If you Don't Know your Destination, Any Road Can Take you: On the Merits of Instructional Objectives

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ABSTRACT: Identifying objectives which is the first step in planning can lead the instructional and assessment processes and also provides us with reliable and valid information about student achievement. To this end, the current study compared two groups of Iranian EFL learners. A pretest and posttest design was used, where participants' ability to recognize and produce the target feature was assessed. Results showed that EG performed significantly better than CG in recognition, and as well as in production on the posttest. The students views, elicited after the study, were compatible with the data obtained from the analysis of the first question quantitative data.

Keywords: Destination, Merits, Instructional Objectives.

INTRODUCTION

Developing learning objectives is one of the most critical steps to indicate that a second language course is designed to achieve certain objectives. In fact, in most of the classroom contexts teachers ignore the vital role of specifying the course objectives at the beginning of a course program, and they only take into consideration the instructional plans and how these plans are put into practice. However, it is necessary to note that an explicit course objective description can inform the other aspects of instructional processes including instructional plans and practices. Genesee and Upshur, (1996), for example, state that in most of the second language classrooms students who enroll in the course do not have the same needs because course objectives are chosen in advance in accordance with the probable needs of an assumed group of learners. However, by describing instructional objectives and removing the inequality between students' needs and objectives, we can call for a change in the redesigning of instructional objectives, plans, practices and even learning outcomes. Gronlund, (2004) also expresses that when course objectives are delineated at the beginning of the program, they can lead us in the selection of instructional materials, encourage and ease the attainment of desired outcome. Considering the key role of course objectives in different aspects of language teaching and testing contexts, Genesee and Upshur, (1996) state that:

"On the one hand, they provide direction for planning appropriate instruction, and, on the other hand, they provide a basis for determining whether you have achieved what you set out to accomplish- they provide criteria for assessing the outcomes of your teaching"(p. 16).

Huba and Freed, (2000) also claim that if we want our students to achieve certain learning objectives at the end of the course, we should provide them with proper opportunities to understand what they need to learn. In fact, teachers should try to involve them in the course preparation and ask for their real needs in order to help them learn what they want to learn. In other words, students must know exactly what is expected of them. They will thus arrange his schedule to meet those activities which will make them able to achieve the course objectives. They will see themselves in a better position to differentiate between more and less important tasks covered by the course. They will thus avoid spending their time on details of the subject-matter which they consider to be less relevant.

They will not have to follow the behavior of their teacher in order to guess what the latter considers important and what may be expected to be the subject-matter of the evaluation. In order to consider the role of language objectives in developing self- directed learners, Reilly and Oermann (1990) also state that providing learners with course objectives at the beginning of the course will result in having learners who are responsible for their own learning and they also try to take part in activities that provide them with opportunities to attain the desired outcomes.

In order to realize the key role of instructional objectives or purposes and to show how they are related to other types of instructional process, we try to summarize three aspects of teaching and learning that have a key role in classroom-based evaluation.
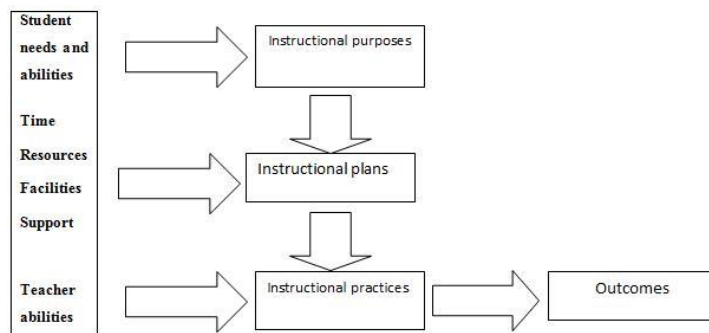
Figure 1. The context of classroom-based evaluation (Adopted from Genesee & Upshur, 1996)

Genesee and Upshur, (1996) believe that that instruction consists of three components called purposes, plans, and practices which are shown above. The purposes make out language objectives and form instructional plans. Within the instructional plans framework, the focus will be on ways which help us to realize the instructional objectives. Finally, instructional practices can provide us with practices to put our above-cited plans into real outcome. It should be mentioned that when teachers change the instructional purposes, then a change is called in instructional plans and practices. In other words, when a type of mismatch occurred between students' needs and instructional objectives, attempts should be made to find an instant change which eliminates the potential problem.
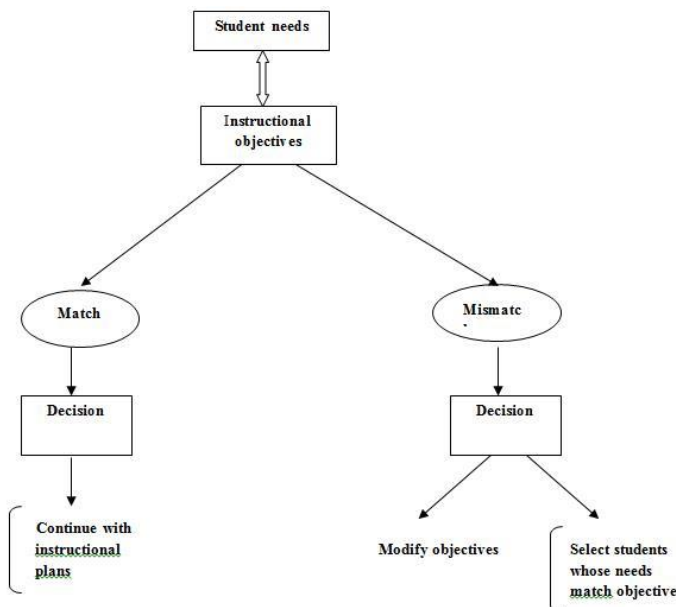
Figure 2. Mismatches and decision making (Adopted from Genesee & Upshur ,1996)

Genesee and Upshur, (1996) claim that language objectives can include an entire course of instruction or an individual unit and lesson. The former is called course objectives and the latter is called unit and lesson objectives. Course objectives are designed to meet general objectives and the unit or individual objectives deal with more

specific and detailed objectives. Since course objectives are very general and cannot be described completely or adequately in specific terms and they are also beyond the scope of our paper, we try to consider a subskill called grammar in which a particular grammatical rule (conditional sentences) will be considered in the framework of unit objectives. It should be mentioned that our unit of grammar is based on 3 lessons which include 3types of conditional sentences.

In most of the Iranian EFL classrooms students enroll in the course programs without being aware of the specific course objectives which are chosen for them in advance. In other words when specific objectives are designed in conformity with the predictable needs of a hypothetical group, it just makes them feel like giving up their course due to possible mismatch between actual student need and instructional objectives. As has been mentioned before, students will not be in a win-situation if they are not informed about the objectives adequately. So, there is a need for an explicit course objective description at the outset to help learners anticipate satisfactory outcomes if they keep at the course in which specific objectives are being pursued in their teacher's program. In other words, when objectives are properly written, teachers attempt to answer directly the question of what you expect learners to achieve.

The present study aims mainly to investigate the impact of providing unit objectives description prior to instruction in improving students' learning and we also concentrate on whether the unit objectives are achieved from students' perspective at the end of the unit program. More specifically, it aims at answering the following questions:
(1) Does delineating unit objectives prior to instruction help students achieve intended unit outcomes?
(2) Are the unit objectives achieved from students' perspectives at the end of the term and are their perspectives compatible with the first question numerical data?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Method
Participants
The present study is conducted in two language institutions located in Guilan province of Iran. The participants who take part in this study are 61 (M = 31; F = 30) Iranian intermediate EFL students who are native speakers of Persian. The participants have no familiarity with any other foreign languages except English language. The age of participants ranges from 19 to 24 years old. The participants will be selected from among a group of 90 EFL students by means of administering the NTC's TOEFL test of language proficiency. The selected students will be those with an intermediate level of language proficiency. Finally, the students will be randomly assigned into an experimental group and a control group.

Instrument
First of all, all of the participants sit for the NTC's TOEFL test of language proficiency in order for their level of language proficiency to be assessed. To address the first research question:

The recognition tests have been adopted from Izumi & Bigelow (2000) and Song and Suh (2008) studies and also are based on *Understanding and Using English Grammar*, and *Grammar in Use, Intermediate Course Book*. Each version consists of 20 items, of which 16 serve for target items and 4 uses as detractors. Of the 16 sentences which include the target structure, 6 of them are correct and 10 incorrect. Seven of the target items began with if clauses and 9 with main clauses. The participants are required to read the tests and to determine whether they are correct and, if incorrect, to underline the incorrect part and produce the correct form. The recognition test items are scored as either correct or incorrect. A half point is given when the learners make a correct judgment about a sentence and underlined the incorrect part, but do not make the correction. Zero point is given when the learners make a correct judgment on each sentence but do not underline the incorrect part of the sentence.

The production tests have also been adopted from Izumi and Bigelow (2000) and Song and Suh (2006) studies and are also based on *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. Pre and post production tests consisted of 10 sets of situations which require the students to read them and to write one sentence in each context calling for the target structure. In order to motivate the students to use the desired target structure, a prompt (e.g., If, Reza, If my father), was also provided for each item. The production test is scored based on the accuracy of the targetlike use analysis. We give 1 point for each target-like production of the conditional form. As there are ten target items in the production tests, the maximum score for each *if*-clause and main clause is 10, and the maximum score for both is 20.

As I have explained we applied two test methods to assess the participants' knowledge of the target form in English: a recognition test and a production test. Two versions of each test were administered. Students received

version A as a pre test and version B for the post test. The reliability for all tests was calculated through KR-21 formula. The correlation coefficients for recognition pre and post tests turned to be 0.75 and 0.70. As with recognition, the analyses of reliability for production pre and post tests yielding the correlation of 0.74 and 0.78. Regarding the validity, it was also estimated for all tests. We calculated the amount of correlation coefficient between our newly- developed tests and the subtest (looking at grammar part) of a valid test. This showed that the correlation coefficient for recognition pre and post tests were   0 .70, 0 .74 and 0.71, 0.70 for production pre and post tests. Furthermore, we also calculated the amount of correlation coefficient of the newly-developed tests and the other subtests part (vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, and writing) of a valid test. As expected, the result showed that since each two subtests were indeed testing different traits or skills, the correlation between our newly-developed tests and other subtests was low.

Furthermore, in order to address the second research question, students will take part in an interview in which the students of each group were asked two questions on the unit objectives efficacy and their effects on their intended unit outcomes.

1. Were you successful at reaching your intended unit objectives which had been described at the beginning of the term?

2. If so, how helpful did you find the role of unit objectives awareness prior to instruction in helping you achieve your intended outcomes?

In order to assess the reliability of qualitative data, we asked our students to take part in our interview and answer the questions for the second time two weeks later. The correlation coefficient between students' views within the first and the second interview was calculated and turned out to be 0.94%.

Procedure

The experimental sequence of the study will be carried out over a period of approximately 1 month. 61 intermediate learners were selected from 90 students in two English language institutions. Based on a NTC's TOEFL proficiency level test, they were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. One week prior to the first treatment session all the participants took part in the two pre tests which involved the recognition test and the production test. Then, in the experimental class, before instruction begins, the teacher provided students with instructional objectives including:

A description of what the learner will be doing when demonstrating that he/she has reached the objective.

A description of the important conditions under which the learner will demonstrate his/her competence.

An indication of how the learner will be evaluated, or what constitutes acceptable performance.

In order to consider the above- cited issues in this study, the teacher expresses them as follows:

Within 6 sessions in the learning class (condition), the students (experimental group learners) will develop receptive (recognize) and productive (use) knowledge of conditional sentences (behavior) which will be assessed through conducting a recognition and production tests.

As we can see the only difference between experimental and control groups lies in the fact that teacher only provided the experimental group learners with all of the above-cited information. After it, the same instructional plans and instructional practices were followed in the both EG and CG classes. At the end, both of the EG and CG students took part in the post-recognition and production tests in order to see the possible changes of the learners from pre-tests to the post-tests. We also interviewed the experimental group students at the end of the term to ask for their perspectives concerning the unit objectives attainment. They had to answer the following two questions:

1. Were you successful at reaching your intended unit objectives which had been described at the beginning of the term?

2. If so, how helpful did you find the role of unit objectives awareness prior to instruction in helping you achieve your intended outcomes?

In order to see the degree of comparability between their perspectives in the oral interview and their scores in the first research question, their perspectives were compared against the numerical data achieved through the first research question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To address the first research question regarding the effects of unit objectives on the accuracy of using the target structure, a *t*-test test was done in order to make sure there were no pre-treatment differences among the 2 groups t (61)= 0.47$, p$ >0.05 for recognition test and t (61)= 0.87, p >0.05 for production test. Based on the results

showing that the two groups were equal in their pre-treatment knowledge of the target form, the differences in the post-tests among the groups, if any, could be due to the respective treatment that each group received. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the means of the two groups' performance in the production pretest were EG= 63.16, and CG= 61.27, and recognition pretest were EG =69.86, and CG=65.15 and the means increased to EG= 82.78, and CG= 69.27 respectively on the production posttest and to EG =93.47, and CG= 67.42, respectively on the recognition posttest. The second t-test conducted on the two groups' scores in the post production and recognition tests indicated that there was a significant effect for treatment on the post-treatment production test t (61)= 2.12, p <0.05, and on the post-treatment recognition test scores test t (61)= 2.73, p <0.05.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for production test scores

		Pretest		Posttest	
Group	n	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
EG	31	63.16	20.02	82.78	69.27
CG	30	61.27	17.35	22.04	17.41

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for recognition test scores

		Pretest		Posttest	
Group	n	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
EG	31	69.86	31.56	93.47	10.48
CG	30	65.15	34.12	67.42	30.15

Since the experimental group outperformed the control group, we interviewed the experimental group at the end of the experiment in order to clarify how unit objectives description prior to instruction helped them to achieve unit objectives. So in order to address the second research question, they were asked to answer the following questions:
1. Were you successful at reaching your intended unit objectives which had been described at the beginning of the term?
2. If so, how helpful did you find the role of unit objectives awareness prior to instruction in helping you achieve your intended outcomes?
For the first question, most of the experimental students (about 78%) believed that they were successful at reaching intended unit objectives which had been described at the beginning of the term. However, about 22% said that they were not able to reach the intended unit objectives.

Table 3. Results of the first question of interview for EG

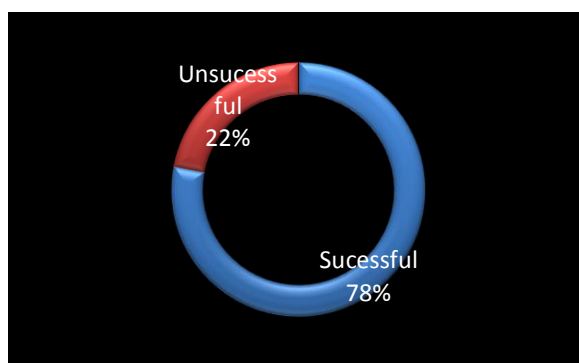| Questions	Frequency	Percentage
Results of the interview for EG		
1. I was successful at reaching unit objectives.	32	78.04%
I was not successful at reaching unit objectives.	9	21.95%

Figure 5. The percentage of unit objectives achievement for EG

For the second research question, about 73% said they found the role of unit objectives awareness prior to instruction helpful in developing their receptive and productive knowledge of conditional sentences. However, about 27% believed that they did not find it helpful.
As one student pointed out:
When my teacher described clearly what we want to learn before beginning the course, I expected to improve a specific category of grammar in this class and I refused to give up my course objectives.

Another student also stated that:

It is quite useless to be in a class unless you know the reason. When my teacher told us about the course objectives, I wanted to achieve them and do the tasks successfully.

Table 4. Results of the second question of interview for EG

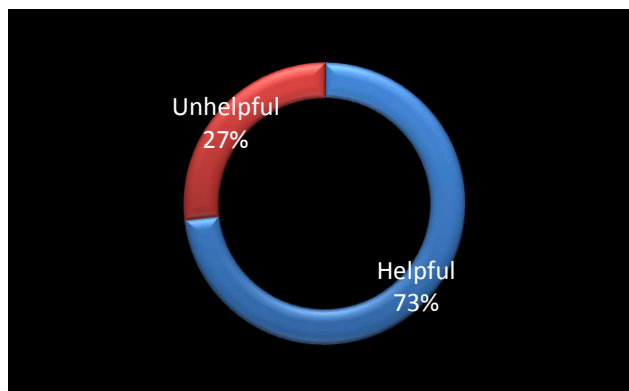| Questions	Frequency	Percentage
Results of the interview for EG		
1. Unit objectives awareness prior to instruction was helpful.	**30**	**73.17%**
Unit objectives awareness prior to instruction was not helpful.	**11**	**26.82%**

Figure 6. The percentage of unit objectives helpfulness for EG

On the whole, the comments of the experimental groups support the data presented in Table 1. That is the students in experimental group were more successful in developing their receptive and productive knowledge of conditional sentences. It can be noted since students' views were compatible with data presented in table 1, it can be said that providing the students with unit objectives in advance had a positive effect on the experimental group learners ability to develop their receptive and productive knowledge of conditional sentences. In other words, they were not only able to recognize the incorrect forms of target structure, but were also able to produce them correctly.

This study emphasized on the fact that if teachers spend some time and provide their students with a clear statement of course/unit/lesson objective before jumping to the instructional plans or practices stages, students can have a criterion for themselves to check their progress during instructional process. In fact students will understand whether the intended objectives please their own real needs and if so, they will move toward them in order to fulfill their own dreams. A clear description of your instructional goals for a course will aid settle on the pathway to develop the course. The results of this study confirm effectiveness of identifying objectives as the first step of an instructional plan and the fundamental part of teaching- learning assessment process (Airasian, 2001; Gronlund, 2004; Huba & Freed, 2000; Mager, 1997; Nitko, 2004). As Genesee and Upshur, (1996) say" course objectives should be described in such a way that anyone who reads them will gain a clear idea of how students will be able to use the second language if teaching and learning are successful"(p. 21). Reilly and Oermann (1990) believe that when students know what they are supposed to be able to accomplish from beginning of the instruction, they will be responsible for their own achievements and they are given the chance to plan their activities in such a way that can help them to achieve their intended outcomes. Weimer, (1993) also state that instructional objectives will help determine the pathway to develop effective planning, teaching, learning and assessment processes through identifying what we expect our students to be able to do at the end of the course.

Having realized the important role of objectives prior to instruction, Genesee and Upshur (1996) claim that sometimes we are interested in understanding whether students can achieve their goal at the end of course or instruction. However, they continue that it is not necessary for teachers to wait until the end of the instruction to assess their learners' progress. Many of the teachers try to modify their course instruction at the end of the course. However, we should know that "if the comparison is made at the end of the course, then changes will benefit future students only; the current group cannot profit from these modifications Genesee and Upshur, (1996).

It should be mentioned that we should try to involve our students in educational classes and consider their needs, abilities and ideas to have more motivated students who are aware of instructional processes. Finally, although we have said that instructional objectives are the key components of educational planning, and they will help our students to know what will be taught, achieved and assessed, it is necessary to know that instructional

objectives should be written in a clear way and they should not allow for a different types of interpretation. Mager, (1997) also states that when you write instructional objectives, you should show what the learner is expected to achieve and not what the instructor is supposed to do. Mager, (1997) also continues that teachers should avoid using unclear phrases such as "to understand," "to appreciate," "to internalize," and "to know" which are immeasurable or unobservable. These kinds of words are open to a variety of interpretation.

CONCULSION

This study is among the first few contributing to the instructional objectives literature by comparing EG and CG learners' prior and non-prior awareness of instructional objectives. The result indicated that learners' awareness of unit objectives prior to the instruction enabled them to recognize and produce three types of conditional sentences with significantly greater accuracy in the posttests. The present study also tried to find whether unit objectives were achieved from learners 'own perspectives at the end of the study. The experimental group learners views, elicited after the study, supported the findings obtained from the analysis of the quantitative data.

The pedagogical implication of the study insists on the fact that although teachers try to figure out useful instructional techniques in their teaching experience, they can also use instructional objective itself as a helpful instructional technique which can help EFL learners achieve course objectives within the course. In fact instructional objective gives us a comprehensive view of teachers and students current input factors which could really play a fundamental role concerning the success of teaching program.

In addition, when we review the literature, we realize that researchers tried to find out focus on form techniques to catch learners' attention to their desired objectives. However, the benefits of instructional objectives found in this study add additional evidence to the usefulness of instructional objectives in general, where learners' attention can be drawn to the objectives not only while accomplishing the meaningful task but also throughout the course program.

Our understanding of the benefits of instructional objectives can be enriched by future studies which take into consideration some course objectives referring to various domains of language performance which will provide an adequate basis for evaluating student learning.

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