester 2 (ELIH 102). These students join university after learning English for six, or more, years at senior secondary school level. All the participants were male students in the age group of 18 to 20 years. All the students come from Arabic medium schools where English learning begins in class six and English is taught as one of the subjects of study. The level of their proficiency in English is rather moderate since they hardly get a chance to use English, written or spoken, outside the class.

4.3. Materials

Learners' writing test samples were used as materials for writing data collection, while their speech samples were used as data in spoken English. For a trimester, students' writing test notes were collected and analysed for grammar errors. For the spoken English data, students were given medicine-related topics to speak for five minutes, and their speeches were recorded electronically in a soundproof room and transcribed on paper for error analysis. For analytical purposes, a review of literature on the critical analysis of the principles of communicative language teaching theory and practice was also used as a resource material.

4.4. Data analysis

Error analysis has been used as the method of analysis for the collected data. A comparative study also has been carried out to compare and contrast the grammar errors in the writing and speech samples analysed. Qualitative, inductive inferences have been made based on the observed pattern of errors, evidence, and reasoning based on regularity of grammar errors.

5. Data collection and analysis

5.1. Writing tests data

The data collected from writing samples were analysed grammatically. Grammar

errors identified in students' writings can be grouped into six categories, as follows:

- Voice errors
- Subject (number)-Verb agreement errors
- Parts of speech errors
- Article use errors
- Capitalization errors
- Other syntactic errors

5.1.1. Voice errors

Analysis shows that 19 out of 30 participants (i.e., 63%) made errors in constructing sentences in English using passive voice. The major errors were found to be related to change of active voice verbs—the finite form of the verb in the active voice is either left unchanged or found missing. A few examples taken from students' writings and given in **Table 1** below, will make the point clear. Suggested expressions to replace the italicized expression in participants' writing are what the grammatically correct forms should have been:

Table 1. Voice errors.

Students' writing	Suggested expressions
<i>is causes...</i>	is caused
diabetes type 2 <i>caused</i> by a wrong lifestyle...	is caused by
<i>can be managing...</i>	can be managed
millions of humans around the <i>affected</i> by these...	are affected
this <i>also known as...</i>	is also known as
symptoms <i>can be reduce...</i>	can be reduced
type 1 <i>is causes</i> obesity...	is caused by
type 2 <i>may treated</i> with...	may be treated
<i>not yet discover any treatment...</i>	any treatment is not yet discovered
they <i>can treated</i> with insulin...	can be treated
you <i>cannot treated</i> with insulin pump...	cannot be treated
where <i>it caused</i> by overweight...	it is caused by

5.1.2. Number agreement errors

Number agreement is found to be a common error. 17 out of 30 (roughly 57%) students were found to commit subject-verb agreement or other singular-plural errors. Sample sentences from students' writing and suggested expressions are listed in **Table 2** below.

Table 2. Number agreement errors.

Students' writing	Suggested expressions
immunity cells <i>attacks</i> ...	attack
diabetes 1 and 2 <i>shares</i> ...	share
symptoms <i>happens</i> quickly ...	happen
that is of two <i>kind</i> ...	kinds
they both <i>causes</i> repetitive urination ...	cause

Table 2. (Continued).

Students' writing	Suggested expressions
symptoms of type 1 and 2 <i>is</i> different ...	are
causes for this disease <i>is</i> ...	are
<i>have a similarities</i> and differences ...	have similarities
all these causes <i>affects</i> metabolism ...	affect
both <i>have it</i> own similarities ...	their
getting <i>near a radioactive waves</i> ...	near radioactive waves
they <i>have a lots of</i> similarities ...	a lot of
both of them <i>have a common symptoms</i> ...	common symptoms
symptoms of type 2 <i>doesn't</i> appear early ...	don't
<i>A differences between this</i> symptoms is ...	difference between these

5.1.3. Parts of speech errors

Again, 14 out of 30 (roughly 47%) students were identified using wrong parts of speech in their construction in English, as exemplified in **Table 3** below.

Table 3. Parts of speech errors.

Students' writing	Suggested expressions
<i>have similar</i> and differences in causes ...	similarities
being <i>unactive</i> ...	inactive
<i>lossing</i> weight ...	losing
we can <i>managing</i> these diseases ...	manage
<i>advice</i> patients ...	advise
diabetes <i>effect</i> the pancreas in a negative way ...	affect
have a great <i>affect</i> ...	effect
<i>similar</i> and differences in ...	similarities
to <i>developed</i> type 1 ...	develop
have <i>similarities</i> things ...	similar
feeling tired more than <i>usually</i> ...	usual
maybe he <i>loss</i> some weight ...	loses
diseases can <i>treatment</i> by medication ...	be treated
what is the <i>different</i> between ...	difference

5.1.4. Article use errors

Some students were found to make errors in the use of articles. Either the article was not used where it was required, or the article used was incorrect in the context. Suggested expressions are what the grammatically correct form should have been. A few examples are given in **Table 4** below.

Table 4. Article use errors.

Students' writing	Suggested expressions
diabetes <i>is chronic health condition</i> ...	is <i>a</i> chronic health condition
that <i>have a too much sugar</i> ...	that have too much sugar
have <i>a differences</i> in causes and symptoms ...	differences
need to take <i>a insulin hormone</i> ...	take insulin hormone
<i>The diabetes is chronic condition</i> ...	Diabetes is a chronic condition

5.1.5. Capitalization errors

Capitalization is a very common issue with almost all the students. The writing samples revealed that except the opening sentence in the paragraph, most of the students began the subsequent sentences with small letters, rarely with a capital letter.

5.1.6. Other syntactic errors: Confused sentence structures

The writing samples showed that 15 (50%) students made such syntactic errors that it was difficult to make heads or tails of the meaning. Only one such sentence from each of these students is being included in **Table 5** below. Suggested expressions are what the researchers deciphered as the intended meanings.

Table 5. Confused sentence structures.

Students' writing	Suggested expressions
It's critical recognized the warning signs ...	It's recognized that the critical warning signs ...
because of increase the ratio of sugar ...	because of increase in the ratio of sugar ...
type 2 can get it among adult ...	type 2 can occur in adult ...
differences include in causes ...	differences between causes ...
same symptoms make the difficult ...	same symptoms make it difficult ...
that is mean more glucose ...	that means more glucose ...
the disease is not have ...	the disease does not have ...
but they can also differences ...	but they can also differ ...
over a long period time ...	over a long period of time ...
might caused death if you don't treatment ...	might cause death if you don't get treatment ...
there also lots of differences ...	there are also lots of differences ...
treatments should be help a lot ...	treatments should help a lot ...
aim to eradicated them ...	aim to eradicate them ...
should be save you from ...	may save you from ...
type 2 diabetes are causes by high BP ...	type 2 diabetes is caused by high BP

5.2. Spoken English data

To collect spoken English data, participants were given a few medicine-related topics to express their opinions on. Each participant was given five minutes to speak and another two minutes to respond to questions from the audience. The entire session of each participant's presentation session was recorded and then transcribed on paper. The major errors noted in participants' speech were subject-agreement errors or preposition use errors, such as:

- There are many task that give the disease to body ...
- And how prevent the diseases ...
- Eczema is the diseases that ...
- Dead skin cells is the system that ...

Other errors reported in participants' writing samples, such as voice errors, parts of speech errors, article use errors and other syntactic errors noted in participants' writing were not reported in their speech.

6. Results

The phrases, cited in Section 5 (Data Collection and Analysis) above in each of the six categories, are taken from students' writings collected from Writing Quiz 2 in the second trimester (ELIH 102) of a year-long English training programme, and the semester-end test. Out of thirty students in the class, not a single student turned in a writing assignment or test free of one or the other grammar errors cited above. On the other hand, the classroom observation over the same trimester showed that all the thirty students displayed a remarkable progress in their oral communication and use of English to present their ideas on given topics, despite a few errors in their pronunciation and articulation. The phrases cited with errors in the sub-section 5.2 Spoken English Data are from the speeches of four different participants. Similar kinds of errors were noted in other participants' speeches as well.

A comparative study of errors reported in participants' writing and speeches shows that

- (i) writing errors are grammatically more diverse and more prominent in nature, and
- (ii) there is a pattern in participants' errors both in writing and speech.

The pattern in writing errors is observed in (a) voice, and (b) subject-verb agreement.

Voice error pattern concerns auxiliary use and past participle use, while the subject-verb agreement error pattern concerns number agreement.

Other grammar errors in the writings are random in nature, without any predictable pattern, while other observable speech errors are not grammatical but pronunciation and accent errors.

7. Discussion

A cursory glance at the results obtained from analysis of participants' writing assignments, tests, and spoken English data shows that participants are making grave errors of grammar in their writings. The data analysis brings forth two points that may be considered as novel findings of the present study, which are rarely discussed in the existing literature the researchers reviewed before beginning the present research. One, concentration of grammar errors is observed more in participants writings than in their spoken English. Two, participants' writing errors are more pronounced in sentence formation in the passive voice.

The research findings may be cited to support the researchers' working hypothesis that there is a potential relationship between explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and development of their writing skill. The present argument is based on two observations. First, participants made more, and

diverse, errors in their writing than in their spoken English. The reasoning of researchers is that participants attained a fairly good communicative fluency in English as they are taught communicative English using CLT as an approach. However, the participants failed to develop an equally satisfactory fluency in writing since lack of explicit grammar instruction added to their weakness in grasping certain grammar rules. Compared to fluency in spoken English, fluency in writing essentially needs fairly advanced understanding of the nuanced points in grammar. Second, the grammar errors in writing are such that they cannot be rectified by adult EFL learners unless explained to them in detail citing the relevant grammar rules and scaffolded with sufficient example sentences. The grammar rules that are flouted by participants in their writings cannot be imbibed from the common communicative tasks, especially by adult learners who learn English in non-native environments where their peers make the same kind of errors as they themselves do, and for whom there are no chances to use, particularly written English, outside the classroom. The communicative atmosphere created in language classes is commonly artificial. Although it helps build oral fluency, yet as teachers are discouraged from explicitly explaining grammar rules, and also from correcting the learners directly if they make errors, it results, as it appears from data analysis, in fossilization of grammar errors that are reflected in participants' writing samples. In comparison, the learners display a good development of communicative skills in English, despite making a few pronunciation and articulation errors, which is quite natural for EFL learners.

The findings from the study concerning participants making more errors in writing than in spoken English, and that too in passive formation in a major way, are significant as they support the researchers' case in favour of explicit grammar teaching to adult EFL learners. To begin with, there are two fundamental differences between writing and spoken language. One, good academic writing skill in any language needs more advanced grammar knowledge than does the spoken language, and to that end, adult EFL learners require explicit explanation on difficult and nuanced grammar points. Two, participants in the present study are found to make more errors in passive-voice sentence construction, which is also a feature more prominently observed in writing than in speech. An analysis of participants' transcribed speech shows that they rarely used passive constructions in spoken English. Obviously, if learners rarely use passives in speech, their spoken English fluency would look flawless, despite there being a few errors that may go unnoticed in connected speech. However, errors in academic and formal writing draw readers' instant attention, and therefore, need to be corrected by way of explicit explanation of nuanced points of grammar.

The findings from the present study cannot be corroborated by citing results from other, similar kind of, studies since, for lack of similar studies in the existing literature — either in Saudi Arabian academic contexts or in other non-native EFL learning environments — the present research findings cannot be reviewed in a comparative light. However, a large number of language-teaching researchers (e.g., Brown, 2000; Crystal, 2004; Frøisland et al., 2023; etc., to cite only a few) favour explicit teaching of grammar, particularly to adult EFL learners to improve their writing skill.

8. Conclusion

8.1. The findings

In conclusion, the findings of the present study can be summed up as answers to the three research questions. First, there does exist a relationship between explicit grammar instruction to adult EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and development of their writing skill. Based on the results obtained from data analysis, the researchers surmise that the writing skill of adult EFL learners, particularly in Saudi Arabian university contexts, will improve if certain grammar points are explained to them explicitly. The students' needs may differ from place to place, and so, the concerned teachers will be better judges to decide what points of grammar to be incorporated for explicit explanation within the communicative approach.

Second, there does exist a pattern in the recurring grammatical errors in adult Saudi EFL learners' academic writings as the participants made more errors in passive sentence construction, followed by subject-verb agreement errors. However, this pattern may be specific to the participants in the present study, and therefore, requires further research at other Saudi universities and with a larger student population, including female students as well.

Third, two inferences can be drawn from the error pattern observed in the grammatical errors in adult Saudi EFL learners' academic writing. One, learners are not very clear with the use of auxiliary verbs, particularly when auxiliaries undergo a change in passive constructions. Two, learners are also not very clear on the number aspect of the subject and its conjugational verb.

The communicative language teaching approach helps learners develop communicative language skills, i.e., listening and speaking, as the researchers have observed in their classes. However, since academic writing requires a higher level of grammatical accuracy compared to spoken English, and therefore, needs a better understanding of grammar nuances, teachers of English in EFL environments need to accommodate explicit grammar instruction, especially on the grammar points they might observe as weak in their respective students, such as passive voice constructions, within the communicative approach for oral fluency development, to make enough scope for students' writing skill development as well. The research findings suggest that if grammar errors are ignored for long, they become fossilized errors and the learners continue making the same kind of errors in their writings.

8.2. Limitations of the present study

The researchers made efforts to make the present study as comprehensive as possible, nevertheless, a few points remained unaddressed owing to some limitations. First, for lack of enough resources and time, the study has been limited to a small number of participants and conclusions have been drawn from their sample writings. Second, the study was limited to only male students as participants because of gender segregation in educational institutes in Saudi Arabia. If writing samples from participants from both genders are collected and analysed, the research may come up with slightly different results. However, gender segregation has been a limiting factor for the present study.

8.3. Further recommendations

Further studies in the same area of research, on a similar topic, may test the findings from the present study for their wider applications, either in Saudi Arabian contexts or in other non-native EFL teaching environments. Further studies may come up with different findings as well.

There are also potentials for further studies involving other aspects of grammar that affect EFL learners' writings. Researchers can also explore if female EFL learners' writings display the similar patterns of grammar errors in their writings as seen in the writings of male learners.

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