



## Teaching English Passivity via Systemic-theoretical Instruction of Vygotskian Concept-Formation

Mohammadreza Sadeghi

### Abstract

The present study investigated the impact of systemic-theoretical instruction (STI) on Iranian EFL learners' English Passive Structure formation. In such doing, first, an Oxford Placement Test was administered among 12 Iranian EFL language learners studying in Iran. Based on the OPT scores, 50 out of 68 participants were randomly selected and divided into two equal experimental and control groups. As the main treatment, Concept Based Instruction (CBI) principles, was taught twice a week, and lasted eight weeks. At the end of the treatment, a posttest on English Passive structure with the similar content as the pretest was given to the learners, and the results were analyzed through independent sample t-test. The findings revealed that there was a significant difference between two groups' performance in learning passive structure in posttest. In fact, the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control groups in terms of English Passive structure learning. Finally, the pedagogical and theoretical implications of the study were presented.

**Keywords:** Concept based Instruction (CBI); English Passive Structure; EFL Learners; Systemic-theoretical Instruction (STI)

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### Introduction

Starting from Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) introduction of conceptual formation theory, cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistic studies have been remarkably fruitful in terms of such aspects as the structure of conceptual formation, expressions in discourse, similar conceptual formations across languages and language-specific patterns (e.g. Barcelona, 2000; Kövecses, 2002, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Concerning L2 teaching and learning, the universality of conceptual formation serves as a standpoint from which cultural and linguistic variations can be elaborated and explained to L2 learners so that the learners can comprehend and acquire different conceptualizations more easily. Littlemore and Low (2006) argue that figurative language enhances communicative competence and language skills. Some researchers have similar opinions that the teaching of L2 metaphors can contribute to a better understanding and acquisition of the target language as well as its culture (Danesi, 1993; Holme, 2004; Lantolf, 1999).

Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, not many empirical studies on teaching L2 conceptual metaphors have been conducted. This lack of sufficient empirical studies in the teaching of L2 metaphoric expressions might be due to three causes. First, which conceptual formation can be chosen as an L2 unit of instruction requires both theoretical linguistic knowledge and high cultural awareness in the target language as well as in the learners' first language. In other words, language researchers and instructors have to identify and analyze the similarity and distinction between the languages and cultures, and then decide to what extent this knowledge of concept formation needs to

be, and can be, taught. Second, traditional pedagogical approaches, which are relying heavily on drills, inconsistent explanation of grammatical patterns, and rote memorization, cannot inform language learners of the complexity and sophistication of any conceptual formation category. Third, it is difficult to explain appropriate criteria to evaluate and assess learners' competence, understanding and even conceptual formation in L2.

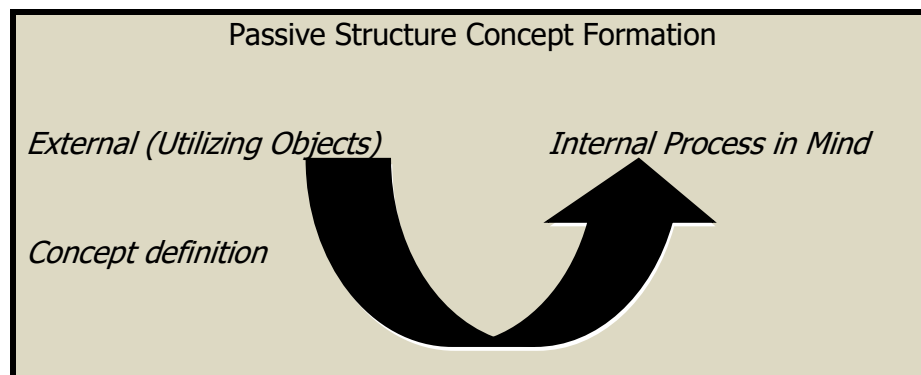
Concept-Based Instruction (CBI) within the pedagogical setting was proposed by Piotr Gal'perin (Haenen, 1996). The principle of CBI is that well-organized education can foster conceptual development, if it provides learners with cognitive tools of high quality and step-by-step guidance. CBI promotes the idea that theoretical concepts should be introduced at the onset of the instruction and then the learners can be guided to develop their own understanding of the concept (Davvydov, 1988; Gal'perin, 1989, 1992a, 1992b). In CBI, explicit instruction of the relevant theoretical concepts is implemented not merely to enhance learners' understanding of the concepts, but also to use this understanding as a framework for guiding performance. According to Gal'perin (1992a),

this is concretized through a series of clearly delineated procedures including introduction and explanation of the concept, materialization of the concept in the form of a visual schema that allows learners to comprehend the concept in a deeper way than is normally achievable through verbal definitions alone, as well as activities that push the learners to articulate their own understanding of the concept, and practice using the concept in communicative tasks guided by the schema when necessary.(p. 17)

Gal'perin (1992a) adds that the teachers' guidance is more effective when it is accompanied with symbolic representations. Following figure presents the detail.

**Figure 1.**

*Passive Structure Concept Formation*



One of the main problems for English language learners is learning English passive structure (e.g. Erikson, 2002; Leont'ev, 1998); Terrell, 1991). Since passive structure concept includes both figurative meaning and grammatical functions, it should be taught in a coherent and consistent way in order to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding. Learning the English passives leads to a unified concept formation within EFL learners' minds. In fact, learners do not manage to utilize the passive verbs in daily interactions. Thus, there should be some attempts to make to find the most efficient methods (e.g. CBI) to teach and stabilized passive structure concept formation for such EFL learners.

The instruction utilized in the present study was selected based on the conceptualization of the *Passive Structure* structure for following reasons. The first is that the concept of time in passive verbs is conceptualized through the spatial domain across languages (Núñez & Sweetser, 2006). The second reason is that current concept-based curricula and pedagogical practices still rely on translation and prescriptive grammatical rules. Even though the concept of Passive Structure exists in most languages, word-by-word translation and grammatical rules can neither efficiently inform the learners of the common ground nor highlight the distinction between the languages.

The aim of the study was to teach English Passive Structure grammar through the medium of conceptual metaphor theory. The results of a pilot study by the researcher on concept formation showed that the students' misuse of passive verbs was duly affected by mis- or non-conceptualization of the English Passive Structure. As mentioned earlier, one of the thorniest teaching structures for EFL language learners is Passive Structure. Whereas in traditional methods English Passive Structure is mostly taught as a unified concept, in CBI there is a tendency to utilize the concept formation possibilities in educational settings. This can assist the learners to be able to find a complete orientation toward Passive Structure concept.

Thus, the current study considered the learning and teaching of English Passive Structure as a conceptual category to be internalized by students through organized tool-oriented concept-based teaching. It was hoped to show that when the Passive Structure was presented to Persian-speaking learners in a coherent and systematic manner through the lens of conceptual metaphor, it would result in enhanced and efficient learning. To achieve this goal, conceptual metaphor was first thoroughly analyzed from a linguistic perspective through CBI, and the analysis was then presented in an easily comprehensible and accessible form to EFL learners. In terms of the research objectives, the following research questions and hypotheses were set:

**Q1.** Does instructing Passive Structure to students via concept-based instruction (systemic-Theoretical Instruction) make any significant difference in the learning of passive verbs?

**Q2.** Does level of language proficiency influence the Iranian learners' conceptualization of Passive Structure when taught via the concept-based instruction (systemic-Theoretical Instruction)?

**Q3.** Do male/female EFL learners benefit the same from the CBI when learning the Passive Structure in EFL?

**HO1.** Instructing Passive Structure to students via concept-based instruction (Systemic-Theoretical Instruction) makes no significant difference in the learning of passive verbs.

**HO2.** Level of language proficiency does not influence the Iranian learners' conceptualization of Passive Structure when taught via the concept-based instruction (systemic-Theoretical Instruction).

**HO3.** Male/female EFL learners do not benefit the same from the CBI when learning the Passive Structure in EFL.

### Literature review

Vygotsky's (1978) cultural-historical theory has inspired and contributed to the creation of literacy programs based on sociocultural tenets at different levels and with a different focus not only in Russia (Gal'perin, 1969, 1992a; Markova, 1979; Talyzina, 1981, among others), but also in other parts of the world (Kozulin et al., 2003; Hedegaard, 1995). Vygotskian research on foreign languages has been carried out by Lantolf, thier students and colleagues (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorn, 2006; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Negueruela, 2003; Ferreira, 2005) at the college level.

One the first researchers who adopted Vygotskian ideas in educational contexts was Negueruela. In Negueruela's (2003) project, Gelperin's step-wise procedure was also utilized in its six stages. Following CBI three main tenets: finding a unit of instruction that provides a complete orientation for the subject matter, materializing of that unit of instruction through didactic aides, and using verbalizations for internalization purposes, Negueruela (2003) designed data analysis procedures, emerging from CBI tenets, to connect CBI to L2 development. This, as he argues, bridges the gap between instructional processes and L2 research methodology.

Some researchers have applied CBI in their research studies. One of the researchers in the field is Negueruela (2003). In his analysis of discourse data (written and oral) entitled "systemic-theoretical instruction and L2 development: a sociocultural approaching to teaching-learning and researching L2 learning" (Negueruela, 2003, p. 67); he observed improvement after CBI, especially in written performance, among all of his students. As he expected, and as Pavlenko (1999) asserted, even though students were able to provide the definition of a certain grammatical aspect, it did not mean

they had control over its functionality. Subsequently, Negueruela's participants' conceptual definition of aspect or mood did not directly reflect their functional use of grammatical features.

In a different study, investigating CBI and L2 development, Lapkin et al. (2008) observed the effect of verbalizations (self-explanations) in developing the concept of voice in French. Their participants were six students taking an intermediate French class at the university level. Data collection took place during two sessions. The first session lasted 80 minutes and included a warm-up, a pretest, self-explanation, a break and an immediate posttest. The second session lasted 20 minutes and consisted of a delayed posttest. The warm up stage was designed to familiarize students with the material. During this stage, the researchers explained French determiners with the use of cards in which the explanation given was written with large typeface. These cards were shown to the students during the explanation phase. The students read each card aloud and then commented on it, directing their comments to themselves. Shortly after students were asked to explain indefinite, definite and partitive articles, identify in boldface type, in a short text. The results of Lapkin et al.'s (2008) study showed that even with such a short instructional period, CBI along with verbalizations, proved to be useful for some students. Lapkin et al.'s study (2008) verified that not all of the participants were comfortable verbalizing grammar concepts, or understanding the material at the same conceptual level. Nonetheless, their research revealed that students who were more comfortable verbalizing reached a higher level of understanding or self-monitoring thereby leading to modification of performance.

In their study, Serrano-Lopez and Poehner (2008) focused on Gal'perin's stage of materialization, which entailed the construction of learning-didactic theoretical models. They, following Talyzina (1981), pointed out the difference between material and materialized objects. In the first difference, the object can be physically manipulated. In the latter, the object is materialized in the form of charts, graphs, etc. They then highlighted the student's materialization of theoretical knowledge in concrete form through 3-D clay models. The main learning goal of these models was the conceptualization of Spanish locatives whose meaning did not correspond to students' L1. Results from their pre-test, post-test and delayed effects revealed that CBI and 3-D clay models provided the students with a deep understanding of the meaning of locatives as well as long lasting effects of the concept formation knowledge learned.

Another study using CBI and modeling was implemented by Ferreira and Lantolf (2008), who investigated theoretical thinking, meaning-making, and writing improvement through a genre-based approach in an ESL freshman composition class. Among the L1 languages spoken by the participants of the study were Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, who were all studying English language. In their study, the researchers combined a CBI approach to target cognitive processes by utilizing the steps of Davydov (1999), a contemporary of Gal'perin, and Systemic Functional Linguistics' (SFL) elements of field, tenor, and mode. As the authors state, Davydov's (1999) approach is known as the Movement from the Abstract to the Concrete (MAC) teaching approach. According to this approach, students learn through the systematic conceptual knowledge of a subject matter, and then are encouraged to process and internalize this knowledge in the concrete contexts.

Correlations between the two pre-course and after-course texts, and evaluations of these texts by independent readers showed improvement in theoretical thinking. Ferreira and Lantolf (2008) mentioned that contrary to Karpov's study (2005), in which second to fourth grade elementary students, taught through systemic theoretical instruction, outperformed the group taught through traditional methods, their study did not have a rate level of positive results. The students taught through CBT in Karpov's study (2005) not only did better at problem-solving but also found the optimal solution to solve certain problems.



## Method

### Research Design

This study enjoyed a quantitative research design, in which the pretest posttest control group was utilized. The learners' English passive learning was the dependent variables, and the concept-based instruction was the independent variable.

### Research Sample

An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to Iranian EFL language learners studying in five language institutes in Iran, ranging between 22-26 years old. There was an attempt to select the participants from five English classes with nearly the same language experience. Based on the OPT results, the participants were divided into experimental and control groups. In the first stage of participant selection, the total number of the control group and the experimental group came to 120 participants, 60 in each. Concerning the gender of the participants, the second stage of the participant selection was to divide the participants of each group into two equal categories. To do so, utilizing convenience-random sampling, 15 female and 15 male participants were selected in each group. Dividing the participants into elementary and intermediate categories was the third stage of the participant selection. Thus, based on the OPT scores, 15 elementary and 15 male and female intermediate EFL learners were selected.

### Research Instrument and Procedures

Three instruments were utilized in the present study: an OPT, and two others tests prepared by the researcher: English Passive Structure pretest, and an English Passive Structure posttest. First, in order to check the level of general language proficiency of the participants at the beginning of the study, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT, 2008) was utilized. The OPT had one section on grammar with 60 multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank items. For the present study, the EFL learners were only given the part which was on grammar. The second test was the researcher-made pretest, contrived especially to evaluate the EFL learners' passive knowledge, both in comprehending and producing passive verbs. This test contained three parts: The first part pertained to the comprehension of passive verbs consisting of 16 multiple-choice items, the second part was associated with production of passive verbs consisting of 12 fill-in-the-blank items, and the last part as error recognition section consisting of 12 items. Third, the posttest encompassed three components: The first was on comprehending passive verbs, the second was related to the production of passive verbs, and the third was related to the appropriate use of passive verbs. The second part required the participants to read some incomplete statements and fill in the blanks using suitable passive verbs to test their English knowledge in production of appropriate verbs of passive structure. The third part was an error recognition task, which was designed to assess the participants' knowledge on passive verbs error recognition. It should be noted here that comprehension, production, error recognition tests were utilized to ensure that all aspects of passive structures were taken into consideration.

This study was conducted at five language institutes in Isfahan, Iran. To ensure a voluntary participation, the researcher gave an informed-consent form to each language learner. They were told that by signing the informed-consent form, they agreed to participate in the study. The main treatment, based on CBI principles, was done twice a week, and lasted twelve weeks. CBI in this study was presented via teaching two textbooks, namely, *Top Notch (1)* and *(2)* by Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher in 2006 through which CBI didactic models were utilized throughout the course.

Prior to the main part of the study, a researcher-made pretest on English Passive Structure was administered to all of the groups. The pretest was piloted with 30 language learners who had the same characteristics of the main participants of the study. In addition, for the three experimental groups, the researcher selected three language teachers with nearly five years of language teaching experience. Then, the researcher held three briefing sessions with them before, during, and after the instruction. In these sessions, he gathered teachers' comments on strengths and weakness of the treatment. He also scrutinized all of the sessions personally, and gave required recommendations to

the language teachers. At the end of the CBI treatment, a posttest on English Passive Structure with similar content as the pretest was given to the learners, and the results were compared and analyzed.

### Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of the research instruments, they were reviewed by three language experts. In addition, the reliability of the research instruments was calculated via Cronbach Alpha.

### Data Analysis and Process

To ensure the normality of data set distribution One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov was run. Table 1 demonstrates the results of this test.

**Table 1.**

*One Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test.*

		Control Groups	Experimental Groups
N		60	60
Normal Parameters <sup>a, b</sup>	Mean	19.08	21.65
	SD	4.27	6.72
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.367	.354
	Positive	.367	.284
	Negative	-.233	-.354
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.367	.354
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.216	.374

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

As it is shown in Table 1., *p*-value for both sets of scores was higher than 0.05. Hence, the scores were normally distributed. Due to the fact that the normality of data set was ensured to answer the first research question the performance of the experimental and the control groups was measured through the parametric test of independent sample *t*-test. Table 2 displays the results.

**Table 2.**

*Independent Sample t-test Results*

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
				F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
EG	60	21.65	6.72	12.758	.001	2.494	118	.014
CG	60	19.08						

As it can be seen in Table 2., the mean score of the experimental groups taught via CBI is 21.65, and that of the control groups is 19.08 with the level of significance of .001. Since the level of Sig. is less than 0.05 set for the study,  $F(2, 118) = 12.758, p < .05$ ) therefore, it is concluded that there is a significant difference between the two groups' performance in the posttest, thereby rejecting the first null hypothesis. In addition, to explore the correlation between the pretest and the posttest scores of the elementary Iranian EFL learners, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was conducted. Table 3 presents the results.

**Table 3.**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficient of the Elementary Group*

		Pretest	Posttest
Pretest	Pearson Correlation	1	.092
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.485
	N	60	60
Posttest	Pearson Correlation	.092	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.485	
	N	60	60

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 3, the results indicate that there is not a high positive correlation (.092) between the pretest and the posttest scores of the elementary participants. Therefore, it is concluded those who obtained higher scores in the pretest did not necessarily score higher in the posttest. The correlation between the pretest and the posttest scores of the intermediate Iranian EFL Learners was investigated and tabulated in 4.

**Table 4.**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficient of the Intermediate Group*

		Pretest	Posttest
Pretest	Pearson Correlation	1	.099*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.020
	N	60	60
Posttest	Pearson Correlation	.099*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.020	
	N	60	60

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to Table 4., the results reveal that there is a high positive correlation between the pretest and posttest scores of the intermediate learners. Therefore, the intermediate learners who scored high in the pretest scored higher in the posttest, too. Furthermore, since the normality of data set was ensured to answer the third question the performance of the male and female groups was calculated through the parametric test of independent sample t-test. The data are presented in Table 5.

**Table. 5.**

*Independent Sample t-test Results.*

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Levene's Test for t-test for Equality of Means				
				Equality of Variances				
				F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
MG	60	22.48	5.48	14.62	0.000	3.077	118	0.011
FG	60	20.25						

As illustrated in Table 5., the mean score of the male groups is 22.48, and that of the female groups is 20.25 with the level of significance of .000. Since the level of Sig. is less than 0.05, and  $F(2, 118) = 14.62, p < .05$ , thus, it is concluded that there is a significant difference between the two groups' performance in the posttest. That is to say, the male groups outperformed their counterparts in the female groups. Thus, the third null hypothesis was rejected.

### Findings

The aim of the first research question was to seek the effect of instructing students the Passive Structure via concept-based instruction (systemic-Theoretical Instruction). The results of the independent sample t-test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental and the control groups' performance in terms of the English Passive Structure learning, confirming the idea that teaching through CBI affects the learning of the English passivities by Iranian EFL learners. Negueruela (2003) in this respect asserts that this can also occur once learners tried to develop Passive Structure by selecting English passivity in terms of intentional conceptual meaning in the language, rather than limiting knowledge to textbook structural points. He also maintains that since CBI is an organized systematic instruction it would lead to development, and that learners' theoretical concept learning would go from complex to concepts, as a theoretical assertion in CBI.

Concerning the second research question, the results obtained from the sample t-test indicate that the intermediate Iranian EFL learners had a better performance compared to the elementary learners in English Passive Structure, which indicate that the level of language proficiency has a significant effect on the Iranian learners' conceptualization of Passive Structure when taught via Systemic-Theoretical Instruction (STI). This might be partly due to the administrative and pedagogical reasons leading to the differences between proficiency levels. Moreover, it seems relatively easy to teach the English passivity as a holistic structural concept by STI opposed to teaching them as discrete structural units by the rules stated in the learners' textbook. Since traditional teaching methods were designed for the control groups, the original exercises offered in the textbook had to be accomplished, which shows that teaching Passive Structure had to be spent explaining structural units. No doubt, STI will enhance the learning process in general. The most convincing evidence is made from the comparison of the amount of time spent on the study of the target English passivity during the learning of the experimental and the control groups.



The third research question investigated the difference between the groups under study across gender. The results of the independent sample t-test revealed that the male groups had better performance and progressed more efficiently in performance and gained awareness control, and internalization of the concept of English Passive Structure compared to their counterparts in the female groups. According to Gal'perin (1989), the cognitive transformation occurs internally while the learners were engaged in material actions during their learning activities. He argues that the learners pass the complete learning process from beginning to the end. He believes that one of the main learners' tasks to accomplish is having the full awareness of the subject matter. In conceptual formation studies across gender, Vygotsky (1978) in his holistic theory of mind explains that verbalizations are key elements because they indicate how conceptual learning proceeds in cognitively mediated goal-oriented activities in male and female learners. Regardless of the gender of the learners, their gaining awareness control, and internalization of the concept will allow to observe higher mental processes, while using a SCOPA (the favored orienting basis and material external cognitive tool to assist learners guide their learning actions) in the process of creating and recontextualizing meanings in practical activity.

### **Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations**

The current results are in line with some other studies such as Tulviste (1989 & 1992), Scribner (1977), Scribner and Cole (1981), Negueruela's (2003), and Lapkin et al's study (2008). For example, in Negueruela's (2003) study, most of his research participants' definitions were initially functional. After administering CBI, all the learners' definitions were semantically based. This showed that learners' definitions were not theoretically functional and thus did not provide a complete orientation for them, except for one of the learners' definition of Passive Structure. This verifies the effect of CBI on learning. Furthermore, as Vygotsky's (1987) also asserts, sociocultural theory, scientific concepts develop differently from everyday concepts. He believes that since everyday concepts are known by their spontaneous usage and the lack of the learners' conscious awareness of their meaning the utilization of such concepts does not imply the learners are aware of the meaning or use of such concepts. The findings of the current study also reveal that the intermediate group was more advantaged in their Passive Structure learning opposed to the elementary group since the intermediate group learned English passivity based on well-organized linguistic analysis due to their ability to form concepts better in their minds. The intermediate group also had enough experience to utilize concept formation appropriately. Furthermore, the complete presentation of English passivity might provide opportunity for the intermediate learners to control the formation of various passive concepts, and explain the Passive Structure mood of an action.

In addition, Lapkin et al's results (2008) indicate that CBI along with verbalizations is effective for some learners. They argue that not all of the learners are able to express grammar concepts orally (verbalization), or touch on the grammatical point at the same conceptual level. Moreover, the present findings are consistent with those of Serrano-Lopez and Poehner (2008). Their results also confirmed the efficacy of CBI at different proficiency levels. Based on the findings of the current study, it was concluded that English Passive Structure learning is enhanced in the following ways. First, pedagogically speaking, at the orienting stage the learners are able to direct their learning by counting on essential features expressed by conceptual categories in their cognitive mood. The same conceptual categories utilized for teaching provide the same teaching-learning sequence and, consequently, promote theoretical understanding, awareness and control of English passive verbs. Utilizing their orienting tool in a top down fashion, the learners could strengthen theoretical understanding practically, while still access empirical knowledge, and generalize its utilization in new settings. By focusing learners' attention on the conceptual categories, they could expand their understanding of critical interrelated concepts in English passive structure.

In concluding, the results revealed that instructing passive structure to students via concept-based instruction made a significantly positive effect on EFL students' learning of passive verbs. For future studies, it is recommended that other language skills and sub-skills, as well as the learners' variables such as motivation and autonomy be taken into consideration. In addition, it is suggested that future studies be conducted with more EFL participants.



### Limitations

The current study suffered from some limitations. First, the number of the participants was limited. Second, time duration to conduct the study was limited. For further study, it is suggested that much more participants be examined. Additionally, for further research a longitudinal study can be replicated with other variables such as proficiency level and learners' characteristics along with concept-based instruction. The theoretical and pedagogical implications of this study address EFL/ESL teachers, learners, syllabus designers and ELT policy makers.

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