

An Action Research on Improving the Ability of Using Pre-nominal Possessives in ESL Writing among Grade Seven Students at a Government School

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Abstract

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) is a huge and responsible task which requires a significant degree of experiment on the part of the ESL teacher. Over the years, second language educators have digressed from form-focused methods such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and the Audiolingual Method (AM) to meaning-focused methods such as Community Language Teaching (CLT) and Community Language Learning (CLL). Learning grammar structures of a second language, especially English, is naturally challenging for learners as the syntactic patterns can be significantly different from their native languages. This study investigated the use of one such grammatical structure which is prenominal possessives among a group of grade 7 students at a government school in Colombo. The study was conducted as an action research with the primary objective of improving the ability to use pre-nominal possessive forms accurately in the writing of the grade 7 students. During the first few weeks of teaching, the researcher observed several recurrent errors in their use of prenominal possessive forms such as the apostrophe. A pre-test was administered to confirm the errors and subsequently, the intervention was implemented. Thereafter, the post-test was administered. An improvement in the accuracy level of using prenominal possessives was evident after analyzing the responses of the pre-test and the post-test. In conclusion, avenues for further improvements were suggested.

Keywords: ESL, prenominal possessives, intervention, remedial activities, interaction

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Introduction

Possessive form is a very crucial aspect of grammar which is indispensable when it comes to expressing oneself in either spoken or written mode, especially when learning one's second language. As the grammarian Strunk (1999) documents in his famous book "Elementary rules of usage" *"showing possession is a very delicate matter in English"*. In fact, possessive form is a common structure which is taught at a high beginning level of English proficiency. According to Taylor (1992) the possessive morpheme is something which is *"attached to the end of a noun phrase to give a form like John's book"*. Phonologically possessive form is realized by three allomorphs (/ez/s/, z/) or zero. Orthographically, it is represented by 's or (') alone. This way of forming possessives in English requires inflecting regular singular nouns and irregular plural nouns not ending in s with 's or by adding an apostrophe after the s ending of regular/irregular plural nouns and singular nouns ending in the sounds. When it comes to the possessive forms it was this form dimension which is challenging for ESL learners. It was decided to examine the problematic aspects of pre-nominal possessive usage among the 7th graders at a government school subsequent to the informal discussions the researcher had with the grade 7 English teachers at this school. The data gathered from these interviews confirmed the appropriateness and the immediacy of need of such a study. The teachers admitted that the possessive form had become an eternal concern of theirs and that they did not have the time and the opportunity to take remedial measures despite the ignorance and confusion in the formation of the possessive forms among their students.

Therefore, it was decided that this topic is worthy of an action research where a variety of remedial activities could be implemented to see if the problem can be solved and the exact point of confusion be identified and thereby handled. As Possessive Form is a very broad topic, this study was limited to the Use of the apostrophe in the formation of the possessive forms of singular nouns/plural nouns and irregular plurals.

The objectives of the study were:

- Identifying the problems in using possessive forms
- Recognizing the causes for the problem
- Implementing remedial activities to overcome the problem
- Evaluating the students' performance to check the progress
- Suggesting solutions if the problem recurs

Literature review

In the attempt to review the literature on possessive form the work done by Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1983) was examined. According to them there are three dimensions of language that must be scrutinized: the structures, their semantics or meanings and the pragmatic conditions governing their use. Therefore, it is useful to view grammar from

these three angels. In this event a teacher who wants to teach a particular grammar structure to the learner may begin to design the lesson by asking the three questions on form, meaning and pragmatics.

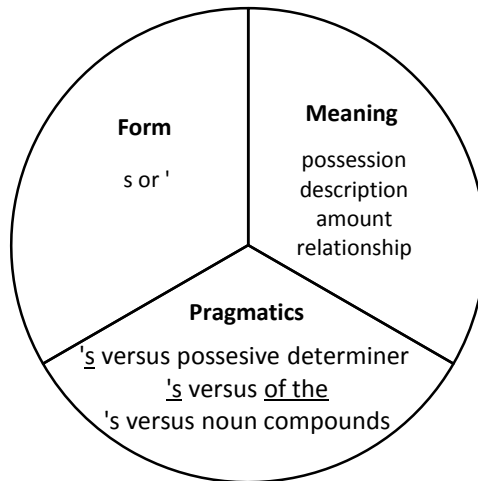


Figure 1. Framework of Possessive Forms (Celce-Murcia & Darren Larsen-Freeman, 1983)

However, teachers need not present all these facts to the learners at once. But this kind of a framework can be helpful for the teacher to organize the facts. By doing so, the teachers can easily figure out the challenging and complex dimensions for the students. When it comes to the possessive forms it was the form dimension which was problematic for the sample. Therefore, any remedial activity had to be so designed in such a manner that it would exemplify the formation of the prenominal possessive for the sample.

In addition to the work done by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, research done on grammatical morphemes was examined. The results of these researches suggested an order which, while not the same as the developmental sequence found in the first language acquisition, a similar developmental sequence among second language learners from different first language backgrounds.

The following is the developmental sequence of the grammatical morpheme as researched by Archibald (1989).

1. Ing
2. Copular Be
3. Articles
4. Auxiliary Be
5. Plural s
6. Irregular past
7. Regular past
8. Third person s
9. Possessive 's

This suggested that this accuracy was not entirely dependent on the learner's first language. However, these morpheme studies did not deny the influence of one's first language on the morphemes of the second language either. For example, it was revealed that learners whose first language has a possessive 's' form which resembles English 's' (such as German) seem to acquire the possessive form earlier than those whose first language has a very different way of forming the possessive. (such as Sinhalese). For example, in Sinhalese the possessive/genitive case is called සම්බන්ධ විභක්තිය (*sambandha vibhakthiya*) which is distinctively different from using the Apostrophe to signify possession as shown below:

John's book ➡ ජෝන්ගේ පොත (*Johnge potha*)

This stark difference could well have been a major cause for the participants of this action research study for having problems in acquiring the possessive's' form in English which is their second language.

Further, according to Ellis (1999) and Long (1988), grammar instruction is most effective when it is focused on raising learners' awareness of how a structure is formed, what it means and how it is used rather than on practicing drills for accuracy.

For this study Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis was adopted as the first base theory for the remedial activities. It was a theory which was influenced by psychology as well. His argument is that the 'comprehensible in put' advocated by Stephen Krashen alone is not adequate for successful second language acquisition. Their stance is that the learner should be given sufficient opportunities to use the language via interactive activities. Long states that the relative emphasis which was laid on accuracy over communication in the teaching of grammar has to change with more emphasis given to communication. He recommends certain pedagogical exercises in this regard. His notion is that the teaching materials should include specific tasks which involve the students as 'Information equals' (Long, 1991).

With regard to the sample of this study, they knew the possessive form can be used to show ownership but they were rather confused as to the formation of the correct possessive form. Perhaps, lack of opportunities to use the possessive form could have caused their confusion. In fact, one could view Long's Interaction Hypothesis as an extension of Krashen's Input theory. Long sees modified interaction as the necessary mechanism for proper acquisition to take place. In his view, what the learners need is not necessary simplification of the linguistic form (even grammar structures like possessive form) but the opportunity for interaction using the particular language element. Therefore, if the learners were given more chances to interact, exposing them to the language, they would have definitely acquired the relevant language elements more successfully. According to Long this modified interaction can be summed as follows.

Interaction modification makes input comprehensible



Comprehensible input promotes acquisition



Interaction modification promotes acquisition

However, modified interaction need not necessarily involve linguistic simplification. It may also include elaboration, slower delivery rate, gestures, movements or the provision of additional contextual cues and tasks. Research on interaction conducted within the framework of the Interactive Hypothesis, states that interaction

"facilitates [language] acquisition because it connects input [what learners hear and read]; internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output [what learners produce] in productive ways" (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452).

In addition to Long's interaction theory, the researcher developed the remedial activities around Vygotsky's socio-cultural model of learning as well. Interactive grammar teaching, which presupposes students' interaction while learning, can be viewed as a cognitive process of learning an L2 that reflects the socio-cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978). In discussing the development of a child's brain and his socialization, Vygotsky argues that there is a strong relationship between learning and cognitive development, in which cognition develops as a result of social interaction and sharing the responsibility with a parent or a more competent person. From an early age, children look to their parents for clues to acceptable social behavior. This brings us to Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) in which there are two main stages of an individual's development. The first stage is what a child or learner can do by himself; the second stage is his potential, what he can accomplish with the help of another, more competent person. The distance between two points is called the *zone of proximal development*. Vygotsky also introduces the notion of a *mediator* - a person who helps students to accomplish what they cannot do by themselves.

Similar to Vygotsky's theory is the often-criticized Krashen's (1981, 1985) *Input Hypothesis*, also well-known as the "*i + 1*" hypothesis. According to this hypothesis *i* represents students' current level of L2 proficiency, and *+1* is level of the linguistic form or function beyond the present students' level. Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* and Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* basically describe the same cognitive process of social interaction in students' development. For Krashen, optimal input should be comprehensible, i.e. focused on the meaning and not on the form. In this study, students will be focusing on the form, but actively, through communicative, meaning-based, exploratory assignments.

Materials and methods/Research methodology

This study was carried out as an action research with a group of 50 grade seven students (age group 12-13 years) at a government school in Colombo during 2 months of teaching practice. Action research was utilized as it was the most effective approach for the teacher to address the issue at hand. In fact, Mills (2011) considered action research as a feasible option for teacher researchers, school administrative staff, and other stakeholders in the teaching and learning environment. Moreover, action research in education can be defined as the process of studying a school situation to understand and improve the quality of the educative process (Hensen, 1996; Johnson, 2012; McTaggart, 1997). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1998), action research has three distinctive characteristics. Firstly, it is carried out by teachers and secondly, it is collaborative. Thirdly, it is aimed at “changing things”.

Intervention plan

The pre-test revealed that 45 students out of a group of fifty students had problems in using the possessive forms as they had made mistakes in the pre-test given. In the formulation of the intervention, the remedial activities were based mainly on two theories: Michael Long’s Interaction Hypothesis and Vygotsky’s Socio-cultural model of learning. Six different types of activities were used in 7 weeks. In addition, three questionnaires were administered to gather information for the research. Two questionnaires were given to the three English language teachers of the parallel classes and one questionnaire was given to the Grade seven students. Finally, the post -test was administered in order for the teacher to assess the success of the intervention.

Data analysis and discussion

Analysis of the remedial work/observations

As identified via the pre –test the sample had problems in the formation of the pre-nominal possessive forms as most of them were confusing the contraction forms and the possessive forms. Therefore, the first activity was designed to dispel such confusions. For most of the activities the theories incorporated were Interaction Hypothesis and Vygotsky’s socio-cultural model; especially the idea of the “expert” and the “competent peer”. It should be mentioned that in the actual implementation of these activities the students’ L1 was used as well. In fact, the use of Sinhalese was very useful in the explanation of the Possessive concept. Throughout the activity sessions the students who were very weak in their understanding of the grammatical concepts were guided and L1 was used in such circumstances.

Activity 1

As the pre-test and the data gathered from the questionnaires evidenced that the students were experiencing problems in the identification of contractions and possessive forms, the first remedial activity was designed to overcome that issue. A passage including many contractions was used and the participants had to hunt for the words with apostrophes. Thereafter, they were asked to examine those words carefully and categorize them. As they were doing this, they were internalizing the difference between contractions and possessive forms. It was inductive grammar learning. Later only, the difference between possessive formation and contractions exemplifying Vygotsky's "Expert" concept was explained. With regard to the Interaction Hypothesis, students were advised to work in groups. During the second half of the activity they had to read the fairy tales and find more contractions and possessive forms.

Activity 2

After helping to dispel the confusion between the contractions and possessive forms, the next activity was designed to instruct them in the formation of the singular possessive form as it was an issue in their daily assignment and was endorsed by the other teachers as well. I got them to construct possessive phrases regarding the belongings of their peers. As an extension of the activity they were encouraged to walk around the class and thus created opportunities for interaction which was one prime theory. The students were given an opportunity to use the language item in real life situation via interaction. Besides as they were moving around the class the monotony of the traditional grammar classroom was minimized. The class was transformed into a hub of action as the students were going round to collect as many possessive phrases as possible. The only complication was the class becoming too noisy.

Activity 3

As it was noticed that the students had problems with the plural possessive forms, the third activity was designed to help them with the formation of the plural possessive forms. They were instructed to scan old magazines and find singular nouns and based on that they were asked to make a grid and fill the columns including the plural possessives as well. As the students were working in groups and they were exchanging ideas where Vygotsky's "getting the help of a competent peer" was in successful operation. The students were very keen as it was a novel and a challenging task for them. Only after they presented their posters the rules for the formation of the plural possessive forms were explained which was inductive learning.

Activity 4

Despite the above-mentioned activities, it was observed that the students were still uncertain as to the singular and plural possessive forms. Therefore, a more demonstrative and interactive way of teaching was implemented. Three crazy hats were used, and they

were questioned prompting them to produce possessive phrases. This made the theory of Interaction alive in the classroom. Then, the phrases were written on the board and then the rules were revised subsequently. The sample responded quite eagerly as they were amused by the use of the crazy hats. This activity was a fine instance of Vygotsky’s concept of “Expert” in operation.

Activity 5

Even though activities were done on the formation of the singular and plural possessive forms the students were still making mistakes in the placement of the apostrophe in their usual written work. Therefore, a novel way of teaching the placement of the apostrophe was tested. The students were instructed to move their bodies and use their hands to indicate the placement of the apostrophes in singular and possessive forms. They used their left hands to indicate singular and right hands to indicate plural. The students thoroughly enjoyed the activity as it was a novel experience for them. In this activity also Vygotsky’s “Expert” concept was put into practice.

Activity 6

As the remedial work progressed the students were showing improvement in their formation of the possessive forms. However, they were erroneous in the possessive formation of the irregular plurals.

Therefore, as the final remedial activity irregular plurals were the focus. This activity involved group work where each group had to find the corresponding possessive group. Then they had to construct the possessive form. Then the sample was asked to construct a dialogue by specifying certain situations. Then they had to enact the dialogue which fostered the Interaction theory as they were communicating in real life situations.

Analysis of the pre-test/post-test performance

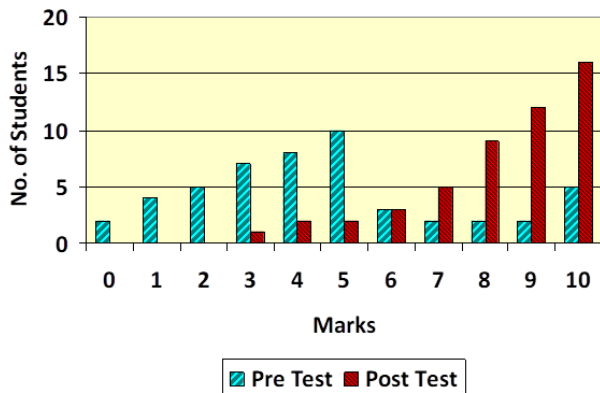


Figure 2. Pre-Test/ Post-test Bar graph (marks)

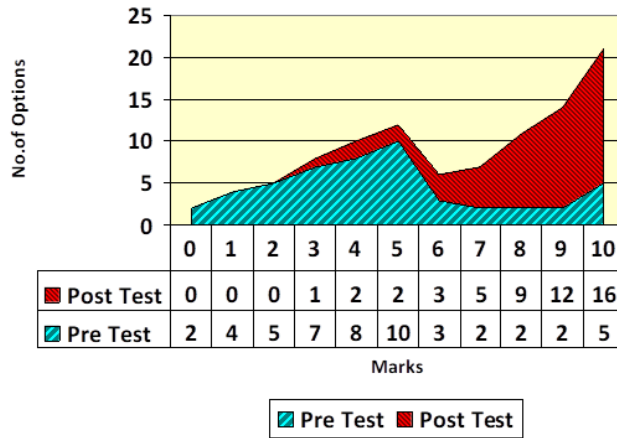


Figure 3. Pre-Test/ Post-test Area graph

As shown by the bar graph in the pre-test the majority of the students have scored between scores 1-5. In fact, 36 students have scored between scores 0-5. Only 14 students have scored in the upper range between the scores 6-10. In other words, most of the students had scored in the lower range of the marks. But when it comes to the post test there is a definite positive development in marks distribution. In comparison to the pre- test scores most of the students have scored between the scores 6-10. In fact, 45 students have scored in the upper range which is 6-10. Only 5 students have scored between the lower range which is 0-5. This indicates an obvious development in the test scores of these students.

As depicted by the area graph, the tendency of the pre-test is positively skewed. It is tail shaped which indicates that many have scored low marks. It depicts that the performance is poor. But as depicted by the area of the post-test the curve is negatively skewed which means that the performance is better as many have scored high marks.

Table 1

Central Tendency Type 1

Mean

X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pre Test	2	4	5	7	8	10	3	2	2	2	5
Post Test	0	0	0	1	2	2	3	5	9	12	16

Table 2

Central Tendency Type 1 Pre Test

x	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	$\sum fx$
Pre Test(f)	2	4	5	7	8	10	3	2	2	2	5	
	2	6	11	18	26	36	39	41	43	45	50	
fx	0	4	10	21	32	50	18	14	16	18	50	233
												Mean 4.66

Mean = 4.6

$$M = (\sum fx) / n$$

Standard Deviation = 2.77

$$\text{Standard Deviation} = \sqrt{\{\sum(x-x_1)/n\}}$$

Table 3

Central Tendency Type 1 Post Test

x	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	$\sum fx$
Post Test	0	0	0	1	2	2	3	5	9	12	16	
	0	0	0	1	3	5	8	13	22	34	50	
fx	0	0	0	3	8	10	18	35	72	108	160	414
												Mean 8.28

Mean Marks = 8.28

$$M = (\sum fx) / n$$

Standard Deviation = 5.45

$$\text{Standard Deviation} = \sqrt{\{\sum(x-x_1)/n\}}$$

Table 4

Central Tendency Type 2

Test	Mean	Standard deviation
Pre-test	4.6	2.7
Post test	8.28	5.45

Measures of any variable tend to center around a certain value. This tendency is called the central tendency. There are three major measures of central tendency. They are Mean, Median and Mode.

Mean is the arithmetic average of a set of scores. It is calculated by adding all the scores together and dividing by the number of students. Therefore, Mean can be used to analyze the performance of students. In this instance the mean of the pre-test is 4.6 where as the mean of the post-test is 8.28. As mean can be used as a representative value it can be said that there is a definite progress when the mean values of the two tests are compared. When it comes to the post-test the mean had doubled which depicts the progress of the students.

Standard deviation is the square root of the mean of the squared deviations of scores from the mean. It shows how scores deviate from the mean of the set of the scores. In this instance the standard deviation of the pre-test is 2.7 whereas the standard deviation of the post-test is 5.45. This shows a clear progress on the part of the students.

Analysis of the questionnaires

Questionnaire 1

According to the data gathered from the first questionnaire, the three teachers who answered the questionnaire believed the pupil's book was only moderately useful. They stated that they were not in the habit of teaching all the grammar components prescribed in the textbook. Answering the question on how they decide on which grammar components to teach, they primarily said that as they have a very tight schedule it really depends on the time factor. But one teacher said that if she finds the students exhibiting continuous confusion over a particular grammar component, she decides to handle that problem. The most common grammar problems that they had identified were possessive forms and the third person singulars. However, none of the teachers had been able to do any remedial work regarding the common grammar problems that they had identified.

Questionnaire 2

After careful scanning of the data available in the second questionnaire, I gathered some information on the possessive forms. All the teachers believed that the students' grammar knowledge is poor. All believed possessive form is an important grammar component that has to be taught. They identified it as a major structure which is very important when it comes to written form. But they had not been able to find a grammar lesson on possessive forms in the textbook of grade seven. They all stated that this particular grammar structure has to be included in the text book. The most common mistake that they identified in the use of the possessive form was the wrong insertion of the apostrophe and the confusion in the irregular possessive forms. They identified lack of usage/practice, lack of reading as the causes leading to the errors made in the possessive forms.

Therefore, it should be said that the ideas expressed in the teachers' questionnaires were very useful for me in the formulation of the intervention plan. It was visible that there was a severe lack of remedial work even though the teachers had already identified some common grammar errors committed by the students. According to my understanding the teachers were pressurized as to the completion of the text book so that they were compelled to ignore certain chronic errors committed by these students. But they mentioned that they had explained the rules of possessive formation even though they had not been able to do any systematic remedial work. I realized that this could have been the scenario in grade six as possessive form is a fundamental grammar module which should have been taught much earlier than grade seven. The teachers believed that the students' lack of reading is a cause for this situation. They stated that the students rarely use English language in the classroom which minimizes their exposure to the language and its vital grammar components. All the three teachers identified possessive form as a very common grammar error, but they had not been able to take any remedial measures due to the time constraint.

Questionnaire 3

The data available in the questionnaire given to the students was useful in assessing the students' views regarding L2 learning and grammar learning. They find grammar difficult. All the students stated that they like to learn English but not English grammar. They identified possessive forms as one of the difficult aspects and that they find it difficult as the teachers had not taught it. None of them knew the specific rules regarding possessive forms.

After a thorough examination of the data available in the third questionnaire it was clear that the students' ignorance of the grammar forms was due to lack of focused instruction and the absence of consolidation with regard to prenominal possessive forms. Even a fundamental structure like the possessive form had not been taught. This is a very serious situation. The most noticeable factor is the students' attitude that grammar is difficult and this must have stemmed from lack of exposure and grammar practice.

Conclusion

As a final note, it should be stated that action research proved to be a very effective technique in dealing with pedagogical issues. The researcher identified possessive forms as the topic of the action research via the pre-test and six remedial activities were designed to help the students overcome the problems. The remedial activities were based on Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Socio-cultural model.

During the initial stages of the intervention, the students were very inhibited. But as the researcher's rapport with the students improved their participation became more focused. As shown by the analysis of the pre-test and post-test scores, the students exhibited

palpable progress in their performance. Most of them seemed to have overcome their problem of the pre-nominal possessive according to the improvement in the test scores.

But the performance was not hundred percent accurate. Only sixteen of the students managed to score full marks for the test. There could have been several reasons for this. Firstly, as the formation of the possessive form is a matter of inserting the apostrophe, one could attribute some of the students' mistakes to negligence. This was evident in some of the answer scripts. Secondly, the students' psychological condition at the time of the intervention could also have contributed to their degree of absorption. If they were under some kind of stress, then they would not be able to concentrate. This scenario can be explained using the fifth hypothesis which comes under Stephen Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. The fifth hypothesis is Affective Filter Hypothesis which explains the affective filter which is an imaginary barrier which prevents learners internalizing the input which is available in the environment. Therefore, if certain students were tense, angry or anxious during the remedial sessions, they would not be able to internalize the basics of possessive formation. Thirdly, had there been students who had a particular inherent incapacity in understanding structures, then they also would not have been able to make the best use of the remedial sessions. In addition to the above three factors, there could have been some other concerns like the students' not liking to learn from a new teacher and inhibitions regarding English language.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the intervention was partially successful as some of the students showed a definite improvement in the formation and the use of the possessive forms. However, certain action could be taken to convert the performance to hundred percent.

Suggestions for improvement

As understood after careful observation and the analysis of the questionnaires, the student sample under observation lacked exposure to English language and especially its grammatical structures. Therefore, the teachers could take the following measures to overcome language problems daily:

- Take remedial measures whenever a problem recurs
- Use language games to teach possessive forms
- Use different pedagogical approaches
- Provide opportunities to use the particular structure in real life situations
- Use inductive methods to teach grammar
- Cater to different learner styles
- Initiate a reading cycle

If the teacher implemented the above-mentioned suggestions, then the results would be very fruitful. However, to achieve this, an immense amount of commitment and planning is

essential on the part of the teachers if they want to be creative practitioners in order to solve a grammar issue such as the 'possessive form'.

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