

Research paper

The Effect of Collaborative Task-based Language Teaching on the Acquisition of Subordinating Conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of collaborative task-based language teaching on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions among Iranian EFL learners. To this end, a quasi-experimental design with a pretest and posttest was utilized, and 80 female Iranian EFL learners, studying at Home of Language Institute, in Hamedan, Iran were selected from among a general population of 94 learners based on a double-stage convenience sampling. Then, they were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group, each one consisting of 40 female intermediate learners. The experimental group was taught the subordinating conjunctions through collaborative task-based language teaching and the control group received instruction through traditional method, each group for eight sessions. After completing the treatment as well as collecting and analyzing the necessary data, applying the statistical operation of gain score comparison revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the performances of the two groups in favor of the experimental group. The results showed that the experimental group had a better performance and got higher scores on the grammatical test of subordinating conjunctions in comparison to the control group. Overall, the findings showed that collaborative task-based language teaching had a positive effect on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions as an important aspect of English language grammar and thus can enhance the writing skill of the learners in the long run. This conclusion bears significant implications and applications for all the stakeholders in the field.

Keywords: *Collaborative Task-based Language Teaching, Subordinating Conjunctions, Iranian EFL Learner, Grammar Acquisition, Writing Skill*

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Introduction

According to Gelb (2025), writing is a medium of human communication that involves the representation of a language with symbols. Writing systems are not themselves human languages (with the debatable exception of computer languages); they are means of rendering a language into a form that can be reconstructed by other humans separated by time and/or space. According to Olson (2017), the fact that writing is in principle the representation of language rather than a direct illustration of thought and the fact that spoken language has a number of levels of structure, including sentences, words, syllables, and phonemes, any one of which a writing system can “map onto” or represent.

Calvert and Sheen (2014) stated that collaborative task-based language teaching has a lot of benefits. For example, it can develop self-management and leadership skills, increase employee skills and knowledge, improve relationships across teams and departments among other benefits. According to Kafipour (2018), collaborative task-based language teaching is any activity where learners are working co-operatively in pairs or groups, such as: pair or group discussions, completing shared tasks in a pair or group, matching, sorting, ranking, activities or games with a competitive element, drama and role play, and information exchange activities.

According to Biber et al. (2021), in writing many items are very important and a good writing contains a mix of simple sentences and complex sentences. Subordinating conjunctions are one of these items in writing and subordinating conjunctions have an important role in writing. According to Nordquist (2020), subordinating conjunctions can be found in sentences containing

two clauses: an independent or main clause and a dependent clause. They must come at the beginning of a dependent clause. Subordinators help lend meaning to a sentence by linking two ideas (Nordquist, 2020). Time, concession, comparison, cause, condition, and place are the types of subordinating conjunctions, categorized by meaning (Long, 2016). Many subordinators are single words such as *because*, *before*, and *when*, but some subordinating conjunctions consist of more than one word such as *even though*, *as long as*, and *except that*. According to Sorenson (2019), the most common subordinating conjunctions in the English language include: *than*, *rather than*, *whether*, *as much as*, *whereas*, *that*, *whatever*, *which*, *whichever*, *after*, *as soon as*, *as long as*, *before*, *by the time*, *now that*, *once*, *since*, *till*, *until*, *when*, *whenever*, *while*, *though*, *although*, *even though*, *who*, *whoever*, *whom*, *whomever*, *whose*, *where*, *wherever*, *if*, *only if*, *unless*, *provided that*, *assuming that*, *even if*, *in case (that)*, *lest*, *how*, *as though*, *as if*, *because*, *since*, *so that*, *in order (that)*, *that* and so on.

According to Robin (2020), subordinating conjunctions are many in number and we use them regularly in our daily communication without knowing. Subordinating conjunctions have different properties and they can be grouped accordingly:

- Those which show cause and effect (that show reason)
- Those which show the significance of time or place
- Those which show condition

Talking the above points into accounts, the purpose of the current study is to investigate the effect of collaborative task-based language teaching on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners.

According to Long (2016), collaborative task-based language teaching is the educational approach of using groups to enhance learning through working together. Learners work with each

other on projects, where they must collaborate as a group to understand the concepts being presented to them (Fitria, 2022; Skehan, 2003). Through defending their positions, reframing ideas, listening to other viewpoints and articulating their points, learners will gain a more complete understanding as a group than they could as individuals (Bjelobaba et al., 2023; Harmer, 2007). In collaborative task-based language teaching, individual participants must also take responsibility for their team learning and succeeding, but their roles, resources, and organization is left up to them (Athanzludwig, 2019). Collaborative task-based language teaching is often used in a positive context to refer to two or more parties successfully working together on a goal or shared project (Aksoy-Pekacar, 2024; Lamas, 2019).

According to Benwell (2015), complex sentences have two clauses, a main (independent) clause, and a subordinate (dependent) clause which are joined by subordinating conjunctions. A subordinating conjunction is a word or phrase that links a dependent clause to an independent clause (Benwell, 2015). According to Sorenson (2019), subordinating conjunctions have an important role in collaborative task-based language teaching. They must come at the beginning of a dependent clause. Subordinators help lend meaning to a sentence by linking two ideas (Nordquist, 2020; Rodríguez, 2021). Time, concession, comparison, cause, condition, and place are the types of subordinating conjunctions, categorized by meaning (Long, 2016; Lubis, 2021).

Many subordinators are single words such as *because*, *before*, and *when*, but some subordinating conjunctions consist of more than one word such as *even though*, *as long as*, and *except that*.

A number of studies have been previously done to shed light on the link between the above-mentioned variables, some of which are reported below. Webb (1995) investigated the relationship between collaborative task-based language teaching, coordinating conjunctions and writing ability of university EFL learners. To do so, a sample of 80 was selected randomly from among male and

female university students. To collect data, two questionnaires, one for collaborative TBLT and one for coordinating conjunctions were used. The collected data were analyzed by the SPSS 25.0 software. For evaluating the writing ability of the subjects, learners were supposed to write a paragraph with a similar and specific topic. The writings, then, were evaluated by two raters and inter rater scale was used to validate the result. This study was a correlational study in which both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were used. As revealed by the results, there was no significant relationship between collaborative task-based language teaching, coordinating conjunctions and writing ability of university EFL learners.

Abdul (2016) investigated the effect of collaborative task-based language teaching on correlative conjunctions among Iranian EFL learners. The research question addressed included: Does collaborative task-based language teaching have any significant effect on the acquisition of correlative conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners? The written productions of the groups were collected and analyzed using t-test. As revealed by the results, there was no significant effect of collaborative task-based language teaching on the acquisition of correlative conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners.

Finally, Setiawan (2011) investigated the impact of audio-lingual method on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions and listening skill of Iranian EFL learners. After collecting and analyzing data, the results revealed that audio-lingual teaching methodology has a positive effect on learner's acquisition of subordinating conjunctions as well as their listening skill.

Based on Nunan (1989), tasks as organized sets of activities play an essential role in the classroom learning process. Collaborative task-based language teaching is an approach that emphasizes the significance of the role of tasks in these processes. As learners in EFL contexts have fewer opportunities to practice language outside school, classroom activities become more

important (Nunan, 1989). Previous studies have investigated in general the effect of TBLT as a new communicative teaching method on both language skills and components. Some studies have focused on the macro-skills including reading, listening, speaking and writing while some other investigations have dealt with the micro-skills of language including grammar, spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary. However, there is a severe paucity of research in two aspects. First, different models or methods of TBLT have not been taken into account. Depending on task characteristics, TBLT consists of such models such as ‘one-way or two-way’, ‘convergent or divergent’, ‘collaborative or competitive’, ‘single or multiple outcomes’ (Nunan, 1989). As mentioned earlier, previous studies have considered TBLT in its totality as a general teaching method and have not paid attention to its different models. Different models of TBLT can lead to different learning outcomes. In this regard, the present research has been planned to work on collaborative TBLT as a major type of communicative approach. The second problem with previous research, as already mentioned, is that such studies have traditionally gone for language skills and components while there are many other factors which can lend themselves to effective research. In this respect, the current investigation, choosing a collaborative task-based approach, has focused on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions as an important element of English grammar. Although the existing instruction in collaborative task-based language teaching seems to have some effects on students’ ability to communicate, it is the sense of both students and departmental instructors that subordinating conjunctions instruction could be more effective and result in a higher student standard in collaborative task-based language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Moreover, this study might be regarded as a pilot study of a new approach in subordinating conjunctions which may increase learner interaction in collaborative task-based

language teaching and beyond. Consequently, for the purpose of the current study, the following research questions and hypotheses were proposed.

The present research tried to answer the following question:

RQ: Does collaborative task-based language teaching have any significant effect on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners?

NH: Collaborative task-based language teaching does not have any significant effects on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were 94 Iranian EFL learners who were studying English at Home of Language Institute in Hamedan, Iran. 80 participants whose score fell ± 1 SD above and below the mean were selected in a double stage sampling. By administering Oxford Placement Test, the researcher was sure that the selected participants were in intermediate level. All the participants were female, and their age range was from 28 to 36. The homogenized participants were divided into two equal groups: one control and the other was experimental. There were 40 intermediate female participants in each group.

Instrumentation

To do this research, certain instruments were used to measure the participants' abilities in terms of language proficiency and their knowledge of subordinating conjunctions in English.

Subordinating Conjunctions Test

This test was made by the researcher. It consisted of 30 items measuring the participants' knowledge of the subordinating conjunctions. The questions were in multiple choice format having four options. The test took twenty-two minutes to be completed. The validity of the test was checked by two experts in the field of ELT in Iran, and the reliability of the test calculated through KR-21 formula was found to be 0.84, showing a rather high index. Although the subordinating conjunctions test was researcher-made and had not been previously used as a standardized instrument in earlier studies, its content was developed based on widely accepted grammatical descriptions and classifications of subordinating conjunctions in the literature. To ensure its appropriateness for research purposes, the test items were reviewed by two ELT experts, and acceptable reliability was established prior to the main administration.

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

OPT was used in order to check the proficiency level of the students. It is one of the most famous and standard tests for specifying ESL or EFL learners' level of language proficiency. This test consisted of 60 items in the form of multiple choice questions, and students were supposed to choose the correct answer from among the alternatives for each question. The required time to complete the test was 40 minutes and the reliability of the OPT test calculated through a KR-21 formula was found to be 0.84, which is an acceptable index of reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

First of all, 94 participants were selected based on convenient sampling from Home of Language institute in Hamedan. Next, they were homogenized through an Oxford Placement Test

and a sample of 80 female Iranian EFL learners, having the same proficiency level, were selected. The students who were at the intermediate level of proficiency were divided into two groups, one control group and one experimental group and there were 40 intermediate female participants in each group. Totally, there were eight sessions of treatment for the experimental group and eight sessions of conventional teaching for the control group. The experimental group received collaborative task-based language teaching to work on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions in English and the control group was taught subordinating conjunctions through traditional methods of teaching grammar.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

TBLT in the present study refers to an instructional approach in which learners worked collaboratively in pairs or small groups to complete meaning-focused tasks designed to promote the use of subordinating conjunctions. Collaboration was operationalized through group-based problem-solving tasks, information-gap activities, and joint writing tasks implemented during eight instructional sessions.

Subordinating Conjunctions were operationally defined as grammatical connectors used to link dependent clauses to independent clauses, including conjunctions expressing time, cause, condition, concession, and comparison. In this study, learners' knowledge of subordinating conjunctions was measured through a researcher-made multiple-choice test consisting of 30 items administered as both pretest and posttest.

Acquisition refers to the learners' improvement in their knowledge of subordinating conjunctions as evidenced by the difference between their pretest and posttest scores on the subordinating conjunctions test.

Results

Results of the Proficiency Test

In order to have homogenized participants in terms of their general English language proficiency, the Oxford Placement Test was administered. The descriptive statistics for the OPT is displayed in table 1 below.

Table 1

The Descriptive Statistics of the Oxford Test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Oxford Test	94	25.00	39.00	31.9787	2.84729
Valid N (listwise)	94				

As it can be seen in table 1 above, the mean and the standard deviation of the participants were 31.97 and 2.84 respectively. The descriptive statistics for the homogenized participants is displayed in table 2.

Table 2.

The Descriptive Statistics of the Homogenized Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Homogenized	80	28.00	36.00	31.7125	1.76602
Valid N (listwise)	80				

As it can be seen in table 2 above, the mean and the standard deviation of the homogenized participants were 31.71 and 1.76 respectively. Hence, out of 94 participants, 80 were considered homogenous members based on their scores of OPT ranging from 28 to 36 (intermediate level). Figure 1 below shows the histogram with normal curve for the homogenized participants.

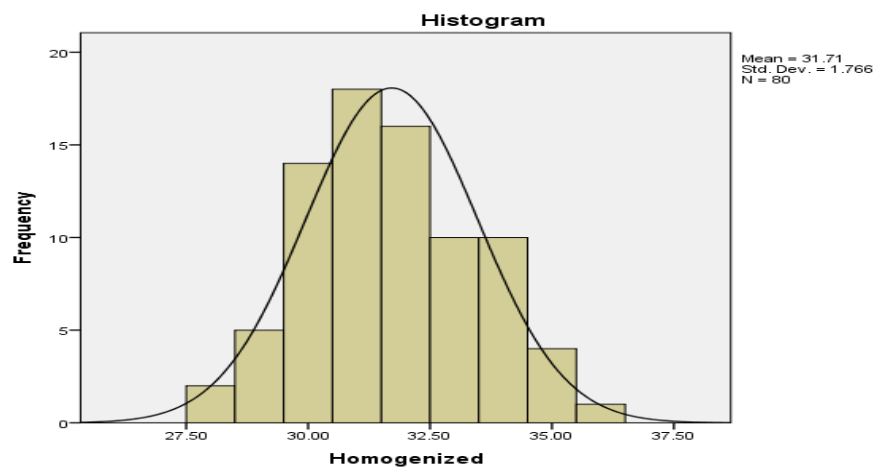


Figure 1. Histogram with normal curve for the OPT scores of the homogenized member.

Answering the Research Question

The research question of this study was aimed at finding if collaborative task-based language teaching had any effect on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners. Table 3 below shows the descriptive statistics of the pretests and posttests of the two groups.

Table 3.

The Descriptive Statistics for the Pretests and Posttests Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cont_Pre	40	11.00	20.00	14.2500	2.16913
Cont_Post	40	10.00	22.00	15.8750	2.81195
Exp_Pre	40	10.00	19.00	15.0000	2.54196
Exp_Post	40	13.00	25.00	19.0250	3.33195
Valid N (listwise) 40					

As it can be observed in the above table, the mean scores for the pretest and posttest of the control group were 14.25 and 15.87 while the mean scores for the pretest and posttest of the experimental group were 15 and 19.02, respectively.

Since the design of the study was quasi-experimental with pretest and posttest, the pretest scores of the participants were taken as the covariate, and naturally analysis of covariate (ANCOVA) should be used. However, before running ANCOVA, certain assumptions should be checked. Table 4. below shows the result of the test of normality.

Table 4.
The Result of the Test of Normality for Checking the Normal Data Distribution Assumption

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Cont_Pre	.096	40	.200*	.953	40	.096
Cont_Post	.082	40	.200*	.972	40	.402
Exp_Pre	.178	40	.003	.944	40	.047
Exp_Post	.159	40	.013	.944	40	.047

The result of both Kolmogoro-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality shows that the data are not normally distributed for the experimental group ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the ANCOVA cannot be used, and gain score comparison should be used instead. The gain score comparison, which is the difference between the posttest and the pretest, was taken into account. The descriptive statistics of the gain scores of the two groups are shown below.

Table 5.
Descriptive Statistics for the Gain Scores of the Control and Experimental Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gain Control	40	-3.00	9.00	1.6250	3.20006
Gain Experimental	40	-2.00	12.00	4.0250	3.23829
Valid N (listwise)	40				

The mean and standard deviation of the control and the experimental groups are 1.62, 3.20 and 4.02, 3.23, respectively. Table 6 below shows the result of the normality test for the selection of the appropriate inferential test.

Table 6

The Test of Normality for the Control and Experimental Groups

Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk			
Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.	
Gain_Cont	0.127	40	0.100	0.945	40	0.050
Gain_Exp	0.079	40	0.200*	0.974	40	0.480

The result of both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality shows that the data are normally distributed for the two sets ($P > 0.05$). Therefore, the appropriate test for mean comparison would be the Independent-Samples t-test. The result of the inferential test is shown below.

Table 7.

The Result of the Independent-Samples T-Test for the Comparison of the Control and Experimental Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Gain_Scores	Equal variances assumed	0.162	0.688	3.334	78	0.001	-2.40	0.71
	Equal variances not assumed			3.334	77.98	0.001	-2.40	0.71

Based on Table 7 above, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups, $t(78) = 3.33$, $p < 0.05$. Therefore, the researcher safely rejected the null hypothesis, meaning that collaborative task-based language teaching had a statistically significant effect on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions among Iranian EFL Learners.

Discussion

Collecting the necessary data and analyzing the obtained results showed that the hypothesis derived from the research question is not rejected. Tables (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7) illustrated that there was statistically a significant positive effect for applying task-based approach on learning a grammatical aspect of English language among Iranian intermediate EFL learners studying in a language institute in Hamedan. Relying on a variety of EFL teachers' perspectives, this change might occur due to the following variables: gender, type of task-based language teaching, and years of experience.

Beyond confirming the effectiveness of collaborative task-based language teaching, the findings of the present study can be theoretically explained through the role of interaction and meaningful language use in grammar acquisition. Collaborative tasks require learners to negotiate meaning, jointly construct sentences, and provide feedback to one another, which increases learners' attention to form while maintaining a primary focus on meaning. This interactional environment facilitates noticing of grammatical forms, including subordinating conjunctions, and promotes deeper cognitive processing compared to traditional rule-based instruction. As learners are exposed to multiple instances of subordinating conjunctions in authentic communicative contexts, they are more likely to internalize their functions and appropriate usage.

The significant improvement observed in learners' acquisition of subordinating conjunctions can also be attributed to the nature of collaborative tasks, which naturally encourage the production of complex sentences. In collaborative problem-solving and joint writing tasks, learners are required to express reasons, conditions, time relations, and contrasts, all of which necessitate the use of subordinating conjunctions. This repeated and purposeful use of complex sentence

structures may explain why learners in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group, who were mainly exposed to isolated grammatical explanations and mechanical practice.

While previous studies have mainly emphasized the general effectiveness of task-based language teaching on language skills and components, the present study extends existing research by demonstrating that collaborative task-based instruction can be particularly effective for the acquisition of specific grammatical features. Unlike earlier studies that treated grammar learning as a secondary outcome, this research highlights how collaborative tasks can directly contribute to the development of grammatical accuracy by creating conditions that integrate form, meaning, and use. Therefore, the findings not only align with earlier research but also provide a more nuanced explanation of how collaborative task-based language teaching supports grammar acquisition.

Findings of the current study revealed that teachers do believe in the positive effect of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in general and collaborative TBLT in specific on learners' acquisition of English language skills and components. This result was supported by Omaggio (2001), Ellis (2003), and Nunan (2004) who agreed that TBLT with intermediate learners can work very well because it engages the learners in acquiring the language experientially, through "doing". Moreover, this result supported Buglar and Hunt (2002) findings that learners who participated in task-based project found the experience to be intrinsically interesting and educationally beneficial.

On the other hand, this result didn't support Carless's study (2002; 2003; 2004) who concluded that there is no evidence to support TBLT's superiority to other language pedagogies in teaching a foreign language to children. Carless (2012) asserted that TBLT might negatively affect children's foreign language learning since they are overburdened with learning the foreign language and performing tasks concurrently, and they may not be able to balance the two.

Conclusion

The present study examined the effect of collaborative task-based language teaching on the acquisition of subordinating conjunctions among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The findings indicated that learners who were exposed to collaborative task-based instruction significantly outperformed those who received traditional grammar instruction. This result suggests that collaborative task-based language teaching provides an effective instructional framework for enhancing learners' grammatical knowledge, particularly in the use of subordinating conjunctions. Overall, the study offers empirical evidence supporting the positive role of collaborative task-based language teaching in EFL grammar acquisition.

The findings of the present study carry several pedagogical implications for EFL learners, teachers, material developers, and syllabus designers. Given the positive impact of collaborative task-based language teaching on learners' acquisition of subordinating conjunctions, EFL teachers are encouraged to incorporate collaborative, meaning-focused tasks into grammar instruction. Such tasks can provide learners with opportunities to use grammatical forms in communicative and interactive contexts rather than through isolated rule-based practice.

For learners, engaging in collaborative tasks can promote deeper processing of grammatical structures through peer interaction, negotiation of meaning, and shared problem-solving. These processes may help learners retain grammatical knowledge more effectively and apply it more accurately in writing tasks.

Material developers and syllabus designers may benefit from integrating collaborative task-based activities into grammar-focused materials, particularly those targeting complex sentence structures such as subordinating conjunctions. Designing tasks that require joint text construction and contextualized language use can enhance learners' grammatical development.

Finally, language institutes and educational policymakers may consider adopting collaborative task-based instructional approaches as part of their curriculum design, as such approaches can contribute to creating a more interactive and learner-centered classroom environment conducive to effective grammar learning.

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