Task-based Instruction vs. Content-based Instruction in Comprehension and Production of Existential Constructions: A Corpus-based Study among Iranian Language Learners as a Foreign Language

Ali Gholami Mehrdad[1], Ph.D. (TEFL)
Neda Toughiry[2], M.A. (TEFL)
[1, 2] Department of English, Islamic Azad University, Hamedan Branch, Hamedan, Iran

Abstract: *The objective of this study is to investigate two ways of instruction of "Existential constructions": task-based and content based instructions on the comprehension and production of Existential constructions by Iranian English as foreign language (EFL) learners. This study is an attempt to compare the effect of task-based instruction in teaching existential constructions versus content-based instructions. In order to achieve the objectives of this study, 60 elementary EFL learners will participate in this research. The design of this study will be performed based on an experimental research in which the respondents will be divided into two groups of 'experimental' and 'control'. Therefore, first, a pre-test will be administered to check the participants' ability to comprehend and produce task-based and content-based instructions in the use of existential constructions of Iranian EFL learners. After the treatment, the post test will evaluate whether the learners' progress come true or not. In this paper, it is concluded that, in comparison to the other four hypotheses, the first research question is proved; on the other hand, we witnessed the learners' progress in comprehending existential construction through the use of task-based instruction.*

Key Terms:

Education / task-based instruction / Content-based instruction / existential constructions / Corpus-based Study

Introduction

In the area of researches in teaching a foreign language, there are so many language skills and components to be taking into account. One of these notable areas is researches upon teaching different parts of grammar. Researchers are always concerned with finding a new way to help foreign language learners learn the rules of the second language better. They are interested to know if it is possible to teach rules of second language with different methods namely through different strategies and classroom activities to understand which of these methods is the most effective.

As (Biber 1990), states ECs have always been a source of confusion for Persian learners of English. Although Persian learners have been taught about these structures, their specific use and

function; but they still avoid using these structures and try to utilize other structures that might be totally inappropriate for a certain context.

The objective of this study is to investigate two ways of instruction of "Existential constructions": task-based and content based instructions on the comprehension and production of Existential constructions by Iranian EFL learners. Previous studies on existential constructions have confirmed the positive effect of task-based instruction by focusing on form. This study is an attempt to compare the effect of task-based instruction in teaching existential constructions versus content-based instructions.

1. Review of Literature

Most Persian learners of English have a hard time distinguishing between certain structurally similar but functionally different grammatical structures. Take, for example, the differences in use between there is/there are and it is/they are in the following sentences:

(1) There's a flower on the table.

(2) It's a flower (on the table).

(3) The flower is on the table.

In terms of structure, the first two sentences seem similar in that in both there is and it is function as the subject and main verb. In terms of function, however, (1) is used when one wants to report (perhaps spontaneously) the presence of something somewhere specific, while (2) and (3) might have been uttered as a reply to a question posed in advance.

Recent theoretical studies also observe that ECs may not be as universally shared as previously assumed and may be subject to parametric variation (Mateu and Rigau 2002), thus creating difficulty for learners with some other L1 background. Ruys (2010) argues, through an analysis of expletive selection in Dutch constructions that cases of ECs and their structure at least partially differ from the sometimes universally assumed description of expletives in Generative Grammar (see, e.g. Hazout 2004).

1.1. Existential constructions

An existential construction is a construction that refers to the existence or presence of something. For example, "There is a God" asserts the existence of a God, or "There is a book in the bookshelf" implies the existence and presence of a book in a particular place.

1.2. Uses of existential clauses

The principal meaning of existential clauses is to refer to the existence of something, or the presence of something in a particular place or time. For example, "There is a God" asserts the

existence of a God, while "There is a pen on the desk" asserts the presence or existence of a pen in a particular place.

1.3. Task-based instruction versus Content-based instruction

Task-Based Instruction (TBI) helps language learners to make real efforts to communicate as best as they can in the foreign language which they are learning. Based on Willis (2004, p.8-9), TBI rests on three main premises. First, language learning is not a linear process, but it is a complex, organic and dynamic process which changes systematically. In fact language learning process obeys the rules of chaotic, complex systems. Second, "language is best learned when the learners pay attention to the meaning not to the form" (Prabhu 1984, cited in Brumfit, 1984, p.234). Accordingly language learners need a lot of comprehensible input through the exposure to a language in order to get the meaning without focal attention to formal features of language. So it can be concluded that TBI follows the "Input Hypothesis" proposed by Krashen in 1985. Third, real-world and authentic situations should be provided for the learners in order to use the language purposefully that leads to acquiring that language in a natural way. This premise is based on the "output Hypothesis" which was presented by Swain 1985(cited in Ellis, 2003).

Lightbown and Spada (2006) define task-based instruction as "instruction in which classroom activities are tasks similar to those learners might engage in outside the second or foreign language classroom" (p. 205).But Task-Based Approach or Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are the two names which are used more than the other names.

Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), or Content-Based Instruction (CBI), as it is sometimes referred to, is an educational program in English as a second language in which the focus is on teaching students' skills they will need in regular classrooms, i.e. for learning in the content areas such as accounting, geography, or chemistry. Richards and Rodgers (2001), Larsen-Freeman (2000), and Celce-Murcia (2001) regard Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) as one of the most influential and representative contribution to Foreign language instruction or pedagogy. Stoller (2002) argues that CBLT promotes critical thinking skills and enables learners to learn language more quickly and with more pleasure. Content-based instruction (CBI) is a teaching method that emphasizes learning about something rather than learning about language.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research questions addressed in the current study are the followings:

1. *Is comprehension of existential constructions of Iranian EFL Learners influenced by task-based instruction?*
2. *Is production of existential constructions of Iranian EFL Learners influenced by task-based instruction?*

3. *Is comprehension of existential constructions of Iranian EFL Learners influenced by content -based instruction?*
4. *Is production of existential constructions of Iranian EFL Learners influenced by content - based instruction?*

2. **Methodology**

In order to answer this question we need to have a trustworthy plan and a treatment that promise the substantial features of treatment. The design of this study will be performed based on an experimental research in which the respondents will be divided into two groups of 'experimental' and 'control'. Therefore, first, a pre-test will be administered to check participants' ability to comprehend and produce task-based and content-based instructions in the use of existential constructions of Iranian EFL learners.

2.1.Participants

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, 60 elementary EFL learners will participate in this research. They will be both male and female and their native language is Persian. They are all pre-intermediate and intermediate learners who are studying in Safir Language Institute of Hamedan City, Iran. They are selected by simple random sampling. They are mostly aged between 10 to 15 years. Since they are instructed in a class, it is assumed that their English proficiency level is rather the same.

2.2.Instrumentation

Pre-test

A pre-test of writing will be used as the first instrument in this study. The aim of the pre-test will be to determine the students' comprehension existential constructions.

Treatment

For experimental group, participants will receive treatment within 4 weeks. The students are taught based on the task-based instruction and content-based instruction on the comprehension and production of existential constructions. During the teaching they are taught based on the three types of the activities included in the task-based instruction (fill in the blank tasks, translation tasks, and completion tasks); and they are also taught based on the content based instruction.

Post-test

After accomplishing the treatment, a post-test will be given to both groups to evaluate their progress. In order to acknowledge the validity and the reliability of the pre-test and post-test as

well as the treatments sessions, the materials that will be used by, at least, one of the other teachers for this research.

To make sure that the participants had no prior knowledge of the target structure an oral pretest is administrated. At the end of the experimental period, all participants will be given two kind posttests in order to measure both their knowledge of existential constructions comprehension and production.

3.3.1. Data Collection

The data will be gathered regarding the tests which will be administered before, during and after the treatment.

2.3. Data Analysis
1. To analyze the descriptive statistics like age, gender, the educational level, etc of the respondents for of this study, some general concepts like mean, median, modes, standard deviation, variance, maximum and minimum will be used.
2. For analytic statistics, Mc Nemar will be used by SPSS software. Because the data are normal and homogeneous.
3. The usual central measure is mean. Since the researcher chooses parametric test, the Pearson correlation tests and t-test independent measurement is used. Since there are two groups, the researcher uses t-test and Mc Nemar; and in the case of repeated measures, matched pair t-test is used.
4. The information about the population is completely known by means of its parameters, then statistical test is called parametric test. E.g. t- test, Mc Nemar.

2.4. Reliability and Validity

The first step before choosing the participants as a homogenous group was to verify the reliability of the proficiency test. It was distributed to some of the participants. After that, the test reliability was calculated separately by means of Cronbach Alpha formula. The result was 0.86 which shows that it is a rather acceptable figure if the calculated number is more than 0.70 and it shows the test reliability. Since the researcher made the best use of the standardized tests, it can be claimed that the tests were valid enough. Finally, the questions distributed to all of them. Having got the scores from proficiency test, the average mean of the scores (out of 100), was calculated and 60 subjects, which scored two standard deviation above and below the mean (between 36 and 64), were selected as intermediate level in this study.

The test reliability was calculated separately by means of Cronbach Alpha formula. The result was 0.86 which shows that it is a rather acceptable figure if the calculated number is more than 0.70 and it shows the test reliability. The way they were selected in these two groups were done by simple random sampling.

2.5. Procedures

The subjects took the proficiency test before any treatment sessions. Due to the fact that they were not then in groups, the researcher divided them in two random groups of males and females as intermediate level. The subjects in these groups took the pre-test to measure their comprehension and production of existential constructions.

Participants will be selected and divided into two main groups. The first group contains three sub groups. Each group will be randomly assigned to one of the treatment conditions. The participants have been homogenized before. To do so, The Michigan English Language Proficiency Test will be administered. Participants' scores on this test will be summarized, and the mean and standard deviation will be computed. The scores of those who have achieved more than one standard deviation away from (above or below) the mean will be excluded from all subsequent analyses. In order to make sure that the participants have no prior knowledge of the target structure, an oral pretest will also be administered prior to the treatment.

1. Results and Discussion

In this part, the general and descriptive features of the testees are considered. Below are some tables which present such general features.

Table 1: the general features of the participants

		gender	age	reading	writing	listening	speaking
N	Valid	60	60	60	60	60	60
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Mean	1.6600	2.4400	2.4200	2.4200	2.9000	2.7400
	Median	2.0000	2.0000	2.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000
	Mode	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00
	Std. Deviation	.47852	1.38741	.97080	1.08965	1.03510	.98582
	Variance	.229	1.925	.942	1.187	1.071	.972
	Skewness	-.697	.726	.723	.066	.207	.289
	Std. Error of Skewness	.337	.337	.337	.337	.337	.337
	Kurtosis	-1.580	-.728	-.068	-.883	-.658	-.335
	Std. Error of Kurtosis	.662	.662	.662	.662	.662	.662
	Minimum	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Maximum	2.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
	Sum	83.00	122.00	121.00	121.00	145.00	137.00

This table shows the number of the learners, their age, and their possible capability in four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Also, the information related to the central tendency, standard deviation and variance is presented.

The hypotheses of this study are taken into consideration. The scores of pre-test and post-test and their mean are evaluated and the results will be discussed and compared. Now, the four hypotheses mentioned before are discussed here separately.

The data analysis that was used to find out the difference between the control and the experimental groups' results in the pre-test was independent – samples t – test.

As the data analysis in independent-samples-t-test shows, the data must have a normal distribution. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical procedure investigates the distribution of data by finding the largest difference between two cumulative distribution functions. Therefore, among 90 participants, by the standard deviation we considered the 60 middle participants for the pre-test; and the highest and lowest 15 participants, which were totally 30, were omitted from the study.

If the significance value is greater than 0.05 ($\alpha > 0.05$) the data is normally distributed. Normal distribution of data means that most of the participants' scores are close to the average, while relatively few examples tend to one extreme or the other. According to table 2 which belongs to the experimental group both two variables have a normal distribution.

Table 2: Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical procedure for normal distribution of experimental group

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Absolute	Positive	Negative	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Experimental group				
Pretest	25	.4800	7.30365	.193	.193	-.123	.965	.310

So, test distribution is normal.
The same situation holds true for the control group. According to table 3 both two variables that belong to the control group have a normal distribution as well.

Table 3: Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical procedure for normal distribution of control group

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Absolute	Positive	Negative	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Control Group				
Pretest	25	-.8636	2.55	.172	.172	-.146	.807	.533

So, test distribution is normal.

In the following sections the results of each test will be put under investigation one by one to find out if there were any significant differences between the results of the control group and the experimental groups' post-tests or not.

Table 4 shows the results of the independent-samples-t-test that was used to compare the results of the pre–test that was taken at the beginning of the study. As we have sig. = 0.011 so sig < 0.05, therefore; there was a statistically significant difference between the control group and the experimental group at the beginning of the study.

Table 4: Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical procedure for normal distribution of control group

	N	Independent Samples t-test		
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control Group	25	39.9545	13.622	0.011
Experimental Group	25	40.4000	13.456	

At the end of the treatment period a post test was given to both groups to see if there were any significant differences between the results of both groups. The results indicated the fact that there was a significant difference between the performances of the control and the experimental group in the post-test.

Hypothesis 1:
Task-based instruction influences the comprehension of existential constructions of elementary Iranian EFL Learners.

Table 5: the comparison of question 1 to 10 in pre-test and post-test

Question number	Pretest scores	Posttest scores	Sig. of Mc Nemar test	Significance Level
1	% 20	% 80	0.021	% 95
2	% 40	% 90	0.004	% 95
3	% 20	% 80	0.016	% 95
4	% 40	% 90	0.004	% 95
5	% 50	% 80	0.002	% 95
6	% 30	% 80	0.003	% 95
7	% 30	% 90	0.002	% 95
8	% 50	% 60	0.125	___
9	% 40	% 90	0.008	% 95
10	% 40	% 70	0.004	% 95

As the table 5 shows, there is a significant relationship between treatment and the improvement of students' skills in the field of existential construction. On the hand, the treatment caused the post test scored to become higher in comparison to the pre-test scores. So, with 95 percent significance, the treatment leads to the higher score of the testees in post-test. Moreover, it can be claimed that the role of education and treatment is proved in promoting the students ability in comprehension the existential construction on the basis of task-based instruction.

Table 6: the mean score of pre-test and post-test

The mean of pre-test scores	The mean of post-test scores	comparison
% 33	% 81	% 48 growth

As the table 6 indicates, the scores of the testees in pre-test and post-test faces a 48 percent growth; and this can prove the hypothesis. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment is effective and the post-test in influenced by the treatment. On the other words, task-based instruction has a direct positive relationship on the comprehension of the existential constructions.

Hypothesis 2:

Task-based instruction influences the production of existential constructions of elementary Iranian EFL Learners.

Table 7: the comparison of question 1 to 10 in pre-test and post-test

Question number	Pretest scores	Posttest scores	Sig. of Mc Nemar test	Significance Level
1	% 20	% 90	0.022	% 95
2	% 20	% 80	0.044	% 95
3	% 30	% 80	0.026	% 95
4	% 30	% 60	0.002	% 95
5	% 40	% 90	0.008	% 95
6	% 40	% 70	0.003	% 95
7	% 40	% 80	0.003	% 95
8	% 50	% 90	0.010	% 95
9	% 30	% 70	0.040	% 95
10	% 40	% 90	0.004	% 95

As the table 7 shows, there is a significant relationship between treatment and the improvement of students' skills in the field of existential construction. On the hand, the treatment caused the post test scored to become higher in comparison to the pre-test scores. So, with 95 percent significance, the treatment leads to the higher score of the testees in post-test. Moreover, it can be claimed that the role of education and treatment is proved in promoting the students ability in production of the existential construction on the basis of task-based instruction.

Table 8: the mean score of pre-test and post-test

The mean of pre-test scores	The mean of post-test scores	comparison
% 34	% 80	% 46 growth

As the table 8 indicates, the scores of the testees in pre-test and post-test faces a 46 percent growth; and this can prove the hypothesis. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment is effective and the post-test in influenced by the treatment. On the other words, task-based instruction has a direct positive relationship on the production of the existential constructions.

Hypothesis 3:

Content-based instruction influences the comprehension of existential constructions of elementary Iranian EFL Learners.

Table 9: the comparison of question 1 to 10 in pre-test and post-test

Question number	Pretest scores	Posttest scores	Sig. of Mc Nemar test	Significance Level
1	% 30	% 90	0.008	% 95
2	% 60	% 70	0.125	___
3	% 30	% 80	0.025	% 95
4	% 50	% 60	0.002	% 95
5	% 50	% 50	0.156	___
6	% 40	% 70	0.015	% 95
7	% 40	% 80	0.022	% 95
8	% 50	% 90	0.008	% 95
9	% 10	% 70	0.004	% 95
10	% 10	% 60	0.008	% 95

As the table 9 shows, there is a significant relationship between treatment and the improvement of students' skills in the field of existential construction. On the hand, the treatment caused the post test scored to become higher in comparison to the pre-test scores. So, with 95 percent significance, the treatment leads to the higher score of the testees in post-test. Moreover, it can be claimed that the role of education and treatment is proved in promoting the students ability in comprehension of the existential construction on the basis of content-based instruction.

Table 10: the mean score of pre-test and post-test

The mean of pre-test scores	The mean of post-test scores	comparison
% 37	% 78	% 41 growth

As the table 10 indicates, the scores of the testees in pre-test and post-test faces a 41 percent growth; and this can prove the hypothesis. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment is effective and the post-test in influenced by the treatment. On the other words, content-based

instruction has a direct positive relationship on the comprehension of the existential constructions.

Hypothesis 4:

Content-based instruction influences the production of existential constructions of elementary Iranian EFL Learners.

Table 11: the comparison of question 1 to 10 in pre-test and post-test

Question number	Pretest scores	Posttest scores	Sig. of Mc Nemar test	Significance Level
1	% 30	% 90	0.014	% 95
2	% 70	% 60	0.245	___
3	% 60	% 80	0.016	% 95
4	% 60	% 60	0.002	% 95
5	% 30	% 70	0.125	___
6	% 40	% 70	0.015	% 95
7	% 40	% 80	0.008	% 95
8	% 70	% 80	0.315	___
9	% 30	% 70	0.004	% 95
10	% 40	% 60	0.045	% 95

As the table 11 shows, there is a significant relationship between treatment and the improvement of students' skills in the field of existential construction. On the hand, the treatment caused the post test scored to become higher in comparison to the pre-test scores. So, with 95 percent significance, the treatment leads to the higher score of the testees in post-test. Moreover, it can be claimed that the role of education and treatment is proved in promoting the students ability in production of the existential construction on the basis of content-based instruction.

Table 12: the mean score of pre-test and post-test

The mean of pre-test scores	The mean of post-test scores	comparison
% 47	% 73	% 26 growth

As the table 12 indicates, the scores of the testees in pre-test and post-test faces a 26 percent growth; and this can prove the hypothesis. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment is effective and the post-test in influenced by the treatment. On the other words, content-based instruction has a direct positive relationship on the production of the existential constructions.

3. Conclusion

Grammar is the study of words and how they can be used to form sentences. It can include the inflections, syntax, and word formation of the language, as well as the pronunciation, meaning, and linguistic history of a particular word.

Poor Communication: Unclear communication is the biggest issue caused by using incorrect grammar when writing or speaking. While the first sentence uses two negatives to create a positive construction, the second example uses a one negative and one positive to create a negative construction. If you are trying to state that you want a book, a new shirt, or some other item, the first sentence is correct. However, if you are trying to tell a friend that you already have everything you need, the second sentence is correct.

Poor First Impressions: In addition to creating communication misunderstandings, incorrect grammar also makes a poor first impression. If you are a jobseeker with grammatical errors in your resume, a company recruiter may see you as less intelligent than a candidate who has similar skills but was able to proofread properly. If you own a business and have grammatical errors in your marketing materials, potential customers may see these mistakes as an indication that your company is sloppy or simply unreliable.

One way to prevent and avoid such grammatical problems is making the use of tasks-based and content-based instruction. In this study, the use of tasks-based and content-based instructions is evaluated on the basis of grammar in which existential construction, as an ordinary grammar point, is influenced by the tasks-based and content-based instructions. Therefore, regarding research type and the results driven from chapter four, the following items may be conducted:

- At any given time there are certain trends in second language education that influence both teaching and learning. One of the latest trends in SLL approaches is task-based language teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes the use of authentic language through meaningful tasks.
- The need to identify teaching approaches which are grounded in local needs and values has been well-established over the last couple of decades. Influential within this theme is research on the interplay between methodology and social context (Holliday, 1994), and the notion of context-sensitivity (Bax, 2003) in relation to communicative language teaching (CLT). Resonating with this line of thinking, an important issue lies in considering how TBLT might be adapted to suit the EFL settings in which it is being implemented, or vice versa, the extent to which educational traditions may need to change in order for effective language learning to occur. A possible repercussion is that adaptations of TBLT may involve some form of merging the global with localized methodologies (Littlewood, 2011). Implicit in such perspectives is the need for inclusive non-doctrinaire approaches to TBLT. Within such an orientation, it would be useful to identify key features central to all forms of TBLT, and explore further those aspects amenable to contextual adaptation.

In summary, variations in patterns and rate of development found in pragmatic production are summarized in the following three main points: (1) distinct patterns of development were found between knowledge as measured by appropriateness and grammaticality scores, and processing

as measured by planning time and speech rate; (2) the situational and linguistic demands involved in high-imposition speech acts slowed the progress in appropriateness scores, but situation type had no effect on planning time and speech rate; and (3) emergence of target-like norms was negligible in the area of pragmalinguistic forms, but a small trend of development was found in the area of semantic strategies used to put together these speech acts.

Study Limitations

1. This study will only be performed on learners with Persian background. Further study needs to be carried out on learners with different first languages.

2. The participants of the study were limited to the elementary level learners. So, care must be exercised in generalizing the results beyond its proper limits.

3. Another factor to be taken into account is the small sample of the participants. This further limits the generalizability of the findings.

4. The result of this study may be affected by other variables; like: age, personality. These factors have not been taken into account in the present study.

References

Bax, S. (2003). The end of CLT: A context approach to language learning. *ELT Journal*, 57, 278‑287.

Biber, L. (1990). 'On the Causes of Syntactic Change in English', in Leiv Egil Breivik and Ernst H. Jahr (eds.), Language Change. *Contribution to the Study of its Causes*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 29-70.

Brumfit, C. (1984). 'The Bangalore Procedural Syllabus'. *ELT Journal*, Volume 38, 4, 233-241.

Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). Grammar pedagogy in second and foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 25(3), 459-480.

Hazout, I. (2004). The syntax of existential constructions. *Linguistic Inquiry* 35: 393-430.

Holliday, Adrian. (1994). *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. NY: Longman.

Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N. (2006) *How Languages are Learned.* (3rd edition) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mateu, J., and G. Rigau. (2002). A minimalist account of conflation processes: Parametric variation at the lexicon-syntax interface. In Theoretical approaches to universals, ed. A. Alexiadou, 211_36. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Prabhu, U. S. (1987). *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Richards, J. C. & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (2nd Ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.

Ruys, E.G. (2010). Expletive selection and CP arguments in Dutch. *The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 13, no. 2: 141_78.

Stoller, F.L. (2002). Promoting the acquisition of knowledge in a content-based course. In J. Crandall & D. Kaufman (Eds.). *Content-based instruction in higher education settings* (pp. 109-123). VA: TESOL