

## The Effects of Input Enrichment (Focused-Task) on Students' Grammar Acquisition

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### ***Abstract***

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of focused-task on students' grammar acquisition. To this purpose, two intact groups each with 15 learners were chosen for teaching the targeted structures (present perfect; used to; modals; in order to vs. in order for, in spite of vs. although, because vs. because of and so on) through input enrichment approach. The results indicated the outperformance of the experimental group during the post-test. The findings support the arguments regarding the importance of focused task-based instruction in grammar learning.

**Keywords:** focused-task, task-based instruction, input enrichment, grammar

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

A current trend in methodology is task-based approaches to teaching (Richards, 1999). These involve the use of tasks that engage learners in meaningful interaction and negotiation focusing on completion of a task. Learners' grammar needs are determined on the basis of task performance rather than through predetermined grammar syllabus. However, whether learners develop acceptable levels of grammatical proficiency via such an approach is problematic. The purpose of the present paper was to investigate the effect of input enrichment technique on grammar acquisition. Input enrichment technique is a kind of focused task which is designed to cater primarily to implicit learning, that is, it is intended to develop awareness at the level of 'noticing' rather than awareness at the level of understanding, like conscious raising tasks (Ellis, 2003, P. 163).

According to Willis and Willis (2007), focus on meaning gives no attention to the forms and the focus of classroom activity is on communication of meaning only. Focus on language, in contrast, includes drawing the students' attention to grammatical forms in a communicative context – how best to express themselves in a given communication situation.

Focus on forms is one which one or more lexical or grammatical forms are isolated and specified for study.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Importance of Grammar Teaching

Swan (1998) claims that there are two good reasons for teaching grammar: comprehensibility and acceptability (as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002).

*Comprehensibility:* Knowing how to build and use certain structures makes it possible to communicate common types of meaning successfully. Without these structures, it is difficult to make comprehensible sentences. Therefore, we are supposed to identify these structures and teach them well.

*Acceptability:* In some social context, serious differences from native-speaker norms can prevent integration and provoke prejudice – a person who speaks 'badly' may not be taken seriously, or may be considered uneducated or stupid. Students may thus want or need higher level of grammatical correctness than is required for mere comprehensibility.

### B. Implicit vs. Explicit Grammar

In recent years, the degree of implicitness and explicitness of grammar instruction has received so much attention. According to Ellis (2009), implicit instruction aims to provide learners with conditions under which they can infer the rules without awareness. The result will be internalizing the pattern without having their attention focused on it. The summarizing task that the researcher applied basically caters for implicit grammar teaching because learners are not consciously focused on using the form correctly but rather they pay attention to the meaning of the texts in order to understand them.

Dekeyser (1995) suggests that explicit instruction involves teaching a certain rule during the learning process and encouraging the learners to develop metalinguistic awareness of that rule (as cited in Ellis, 2009).

### C. Focused Tasks and SLA

Focused tasks are tasks aimed to predispose learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, for example a grammatical structure (Ellis, 2003, p. 16). Of course, this processing must occur as a result of performing activities that satisfy the criteria of a task, i.e. language is used pragmatically to achieve some non-linguistic outcome. Therefore, focused tasks have two aims: one is to focus on communicative language use; the other is to target the use of a particular, predetermined target feature.

Ellis (2003) claims that there are two ways in which a task can achieve a focus. One is to design the task in such a way that it can only be performed if learners use particular

linguistic features. The second way of constructing a focused task is by making language itself the content of a task like consciousness raising tasks.

#### *D. Designing Focused Tasks*

Ellis (2003) assumes that there are three principal ways in which researchers have set about designing focused tasks: (1) structured-based production tasks, (2) comprehension tasks, and (3) consciousness-raising tasks.

*Structured-based production tasks:* Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) distinguish three ways in which a task can be designed to incorporate a specific target language feature. The first is 'task-naturalness'. In this case the target structure may not be necessary to complete a task but naturally it is assumed to be used by the learners. The example Loschky and Bley-Vroman give is of a task that involves the exchange of information about a travel itinerary. The second way of incorporating a language feature is in terms of 'task utility'. By this they mean that the target structure is not essential in performing a task but it is 'useful' like spot the difference task by using different prepositions. The third way of incorporating a language feature is in terms of 'task-essentialness'. This requires that learners must utilize specific feature in order to do the task because the feature becomes the 'essence' of the task.

*Comprehension tasks:* Comprehension tasks may be more successful in eliciting attention to a targeted feature than production-based tasks because learners cannot avoid processing them (Ellis 2003, p. 157). There are two ways this has been attempted-input enrichment and input processing.

'Input enrichment' involves designing tasks in such a way that the targeted feature is (1) frequent and/or (2) salient in the input provided (Ellis 2003, p. 158). The present study, thus, focused on this technique by highlighting or underlining the targeted feature and also by using the targeted structure frequently in the written texts.

'Input-processing instruction' is a term coined by VanPatten (1996). Its goal is to alter the processing strategies that learners take to the task of comprehension and to encourage them to make better form-meaning connections. There are three key components: (1) an explanation of form-meaning relationship, for example, the use of the passive to topicalize the patient of a sentence by placing it in the subject position, (2) information about processing strategies, for example, the need to attend to the form of the verb to determine whether the subject is the agent of the verb or the patient as in the case with passive verbs, (3) structured-input activities where learners have the chance to process the targeted feature in a controlled manner.

*Consciousness-raising tasks:* The main purpose of consciousness-raising (C-R) is to develop explicit knowledge of grammar or it is intended to develop awareness at the level of 'understanding' rather than awareness at the level of 'noticing' like input enrichment task. (Ellis, 2003, p. 163). Another feature of this task is that whereas the previous types of task were built around content of a general nature, for example, stories, pictures of objects, C-R tasks make language itself the content.

### *E. The Psycholinguistic Rationale for Focused Tasks*

Ellis (2003) suggests that there are two psycholinguistic bases for focused communicative tasks: (1) skill building theories and the notion of automatic processing, and (2) implicit learning.

Automatic processing involves the activation of certain nodes in memory each time the appropriate inputs are present (Mclaughlin and Heredia, 1996, p.214). Shrifin & Schneider (1977) argue that automatic processing contrasts with controlled processing. A key difference between automatic and controlled processing is that whereas the former occurs automatically and in parallel form, the latter occurs more slowly and functions serially. Skill development involves converting the controlled processing into automatic processing, in other words, it is the proceduralization of declarative knowledge (Anderson, 1993, 2000). Declarative knowledge is factual, i.e. it includes explicit knowledge of grammatical rules. Procedural knowledge is declarative knowledge that has become fully automatized.

N. Ellis (1994) argued that implicit learning is the acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations. The main difference between skill building theories and theories of implicit learning lies in the particular role that explicit knowledge plays in language learning. Skill building theories see learning as a process by which explicit knowledge is converted to implicit knowledge through communication practice. In contrast, theories of implicit learning view the process by which learners acquire implicit and explicit knowledge as inherently different and separate (Ellis, 2003, P. 148).

### *F. Research Question*

The present study aimed to answer the following question:

1. Does input enrichment as an approach to focused-task have any significant effects on students' grammar acquisition?

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### *A. Participants*

The participants in this study were 30 intermediate female teenagers. They were intermediate students in Safir institute, in Kangavar, Iran. The participants had a mean age of 15 and had been studying English for 8 semesters in Safir institute. Both groups were randomly selected from 7 intact classes consisting of 105 students. The treatment lasted for two months, two days a week, 70 minutes a day in the institute.

### *B. Instruments*

Three instruments were utilized to achieve the purpose of the study: Oxford placement test. The Oxford Placement Test measures a test taker's ability to communicate in English. It provides information about a person's language level. This test is comprised of 60-items. The test is reliable (consistently grading test takers at the right level) and valid (having a strong theoretical basis). Parallel grammar tests (as pre-test and post-test of the study (extracted from Nelson book) were administered. Parallel tests are the ones which measure the same construct and have the same mean and standard deviation (Bachman, 1990, p.168). The test is comprised of 50-items.

### *C. Procedure*

In summary, the present study was a quantitative research and a quasi-experimental design, because the researcher selected intact classes randomly but he did not give random assignment to each individual. After selecting the whole population (N=105), a pre-test to assess their initial knowledge in grammar was administered. It was a test of grammar consisting of 50 multiple-choice items taken from *Nelson Test book*.

Based on the result of this test, participants (two classes) whose scores were one standard deviation above or below the population mean were selected as target subjects for the study. Then, the two groups were randomly assigned to a control group and an experimental group of the study. Both groups were given reading comprehension texts in order to summarize the text or to write down the topic sentence and major support sentences. However, the texts delivered to the experimental contained a lot of specific grammatical features. For example in one text present perfect tense was salient. In another text, 'used to' was utilized frequently. In the third text, 'because of' and 'because' were highlighted and so on. The treatment lasted for about eight weeks or so.

Afterward, all participants were given post-test of grammar. The test was extracted from Nelson grammar Test. Finally, the results of both pretest and posttest were compared for data analysis.

## **IV. RESULTS**

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of focused task instruction on Iranian EFL learners grammar acquisition. To fulfill the purpose of the study, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used.

As mentioned above, 105 learners participated in this study. The participants were female studying English at Safir Institute in Kangavar, Iran.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for two groups in Oxford placement test**

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
placement	105	35.00	19.00	54.00	33.6952	8.17492
Valid N (listwise)	105					

All the data including mean, maximum score, minimum score, range, and so on are shown in Table 1.

#### A. Independent Sample T-Test as the Pre-Test

First of all, it is worth noting that Independent Pair t-test is used to determine whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. Since there were two groups in the present study, the researchers used Independent Pair t-test to compare the means of different groups.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for two groups in Pre-test (grammar)**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
control	15	7.00	14.00	11.2667	1.70992
experiment	15	7.00	14.00	11.1333	2.29492
Valid N (listwise)	15				

Table 2 provides useful descriptive statistics for two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores.

**Table 3. Independent Samples Test in pre-test**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
input	2.304	.140	.180	28	.858	.13333	.73894	-1.38032	1.64698
			.180	25.882	.858	.13333	.73894	-1.38592	1.65258

Table 3 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. As can be seen in this table, the significance level is 0.85 ( $p=.85$ ) which is above 0.05; therefore, there is statistically no significant differences between the groups at the beginning of the study.

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for two groups in Post-test (grammar)**

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
control	15	4.00	10.00	14.00	12.1333	1.12546
experiment	15	5.00	13.00	18.00	15.2667	1.79151
Valid N (listwise)	15					

All data regarding, mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores are provided in table 4.

**Table 5: Independent Samples Test in post-test**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
input									
Equal variances assumed	5.535	.026	-5.73	28	.000	-3.13333	.54627	-4.25232	-2.01435
Equal variances not assumed			-5.73	23.56	.000	-3.13333	.54627	-4.26189	-2.00477

Table 5 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. As can be seen in this table, the significance level is 0.00 ( $p=.00$ ) which is below 0.05, therefore, there is statistically significant differences between two groups. Therefore, the null hypotheses could be rejected. It means that input enrichment task instruction was effective.

## V. CONCLUSION

Ellis (2003) has pointed out that focused communicative tasks involving both reception and production are of considerable value to both researchers and teachers. For researchers, they provide a means of measuring whether learners have acquired a specific feature. They are often preferred to tests because they provide evidence of what learners do when they are not consciously focused on using a form correctly and thus be considered to elicit implicit knowledge rather than explicit knowledge. Focused tasks are of value to teachers since they provide a means of teaching specific linguistic feature communicatively-under 'real operating conditions'.

Regarding the question posed in this study, the result showed that for the chosen grammar point, students who were taught under the input enrichment conditions generally outperformed those who had not been exposed to such instruction. There might be several reasons for the students' superior performance in the experimental group. One of the most important facets of this technique is that it promotes learners' grammar by providing them with plenty of opportunities to notice specific form in the written text. Other important aspect of this technique is that it triggers learners' conscious mind by providing them with a lot of communicative activity while their subconscious mind picks up linguistic features non-thoughtfully. When the learners were asked to repeat the task during post task activities, their fluency and the number of the targeted forms they uttered were dramatically increased.

Finally grammatical features are highlighted and automatically attract learners' attention and there is no need to compel them to pay attention to them. It could be claimed that it is similar to peripheral learning.

Generally speaking, according to the obtained results, the input enrichment teaching in EFL students tended to improve through exposure to abundant input. Specifically, input enrichment instruction not only affected the grammar acquisition of the participants and improved it but also the researcher assumes that this technique corresponds to all level of language proficiency and to nearly all languages: Arabic, Persian etc. The conclusion that may be made from the above statistics analysis is that the participants who were taught based on focused task generally tended to score higher in vocabulary test.

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