

THE EFFECTS OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING TASKS ON THE COMPREHENSION OF “IF CLAUSES” BY THE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discuss the semantic properties of 'if clauses in English, to discover whether the learners of English are cognizant of these properties and to find out if consciousness-raising activities can facilitate the comprehension of the target grammatical item. Language learning involves the mastery of language items such as phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic; the development of language skills in the target language; the use of language items to fulfil language functions and building up communicative strategies. The mastery of language items plays a vital role both in the development of language skills and in carrying out language functions. Some language items can cause more difficulty for learners of English in comparison with the other language items. One of the grammatical items that are difficult to learn is 'If clauses' as foreign or second language learners have difficulty with the comprehension of the basic semantic properties of the item in question. The aim is to reveal what sort of problems learners have with if clauses' and to test whether the consciousness-raising activities are effective in solving the problem. To this end, ninety-eight participants were given a pretest on the onset of the activity and a posttest after the activity. The t-test was used to compare the pre and posttest results. The difference between two test results has been found to be statistically significant.

Keywords: If clauses, Syntactic properties, Semantic properties, Consciousness Raising.

INTRODUCTION

Learners of English and even the learners of the ELT departments have difficulty with the comprehension and use of 'If Clauses'. The difficulty mostly results from the overgeneralization of the conditional sentences in most of the grammar books such as type one, type two, type three, mixed type and so on. Under the dominance of Communicative Language Teaching, the teaching of language items began to be underestimated and the emphasis was shifted from 'form' to 'content', especially after the introduction of the terms, 'learning' and 'acquisition' by Krashen (1981). However, it has become inevitable to focus on the language items even in the extreme communicative approaches. For example, in Task based Learning, which consists of three stages such as Pre-Task, Task Cycle and Language Focus, there is a stage, in which consciousness raising takes place, and new language items are practised (Willis, 1996). This is quite natural since learning a language involves the mastery of language items, becoming aware of language functions, building up language skills, developing communicative strategies, and finally learning to use a new language for communicative purposes.

Celcie-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) mention a survey about the most serious teaching problems encountered by ESL teachers in the Los Angeles area. According to this survey, one of the problematic items encountered in Teaching English was found to be 'if clauses', which ranked fifth in order of difficulty after 'articles', 'prepositions', 'phrasal verbs' and 'verbals'. The Learners of English encounter over-generalised rules about 'if clauses' in reference grammars or course books. For example, in the book, 'Practical English Grammar' (Thomson and Martinet. 1980), conditional sentences fall into three types as 'type one', 'Type two' and 'Type three'. This type of classification is based on the formal aspects of the conditional clauses. As can be seen in most of the grammar books, Parrot (2001) divides conditional sentences into the following types such as type 1, type 2, and type three and then he mentions zero conditionals and mixed type conditionals. This also reflects the structural approach to the study of conditionals. We can see that in some grammar books conditionals are classified as 'future possible', 'not real (not probable)' and 'unreal past' from the semantic

perspective (Swan and Walter, 2201). However, this classification of conditionals is also restricted to the study of certain types of conditionals. There is not necessary information on factual conditionals. Celcie-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) point out that ESL/EFL textbooks and reference grammars often provide somewhat oversimplified information' by giving emphasis to the three types of conditionals. They also claim that conditional sentences are overlooked in many ESL/EFL textbooks although they are of high frequency in everyday English.

To check whether advanced learners of English (98 fourth year students at the English Department of the Educational faculty at Dokuz Eylül University and Cyprus International University) are familiar with the other types of conditional sentences (factual), they were given a list of conditional sentences (42) as a pre-test and asked to mark whether they are well formed or ill-formed. Most of the students marked the following sentences as ill-formed:

- 1- If it rained, I went by car (Palmer, 1974).
- 2- If he said that, he is a fool (Palmer, 1974)
- 3- If he was here, he will finish it soon
- 4- If they ever won, they had always trained hard (Palmer, 1974).
- 5- If it will be of any help, I will come along (Palmer, 1974).
- 6- If the game won't be finished until nine, I'll stay here till tomorrow.
- 7 - If that was what she told you, she was telling lies.

In the same way, few students marked the following sentences as well formed:

- 8- If it is raining out there, my car is getting wet.
- 9- You want to know, I have not seen her.
- 10- If you are going out, it is snowing.
- 11- If you have enough money, why don't you buy a car?
- 12- If she said that, he did not expect you to take it personally.
- 13- If you will help me, I will finish it soon.

Some students said that the sentences (8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13) did not fit into the types of the 'if clauses' that they had studied. Some students stated that the aforementioned sentences sounded logical when they were considered from the perspective of the Turkish language. This substantiates the idea that the learners of English are provided with 'oversimplified information' on the 'if clauses' in English. This is one of the main reasons why learners of English have difficulty both with the comprehension and use of 'if clauses'.

According to Hill (1960), there are 324 types of conditional sentences with regard to distinct tense-modal sequences, in other words from the perspective of the morpho-syntactic features. This should not imply that all these types must be incorporated into the English language-teaching syllabus, which is difficult and impractical. As this type of classification of conditional sentences is based on the morpho-syntactic features, this cannot be a plausible solution to the problem. It is advisable to make use of the semantic and pragmatic classification of the subject matter. As the focus is basically on meaning, the following type of classification is believed to enable the learners of English to be familiar with the possible 'if clauses' in the English language.

To introduce the meaning-focused classification of the 'if clauses', learners were first asked to discriminate factual and suppositional if clauses and then study the semantic properties of each type of 'if clause' by carrying out consciousness-raising tasks.

The following plan was used for each consciousness-raising task

- a- Learners are provided with a context for the study of the target grammatical item (each type of clause).
- b- They are asked to study the example sentences projected onto the white board.

- c- They are asked to identify ill formed and well-formed sentences.
- d- They are asked to elicit when the target grammatical item is used.
- e- They are asked to make up sentences with the target item. (Ellis in Learners worked on the following classification of if clauses.

SENTENCES WITH "IF"

It is possible to divide 'if clauses' into two as factual and suppositional from the perspective of their semantic and pragmatic features. Factual 'conditional clauses are used to indicate factual events or states. Such clauses are termed as 'real conditionals' in some grammar books. Suppositional if clauses serve to express non-factuality or counterfactuality, which we use in the sense explained by G. Leech (1981:301-305).

The studies by Palmer (1974) and Celcie-Murcia; M. Larsen-Freeman and Williams (1999) form the basis of the following classification:

I- FACTUAL/ II- SUPPOSITIONAL

I-FACTUAL

A-FUTURE (POSSIBLE):

In this type of if clauses, both clauses refer to 'future time' generally, the 'if clause' is in the present tense, the matrix clause contains a modal. The realization of the 'if clause' is contingent on the matrix clause. The modal auxiliary 'will' can be used in one of its modal senses in the 'if clauses' as in 15, 16 and 17.

- 14- If it rains I'll stay indoors.
- 15- If you will help (please), I'll finish it soon.
- 16- If you will bet on horse races (insistence), you mustn't complain if you lose your money.
- 17- If you won't help us (refuse), our plans will be ruined.

B) NATURAL OR HABITUAL IF CLAUSES

In this type of conditional clauses, the 'if clause' has a similar meaning to a 'whenever' clause. In the following example clauses (18, 19, 20, 21 and 22), the fulfilment of the event in the main clause is contingent on the 'if clause'.

a) Natural Factual If Clause (present):

- 18- If oil is mixed with water, it floats.
- 19- If metal gets hot, it expands.
- 20- If water is heated to 100 C, it turns to steam.

b) Habitual Factual If Clause (Present or past):

- 21- If I go there, I see her.
- 22 - She worried about her husband if she went away for a weekend.

C) Deduction Type:

In this type of conditional clauses, whether what is expressed in the main clause is true or not is dependent on the truthfulness of the 'if clause'. If the former is true, so is the latter as in the following examples:

- 23- If she said that, she is a fool.
- 24- If he was here, he will finish it soon
- 25- If he arrived only yesterday, he'll probably not leave before Sunday
- 26- If that was what she told you, she was telling lies.
- 27- If it's raining out there, my car is getting wet.
- 28- If he was there, he must have met her
- 29- If Daisy said that last night, she was lying

D) Relevance Type:

Palmer (1974) uses the name the 'relevance type'. There is no dependency relationship between the two clauses. What is expressed in the matrix clause is true, independent of the 'if clause'. The 'if clause' is simply used as an opening gambit in most of the cases.

30- If you want to know, I haven't seen her

31- If you are going out, it's snowing.

33- If you have enough money, why don't you buy a car?

34- If you ask me, she cannot do it.

35- I'm sorry, if I'm disturbing you.

E) Concession Type

The meaning of the conjunction 'if' is similar to 'although' or 'in spite of'. That is why we prefer to use the term 'concession type'.

36- If she said that, he didn't expect you to take it personally.

37- If he's poor, he is at least honest.

F) Reversed Dependency Type (Future):

In this type of conditional clauses, the modal auxiliary 'will' is used to refer to 'future time' and the dependency relationship between the two clauses is reversed in most cases. For example, in 35, what is expressed in the 'if clause' is dependent on the matrix clause. That is why, we prefer to use the term 'reversed dependency type'.

38- If it will be of any help, I'll lend him some money.

39- If the game won't be finished until nine; I'll spend the night at your place.

40- If the game isn't going to be finished until nine I'll stay here tonight.

41- If the match will be cancelled, let's not go.

42- If he won't be here before midnight, there's no need to rush.

G) Rhetorical If Clauses

This is similar to Deduction Type. It is used to make a strong assertion.

43- If she doesn't get the first prize, she is no daughter of yours. ('She certainly will get the first prize.')

44- If they are French, I'm the king of France. ('They are not').

45- If he is younger than me, I will eat my hat. (He's not younger.)

II- SUPPOSITIONAL IF CLAUSES:

Suppositional if clauses serve to express either non-factual or counterfactual conditions. In non-factual conditionals as in 43, 44 and 45, the realization of the event or state is not expected. In such sentences, either present (43) or future time (44, 45) is expressed.

A) NON-FACTUAL:**a) present:**

46- If I had enough time, I would help her.

b) future:

47- If I were to have enough time, I would go there.

48- If she came here tomorrow, I'd be happy.

B) COUNTERFACTUAL:

What is expressed in counterfactual conditionals is contrary either to a past fact (46) or to a present fact (48 and 49).

a) past:

49- If he had studied harder, he would have done it.

b) present:

50- If I were you, I wouldn't do to that.

51- If he were alive, he'd help them.

After doing the consciousness raising activities, the participants of the study took the same test as a post test. They were asked to mark whether the sentences in the test were ill formed or well-formed. The T-test was used to see whether there were any statistically significant differences between the pre and post-test results, considering two means in relation to the variation (the standard deviation of the difference between the means) in the data.

The results of the study are depicted in the following table:

Table I. Pre-treatment and post treatment results

	Number (N)	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	sem	t	p	Significance Level
Pre-test	98	25.78	4.40	194	3.46	6.17	0.0001	p < 0.05 Significant
Post-test	98	34.01	4.18					
* p<0.05								

As seen in Table I, the mean of the pre-test scores is 25.78 and the standard deviation is 4.40 whereas the mean of the post-test scores is 25.78 and the standard deviation is 4.18. This means that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. In other words, looking at the averages to determine what the difference is, it is seen that there is an extremely significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results at the * p<0.05 level. This indicates that the consciousness-raising activities based on the semantic properties of 'if clauses' have been proved to be effective in helping the learners to understand the characteristics of the if-clauses in English.

CONCLUSION

While teaching if clauses, we should help the learners of English to notice the differences between factual and suppositional 'if clauses'. It is possible to capitalize on the similar concepts expressed in the mother tongue. For instance, it is possible to direct the attention of Turkish Speakers of English to the fact that in suppositional 'if clauses', the conditional marker is added to the verb stems before the aspect, mood, tense and agreement suffixes whereas it is added after aspect and tense markers in factual if clauses. After getting the learners to elicit the differences between factual and suppositional conditionals, some consciousness raising activities can be organized for the study of the sub types of these conditionals. Such activities are expected to provide learners with necessary input that will result in 'language awareness'.

In addition to these, the following points should be taken into consideration:

- 1 We should avoid over-generalisation as much as possible.
- 2 We should give more emphasis to the meaning and the function rather than to the form.
- 3 We should provide our students with a good context for the introduction and the use of the 'if clauses'.
- 4 Finally, in the study of the 'if clauses', we should examine them from various perspectives, not only from their morphological and syntactic properties.

Suggestions for Further Study:

- 1- A quasi-experimental study including a pre and post-test design with both an experimental group and a control group can be conducted.
- 2- Learners' use of 'if clauses' can also be tested.

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APPENDIX

IF CLAUSES: WHICH SENTENCES ARE ILL-FORMED?

Mark the sentences which are ill-formed.

- 1- If oil is mixed with water, it floats.
- 2- If he said that, he is a fool.
- 3- If she were here, I will be happy.
- 4- If it rained, I went by.
- 5- If he was here, he will finish it soon.
- 6- If they ever won, they had always trained hard.
- 7- If that was what she told you, she was telling lies.
- 8- If it is raining out there, my car is getting wet.
- 9- If he was there, he must have met her.
- 10- If I go there, I see her.
- 11- If you want to know, I have not seen her.
- 12- If you are going out, it is snowing.
- 13- If you have enough money, why don't you buy a car?
- 14- If she said that, he did not expect you to take it personally.
- 15- If you will help me, I will finish it soon.
- 16- If I had enough time, I would help her.
- 17- If I were to have enough time, I would go there.
- 18- If she came here tomorrow, I would be happy.
- 19- If he has studied harder, he would have done it.
- 20- If I were you, I would not do that.
- 21- If the game won't be finished until nine, I '11 spend the night at your place.
- 22- If the game isn't going to be finished until nine I'll spend the night at your place.
- 23- If the match will be cancelled, let us not go.
- 24- If it will be of any help, I will come along.
- 25- If you didn't help me, I would have been in trouble.
- 26- If Daisy said that last night, she was lying.
- 27- It's a stupid idea, if you ask me.
- 28- If you do not leave now, I am calling the police.
- 29- If I would have gone to Istanbul, I had seen my old friends.
- 30- If you accept that job, you are never going to regret it.
- 31- You are going to find yourself in difficulty, if you carry on like this.
- 32- If she will come tomorrow, what shall we ask her to do?
- 33- If you have an exam tomorrow, why aren't you studying?
- 34- She would now be making a lot of money if she had not left.
- 35- If you have been working all day, you probably need a rest.
- 36- We will go and see Daisy and Robert if we will be in London.
- 37- If he's poor, he is at least honest.

- 38- If he gets into a relationship, he madly falls in love.
- 39- If she failed to comprehend, she invariably laughed.
- 40- Everything is possible, if we want it enough.
- 41- If you don't have money, you are powerless.
- 42- Women were reproved, if they didn't wear hats in court.

(Answer Key)/ IF CLAUSES: WHICH SENTENCES ARE ILL-FORMED?

The sentences marked with an asterisk (*) are ill-formed.

- 1- If oil is mixed with water, it floats.
- 2- If he said that, he is a fool (Palmer, 1974).
- 3- *If she were here, I will be happy.
- 4- If it rained, I went by car (Palmer, 1974).
- 5- If he was here, he will finish it soon.
- 6- If they ever won, they had always trained hard (Palmer, 1974).
- 7- If that was what she told you, she was telling lies.
- 8- If it is raining out there, my car is getting wet.
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- 10- If I go there, I see her.
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