

# The Effect of Syntactic Awareness-Raising Techniques on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Written Narrative Task Performance

Research Article

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## Abstract

Attention to language awareness is prominently increasing with the passage of time due to the effects different awareness-raising techniques might have on language learners' performance. The present study specifically focused on the effects of syntactic awareness-raising techniques on Iranian intermediate EFL learner's written narrative task performance.

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The participants in the study included 40 intermediate learners whose initial homogeneity in terms of language proficiency was assessed via a General English Test. They were further randomly assigned to one control group and one experimental group, each comprising 20 participants. The amount of instructional time was 17 sessions, during which the participants in the experimental group received syntactic awareness-raising techniques through 'story grammar elements' and 'word order correction'. Right after the treatment, a post-test comprising a written narrative task was administered. Data analysis results demonstrated that the experimental group which received the syntactic awareness-raising techniques outperformed the control group in retelling short stories in written form. The findings of the current study highlight the contribution of language awareness to the improvement of proficiency in EFL learners and pave the way for its inclusion in language teaching syllabuses.

**Keywords:** narrative task, written task, story grammar element, language proficiency, word order correction

## Introduction

Tasks have been documented to play a significant role in language learners' oral and written performance. Improving proficiency in language has been sought to be highly related to application of tasks (Kuiken & Vedder, 2012). According to Ellis (2003), plenty of reasons can be found in task performance indicating the EFL learners' skill to apply their knowledge in authentic communication. This conceptualization highlights the substantial role of tasks in language teaching research as well as pedagogy. Learners may not be successful to develop the proficiency required for effective communication unless they are given opportunities to practice such samples, which are elicited by either oral or written 'tasks' (Ellis, 2003). Narration of a story in spoken and written forms is among the tasks which occur in response to some kinds of stimulus including either a picture strip or a short film.

Storytelling whether oral or written leaves back effects on overall language proficiency (Berns et al., 2013). Research carried out by Sullivan and Brown (2015) revealed that 10- to 16-year-old learners whose reading was just for pleasure improved much better in some areas as spelling, vocabulary, and math, compared to those who were less inclined to read. According to Paul (2012), reading a story aloud helps improving grasp of syntax and sentence structure. Samantaray (2014) described storytelling as a technique which attracts learners' attention and concentration. Accordingly, based on this technique, it is feasible to encourage prediction and expectation of events. As learners find an opportunity to predict the consequences of an event, their comprehension, enjoyment, and happiness are provoked. Thus, learners make significant improvements in their language use if they apply this technique in language learning (Samantaray, 2014). Thus, the environment in the classroom is changed into a productive one along with plenty of learner's participation, concentration.

Stories are supposed to provide a bulk of information about learners' written language skills. Pray (2005) thinks of narrative tasks as useful assessment tools to assess language learners who are making attempts to learn, read, and write. On the other hand, to recognize the level of communicative competence in learners and their cognitive academic language proficiency, narrative samples are among the best measurement devices (Ortiz, 1997).

In narratives, compared to daily conversations, the learners require more complex language and higher level thinking. So as to raise the learners' awareness of the event, the vocabulary must be explicit, pronoun references are required to be clear, descriptive language must be used and the storyteller must tell the story in a logical sequence (Petersen et al., 2010). While there are various ways to provoke learners' consciousness of the structure of the language, in the present study, it was raised by means of two techniques; 'story grammar elements' and 'word order correction'.

Technically speaking, 'Story' refers to a narrative spoken or written discourse, while 'grammar' is usually described as the study of words. Stein and Glen (1979) refer to 'story grammar' as the different elements or parts of a story. The goal of 'story grammar elements' awareness in the present study is to explicitly teach the learners to recognize story grammar elements including the plan, attempt, characters, setting, initiating events, internal response, etc. within stories, and to instruct them to incorporate accurate story elements into the rewritten stories.

As a system of language, grammar is concerned with word order and morphology. Word order is defined as an understanding of how words in a language come close to each other to create logical sentences (Tunmer, 1989). Languages are different regarding the distribution of words within phrases and the ways phrases distributions occur relative to each other within sentences. Whereas there are various constructions of word order such as Subject-Verb-Object (SOV) in world languages, the primary word order in English is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). Selecting a word form consistent with its grammatical role in a sentence is the second subdivision which is considered in syntactic awareness. Researching into different languages reveals that either the inflection of a word based on grammatical rules (e.g. agreement in tense, aspect, number, gender and case) can make the form or the word syntactic status in a sentence can construct it.

Researching into educational EFL contexts such as Iran reveals the fact that after several years of language studies, learners have terrible mistakes in oral and written production although most of the class time is allotted to teaching grammatical points (Behroozi & Amoozegar, 2014). The problem lies in the fact that such contexts suffer from the deficiencies which mainly stem from the methodology of the teachers set aside the material the students are provided with, the shortage of time and the degree of exposure to language outside the classroom (Dolati & Mikaili, 2011). To deal with the problem which might originate from the methodology of the teachers, the researcher made attempts to

find ways of helping learners improve their written narrative proficiency through raising their syntactic awareness.

To the best knowledge of the researcher, few studies have been done in Iranian context investigating the impact of syntactic awareness raising techniques on intermediate EFL learners' written narrative task performance. So, in this study, the researcher intended to fill this gap and explored this under-investigated area by studying the impact of syntactic awareness raising techniques on written narrative task performance of intermediate EFL learners in Iran.

To test the research hypothesis, i.e., syntactic awareness raising significantly affects Iranian intermediate EFL learners' written narrative task performance, the researchers tried to address the following research questions:

1. Does syntactic awareness improve fluency in Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' written performance?
2. Does syntactic awareness improve accuracy in Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' written performance?
3. Does syntactic awareness improve complexity in Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' written performance?

## **Literature Review**

Nowadays, language awareness (LA) is widely believed to be an important dimension in language learning, language teaching and language use. Research in this area is being flooded with researching the effects of awareness studies on different components of language. In the general field of cognitive psychology, conscious and unconscious processes and the notion of interface in second language development have been for long the center of attention. A number of such empirical studies were surveyed by Long and Robinson (1998) and Ellis (1990). Their findings illustrated that consciousness learning is likely to contribute to successful development in language learners.

Language awareness has been regarded as one of the most important inclination of research in language education since the early 1980s. The relationship between awareness and learning is one of the major topics which has attracted many researchers studying on the area of language pedagogy. At the very beginning, the focus of language awareness movement was language awareness of learners. The main justification for the movement was that the learners whose analysis and description of language is accurate are possibly more efficient users of the language (Andrews, 2008). Thus, performance in using the language to a large extent depends on explicit knowledge of formal aspects of language.

### ***Awareness and Second Language Development***

Although some researchers as Krashan and Seliger (1976) believed learning is essentially unconscious, new trends after decline of behaviorism concentrate

on the importance of consciousness in language learning. This recognition has emphasized the significant role of awareness in learning the language. Skehan (1996) suggest that learners' previous knowledge is activated by focus on form instruction and that it assists them make a link between their linguistic knowledge and the language they are going to use communicatively. Focus on form instruction develops learners' awareness of grammar structure difficult to understand through formal instruction of language alone.

At this point, we should return to Long's original consideration (1991) that language instruction based on task is notably appropriate for focus on form. Crookes and Gass (1993) in a numbers of surveys and reports have discussed that success in target language comprehension and production to a large extent depends on task performance. They have emphasized how users of language through focus on form activities can improve their proficiency in language.

Development of task-based language teaching is among controversial topics of discussion which encompass the tasks that are likely attractive with regard to consideration of awareness and learning in addition to the methodology in which they are implemented. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1990), for instance, recommends development of closed communicative tasks, successful completion of which needs attending to the target grammatical knowledge. Communicative grammar tasks are among the ones advocated by Fotos and Ellis (1991). This kind of tasks, which involves mechanisms to facilitate acquisition, tries to raise the learner's consciousness about the grammatical properties of the second language.

The previous studies done on the application of awareness techniques do not cover all areas. Some studies have concentrated on the role of syntactic awareness and learning strategies on language (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006) but less is known about how syntactic awareness techniques can influence the students' ability in narrating the task in written form.

Tong et al. (2014) made an attempt to investigate the possible association between two metalinguistic skills, syntactic and morphological awareness and reading comprehension. They included separate and combined measures of each in the reading comprehension texts. The results of their findings revealed that the relationships among syntactic awareness, morphological awareness, and reading comprehension were greatly under the influence of the tasks which were used to measure the first two.

Second Language Acquisition researchers have, to some extent, downplayed the crucial relevance of the semantico-syntactic awareness features that might animate learners' behavior during task implementation. The contributions of socially-oriented factors to task performance, the importance of learner factors , and the significant role given to internalization and scaffolding in the Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) to complete tasks (Guk & Kellogg, 2007) reveal that there is a need to pay attention to this less-trodden area as to how providing syntactic awareness can influence the learners' involvement in written task performance. Altogether, a number of studies have concluded pri-

ority of task performance in terms of providing opportunities for both target language comprehension and production.

### ***Syntactic Awareness***

The skill to manage and reflect on the grammatical structure of language is referred to as syntactic (or grammatical) awareness. This includes an understanding of how words of one language sit next to each other to create sentences. According to Koda and Zehler (2008), there are two major subdivisions for this process, the first of which is referred to as word order. Word order correction tasks include irregularity in the word order which has to be resolved by rearrangement (e.g. "hits the dog Jane"). Selection of a word form consistent with its grammatical role in a sentence is the second subdivision which is involved in syntactic awareness. Gaux and Gombert (1999) consider it as morphosyntactic awareness. One group of tasks in this regard is grammatical correction tasks, where the learner has to repair a morphological or grammatical deviation in a sentence (e.g. "boys makes mistakes"). Altogether, syntactic awareness is classified under metalinguistic skills due to the prominent attention it gives to the *structure* rather than the *meaning* of a sentence. In the present study, syntactic awareness is realized by means of two techniques: story grammar elements and word order correction.

**Story Grammar Elements.** More complex language and higher level thinking than what is required for daily conversations are needed in Narratives. To illustrate an event in details for the person away from that event, the storyteller must use clear pronoun references, explicit vocabulary and descriptive language, as well as logical sequence in the short story (Petersen et al., 2010). The typical forms to tell the stories follow the following inclinations: story grammar structure, problem-resolution, goal-oriented (Stein & Glenn, 1979). The framework proposed by Stein and Glenn's for story grammar structure defines the most noticeable elements in fictional narratives. The characters, setting, initiating event, internal response, plan, attempt, consequence, and resolution are among the elements included in a story. Accordingly, recognition of the elements of narrative text and using them to improve the learners' comprehension of the story should be considered in direct instruction of story grammar elements.

According to Stein and Glenn (1979), the pattern which is followed to construct a large number of stories is story grammar. Causally- and temporally-related- information which is most often found in stories form these patterns (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Based on Cognitive Load Theory, to build a complete story this framework can be used as a schema. Narratives constructed in classroom activities are believed to be acceptable if they follow the organizational pattern known as story grammar (Stein & Glenn, 1979), a framework that outlines the salient elements in fictional narratives. Predictability and comprehensibility of stories can be defined by story grammar. In the school curriculum, narratives usually include complete episodic constructs. When viewed from an

educational perspective (Petersen et al., 2010), narrative proficiency is reflected in macro-structural complexity indicated by story grammar and episodic constructs.

**Word Order Correction.** From among the techniques which can be used to realize syntactic awareness is word order correction. It means getting togetherness of words to form sentences. Two important subdivisions can be recognized in this process. "Word order" is the first subcomponent. What makes a demarcation line between languages is the way words are distributed within phrases and the way phrases are distributed relative to each other within sentences. The salient word order in English is SVO (Subject-Verb-Object). In world languages, other word order variations such as SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) can be found. Selection of a word is the second subdivision which is involved in syntactic awareness. It should be consistent with its grammatical role in a sentence. In most languages, inflection of a word according to grammatical rules such as agreement in tense, aspect, number, gender or case as well as its syntactic status govern how words are formed and stung together.

Word order correction tasks can be used to assess syntactic awareness (Tunmer, 1989). In such tasks learners are given a sequence of words presented in a nonsensical order and are asked to rearrange these words to form a meaningful sentence. As an example, the teacher might say, "John throwing was stones," and the learner is required to answer "John was throwing stones". In other words, in this kind of task, learners have to rearrange the words presented to them in a jumbled order e.g. "broke the glass Jack". To correct word order at sentence level, understanding is required at the paragraph level. This kind of syntactic knowledge strongly correlates with passage comprehension (Goff et al., 2005).

This study aims at raising the awareness of EFL learners by drawing their attention to some formal aspects of language either implicitly or explicitly. This focus on form inclination highlights overt attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons (Long, 1983). The results of this study, if positively support the hypothesis regarding the effects the syntactic awareness raising techniques might have on learners' written narrative task performance, could pave the way for language teachers' application of these techniques in EFL contexts. It can trigger the inclusion of such techniques in language teaching approaches. Meanwhile the positive results could help students master a better narrative proficiency.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The current study was carried out in a Foreign Languages (FL) school among male English learners in Kermanshah, a city in the west of Iran. The reason that the researchers carried out the study in a male FL school was that it is against the law to have mixed-sex classes in FL schools in Iran. The participants' language background was Kurdish and Farsi and they were 13 to 18 years old. Af-

ter administering an English Test (PET) to homogenize the students, 40 participants were selected based on one standard deviation above and below their mean. Then, the intermediate level participants were randomly assigned to two groups: one control group and one experimental group.

### ***Teaching Instrument***

The selected course book was titled 'Steps to Understanding' written by Hill in 2004. In the book, 120 short stories are placed at four stages: introductory (750-headwords), elementary (1000 headwords), intermediate (1500 headwords) and advanced (2075 headwords). This book is at the 750-headword level, and all the stages are very carefully graded covering not only vocabulary, but also idioms and grammar. Short stories are nearly 150 words long, and some of them include one or two words outside the grading. The reason that the researcher selected a book containing short stories is that short language samples appropriately indicate the improvement in learners who retell the short stories (Heilmann et al., 2010).

### ***Testing Instruments***

This study made use of 3 measurement instruments to collect information on the participants' language proficiency level and their ability to narrate short stories orally. To ensure reliability for scores both in pre-test and post-test, all performances were scored by two raters and reliability was calculated for two sets of scores.

In picture stories, validity is determined in terms of the ambiguity residing in picture sets. The significance of selecting picture cues which possess significant pull for the motive in questions has been frequently indicated (Pang, 2010) and the need to attend to the cue strength of the different component pictures is appropriately demonstrated (Brunstein & Maier, 2005). It is not clear how much the amount of pull and cue strength of picture set should be to ensure right amount of ambiguity. Accordingly, Ramsay and Pang (2013) emphasized that there is a need to balance the competing concerns of pull and ambiguity of short stories. So, picture sets should exhibit moderate ambiguity if validity is to be ensured. Thus, the researchers negotiated convergent and predictive validity of the selected picture stories with a panel of three experts to ensure the validity of the picture stories.

**General English Test.** A preliminary test of English, "Oxford Placement Test", was used to determine the proficiency level of the learners and to homogenize them. As using the three sections of the test was time-consuming and unnecessary regarding the purposes of the research, the researcher adopted section one of the test (i.e., reading and writing). The PET exam is either paper-based or computer-based. For the purpose of this study, the paper-based one was used since it was available easily and there was no need to a computer. Also,



the probable difficulties while taking the test online were prevented. Moreover, the paper-based form could be taken in the favorite time and place.

**Pre-Test.** The pre-test consisted of a picture story and participants were required to rewrite the story based on a set of pictures (9-12) taken from Hill (2004). The pictures were presented to them on paper. It was administered after homogenizing the participants and before the treatment.

**Post-Test.** A written post-test checking the student's ability to rewrite short stories was administered a week after the treatment to measure the relative effects of syntactic awareness on the learners' ability to narrate short stories in written form. The post-test consisted of a picture story including a set of pictures. The participants were required to rewrite the story based on the pictures. The same as pre-test, the post-test measured the accuracy, fluency and complexity of the samples of language the participants produced in written form.

### *Procedure*

The preliminary English Test (PET) was administered in the first session of instruction to homogenize the students. The course book then was used as the medium of instruction in both control and experimental groups' classes. For the purpose of the present study, the 17-session treatment began following the pretest. The sessions were held twice a week and lasted for 70 minutes, for 8 running weeks. The classes were taught by the same teacher who is a PhD candidate of TEFL.

The control group received the following treatment:

For practice in understanding and writing English, the learners listened to the teacher or the cassette first. Then, they read the story at first in chorus with the voice on the cassette, and then aloud. The meaning of unfamiliar words and the structural points were illustrated to them. Finally, to check the learners' understanding of the short stories and their command of vocabulary and grammar, the learners were required to answer a certain number of exercises such as short answer questions following the short stories.

The experimental group received the treatment on syntactic awareness based on two techniques namely **story grammar elements** and **word order correction**. In the present study, the goals of story grammar elements awareness included explicit instruction to the learners so as to find out story grammar elements within stories and instruct them to suitably place these elements into the short stories they were supposed to rewrite. If in classroom activities, narratives followed the organizational pattern known as story grammar, they would be judged acceptable (Stein & Glenn, 1979).

Thus, in each story, the learners were assisted in distinguishing elements including plan, setting, initiating events, internal response, the characters, attempt, consequence and resolution of the story. After reading each short story,

the learners determined the different elements of story on a piece of paper. Then the teacher himself identified the elements and the learners checked their answers.

To apply the word order correction technique, some sentences in the short stories were chosen then reversed. Sentences which were chosen were no more than five words as this put a heavy burden on the memory of the participant in the study. The participants were required to correct the wrong order of the words comprising the sentences. Every session, a sequence of words was presented in a deviant order and the learners were asked to rearrange these words to form a meaningful sentence. The teacher selected sentences from short stories and wrote them on the board in an illogical order e.g. "John making was beds," and the learners were required to answer "John was making beds".

### ***Measures***

To focus on three measures of participants' production in written form (fluency, accuracy, and complexity), their productions were measured both in pre-test and post-test. After that the audiotaped data were transcribed and coded, written proficiency in narrative task was measured in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity.

Following Bygate (2001) who defined t-unit as "a finite clause together with any subordinate clauses dependent on it" (p. 3), the data were collected. The same as Housen and Kuiken, (2009), fluency was measured by counting the numbers of false starts, repetition, replacement and reformulations in every t-unit. Number and lengths of pauses were not considered in this study as measures of fluency due to the large number of participants. To measure accuracy, the researchers followed Skehan & Foster (2005) for whom accuracy was reflected by calculating incidents per t-units. In other words, higher accuracy in the stories retold was a matter of the number of incidents in every t-unit. Following Kawauchi (2005), complexity was measured by counting the number of words per t-units. In other words, the complexity of the language use depended on the rate of words used in the language. As there are different types of words in the language, the researchers only counted the number of content words including nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives.

### ***Data Analysis***

Transcription and coding for narrative proficiency in retelling the short stories in written form was carried out after that the language samples were elicited in the pre and post-tests. Then, reliability calculations were carried out to ensure reliability of the pre-test and post-test. To address the three research questions, at first, the differences between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control group and the experimental group were analyzed quantitatively. Then, they were compared through a paired samples t-test.

## Results

The first step in data analysis was to check the reliability of scores both in pre-test and post-test. All performances were scored by two raters and then reliability was calculated for two sets of scores. An account of the percentage of agreement between the two raters was used to determine inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater reliability indices taken from two raters yielded coefficients ranging from .91 (written accuracy) to .95 (written fluency) to .95 (written complexity). So, the average percentage of inter-rater reliability for the six measures of fluency, accuracy, and complexity was .93 indicating a high inter-rater reliability.

The inter-rater reliability of the post-test was also an account of percentage of agreement between the two raters. Alpha Cronbach, in this phase, produced coefficients ranging from .93 (written accuracy) to .94 (written fluency) to .95 (written complexity). Therefore, the average percentage of inter-rater reliability for the three measures of fluency, accuracy, and complexity was .94, again, indicating a high inter-rater reliability in post-test.

In this study, four measures of fluency namely "number of repetition", "false starts", "reformulations" and "replacements" were taken into account. All of these components were counted and added and then divided by t-units. For accuracy measurement, the total number of the ungrammatical cases was divided by t-units. So for these two measures, the lower the number, the better the performance. To measure complexity in initial and post performances of language learners, the occurrences of the number of content words per t-units were taken into consideration.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics to compare the differences between the means of control group and experimental group with regard to written proficiency in narrative task performance. It describes the means of the two groups in pre-test and post-test with regard to fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

**Table 1**  
*Means of the Control Group and Experimental Group*

Groups	Variables		N	Mean	Std Deviation
Control	Written fluency	Pre	20	6.75	1.2
		Post	20	7.1	1.02
	Written accuracy	Pre	20	11.4	1.09
		Post	20	12.1	1.02
	Written complexity	Pre	20	45.6	5.07
		post	20	44.8	4.50
Experimental	Written fluency	Pre	20	6.95	1.09
		Post	20	10.55	0.99
	Written accuracy	Pre	20	12.55	1.9
		Post	20	16.75	1.91
	Written complexity	Pre	20	45.05	4.47
		Post	20	58.55	5.57

As Table 1 shows, in written narrative task performance, the mean of control group in pretest is 6.75 in written fluency, 11.4 in written accuracy, and 45.6 in written complexity. In post-test, the mean of control group is 7.1 in written fluency, 12.1 in written accuracy, and 44.8 in written complexity.

Table 1 also shows that the mean of experimental group (syntactic awareness) in written narrative task performance in pretest is 6.95 in written fluency, 12.55 in written accuracy, and 45.05 in written complexity. In post-test, the mean of experimental group is 10.55 in written fluency, 16.75 in written accuracy, and 58.55 in written complexity.

In every study, to choose an appropriate statistical test to analyze the data, it is required to evaluate the normality and non-normality of the distributed data. For this purpose in this study, Kolmogorov Smirnov test was used. As Table 2 shows, both in pretest and post-test, Kolmogorov Smirnov test determines that, in the two groups, the level of the significance in fluency, accuracy, and complexity in written narrative task performance is more than 0.05. This shows normality of the distributed data. So, in this study, the parametric tests used for the variables were appropriate.

**Table 2**  
*Kolmogorov Smirnov Test to Determine the Normality of the Distributed Data*

Groups	Variables	Test	Sig.	
Control	Written fluency	Pre	0.81	0.51
		Post	0.94	0.33
	Written accuracy	Pre	0.86	0.44
		Post	1.16	0.13
	Written complexity	Pre	0.63	0.8
		Post	1.43	0.53
Experimental	Written fluency	Pre	0.8	0.53
		Post	1.15	0.13
	Written accuracy	Pre	0.73	0.65
		Post	0.68	0.74
	Written complexity	Pre	0.56	0.9
		Post	0.49	0.97

To test the research hypothesis, i.e. syntactic awareness significantly affects the learners' written narrative task performance, three measures naming fluency, accuracy, and complexity were taken into consideration. Regarding fluency, the numbers of words per t-units were counted. Accuracy was measured by calculating the number of error-free t-units per t-units. Error free t-units were those with no grammatical, lexical or spelling errors. Complexity was measured by calculating the number of sentence nodes per T-units. In this regard, in narratives, the number of sentence nodes, marked by tensed and untensed verbs, was divided by the total number of t-units in the narratives.

To assess the equality of variances for a variable calculated for two groups, Levene's test was used. Table 3 shows the results of Levene's test.

**Table 3**  
*Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances<sup>a</sup>*

Variables	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Written fluency	0.00	1	38	0.94
Written accuracy	0.47	1	38	0.49
Written complexity	2.26	1	38	0.14

As the amount of  $p$ -value in Table 4 is larger than 0.01, it means that the equality of covariance has not been violated. As in all of the cases, the amount of  $p$ -value is more than 0.05, it means the equality of the variance for all cases.

**Table 4**  
*Multivariate Tests*

	Value	F	Sig
Wilks' Lambda	0/08	125/95	0/00

The results in Table 4,  $F(3, 33 = 125.95, p = .00)$  and Wilks' Lambda equals .05 indicates that there is a significant difference between the control group and experimental group post-test scores.

**Table 5**  
*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Variables	F	df	Sig
Written Fluency	214.96	1	0.01
Written Accuracy	186.15	1	0.01
Written Complexity	125.03	1	0.01

The results of analysis in Table 5 shows that, for all of the three measures of fluency ( $F = 214.96, p = 0.01$ ), accuracy ( $F = 186.15, p = 0.01$ ), and complexity ( $F = 125.03, p = 0.01$ ), the difference between control group and experimental group is statistically meaningful.

**Table 6**  
*Comparing Proficiency in both Control and Experimental Groups*

Variables	Group	Mean	Std Error
Written fluency	Control	7.19	0.15
	Experimental group	10.45	0.15
Written accuracy	Control	12.58	0.18
	Experimental group	16.26	0.18
Written complexity	Control	44.42	0.88
	Experimental group	58.92	0.88

A short look at the mean scores of two groups in Table 6 suffices to address the three research questions. The first research question tried to investigate the effect of syntactic awareness raising on learners' fluency in written narrative task performance. It becomes clear that, in the fluency measure, the mean score of the experimental group (10.45) is higher than the control group (7.19), which is an indication of the outperformance of this group to the control group. The second research question investigated the improvement in accuracy of experimental group written narrative task performance. Similarly, the higher mean score of the experimental group's accuracy measure (16.26) shows that this group has outperformed the control group (12.58) in this aspect of performance. The third research question examined the complexity as a measure of participants' language proficiency. The results revealed that experimental group has outperformed control group as the mean of experimental group (58.92) is higher than the mean of control group (44.42). Therefore, the three research questions are positively addressed and the research hypothesis stating that "Syntactic awareness has a significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' written narrative task performance" is confirmed.

## Discussion

Oral and written performances in a foreign language as English have always been problematic issues. Achieving an accurate and fluent command of spoken and written language has proved a daunting task for many language learners in EFL contexts such as Iran. To be able to serve as a proficient language speaker and writer, a language learner needs to be both accurate and fluent. Accuracy, fluency and complexity as three measures of language proficiency are required to be taken into consideration in written task performance. The present study was carried out to investigate the effect of one independent variable i.e. syntactic awareness raising techniques, on one dependent variable i.e. intermediate language learners' written narrative task performance.

The findings of current research revealed a meaningful difference between the performance of the experimental group before and after the treatment, as well as between the performance of the experimental group and control group in the post-tests. Participants in the experimental group significantly improved in three aspects of proficiency in written task performance (i.e. fluency, accuracy and complexity).

In current study, the researchers used a different measure of fluency, accuracy and complexity to check the EFL learners' written performance. With regard to fluency, words per t-units were counted. Accuracy was calculated in terms of the number of error-free t-units which occurred in all t-units. In present study, error free t-units were those free from grammatical, lexical or spelling errors. The number of S-nodes per T-units was counted to measure complexity. In this regard, in the narratives, the researchers divided the number of sentence nodes, shown by tensed and untensed verbs, by the whole number of t-units.

Current study results support the notions of "noticing hypothesis" proposed by Schmidt (1990) in that the learners' attention to the features of language emphasized and highlighted by the teachers led to their language improvement. Schmidt (1990) accepts that language learners are not in a position to choose the salient features of the language they encounter. It is the duty of the teacher to give importance to some features and ignore trivial ones. In this research, the researchers attracted the notices of the learners by drawing their attention to "story grammar elements" and "word order correction" which consequently resulted in improvements in language proficiency.

The findings of this study were in line with results obtained by other researchers on narrative performance in which progress in story structure were reported (Cruz de Quiros et al., 2012; Davies et al., 2004; Green & Klecan-Acker, 2012). Particularly, the results of present study supported those of Spencer and Slocum (2010) who revealed explicit instruction of story grammar elements results in the use of those elements in story retells in young learners' narratives.

The results also support the findings of Ruhi (2001), Pica (1985) and Rahimpour (2001) that there is a direct relationship between increasing consciousness and attention to form and planning. In other words, the language learners' production to a large extent depends on his attention to form and planning.

The result obtained from present study is also in line with those of Hayward and Schneider (2000). In their study, they taught 13 English speakers story grammar elements explicitly along with story retell to improve their narrative abilities. In the intervention, they used some techniques including sorting and sequencing story grammar components, reconstructing scrambled stories, identification of missing story grammar components and identification of story grammar elements. Interventions were also incorporated into the regular classroom instruction as central activities. Findings from this study demonstrated that 12 out of 13 participants made progress as relevant story events and elements were applied or incorporated.

Word order correction as another technique was used to raise the learners' syntactic awareness to narrate short stories in written form. The results revealed that the learners' ability to reverse the sentences, to a large extent, depended on syntactic complexity. This suggests that syntactic ambiguity influences syntactic awareness. Accordingly, learners who suffered from syntactic ambiguity in sentences couldn't rewrite the short stories as well as other learners. This is in line with the results found by Nation and Snowling (2000) suggesting that poor comprehenders had more difficulty with reversing long, complex and ambiguous sentences than typically-developed learners.

Despite the various results obtained for individual learners, the findings obtained from present study indicated that words with high-frequency were used more than usual. Learners, no matter what language they were learning made errors in their written narrative task. This was because they lacked experience

or exposure to low-frequency words and when this occurred, overextension in the use of high-frequency words increased (Bedore & Pena, 2008). This was revealed in some of the transcripts in the current study. As one example, overextension can be seen in one of the learner's transcript. It appeared that any time the participant wanted to write "said", "told", "ordered" and "asked", he used "said".

Another salient result was that the participants overextended high-frequency words. Overextension of specific words was prevalent in the transitions between utterances. For example, the words "so", "and" and "and then" were the first words of most utterances as the learners rewrite the stories based on pictures sets.

Another important point to be mentioned is the length of the language transcripts. In narrative, productivity is measured by means of the length of the transcripts. Thus, the most reliable microstructural measure was the language samples between 35 and 65 utterances (Miller et al., 2011). A large number of participants in the present study produced scripts consistent with or even higher than the range mentioned.

Moreover, in the current study, all participants and the teacher reported their pleasure and satisfaction with the experience. Moreover, they approved that the intervention can create long lasting changes in written narrative skills of nearly all learners.

The present study had some limitations. The most important limitation of this study was using intact classes which were previously registered by the Foreign Languages School. The researchers had a population of nearly 40 learners as the average number of research population since no more than 20 learners could be placed in the classrooms. This might limit the generalizability of the findings. As each participant was receiving different amount and type of instruction outside the Foreign Languages School, this was also regarded as a limitation. As learners attend different high schools, they received different kinds of instructional services during the study. This could consequently influence the results of the study.

As the study measured the effect of one independent variable i.e., syntactic awareness realized by means of two techniques i.e., story grammar elements and word order correction, it was not possible to measure the individual role of each of them in the participants' improvements in written narrative task performance. This can be regarded as a main delimitation of the study.

## Conclusion

To date, researches carried out demonstrate the importance of narrative skills as substantial tools to maintain effective communication in every day conversation (Duinmeijer et al., 2012), in reading outcomes (Paul & Smith, 1993) as well as in academic activities (Heilmann et al., 2010). Thus, embedding them in interactive learning context is of paramount importance. Couched in this concep-



tualization, this research was carried out to investigate the accuracy, fluency and complexity (AFC) development in learners' task performance as a result of syntactic awareness raising through story grammar elements and word order correction applied in foreign language classes in Iran. Specifically, this study showed the development of the three above-mentioned constructs by using six measures over 17 sessions in written narrative task performance of 40 foreign language learners of English. The result of the present study indicated that the syntactic awareness raising activities influence the foreign language learners' retelling short stories significantly.

The results of this study can help teachers incorporate syntactic awareness raising in their methodology as it can improve intermediate narrative skills of the learners to a great extent. Moreover, Syllabus designers and textbook writers can include parts as script stories in their textbooks which provide rooms for teachers to apply syntactic awareness raising techniques in language learning classes.

Due to the effectiveness of applying such techniques, as found in the present study, educational policy makers can hold in-service classes to train teachers how to apply awareness raising techniques in their classes. The reason is that this is a skill which needs teachers to be trained how to use it correctly and efficiently, otherwise the results will be reverse.

Awareness raising activities which may improve written performance have opened new avenues of research. The present study only took the effect of syntactic awareness raising techniques on written production of EFL language learners. Additionally, the effects awareness raising techniques might have on the other language skills such as reading and speaking as well as listening can open new areas for investigation.

The results obtained from current research indicate that syntactic awareness raising can improve the narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL intermediate learners. This opens new areas for future research. To be able to evaluate the difference between learners at different level of competency, comparative study of different proficiency levels can be carried out.

To replicate the result, this research should be conducted with both younger and older learners. It can improve generalizability of the results. Also, in similar studies, larger groups of learners could be targeted. Previous studies have emphasized strong relationships between narrative skills in preschoolers and development in emergent literary skills (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; McCabe & Rollins, 1994). Researches carried out highlights the significant role narrative skills play as predictor of progress in language proficiency (Cleave et al., 2010). Moreover, some studies have emphasized their salient features when it comes to predict future reading outcomes in the language learners (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002). In the area of language pedagogy as well, thorough information about learners' narrative and language skills is of primary significance (Riley & Burrell, 2007). Thus, new studies need to research into narrative abilities of children of different ages and different levels

to ensure the efficacy of this type of research so that teachers could be in a better position to understand language development of their students.

The results obtained from present study provide implications for EFL syllabus designers, curriculum planners, and language teachers to construct suitable material for pedagogical purposes. At the same time, language learners based on such techniques can improve their language proficiency.

Nowadays, it is thought that communicative language teaching is inappropriate to promote proficiency in EFL language learners (Kalanzadeh, et al., 2013) and that task-based instruction can serve as a compromise to remove this inefficiency (Scura, 2016). Teachers and learners should be aware of fact that making a link between theories of language and their practical realizations requires methodological techniques. They search for possibilities to invent techniques to promote learners' performance in language. A short literature review on history of language pedagogy shows inadequate discussion of awareness raising integrative techniques and methodological plans or strategies to use language meaningfully.

In the view of such a practical need in second language pedagogy, raising learners' awareness of syntactic features of language by means of focus on form activities could improve meaningful communication. Thus, such practices can be incorporated into a meaning-oriented instruction. Curriculum planners should investigate feasible ways to design appropriate tasks where learners' awareness can be easily raised through creating links between form and meaning. This later one could serve as a practical suggestion and it is an impetus for EFL teachers to think of awareness raising techniques which assist learners to improve not only communicative fluency but also grammatical accuracy.

For researchers, it illuminates the future research on this less investigated area creating the floor for them to go deep through the EFL contexts and find more about the probable effects syntactic awareness raising might have on language teaching and learning.

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