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The Mediating Role of Creative and Language Awareness Input in Enhancing Syntactical Elements Comprehension

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Effective learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) requires special skills and a creative mind; students must manipulate the information they receive in class and transform it into innovative and effective communication through their personal lens. Language awareness plays a critical role in this process, emphasising not only the understanding of language structures but also the conscious application of these structures in various contexts. Creative teaching, on the other hand, helps students be active participants in the learning process rather than passively learn rules and concepts. One hundred four C1-level EFL students, all candidates in English philology, were studied for their use of creative and language awareness input-based learning over their first-semester writing course, which focused on syntactic structures in composition. The study employed a quasi-experimental design, using pre- and post-tests to quantitatively assess the impact of traditional instruction versus a more creative, language-aware approach on syntactic comprehension. The findings suggest that a course structure based on these principles not only aids comprehension of syntactic structures but could also improve bilingual self-expression within a foreign linguistic output.

Keywords: syntactical structures, EFL, creativity, language awareness, adult language learners

INTRODUCTION

Understanding and consciously applying language structures across various contexts is essential in language learning. Still, such an engaging and meaningful use of a foreign language in a dynamic world, here English, requires not only a variety of modalities in delivering language input (Kress, 2003) but also something beyond an isolated, monolingual perspective on language learning (Canagarajah, 2013). It calls for an approach that considers each learner's personal and unique assets. This approach is indispensable for teachers and learners: it offers teachers a chance to question their established practices and "prepackaged themes" (Choi, 2016, p. 158), while it also opens new opportunities for students to partake in shaping alternative representations of language. These ideas go hand in hand with an asset-based approach, which draws on students' strengths and resources (Anis, 2023; Cummins, 2001), as well as with an

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ecological-semiotic view of the self, discussed by Choi (2016) drawing from van Lier (2007).

Still, to some extent, it does seem that teaching grammar, especially syntax, feels more restrictive and rule-bound to provide room for exploring these aspects; it often demands adherence to specific structures, which can seem less open to creativity. Vocabulary learning, creative writing or semantics, on the other hand, invite context-driven interpretations to explore multiple meanings, connotations, and even culturally embedded expressions. Even so, despite being under-researched, creativity and language awareness in teaching grammar hold potential for exploration (Gerngross et al., 2006), with some scholars (Jones & Richards, 2013) observing that creativity should be an obligatory, rather than merely seasonal, component of language instruction.

To start with, engaging students through creative techniques and awareness-based strategies could foster a deeper comprehension of syntax by encouraging their active, personal and locally-situated involvement. This is particularly significant in non-English speaking countries, where developing bilingual and multilingual language identities, rather than just an isolated understanding of the language, is crucial (Choi, 2013). Additionally, the durability of input processing is vital since students often lack natural English exposure outside the classroom, resulting in a more distanced perspective. Thus, identifying how students process and internalise syntactic structures and create mental representations is imperative. Learning English as a foreign language (EFL), especially at the C1 level, encompasses more than memorising vocabulary and grammar rules. It requires a comprehensive understanding of linguistic structures and the ability to use language creatively and effectively. With a focus on the Polish educational context, where students often learn English alongside their native Polish, this study investigates the potential benefits of integrating creative and language awareness-based inputs into EFL instruction.

A crucial aspect of this research is understanding the role of different types of creative input in syntactic comprehension. Creative input involves imaginative and engaging materials encouraging innovative and meaningful language use (Choi, 2016; Gerngross et al., 2006; Li, 2011; Tin, 2013). Drawing on this, one can claim that creativity in a foreign language goes beyond creative strategies based on higher-order thinking skills like analysis and verification. It also involves exposure to more imaginative and innovative forms of language. Research shows that these methods can enhance learners' ability to manipulate syntactic structures and enrich their linguistic expression (Shehzadi & Shah, 2022; Tok & Kandemir, 2015). Moreover, creative and higher-order thinking skills strategies align well with teaching based on deeper cognitive processes and more conscious learning based on critical thinking skills (Castro Carracedo, 2025). Here, understanding how the brain functions, retains information and processes language can inform more effective teaching practices (Jensen, 2005). By engaging students in analysing, reconstructing and creating, educators can encourage active learning rather than passive reception of information (Sawyer, 2012). These approaches enhance syntactic acquisition and promote linguistic creativity and self-expression, which are crucial elements for proficient language use (Cook, 2008). Additionally, deeper processing of linguistic information on multiple and multilingual levels can also

be achieved through awareness-raising activities. In linguistic terms, language awareness includes one's ability to focus on language form, switch between form and meanings and categorise words into parts of speech, explain the functions, self-evaluation, code-switching and other metalinguistic, metacognitive and multilingual aspects (Komorowska, 2022). Using this framework, especially at the level of syntactical elements, wherein language awareness goes hand-in-hand with creativity, offers a deeper understanding through thoughtful, comparative and strategic methods.

Hence, the main research aim is to determine whether creative input, grounded in language awareness principles and instruction, positively affects the acquisition of syntax. This intervention is hoped to make learning of these grammatical structures more engaging and meaningful for Polish and Ukrainian students by connecting it with their unique language backgrounds and experiences, ultimately supporting long-term learning. Consequently, the central research question guiding this study is: Does creative input based on language awareness principles positively influence the comprehension of syntactic structures among English language students?

Literature Review

Language awareness in foreign language teaching (FLT), as detailed by Komorowska (2022), encompasses several critical dimensions: learner metalinguistic awareness, which includes focusing on form and categorising words (Ellis, 2005; Jessner, 2014; Michońska-Stadnik, 2013; Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2011); learner metacognitive awareness, involving task planning and strategy use (Jessner, 2014; Trendak, 2016); and learner multilingual awareness, which covers cross-linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects (Jessner, 2006, 2014; Wach, 2018). The authors define language awareness as encompassing linguistic creativity while also stimulating creativity. Richards and Schmidt (2010) describe language awareness as a movement to stimulate curiosity about language, linking various language experiences in education. Additionally, awareness in FLT involves broader sociocultural, economic and political aspects, as well as self-knowledge and self-awareness, which are crucial for both learners and teachers (Schmidt, 1994; Smuk, 2016).

Input in language learning refers to the language data learners are exposed to, including both content and teaching methods. Types of input include content-based input, which involves language materials such as texts, audio and video; interactive input, which requires learners to actively use language; and task-based input, which includes activities promoting language use in context (Timuçin, 2013). Engaging learners through these varied forms of input ensures a comprehensive approach to language acquisition. Creative input involves introducing learners to engaging, imaginative materials that encourage innovative language use. Jones and Richards (2016) claim that creativity in language learning is a purposeful, multi-staged, and a social process truly transformative only when scaffolded to integrate knowledge both within and beyond the classroom through carefully structured input. Research shows that creative tasks can enhance learners' ability to manipulate syntactic structures and enrich their linguistic expression (Shehzadi & Shah, 2022; Tok & Kandemir, 2015). Tin (2013) points out that creative communication activities, which differ from simply learning new language

structures, help students feel more comfortable and less anxious about unfamiliar forms. By incorporating diverse cultural experiences, these tasks encourage students to step out of their comfort zones and include stages for generating and exploring ideas through translanguaging (Choi, 2016; Li, 2011). Other authors highlight creativity's role in cognitive development and problem-solving, suggesting that creative tasks can help students use language more flexibly and expressively (Shehzadi & Shah, 2022; Tok & Kandemir, 2015). Although fostering creativity may not be the primary goal in teaching English, deep data processing can significantly enhance the acquisition of language competencies. Furthermore, creative thinking, which requires problem-solving and deep data processing, promotes transitioning information from short-term to long-term memory (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

Understanding input processing is crucial in distinguishing between acquisition (implicit learning of language structures) and comprehension (ability to understand and use language). Effective input facilitates explicit knowledge (declarative) and implicit skills (procedural). VanPatten and Williams (2007) argue that engaging, memorable and comprehensible input is essential for both types of knowledge, making it a critical aspect of language teaching. Gerngross et al. (2006) emphasise that learning grammar elements through creative input should be an awareness-raising activity, proposing a three-step Discovery, Consolidation and Use (DCU) model that encourages a more learner-led, inductive approach to grammar learning. This intersection of language awareness and creativity highlights the importance of engaging learners in discovery-based activities, promoting a deeper understanding and more effective application of syntactic rules. The authors argue that although this division seems to reflect the traditional Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) model, the discovery model is less mechanistic and more learner-led. First, presentation implies that learners learn precisely what the teacher presents to them; in contrast, discovery includes induction, where students are exposed to language data and then are prompted to work out the rules themselves.

Brain and memory research emphasises active engagement for transitioning information to long-term memory, applying not only to vocabulary and grammar but also to syntactic structures in EFL. Brain-based teaching aligns educational methods with how the brain processes and retains information. This approach emphasises creating learning experiences that engage cognitive functions, enhancing retention and understanding. Brusilovsky and Millán (2007) suggest that applying brain-based principles in language teaching makes learning more effective and engaging. Key concepts include working memory, neuroplasticity and cognitive load. Engaging students in activities requiring new vocabulary in different contexts strengthens working memory.

Repeated practice and exposure to language tasks solidify new language skills while breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps reduces cognitive load and improves learning efficiency. When learning grammar, the content and emotional depth of experiences play a significant role. Gerngross et al. (2006) reference Stevick (1989, p. 126) and emphasise how crucial these factors are in grammar acquisition. To illustrate, the authors suggest considering the difference between Martin Luther King's powerful statement, 'I want to be the white man's brother, not his brother-in-law' and

the bland ‘the man’s hat is green’. The former is rich in emotion and context, making it much more memorable and impactful than the latter. Given this understanding, it becomes clear that learning complex syntactic structures through language awareness and creative inputs, which require knowledge of syntax, morphology and semantics, can be enhanced by using culturally rich and relatable content.

Research shows that bilingualism, a rich linguistic repertoire and exposure to different cultures enhance creative potential. Choi (2016), a researcher teaching Japanese students, noticed that in their creative writing outputs, they demonstrated multilingualism, defined as the perception and mental concepts from different languages, even though they were using only one language, i.e. English. Kharkhurin (2010) found that sociocultural context modulates bilingualism’s influence on creativity. Similarly, Maddux et al. (2010) demonstrate that living in foreign cultures promotes creativity by enhancing idea flexibility and overcoming functional fixedness (Kharkhurin, 2010; Maddux et al., 2010). Types of cultural influence on creativity include sociocultural context, bicultural and multicultural experiences and cultural tightness and looseness (Chua et al., 2015). Culture provides contextually rich materials that are relatable and engaging for learners. Films, history, folklore, music and social media content illustrate language use in authentic settings, enhancing comprehension and practical application. Using contemporary materials reflecting the target language’s culture, such as films and songs, makes learning more engaging and relatable, boosting motivation and efficacy (Ševečková, 2016). Finally, Eschenauer et al. (2023) show that integrating artistic, bodily and linguistic creativity stimulates emotional skills, executive functions and oral communication in foreign language learning. Motivating students through culturally relevant and emotionally engaging materials improves their overall learning experience and outcomes.

Creativity and language awareness in language teaching share several core elements: they are purposeful (Jones & Richards, 2016), socially and locally situated (Canagarajah, 2013), adaptive (Gerngross et al., 2006), and personally unique, drawing on each learner’s assets and experiences (Choi, 2016; Cummins, 2001; van Lier, 200). They also elicit higher-order thinking skills, such as synthesis and analysis, supporting a brain-based teaching approach that enhances long-term retention (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Creativity enables us to combine prior knowledge and apply it to create new linguistic forms (Higueras-Rodríguez et al., 2025), while language awareness allows us to impose constraints that make these forms conscious, purposeful, inclusive, and personal. Based on these theoretical and empirical evidence, we hypothesise that language input grounded in creativity and language awareness principles positively influences the comprehension of syntactic structures. Therefore, the intervention might result in significantly better comprehension of syntactic structures.

METHOD

The pre/post-test design within the quasi-experimental framework aimed to evaluate comprehensible input encompassing both declarative and procedural knowledge. The tests assessed students’ ability to recognise and produce syntactic structures and

measured their comprehension. Pilot-tested for clarity and reliability, tasks included identifying complete sentences, parts of speech, subject-verb agreements and combining sentences with conjunctions. Students also wrote a paragraph about a memorable day, evaluated for syntactic and lexical richness, grammatical accuracy and logical coherence. A quantitative method was used, collecting numerical data through pretest and post-test scores. Statistical analyses, including basic descriptive statistics and a mixed ANOVA, were conducted to assess the course's impact on students' overall syntactical performance.

Participants

First-year undergraduate Polish and Ukrainian students enrolled in the English Studies programme were considered in the research. These students, having recently completed secondary school, were all expected to have an English proficiency level between B2 and C1. English is the primary medium of instruction for their courses. A total of 104 students participated in this study. They were all enrolled in the first semester of their writing class, a practical course designed for the initial term. All students followed the same syllabus and course objectives as outlined for the first semester. All participants were selected using convenience and purposive sampling methods, where readily available individuals were met, and deliberately selecting those who fit a specific purpose or focus (Punch, 2005, p. 187).

Procedures

The study evaluated the effectiveness of creativity- and awareness-oriented instructional methods on students' mastery of syntactical knowledge at the C1 level over a semester from October to February, consisting of 14 sessions. Participants were divided into an experimental group, which received language awareness activities and creative input sessions following the DCU (Gerngross et al., 2006), and a control group, which followed traditional EFL coursebook-based instruction using PPP. The 90-minute module following the DCU model—Discovery, Consolidation, and Use—used engaging and practical activities to help students fully explore the potential of creative and awareness-based inputs. In the Discovery phase, students guessed, described, elicited, and corrected, introducing new ideas and preparing them for a more in-depth exploration. The Consolidation phase then incorporated tasks such as reading, discussion, comparison, co-description, and rewriting to reinforce connections between various language concepts. Finally, in the Use phase, students produced, wrote, and created, applying their knowledge to real contexts. The experimental modules relied on scaffolding (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) to move students from an initial grasp of concepts to confident use of language, ultimately guiding them toward original content creation (see Appendix 1).

Moreover, to achieve the research goals, the experimental group's course was structured around scaffolding techniques, with a focus on progressively building knowledge, as shown in Appendix 1. Importantly, some tasks were adjusted either before or during class to give students more freedom to express personal perspectives and preferences. For example, after completing activities focused on identifying, remembering, and organizing information, students moved on to a creative writing task designed to

encourage both creative language use and multi-layered reflection on the examples used. With knowledge of Kapsel, a dog who frequently visits the campus library and interacts with students, the instructor used this familiar figure to anchor the task in a real-life context beyond the EFL curriculum. Originally, the task required students to describe a day on campus from Kapsel's perspective. However, students suggested using a cat's perspective instead, whose naturally critical personality offered a humorous and evaluative view of campus life. The instructor welcomed this shift, recognizing it as an opportunity for students to engage more critically and personally with their surroundings. In contrast, the control group described a day at Oxford University, providing a monolingual perspective without the local cultural context. Together with students, we used Canva AI to generate images depicting campus life, adapting them to our university's context and include a characterful cat, and then students worked together to create descriptive scenes based on these images. The purpose of differentiating the tasks between groups was to shift the experimental group's view from a purely academic perspective to one that felt culturally and locally relevant, which could deepen their connection to the language

The structure and design of the pre/post-test were based on the premise that evaluating the comprehensibility of input must encompass both declarative and procedural knowledge. Accordingly, the course tasks were designed to prepare students not only to recall and organize information but also to produce it effectively and meaningfully. VanPatten and Williams (2007) argue that engaging, memorable and comprehensible input is essential for both types of knowledge, making it a critical aspect of language teaching. Consequently, the pretest and post-test assessed students' ability to recognise and produce syntactic structures, thereby measuring their comprehension.

The course covered the following linguistic structures: identification of a complete sentence; identification of parts of speech and their functions within a sentence, including nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections. Students were trained to recognise, identify and provide examples of subjects in various contexts, such as sentences, prepositional phrases and appositive phrases. They also studied verbs, concentrating on action verbs, linking verbs and auxiliary verbs in sentences. Subject-verb agreement was also emphasised, particularly with personal pronouns, the verbs DO and BE, and challenging subject structures. The curriculum included understanding and analysing phrases, such as infinitive phrases, participial phrases and gerund phrases. Combining sentences was taught through multiple methods, including using a comma plus a coordinating conjunction, a semicolon with an adverbial conjunction and a comma, and using a semicolon alone. Hence, combining sentences through subordination involved the study of independent and dependent clauses, subordinating conjunctions and the use of relative pronouns with proper punctuation of relative clauses.

Example Activities

Example no. 1: The Ultimate Parts of Speech Wizardry

Syntactical Structure: Parts of Speech and their Functions. Using the provided vocabulary bank, which includes words like Paris, Shakespeare, city, author, apple,

music, love, freedom, books, cars, water, knowledge, team, flock, he, they, mine, yours, myself, herself, who, which, this, those, who, what, someone, anybody, run, talk, is, seem, can, must, give up, run out, green, happy, some, few, my, our, bigger, better, biggest, best, slowly, quietly, always, sometimes, here, everywhere, now, yesterday, very, almost, at, on, in, above, below, between, into, out of, by, with, and, but, or, although, because, either...or, neither...nor, hello, wow and um, students (while working in groups of three to four members) were encouraged to create sentences based on different parts of speech:

a. Create a sentence using a Proper Noun and an Action Verb.
b. Combine a Common Noun, Descriptive Adjective and Linking Verb.
c. Use a Concrete Noun with an Adverb of Manner and Modal Verb.
d. Formulate a sentence expressing Abstract Nouns and Possessive Pronouns.
e. Create a sentence using Countable Nouns, Quantitative Adjectives and a Coordinating Conjunction.
f. Use an Uncountable Noun with an Adverb of Frequency.
g. Formulate a sentence with Collective Nouns and Relative Pronouns.
h. Create a question using Interrogative Pronouns and Phrasal Verbs.

This activity aimed to encourage teamwork while constructing complex sentences. This exercise should start with a model sentence and a quick lead-in, followed by students using semi-free association to create witty and even absurd sentences.

Example no. 2: Yesterday in my Dream…

Syntactical Elements: Parts of Speech and their Functions: Revision. First, the students were asked to discuss the role of each grammatical function boldfaced within the poem, without naming it initially, e.g. an appositive adds extra information, an adverbial clause describes the verb, etc.:

In my dream, my best friend, a werewolf with a penchant for poetry, wrote a sonnet.
When the moon dances tango, werewolves play the violin.
The taco that spoke three languages taught me Spanish.
Whatever the talking cactus said remains a mystery.
The vampire with a sun allergy always carried an umbrella.
I want to fly a broomstick and ride a unicorn.
I'll join the space race unless zombies join too.
Eureka! My robot can now bake cookies!
My dream is to dance with Bigfoot.
Teleporting always gives me hiccups.
The flustered alien forgot where he parked his spaceship.
The mermaid singing on a rock in the moonlight.

Then, the students received clues about these functions and decoded another dream, but this time they had to solve rebus puzzles using the supporting images and sentence clues, e.g. describe what an imaginary invention does as the predicate, supported by supported by the visual elements as depicted in Figure 1 below:

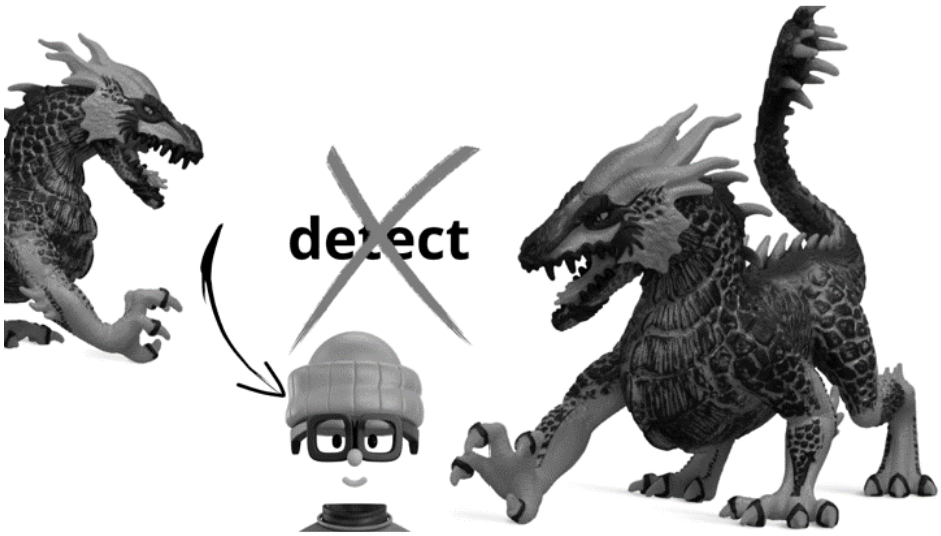

Figure 1
Example activity: Yesterday in my Dream

Figure 1 features two adult, fierce-looking dragons hunting for an invisible boy, who is visible only by his glasses, hat, and garment. Above the boy, the word 'detect' is crossed out, which gives clues to the students on the word formation process needed to describe the boy.

This activity aims to expose students to grammatical structures within a more creative context. Here, the students engaged in the activities and themes of their interest – folklore, fairy tales and popular games. This activity centred on developing syntactical awareness. Additionally, students were asked to create their puzzles or riddles using the grammatical functions learned, allowing them to develop mental representations of these structures and apply them more meaningfully.

Example no. 3: Classroom Chronicles

Syntactical Structure: Subject and Object Recognition within Sentence Complexity. Students were asked to look around the classroom and identify an object. They were then encouraged to create a personal and imaginative sentence about it. The teacher instructed them to make the sentence more complex by adding a prepositional phrase and an appositive phrase, e.g. The clock on the wall, covered in cobwebs, reminded me of the forgotten attic in my house. After that, the students were prompted to evaluate each other's work and underline the subject, object and other grammatical constructions within a sentence structure.

This follow-up activity aimed to improve students' ability to recognise and use subjects and objects in various sentence structures. Additionally, this exercise required learners to categorise sentence structures and plan their creation. Focusing on hands-on items (situational context), imaginative language and personal references might make the consolidation phase more memorable and relatable.

Example no. 4: Grammar Jumble: Arrange the Words

Syntactical Structure: Subject Placement, Word Order. Students were first exposed to the following sentences and were asked to determine the common denominator:

1. The Poznan Penguins painted picturesque penguins painlessly.
2. The curious cat chased the colourful chameleon cautiously.

Then, they were asked to arrange the jumbled words into grammatically correct sentences, focusing on word order, subject placement and overall sentence structure, e.g. at, astronomy, an, amazing, astronomer, attend, a, asteroid, anxiously. Finally, they were instructed to create similar one-letter (except for function words such as articles) sentences independently.

Example no. 5: Winter-Phrases Wonderland

Syntactical Structure: Six Phrases of English. Students observed the given sentence fragments and identified different grammatical structures, discovering their functions and translating them into Polish for a deeper understanding:

a. Sipping mulled wine infused with spices (…)
b. Wrapped up snug in her duffle coat (…)
c. 'Brass monkeys out here,' muttered the bus driver (…)
d. To smell the smoky scent of a burning log fire (…)
e. Under the woollen scarf wrapped tightly around her neck (…)
f. The shimmering blanket of snow covering Hyde Park (…)
g. A thick coat of snow on the evergreen branches (…)
h. Trekking through the deep, untouched snow (…)
i. Icy branches glistening in the early morning light (…)
j. Twinkling lights wrapped around the evergreens (…)
k. The serene silence after a heavy snowfall (…)
l. Steaming mugs of cider held in glove-wrapped hands (…)
m. To breathe in the crisp, frosty air (…)
n. Kettle on for a brew after a long day (…)

Students were then asked to think of specific words related to winter and how they relate to the Polish context they are in, comparing it with the British winter streets. They were also asked to recognise six different phrases in English and, in groups, create their sentences to form a winter poem.

FINDINGS

To verify the impact of the course on the improvement of the students' results, statistical analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 29. First, basic descriptive statistics and the Shapiro-Wilk normality test were calculated to confirm the assumption of a normal distribution of the indicators in the sample of data collected. Subsequently, a mixed ANOVA (4x2) was employed, comparing the results of individuals from two control groups and two experimental groups in terms of tests taken before the course and five months after the course. The sample obtained (n = 104) allowed the detection of a moderate effect size of f = .17, assuming an error of $\alpha = .05$ and a power of $1 - \beta = .80$.

Descriptive Statistics of Variable Indicators

Table 1 presents the basic descriptive statistics of the scores of the students tested in the control and experimental groups. The distributions were tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test; the number of subjects in each group was n = 26.

Table 1
The basic descriptive statistics

Dependent Variable	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*	*As*	*K*	*Min*	*Max*	*W*	*p*
Control Group 1									
Pretest	20.27	20.50	4.13	0.00	-0.89	12.00	27.00	.95	.256
Post-test	23.81	24.00	2.23	-0.07	-0.54	19.00	28.00	.97	.711
Control Group 2									
Pretest	20.85	22.00	3.56	0.03	-0.35	15.00	29.00	.94	.119
Post-test	22.58	22.50	3.65	0.21	-0.27	16.00	30.00	.97	.612
Experimental Group 1									
Pretest	19.72	19.00	3.05	-0.03	-0.97	14.00	25.00	.97	.564
Post-test	25.19	25.50	2.51	-0.17	-0.49	20.00	30.00	.98	.913
Experimental Group 2									
Pretest	18.92	19.00	4.05	0.32	0.73	10.00	29.00	.98	.804
Post-test	25.42	25.00	2.32	0.63	0.01	21.00	30.00	.92	.047

Annotation. M – mean; Mdn – median; SD – standard deviation; As – skewness; K – kurtosis; Min – minimum value; Max – maximum value; W – Shapiro-Wilk test result; p – p-value for Shapiro-Wilk test.

The analysis of the distributions of the variable indicators in the data (Table 1) confirmed a significant deviation only in the case of the post-test in the second experimental group, where the p-value of the significance coefficient was below the accepted threshold of $p < .05$.

The W value for this group was .92, with a p-value of .047, indicating a deviation from normality. The Shapiro-Wilk test is commonly used to assess the normality of variable distributions. In our case, most variable distributions did not significantly deviate from normality ($p > .05$), suggesting that the distributions were approximately normal. The exception is the post-test in the second experimental group, where $p < .05$.

However, according to George and Mallery (2021), it is possible to use parametric tests even in the presence of deviations from normality, provided that the skewness and kurtosis values fall within the absolute range of |2|. Additionally, Schmider et al. (2010)

demonstrated that analysis of variance (ANOVA) is robust to violations of normality, particularly in situations with equal sample sizes.

Thus, the above analysis implies that the Shapiro-Wilk test results and the skewness and kurtosis values indicate an acceptable level of normality for most groups and test conditions. Although the second experimental group showed a deviation from normality in the post-test, the overall results suggest that ANOVA is an appropriate method for analysis in this study.

Hypothesis Verification

According to the research hypothesis, the course conducted would positively affect the test scores of the experimental groups. To test this, a mixed ANOVA (4x2) was performed, where the between-subjects variable was the group studied, and the within-subjects variable was the time of measurement (pretest vs. post-test). This design examined the main effects and the interaction effects between the group type and the time of measurement.

The main effect of time was significant, $F(1, 99) = 85.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .46$, demonstrating that overall, test scores improved from the pretest to the post-test across all groups. This significant main effect supports the idea that there was a general increase in knowledge or skills throughout the study. The main effect of the group was also significant, $F(3, 99) = 7.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$; thus, there were significant differences in test scores among the four groups when considering both pretest and post-test scores. This means that the groups differed in their overall performance levels. The interaction effect between the group and time of measurement was significant, $F(3, 99) = 14.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$. This significant interaction effect indicates that the improvement in test scores from pretest to post-test varied depending on the group.

To further investigate the nature of the interaction, simple effects analyses were conducted with the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons to maintain a stringent significance threshold. There were no significant differences among the groups in the pretest scores ($p > .05$), confirming that all groups started with a similar level of knowledge or skills before the course began. The results are represented in Figure 2.

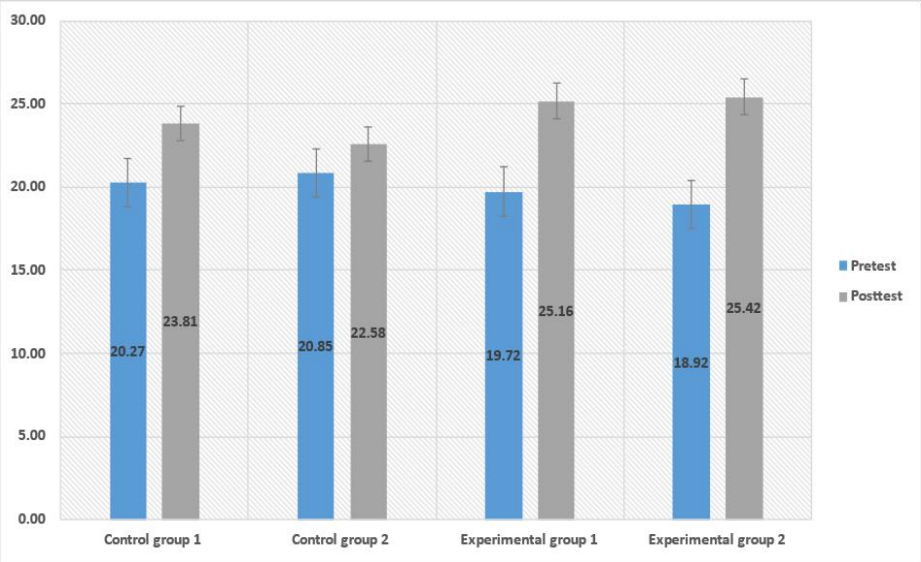

Figure 2
Effect of the course on test results
Annotation. Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals of the mean test scores.

The analysis of variance (Figure 2) revealed a statistically significant interaction effect between the groups compared and the time of test administration, $F(3,99) = 14.34$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .30$. This indicates that the effect of the test administration time on the scores was different across the groups.

The analysis of simple effects demonstrated that the compared groups did not differ from each other in the pretest conditions ($p > .05$), indicating that all groups had a similar level of knowledge before the course began. The mean intensity of knowledge for all groups at the pretest was $M = 19.94$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 3.74$. This homogeneity suggests that any post-test differences can be more confidently attributed to the intervention rather than to pre-existing differences.

Significant statistical differences were observed in the post-test between the second control group and the experimental groups. Specifically, the second control group scored lower in the post-test ($M = 22.58$; $SD = 3.64$) compared to the first experimental group ($M = 25.16$; $SD = 2.56$; $p = .007$) and the second experimental group ($M = 25.42$; $SD = 2.32$; $p = .002$). These results suggest that the intervention had a significant positive effect on the experimental groups.

No significant differences were noted between the two control groups ($p = .658$) or between the two experimental groups ($p = 1.000$), indicating consistency within these pairs. Furthermore, no significant differences were found between the first control group and either the first experimental group ($p = .493$) or the second experimental group ($p = .220$), implying that while the second control group underperformed relative

to the experimental groups, the first control group did not show a statistically significant difference from the experimental groups.

Additionally, all groups significantly improved their test scores after five months, with improvements significant at $p < .01$. This indicates that the knowledge or skills being measured by the test improved over time for all participants, regardless of group assignment.

The analyses conducted partially support the hypothesis of a positive impact of the course on test results. Particularly, the experimental groups, which presumably received the intervention, performed better than the second control group. However, the lack of significant differences between the first control group and the experimental groups suggests that other factors might have influenced the outcomes, and the intervention's impact might not be uniformly strong across all comparisons.

Overall, the results indicate that the intervention positively influenced the test scores, as evidenced by the higher post-test scores in the experimental groups compared to the second control group. However, the lack of significant differences between the first control group and the experimental groups calls for a cautious interpretation, possibly suggesting that the first control group experienced some improvement that was not directly related to the intervention.

DISCUSSION

This study primarily demonstrated that creativity does not disrupt the regular aims of the curriculum; in fact, it strengthens its objectives. Far from being an optional extra, creativity has the potential to become an essential part of language teaching, rather than something merely seasonal (Jones & Richards, 2013). By integrating creativity with language awareness in teaching syntactic structures, this approach has had a clearly positive impact on learners' understanding of syntax. Students in the experimental groups, who engaged with creative and language-aware tasks, showed a slight improvement in identifying and using syntactic structures compared to control groups. This improvement was evident in declarative and procedural knowledge of syntax. This improvement suggests that embedding creativity within a structured university programme is indeed worthwhile, particularly as it helped foster syntactic understanding within the practical constraints of a single semester (Gerngross et al., 2006; Tin, 2013). Interestingly, these findings correspond with substantial research that underscores the benefits of language awareness in foreign language teaching (Ellis, 2005; Jessner, 2014). Developing language awareness, as Komorowska (2022) and others (Michońska-Stadnik, 2013; Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2011) have noted, encourages learners to focus on the shape and structure of language. Combining this with creativity provides a ground for teachers and students to engage with language in a way that is not only memorable but also personally meaningful (Tin, 2013). At its heart, this approach draws from an asset-based model of learning, which values students' unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Cummins, 2001; Anis, 2023). By incorporating students' personal and cultural experiences, we're moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to something far more inclusive. As van Lier (2007) has argued, grounding language learning in students' lived experiences makes it more

relevant and powerful. This was especially evident within our Polish context, where C1-level students often use both Polish, Ukrainian and English in their daily lives. Through tasks like decoding culturally resonant rebuses, freewriting, discussions and even translating familiar concepts, students created "bilingual mental maps," which helped them apply English syntax in a way that felt both natural and grounded (Choi, 2016; Li, 2011). Emotional engagement and cultural contextualisation helped students create bilingual mental maps through translanguaging (Choi, 2016; Li, 2011).

Additionally, a creative approach to syntax breaks away from rigid, rule-based grammar learning, which often feels restrictive and uninspiring. Instead, using Discovery, Consolidation, and Use (DCU) methods allowed students to explore language rules in a more hands-on way, encouraging them to discover grammar rather than simply memorise it (Gerngross, et al., 2006; Tin, 2013). This student-led model, as promoted by Gerngross et al. (2006), offers a refreshing alternative to the traditional Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) approach, which can sometimes feel a bit stale. This approach also gives students a real sense of responsibility for their learning, letting them make choices within tasks—for instance, deciding to describe a scene from the perspective of a cat rather than a dog—so they have a greater role in shaping their educational experience. With the use of real-world, culturally rich content—like folklore, music, and even film references—we could make syntactic structures more accessible and enjoyable. This resonates with Stevick's (1989) notion of meaningful grammar learning (cited in Gerngross et al., 2006), where the emotional and cultural depth of material makes grammar more memorable. In line with brain-based research on learning, engaging students with interesting, relatable content improves both their retention and their comprehension (Jensen, 2005; Brusilovsky & Millán, 2007). It is the difference between teaching the syntax of a bland sentence and one filled with cultural relevance; the latter sticks because it feels more "alive" and relevant to students' lives.

In summary, the interconnectedness of creativity and language awareness is crucial in enhancing syntactic learning. Gerngross et al. (2006) and Tin (2013) highlight that creative tasks not only engage students but also promote a deeper understanding of language structures through innovative and meaningful use of language. Language awareness enhances this process by encouraging metalinguistic skills that help students understand and manipulate syntactic forms. Through the integration of these approaches, students engage in tasks that require higher-order thinking skills, such as synthesis, analysis, and creation, as well as categorising and comparing expressions, functions, and syntax (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This process is particularly essential in fostering creative learning, as it enables students to build upon their existing knowledge base while gradually assimilating new concepts, rather than requiring them to adopt entirely unfamiliar material abruptly. Wach's (2018) principles of cross-linguistic and sociolinguistic awareness further support this integration, suggesting that comparative tasks, personal references and culturally situated contexts enhance memory processes and help students internalise grammatical functions and word order. In practical terms, creativity and language awareness were seen in tasks where students decoded rebuses, engaged in freewriting and created multilingual, locally-related content. These activities resulted in richer morphosyntactic output and greater engagement compared to traditional EFL, monolingual text models. The methods of

language awareness grounded in DCU (Gerngross et al., 2006) and creative strategies involving controlled exploration and free association (Tin, 2013) provided students with greater freedom and opportunities for exploration. Ševečková's (2016) observation that creative input gives students more control, simultaneously allowing the teacher to act as a facilitator and co-learner in the teaching-learning process was indeed observed by the researcher.

While the analysis confirmed the positive impact of the intervention, this study is not without its limitations. Primarily, the objective was fulfilled as part of a regular university programme, where integrating creativity to enhance syntactic comprehension was feasible within a single semester, though it would have been challenging to measure additional variables in such a limited timeframe. The results, though analyzed quantitatively to provide an overarching view, do not fully capture the details of individual morphosyntactic features or stylistic variations in writing. A more detailed qualitative analysis would offer deeper insights into these areas. Additionally, the intervention spanned only a few months; a longer observation period, such as a full academic year, would allow for a more robust assessment of students' retention and application of complex syntactic structures in both written and spoken outputs, such as essays and contextualized communication. Therefore, extending the observation period and employing mixed methods would enhance the study, ensuring a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness and purposefulness of embedding creativity within the language curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated the positive impact of integrating creative and language awareness-based inputs in understanding syntactic structures among EFL students, validating the hypothesis that such an approach enhances subsyntactic knowledge acquisition. Integrating creative and language-awareness inputs in EFL instruction is especially crucial when teaching syntactic elements like parts of speech and their functions. In non-English-speaking contexts, diversifying and enhancing teaching methods is vital because students must not only memorise numerous intra-linguistic structures but also navigate and creatively manoeuvre between two linguistic repertoires and their respective grammars.

One of the biggest challenges of effective teaching is balancing input processing with a focus on form. This dual-language challenge demands a more dynamic and engaging approach to teaching syntax, ensuring that learners can effectively communicate and apply grammatical rules in varied and meaningful contexts. More importantly, this study offers ways of fitting creativity and awareness-raising activities, often considered merely supplementary, into the broader curricular demands of Polish schools and their standardised testing. The protocol developed in this study combined metalinguistic awareness and innovative use of language within comprehensible language input, aligning with the syllabus and its demands. This approach displays an organic quality, enabling educators to help students develop the skills necessary to proficiently manage and integrate both their native language and English in a more contextual, problem-solving, creative and conscious way every day.

Future studies could explore a multilingual context wherein advanced students operate and create their linguistic outputs. Further research could also outline new models for working with students, especially in the context of new technologies; the relevance of creative, responsible and conscious language; and the role of the teacher and their interaction with the group with regard to the increasing autonomy of language learners are recommended.

Disclosure of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix 1

Writing Seminar Meeting Plan Sample

Writing_Seminar_Module_1_Parts of speech and their functions_Part_2_Handout
Level: C1
Time: 90 minutes
Aims:

- To deepen understanding of parts of speech and sentence elements, with a focus on complex sentence construction and creative expression.
- To promote metalanguage awareness by analysing sentence structures and identifying language functions, incorporating Polish-English comparisons.
- To encourage students to use creative language descriptively, reflecting on linguistic elments between Polish, Ukrainian and English.

Seminar_Meeting_Plan

Discovery (30 minutes)

Exercise 1 (20 minutes)
In this activity, we will review the following parts of speech and sentence functions: subject, predicate, direct object, indirect object, subject complement, object complement, adjective, adverb, prepositional phrase, appositive, adverbial clause, adjective clause, noun clause, modifier, coordinating conjunction, subordinating conjunction, interjection, infinitive, gerund, and participle. Each sentence below provides an example of one of these elements in use. Students do not see this; only the instruction below is displayed on a PPT slide:
As we go through each example, focus on the highlighted part of the sentence. Think about how these structures affect the meaning and tone of the sentence, and consider how similar ideas might be expressed in Polish and Ukrainian. This will help reinforce your understanding of each function and provide a foundation for creating your own complex and creative sentences.

1. *The **mischievous gnome** tiptoed through the forest of Szyndzielnia.*
2. ***The ghost of the old Bielsko textile mill** wanders the factory floors at night.*
3. *My pet dragon devours **sweet Polish plums** from the Beskidy Mountains.*
4. *The storyteller gave **young Kasia and Iryna** an ancient map to a hidden spring near Klimczok.*
5. *The abandoned villa on Sobieskiego Street **is a gateway to forgotten tales.***
6. *The townsfolk crowned the wise raven **as their guardian**.*
7. *The brave knight rode through the **foggy, pine-covered** Beskid hills.*
8. *The fairy danced **on the top of the Reksio monument in the moonlight**.*
9. *My friend, **a famous painter from Bielsko-Biała**, captured the mountain's spirit on canvas.*
10. *When **the first snow blankets Szyndzielnia**, the wolves begin to roam.*

11. *The old man, **who remembers Bielsko before the war**, tells tales of long-lost magic.*
12. *Whatever the ancient oak in Błonia whispers is known only to the wind.*
13. *My dream is **to uncover the mysteries of Bielsko-Biała's old streets**.*
14. ***Hiking through the Beskid trails** fills me with wonder.*
15. *The **twinkling lights** from Bielsko-Biała below shimmered as we looked down from Szyndzielnia.*

Exercise 2 (10 minutes)

In this activity, you'll analyse the paragraph below to identify and correct the grammatical functions labelled in parentheses. Each phrase has been assigned an incorrect label, and your task is to identify the correct function for each one based on what we've reviewed about parts of speech and sentence structure.

> *On a **frosty Friday** (predicate), **snow will cover southern Poland** (appositive phrase) as a **cold front, a severe weather system from the south** (subject), sweeps across the country. Locals are preparing for the worst by **stocking up on supplies** (prepositional phrase), while others plan **to shovel snow** (direct object) off their sidewalks early. **In the mountains near Bielsko-Biała** (gerund), the heavy snowstorm will bring **fresh layers of snow** (indirect object) and **icy conditions for drivers** (infinitive), causing many to seek shelter.*
>
> This fragment was adapted based on news from Onet.pl, dated 30 November 2023.

Consolidation (30 minutes)

Exercise 1 (20 minutes)

In this activity, we will practice complex sentence structures to understand how different elements affect meaning and tone. Using objects around you, create descriptive sentences by applying different language structures. Additionally, we'll explore how similar structures might function in Polish and Ukrainian, reflecting on any differences in meaning or imagery.

1. Find an object in the classroom and create a sentence using a **prepositional phrase** or **appositive phrase** to add detail or context.

   Example:

   *The clock on the wall, **coated in a fine layer of dust**, ticked away as if counting down to a hidden deadline.*

   _____

2. Look outside the window, choose an object, and write a sentence using an **object complement** or **adjective clause**.

   Example:

   *The old tree outside, **its branches weighed down by the first frost of winter**, stood as a silent witness to the passing seasons.*

   _____

3. Observe a clothing item on a classmate and write a sentence using a **relative clause** or **participle phrase**.

   Example:

   *My classmate, **draped in a worn, oversized jumper**, looked as cosy as a cat nestled by a fireplace.*

   _____

4. Select a classroom object (e.g., pencil, book) and write a sentence using an **adverbial clause** or **infinitive phrase**.

   Example:

   *The Christmas tree in the corner, **adorned with faded baubles from last year**, seemed to glow brighter as we wrapped up our*

lesson.

_____

Exercise 2 (Follow-up discussion)

a. Discuss whether similar words, phrases, or structures in Polish or Ukrainian could convey the same scene. Do different prepositional phrases or relative clauses evoke the same image, or does something shift in tone or clarity?
b. Does using different grammatical structures create the same mental image in each language? Are the English, Polish, and Ukrainian sentences identical in tone and mood, or does imagery shift with structural changes?

Use (45 minutes)

Exercise 1 (45 minutes in-class + home assignment)

*Imagine you are **a campus cat** observing the university environment. Working in groups of three, collaboratively write a description of up to 150 words, using at least one appositive phrase. Highlight the subject and predicate in each sentence, and incorporate various language functions (e.g., adjective clause, prepositional phrase). Underline each function used to clearly identify them. Use the sequence of images and locations we created together as inspiration for your description. After completing your description, you will be asked to post it to the group on Teams and exchange it with another group. Review the other group's description, underline the identified language functions, and provide constructive feedback.*

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