

## The Effect of Textual Input Enhancement on Learning Verbals in High-School EFL Male Students

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**Abstract** – The purpose of the present study was to determine whether textual input enhancement had any effect on the acquisition of English verbals in Iranian High school learners. Cambridge English Unlimited placement pretest showed that the two groups were unfamiliar with verbals prior to the treatment. Based on their scores in such test, the participants were classified as pre-intermediate level learners. To conduct the study, a quasi-experimental design with the pre-test, treatment, post-test sequence was used. The experimental group was taught verbals through textual input enhancement in eight sessions, adopting strategies such as enlargement, bolding, and underlining, while the comparison group was taught verbals without using textual input enhancement method. As the data obtained showed not to be normal the Mann-Whitney U test was run and the results showed that the null hypothesis was rejected. The results indicated that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group and the implementation of textual input enhancement enhanced EFL learner's acquisition of verbals.

**Keywords:** Textual Input Enhancement, Learning Verbals, EFL

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Input enhancement is grounded theoretically in models of SLA, such as the one presented by Gass (1997) that maintains cognitive-linguistic noticing of L2 input is prerequisite to the further processing of that input. Input noticing permits input intake leading to the establishment of form-meaning associations and the ultimate integration (i.e. acquisition) of these associations into the learner's emerging grammar (VanPatten, 1996).

“Input processing refers to the strategies and mechanisms learners use to link linguistic form with its meaning and/or function” (VanPatten, 2004). It is an online phenomenon that takes place in the working memory (VanPatten, 2004). Earlier L2 works (Lee, 1987; VanPatten, 1984) were principally interested in the assignment of function to noun (e.g., subject/agent vs. object/patient), but work on input processing has subsequently led to questions about how learners link particular forms (e.g. inflections) to their meanings and functions (VanPatten, 2004). According to VanPatten, (2007), input processing is a by-product of comprehension. Although comprehension cannot guarantee acquisition, acquisition cannot happen if comprehension does not occur. It is because a good deal of acquisition is dependent on learners making appropriate form-meaning connections during

the act of comprehension. A good deal of acquisition is dependent upon learners correctly interpreting what a sentence means (White, 1987).

In grammar, the new improved blend of two parts of speech is called a verbal (Krashen, 1985). Verbals are extremely useful hybrid words that seem to carry the idea of action or being, but do not function as true verbs.

### **A. Statement of the Problem**

Despite the various views whether grammar should be presented or not, there is a general agreement that a systematic and purposeful teaching of grammar is vital to master the target language (Aghajani & Rahimy, 2013). Most English students in Iran suffer from weak proficiency in English language skills. There is limited opportunity for students who study in high schools to write in English. Writing is a skill that many teachers find difficult to teach and, as a result, a skill many learners do not enjoy. That is why during the last two decades there has been a surge in the introduction of new techniques for helping students become better writers (Aghajani & Rahimy, 2013). The results of many studies (Harley, 1998); Leow, 1998) support the theory that enhanced input or input that has been rendered more salient to the learner relates to the ease with which different elements of language can be noticed and learned.

There are several problems that students have been encountering in their English lessons especially among the non-native learners including Iranian EFL students. Most of high school students find it confusing to use verbals in its proper form. While English verbals can be one of the most useful parts of their lesson, they can also be difficult to learn. Therefore, students need more time to study to master their use. These items prevent students' attention to the form and structure of sentences and ambiguity appears in understanding the meaning of the sentences. There seems to be a need to find the way to motivate and attract EFL learners' attention to the form and meaning of verbals, and help learners to differentiate them from verbs.

Second language learners often do not learn forms carrying little meaning (such as tense markers, and morphology) that are abundant in the input (Cadierno, 1995; Overstreet, 1998; VanPatten, 1989) because the forms are, for various reasons (e.g., redundancy or unpronounced phonology), not salient to the learners (Sharwood Smith, 1993). According to this explanation, input enhancement could help foster that necessary attention to non-salient forms. Because of the significance of verbals and EFL learners' confusion in acquiring them, as well as the possible effectiveness of using input enhancement in improving EFL learners' knowledge of verbals, the present study investigated the effect of textual input enhancement strategy on learning verbals. Thus, the following research question was proposed in the study:

1. Does textual input enhancement have any significant effect on learning verbals by Iranian high school male students?

## II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

### A. Input Enhancement

One more implicit instantiation of pedagogical focus on form is input enhancement. Initially conceived as *consciousness-raising*, input enhancement is a term devised by Sharwood Smith (1991) to denote a deliberate attempt to make specific features of L2 input more salient in order to draw the learner's attention to them. Sharwood Smith (1991) first introduced the concept of consciousness-raising as a reaction to Krashen's (1985) assumption that formal grammar instruction serves little, if any, purpose in the second language classroom. In challenging this assumption, Sharwood Smith (1991) as well as Sharwood Smith (1993) emphasize that since the roles consciousness and meta-linguistic awareness play in facilitating language acquisition are inconclusive, they need to be reexamined.

### B. Textual Input Enhancement

Input enhancement can be achieved through a number of ways: explicit discussion of the form, meta-linguistic description of the form, implicit error correction through the use of special pattern of stress or intonation or through the use of gestures or facial expressions, input flooding or textual (or visual or typographical) input enhancement. Along with the development of cognitive theories of SLA during the past two decades, the role and efficacy of 'textual input enhancement' technique in L2 learning has provoked considerable controversy. Textual input enhancement prompts learners to analyze, notice and organize the implicit rule-like behavior. In other words, textual input enhancement is an implicit attention-drawing device which draws learners' attention to a perceptually enriched linguistic feature in a typical written text used as input. It refers to the manipulation of typographical cues through highlighting techniques such as font enlarging, italicizing, bold-facing, underlining, capitalizing, shadowing, or a combination of more than one of these techniques. This pedagogical technique is assumed to achieve learners' noticing of the targeted form while dealing with meaning, with the hope that input becomes intake.

### C. Verbals

In traditional grammar, it is a verb form that functions in a sentence as a noun or a modifier rather than as a verb. Verbals include infinitives, gerunds (also known as *-ing* forms), and participles (also known as *-ing* forms and *-en* forms). Unlike ordinary verbs, verbals are not inflected for person and tense.

### D. Major Studies on Textual Enhancement

Shook's study (1994) was one of the earlier studies to evaluate visual or textual enhancement in a second language context. He wanted to determine whether or not this kind of input was effective. Two target features of Spanish language were used in his study: the relative pronouns (*que, quien*) and the present perfect. Participants in this study were Spanish

learners, who were divided into three groups. Findings from this study showed that subjects in the first two groups, who received the enhanced passages, performed significantly better than the third group (the control group), the members of which read unenhanced versions of all the assessment tasks. Shook subsequently states that textual enhancement made a difference, and gave the participants the ability to recognize and produce the target forms. He also points out that there were no significant differences between the first group (who were told explicitly to pay attention to the enhanced forms) and those who did not receive this explicit instruction. The implication was that reading the enhanced versions was enough for subjects to make improvements in their production without explicit direction (Shook, 1994).

Sharwood Smith (1993) proposes two types of positive and negative input enhancement. In positive input enhancement the correct forms in the input are emphasized whereas in negative input enhancement the incorrect forms are highlighted. An example of positive input enhancement would be visual input enhancement of a reading text in which the intended forms are bolded, underlined, capitalized, or italicized. An example of negative input enhancement would be the use of error flags which would focus learner's attention on their mistakes.

Aghajani and Rahimy (2013) studied the relationship between an instructional approach and English tenses acquisition and proposed that the input enhancement approach was more effective than the traditional approach. Their study also showed that using a computerized program made a significant difference in the achievement of students.

Khoii and Tabrizi (2011) examined the role of input enhancement through multimedia on the improvement of EFL learners' writing ability. The researchers focused on the use of two writing tasks with the input enhanced using the Adobe Flash CS4 Professional Program. Seventy homogenous female students studying English as an L2 were divided into one control and two experimental groups. The results revealed that both experimental groups had significantly outperformed the control group, with the multimedia group also having outperformed the paper and pencil experimental group, lending support to the theory that enhancing the input through multimedia provides the opportunity for extensive visualization of the content, affects learner knowledge, and thereby produces more competent writers.

Simard (2009) in a study on the differential effect of different Textual Enhancement formats applied seven different types of Textual Enhancement. She found that capital group and three cue groups, which was a combination of three different Textual Enhancement formats, outperformed the other groups. What Simard concluded was that different types of Textual Enhancement can be differentially effective.

Farahani and Sarkhosh (2012) also studied the differential effects of different Textual Enhancement formats and reported the differential effects of different Textual Enhancement formats. They applied five different types of Textual Enhancement (underline, bold, italic, choice, background). They reported that underlining Textual Enhancement format was more effective in bringing about the intake of the English subjunctive mood.

White (1998) investigated the effect of Textual Enhancement (enlargement, different combinations of bold, italics and underline) on the use of third person singular possessive

determiners. The findings revealed that Textual Enhancement did not lead to the correct use of the target structures but augmented the frequency of the use of these features.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **A. Participants**

It was announced by Meeraj Andishe high school that two classes were to be held on teaching grammar (verbals). Business Result Test (Appendix A) was used to decide about the volunteers (140 people) who wanted to participate in this study. Obtaining scores between 13 and 26 is an indication of being at the pre-intermediate level based on this test (Business Result Test, 2013). Sixty students whose scores were one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean were chosen to attend the classes.

In order to reduce the effects of extraneous variables and selection bias, thirty students were randomly assigned to the treatment group and thirty others to the comparison group. The same teacher taught verbals to the two classes and the classes were held for two weeks (eight sessions for each group).

#### **B. Materials**

The textbook which was selected was English Result book (McDonald, 2009). Completion tasks, in-class practice, students' short oral summary of the text, and information gap activity included the types of activities the students were involved in.

The first reason to choose the book was that the language level seemed appropriate for the students and the content was authentic. The second reason was that this book uses the language which students can put it into practice immediately. The third reason was that each lesson contained grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation practice, skills practice, and also self-check tests to help students measure their own progress. And the final reason was that it includes online interactive activities and free practice tests.

#### **C. Instruments**

Quantitative analysis procedures were involved in the present study. As the main research goal was to study the effectiveness of the textual input enhancement on learning verbals by high school students, the instruments consisted of, as mentioned above, the Business Result Test (2013) used to homogenize the participants and English Unlimited placement test of Cambridge (2014) used as the pre-test and post-test in this study.

The Business result test includes 30 multiple choice items which arranges from easy to difficult test. The reliability of the Business result test was calculated on the bases of IELTS test which is reported by the test developers to be 0.86.

As it was necessary to know about the EFL learner's knowledge of grammar before starting the treatment to check the effectiveness of the textual input enhancement after the

treatment, the 40 multiple-choice English Unlimited placement test of Cambridge was given to the students to answer in 40 minutes. The reliability and validity of this test has been sustained by university of Cambridge and IELTS experts to be 0.87 and 0.90.

#### **D. Procedure**

Before starting the treatment, Business Result Test was administered to the experimental and comparison groups to ensure their homogeneity regarding their English proficiency level. In order to investigate the effect of textual input enhancement on learning the verbals, a pre-test was administered to both groups to determine their level of grammar knowledge and to statistically control any differences between them at the beginning of the study.

The experimental group received their instruction using reading texts in which gerunds, infinitives, participles and also tenses were identified by bolding, underlining and larger font size. English book was not available for participants and they were allowed to use teacher-prepared text only at home for their reading comprehension practice and pay attention to the form of the verbs. Therefore, three other texts from English Result book were taught accompanied by some comprehension questions about the content of the text with the aim of teaching learners to interact with the texts. In order to draw the participants' attention to verbal structures, textual (also known as typographical) input enhancement was used. In each class session, 30 minutes was allocated to the reading task. The participants were provided with different reading passages which contained the verbal structures. After reading the passages, the participants were asked to complete certain tasks. The tasks required the learners to use the verbals in different contexts. According to Sharwood Smiths (1993), the type of enhancement varied from activity to activity to maximize the novelty of the technique and to increase the likelihood of paying attention to the forms.

Before reading texts, the participants were asked to answer some questions. These pre-reading questions were included in order to activate the participants' prior knowledge of the topic. Immediately after reading such text, the participants attempted to answer the same questions. The researcher provided feedback and explanations to the participants after reading the text in order to ensure that the participants had understood the text.

For the comparison group, the researcher teacher taught the same materials except that input enhancement techniques were not used.

In the first session the Textual Input Enhancement was introduced generally. The teacher asked students to introduce themselves in English in brief and wrote every verb they used in their sentences. She wanted to draw their attention to structure of the verbs indirectly.

The second session started by giving a copy of the text to be read to the learners. They were given 15 minutes to read it for themselves and were then asked some questions about the content. They were also asked to select a title for the text. Verbals were emphasized by bolding them and showing when and how they are used in a sentence by highlighting prepositions, and verbs which they come with, and by underlining the location in which they can be used (clarifying specific features).

In the third session, they were given some completion tasks and the verbs which had to be answered were provided colorfully in a box. The answers were discussed in class as classroom practice. At the end of the session, for homework practice, three texts were given to the learners accompanied by some comprehension questions about these texts. The learners should find the verbals by underlining. The researcher followed this procedure in teaching verbals for 8 sessions.

For the fourth session, learners performed some tasks by interacting and exchanging opinions with each other for 15 minutes. Then the original form of the text was given to them to help them check their choices and pay attention to the targeted features, while the teacher provided the necessary help and feedback.

For the other four remaining sessions, participants were asked to start working on their texts. In the experimental group, they were asked to think about the topic of the text and answer two questions before reading the text. When they finished reading, they started discussing their answers; they were also asked to provide a short oral summary concerning the text, which would be similar to the original texts. Each participant gave a short summary of his texts and the other students listened to him. After the learners had finished, they were given another task which was ‘an information gap activity’, which had two different versions. Participants worked together in pairs, while each had different information on their sheets. They had to talk to each other in order to complete the information, and the task also encouraged learners to use the target form while they were involved in asking questions and answering them to fill the gaps.

The comparison group was instructed using the conventional method in which the teacher used all of the activities and tasks and texts from English Result book without enhancing the verbals.

The teacher managed the class herself. Students listened to her and worked on the book. The teacher asked the participants to read the passage, answer the reading comprehension questions, and do the grammar exercises. She gave a quiz to the participants, corrected them while explaining each question. Guided by the teacher, the participants read the passages, did the comprehension exercises and worked on grammar (verbals). Half of the class time was spent on grammar exercises with the teacher’s guidance.

## **E. Data Analysis**

In order to find out if any changes had taken place as an outcome of instruction, the gained scores on learning verbals were statistically analyzed running Mann-Whitney U via SPSS software (SPSS Inc, 2009. Version 18).

The Mann-Whitney U method of analysis was performed because it lets researchers to statistically signify differences between groups. It needs to be mentioned that Mann-Whitney U was used because the obtained data showed not to be normally distributed.

#### IV. RESULTS

##### A. Normality of the Obtained Data

**Table 1: The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk's Tests of Normality for the Experimental and Comparison Groups**

Group		Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Post Test	Experimental	.203	30	<b>.003</b>	.904	30	<b>.011</b>
	Control	.135	30	.173	.941	30	.099
Pre-Test	Experimental	.159	30	.053	.940	30	.089
	Control	.092	30	.200*	.982	30	.880

Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk's tests of normality were investigated for the normality of the obtained data. It showed that the post-test data for the experimental group was not distributed normally (Sig= 0.03, .011). Therefore, as the assumptions of normality were violated, it was decided to use a non-parametric method of analysis.

##### B. Testing the Hypothesis

As it was explained above, it was decided to use the Mann-Whitney U method of analysis. Therefore, the gain scores (the difference between the post-test and pre-test) were calculated for both groups. First, the data were exposed to Mann-Whitney U test.

The mean rank for the experimental group is almost twice that of the comparison group. To assess significant differences between groups, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed.

**Table 2: Mean Ranks for the Experimental and Comparison Groups**

	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Differential Scores	Experimental	30	40.13	1204.00
	Control	30	20.87	626.00
	Total	60		

As it can be observed in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the two groups. In other words, the Mann-Whitney U test shows that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group meaning that using textual input enhancement was more influential in helping EFL learners acquire verbals as compared with the traditional method used to teach verbals in the comparison group, (U=161, Z=4.370, p<.000).

## **V. DISCUSSION**

This study investigated the effect of using textual input enhancement on verbals. It was found that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group. The mean and the standard deviation of the gained scores were 1.1333, and 1.07304 respectively.

The findings of this study rejected the null hypothesis ( $U=161$ ,  $Z=4.370$ ,  $p<.000$ ). By comparing the mean and the standard deviation obtained by the experimental and the comparison groups mentioned above, it was found that there was a significance difference between learning verbals in the experimental and the comparison groups. It means that learning verbals through textual input enhancement was more successful. The scores obtained for the experimental group were found to be positively affected using textual input enhancement.

In an investigation done by Overstreet (1998), the effect of textual input enhancement (underline, bold, enlarged letters, and different font) and content familiarity on subjects' intake of Spanish imperfect were investigated. He found a negative effect for textual input enhancement on comprehension.

In another study, Radwan (2005) studied the effect of textual input enhancement on dative alternation. He found his study distinctive from the majority of studies in the field in that he had not resorted to morphological elements but had chosen dative alternation which was a syntactic feature. Radwan had four groups. The first group was the textual input enhancement enhanced condition, the second group was rule oriented condition, the third group was content oriented condition, and the last group was the comparison group. The results revealed that the students who received textual input enhancement outperformed those who did not receive that instruction. The result of the present study is consistent with those obtained by Radwan.

The findings of this study lend support to the results found in the research done by Shook (1994). He wanted to determine whether or not textual input enhancement was effective. Shook found that textual input enhancement made a difference, and gave the participants the ability to recognize and produce the target forms.

The results of this study is also in line with the results obtained in another study by Lee (2007) in which he studied the effect of textual input enhancement on 259 high school students. The texts Lee gave to the participants were different in terms of the way the target features were typographically enhanced and also the degree of familiarity of the content. He finally found textual input enhancement effective.

To sum up, it seems that using textual input enhancement helps high school learners learn grammar (e.g. verbals) more effectively than their peers attending traditional classes.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

The null hypothesis formulated in this study was, "textual input enhancement does not have any significant effect on learning verbals by Iranian high school students". The results of the study revealed that high school students learn verbals better through textual input

enhancement. The participants who received the enhanced passages produced the target form more than those who did not receive input enhancement.

The results of the study indicate the importance of using textual input enhancement techniques like underlining, bolding, and larger font size to verbals. The findings seem to show that textual input enhancement can be an effective method and could be used to enhance the salience of language features that may prove difficult for L2 learners. The study also offered some pedagogical implications and suggestions for future researchers. This study investigated the effect of textual input enhancement on verbals at high school. Further research on the effectiveness of textual input enhancement on teaching other aspects of grammar such as auxiliary verbs is recommended. There may be some other fields than verbals such as learning vocabularies with more than one meaning in second language teaching in which the textual input enhancement can be useful.

The results may be of relevance to task designers and teachers in better understanding the potential contribution of textual enhancement task in promoting learning FL structures.

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