

# Exploring Iraqi EFL Learners' Command of basic Grammatical Structures at the Tertiary level

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**Abstract**— Language learning has been equated with learning its grammar. The view was that mere words without grammar of some kind do not constitute a language. This view has been challenged by the communication-based approaches which relegated grammar to a secondary status. The new English course for Iraq which was the prescribed course for teaching English as a foreign language from 1972 to 2004 which was structurally-based has been deserted and since then there has been a shift to communication based courses in which grammar is assumed to be a by-product which develops automatically while emphasis is placed on communication. The present study aims at testing this assumption to see whether students have mastered the basic grammatical notions and structures after 12 years of studying English using communication-based syllabuses. The research questions addressed were: to what extent have Iraqi students mastered the grammatical notions and structures? Which notions and structures had not been adequately mastered? The results indicate that the basic grammatical structures and notions have not been adequately mastered after a long period of studying English at the tertiary level and the students still find difficulty in most grammatical structures, including comparative constructions, concord, passivization, and perfective aspects. The reasons were identified and suggestions for overcoming the difficulties in these areas were made.

**Keywords**— Iraqi EFL learners, Grammatical structures. Textbook Evaluation, Teaching Grammar.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar has traditionally been regarded as the core of language. Palmer (1971) rightly argues that man is not Mere homo loquens but homo grammaticus. It is grammar that makes language so essentially human characteristics. grammar is seen, in this sense, as a complex set of relations that link sounds or written symbols of the language with the meanings of the message conveyed. More technically, grammar tells which combinations of sounds or words are possible and acceptable in a given language and which are not. These combinations are expressed in terms of rules so that the grammar of a language consists of a set of rules which native speakers intuitively follow in the production of well-formed

construction (Finch,2000). Rules here is understood as an internally imposed constraints which unconsciously

present in the Minds of the speakers of that language and which every speaker has to obey to produce a grammatically correct sentences.

The view of a grammar above has to do with linguistic competence which potentially enables the speaker or writer to produce unlimited number of a grammatically correct sentences. This view has not to be identified with the pedagogic grammar which is specifically designed for teaching purposes (Noblitt,1972:321). Pedagogic grammar is essentially eclectic in that it needn't account for all the grammatical rules of a given language. It chooses among the grammatical rules developed by linguists what are appropriate to a given a group of learners in a given context and at a particular level of language study. This is because pedagogic grammar seeks a practical adequacy rather than descriptive adequacy which scientific grammar aims at (Corder,1973:330; Richards,1985:144).

Historically, the emphasis on teaching grammar in a second or foreign language classroom since the mid1940s of the past century led to the grammar-based syllabi where learning a language is equated with learning its grammar. The argument was that knowledge of grammatical rules was essential for the mastery of language simply because one cannot use words or bits of words properly unless he knows how they should be put together in the order typically used by the native speakers of that language ( Ur, 1988).

The emphasis on teaching grammar has been seriously challenged. There has been a general agreement among practitioners and applied linguists that grammar needn't be taught directly and for its own sake. Krashen (1982/1985) maintains that explicit grammar has only a peripheral role in second language acquisition Jimenez and Murphy (1984 cited in Garrett 1986) add that paying much attention to grammar in foreign or second language syllabus may impede the effort to achieve communicative competence because the learners' attention will be deflected from the expression of meaning which is the point of communication to the consideration of form.

This view has led to the communication based syllabuses which have been in vague since the late 1970s of the past century starting with the notional/ functional approach ( Finchiaro, 1983). This semantic content of language and the learners needs and interests have been given priority far more than mastery of the language as an unapplied system. The Notional/ functional syllabus identified three categories: notions: (for example time, space, matter,

quantity); categories of communicative functions (for example warning, inviting threatening, agreeing, suggesting,); and semantico- grammatical categories which specify how notions and functions are realised in various linguistic forms. Grammar was dealt with as a subservient and was governed by the communicative functions (campbell,1978:16).

Communication-based syllabuses are message- oriented rather than grammatically- based. They are interested in the message itself rather than how the message is conveyed. They account for the integration of two types of competence: linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. linguistic competence accounts for the ability to produce grammatically- correct sentences while the sociolinguistic competence accounts for the verbal and non-verbal strategies which are called into action to compensate the communication failure. It is argued that a grammar-based syllabuses are some version of the rules that have been developed out of the formal analysis of language; sound systems and structures. Knowledge of grammatical rules and semantic structures does not guarantee that the learner will be able to use the language appropriately and effectively. This view has led to the adoption of a strong version of communicative approaches that eliminate grammar lessons and relegate grammar to a secondary status.

Yet it has recently found that fluency does not always lead to accuracy Schimdt (1983 in Richards 1985) found that despite the prolonged contact with English in English-speaking environment, his subjects failed to go beyond the initial stage of proficiency in many areas of grammar. This has led to the adoption of the weak version of the communicative approach especially in teaching English as a foreign language.

In 2008 the Ministry of Education in Iraq replaced *the New English course for Iraq* prescribed as a textbook for teaching English at pre-university level which was structurally based by *Iraqi opportunities* produced by York Press and Pearson Education Limited (as a series for teaching English as a foreign language to Iraqi learners at the pre-university level. This new series was communicatively oriented. It adopted the strong version of the communicative approach. The grammar was introduced inductively although it contained a grammar summary for each unit. The approach prescribed by the writers of *Iraqi opportunities* was called Discovery Approach in which the learner discovers and work out rules of form and usage. The benefit of this new series for our students ,as far as grammar was concerned was not extensively investigated except for Al-Qarabash (2019) because the series was abruptly stopped in 2011 and replaced by a new series entitled *English For Iraq* written by Johnston and Messieres (2010) with an editorial and adaptation committee from the Iraqi Ministry of Education. To the best of our knowledge the mastery of English grammar in this series has been extensively assessed. The assessment made by Al-Qarabash (2019) of the English

grammar of the *Iraqi Opportunities* was made without providing adequate argument and evaluation of the results obtained.

This paper aims at verifying the assumption made by the writers of *English For Iraq* that grammar can best be learned through involving students in communicative events. It addresses the following research questions:

1. Have the Iraqi pupils had adequate command of basic grammatical notions and structures after 10 years of studying English using the *English for Iraq* series?
2. Which forms and structures have been mastered and which ones have not?

It is hypothesized that

1. After 10 years of using *English for Iraq* series, the Iraqi learners of English at tertiary level have had considerable command of grammatical forms and structures.
2. The learners face difficulty in passive constructions, parallel structures,, correlatives and present participle as an adjective.

## II. METHOD

This section provides a detailed description of the demographic characteristics of the participants in the present study, the data collected and analysed, the research design and procedure. Statistical analysis will also be made.

### Participant

One hundred ( 50 girls and 50 boys) 6th preparatory school students were randomly selected from four official preparatory schools for girls and boys in Mosul City. Their ages ranged between 17 and 20 years. They had at least 10 year experience of studying English as a foreign language using *English for Iraq* as a textbook series for learning English. The reason behind choosing 6th grade students was that these students have already had completed the textbooks of the *English for Iraq* series which consists of 10 textbooks. The teachers of the schools selected were asked to choose average students rather than top or dull students so as to provide a fair evaluation of the course being assessed. The teachers and the students were told that the test to be conducted was for research purposes and had nothing to do with the evaluation of the teachers and or their students.

## III. MATERIAL

A survey of the grammatical forms and structures introduced in the textbooks from book 1 to book 10 of *English for Iraq* series was first made. Then the basic forms and structures represented in the standard books for teaching English grammar such as Murphy's (1994) *English Grammar in Use* and Greenbaum and Quirk's (1990) *A Student Grammar of The English language* and

Eckeresely and Eckeresely's (1960) *Comprehensive English Grammar for Foreign Students* were consulted and a list of the basic grammatical forms and structures was then made as reference to choose from. The aim was to identify what was agreed upon as basic grammatical forms and structures that a foreign language learner of English are expected to master in order to communicate in English effectively.

### The test

The test consisted of 50 items. Each item tested a specific area in English grammar. The test was divided into two parts: part 1, (25) items tested the student's mastery of English grammatical forms and structures at recognition level while part 2, (25) items tested their mastery of English grammatical forms and structures at production level. Recognition test took the form of multiple-choice questions the aim was to see whether the learners were able to recognize the appropriate forms or structures that are suitable to the stems given ; whereas production test consisted of open-ended questions. The aim was to see whether the learners were able to produce the appropriate grammatical forms or structures according to the prompts given.

To ensure the validity of the test, samples of the test were sent to specialists in grammar and language teaching asking them whether the test had covered the basics of English grammar and whether the test was suitable for the pre-university level students. To ensure reliability, the test sheets were given to for teachers, 50 sheets for each, to check them, so that each checked another teacher's test sheets.

Before the final administration of the test a pilot study was conducted 25, 6th grade students (15 boys and 10 girls) were asked to do the test to evaluate its appropriateness in terms of time, length, and level of difficulty. When an interview was made with the volunteers who did the test, the majority complained that the test was time consuming but manageable and covered all the areas of grammar that had been studied in the past 10 years using Iraq *English for Iraq* textbooks.

Depending on the feedback from the pilot study and taking the suggestions made by the jurors and the feedback given by the volunteers in the pilot study some items of the test were modified and the number of the items were reduced to 20 items at recognition level and 10 items at the production level

The test was scored out of 100 so that each correct item was given four scores

The test was administered on May 5, 2022 to ensure that the students had finished the complete course of learning English using *English for Iraq* series.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### V. RESULTS

The results of the test were statistically computed. The mean scores of the correct and incorrect answers were first made. the percentages of both were also made. The aim was to see the average score and percentage obtained by the testees in each test item. These results are expected to shed light on the extent to which the testees have or have not mastered the structures under investigation

The scores of the correct and incorrect answers as well as the percentages for the whole test were computed the aim was to find out to what extent do the testes have mastered the basic grammatical structures.

The results indicate that the mean score for the correct answers is( Mean: 38.9) These result disconfirm the first hypothesis which reads: "after 10 years of using *English for Iraq* series, the Iraqi learners of English at tertiary level have had considerable command of grammatical forms and structures". The results also partially confirms the second hypothesis that" Iraqi learners face difficulty in passive constructions (Mean:20). While reported speech was near the average (mean 45). The grammatical forms and structures that have not been mastered after very long time (10 years) using *English for Iraq* series were: parallel structures (Mean:12), correlatives (Mean:17) , question tags (Mean: 30), words after preposition (Mean:32), present participle as an adjective (Mean: 20), the constructions "too...to" (Mean:10) and "not only... but also" (Mean:10) and the idiomatic use of prepositions (Mean: 19).

By contrast the grammatical forms and structures that seem to have been mastered were Concord (Mean: 62) conditionals (Mean:62), the use of relative pronouns (Mean:70 ) distinction between count and count nouns (Mean: 72).

## VI. DISCUSSION

The results obtained clearly show that after 10 years of studying English at a pre- University level following the *English for Iraq* series, the basic grammatical structures which have high frequency in standard books in English grammar have not been mastered. These results can be due to different reasons. First, the series focuses on the foreign language skills rather than Grammar so that the grammar has not been given its due interest. Second, the majority of teachers have not been adequately trained on teaching English using the communicative approach. They still use the traditional method in teaching the communicatively - oriented books and the students find themselves at loss and cannot make a match between the linguistic material introduced in the textbook and the handouts used by the teachers. Also students at pre-university level are used to

spoon feeding. They can hardly induce the underlying grammatical rules. They are accustomed to deductive teaching in which the teacher gives them the grammatical rules and examples that exemplify them. The last but not least reason is that teaching English at this level is examination- oriented where the aim of studying English is to pass the examination. Therefore, students rarely refer to the textbook to acquire knowledge and the texts and exercises are referred to only to simplify the point which the teacher highlights and is required in the examination.

It seems, then, that away out of the situation above the following might be reconsidered

1. The teachers should be trained on the methods of teaching and technics of presentation that are prescribed by the teacher's guide to *English for Iraq* series
2. Inductive teaching should be adopted and the students should be encouraged to induce the grammatical rules from the texts studied.
3. Emphasis should be placed on teaching the four language skills and the students should be encouraged to use the keys structures while using a task-based teaching prescribed by the series above.

## VII. CONCLUSION

From the results obtained one can easily conclude that the Iraqi EFL students at pre- university level have not mastered the basic grammatical forms and structures after 10 years of studying English as a foreign language using *English for Iraq* series. The Reason may be due to the teachers who are still teaching English according to the Grammar translation method and most of whom have not been trained in the communicative approach to language teaching. Tasks and information gap techniques are rarely used in the language classroom. The writer of the *English for Iraq* series do not take into consideration the Iraqi context, teachers' previous experience and preferences so that the topics and texts are of least interest to the students. It is hoped that further research would validate these assumption and provide a better basis for arguing that the textbook Series needs considerable review and amendment.

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## Appendix

**Table 1 The Average Scores Obtained by The Participants**

The Grammatical notions and structures	
correct answers	Incorrect answers
1. Concord	62
38	
2. tenses	56
74	
3. Passive constructions	20
80	
4. Parallel structures	12
88	
5. Conditionals	62
38	
6. Correlatives	17
83	
7. Reported speech	45
55	
8. Quantifiers	53
47	
9. comparison (sameness)	60
40	
10. comparison (difference)	53
47	
11. Verb-complementations	40
60	
12. question tags	30
70	
13. determiners	64
38	
14. non-finite clauses	41
59	

15. verb after prepositions		32
68		
16. present participle as adjective		20
80		
17. modals		69
31		
18. Zero articles		36
64		
19. used to		50
50		
20. Enough/too		32
68		
21. Too...to		10
90		
22. Used to		50
50		
23. genitive		30
70		
24. Two-word verbs		41
59		
25. indefinite pronouns		31
69		
26. relative pronouns		70
30		
27. not only ...but also		10
90		
28. Idiomatic use of prepositions	19	81
29. count/ non-count nouns	73	27
30. It/ there		50
50		