

The Role of Gender in Iranian EFL Learners' Grammar Knowledge Development through Enriched Input

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Abstract – The aim of this study was to examine the role of gender in students' grammar knowledge development through enriched input. In other words, the aim of this study was to determine whether students' gender can affect learning English as a foreign language or not. Participants of the study were 30 Intermediate students (15 males and 15 females). The employed procedures were quantitative methods of analysis, making use of descriptive analysis and pair t-test. The results indicated that learning grammar through enriched input is to some extent related to gender and it has a significant effect on the achievement test. The results of this study help instructors to select their instructional strategies more effectively related to gender of students.

Keywords: Input enrichment, t-test, gender

I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar teaching has been a matter of debate for a long time especially for foreign or second language teaching. On the side of the continuum, there are people who claim that grammar teaching is not necessary because its teaching does not help in the acquisition of the language. Krashen and Terrell (1983, p. 144) support this view when they say, "we prefer to avoid oral grammar instruction in classroom simply because they take time away from acquisition activities." On the other side of the continuum there are others who claim that grammar teaching is necessary. An argument to support grammar instruction comes from Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988), who believe that ESL/ EFL students need to know grammar because many of them are expected to take part in widely used international examinations such as the TOEFL and the IEITS.

There is now a general consensus that the issue is not whether or not we should teach grammar. The issue now centers on questions such as, which grammar items do learners need most? How do we go about teaching grammar items in the most effective way? Are they best taught inductively or deductively? According to (Celce-Murcia & Brinton, 1983, p. 256) grammar is about the form of the language, but it is also used to make meaning.

Most recently, evidence has shown that while both boys and girls have improved their performances, girls achieved higher marks than boys in EFL learning. Gender has been regarded as an important affective factor that plays a specific role and influences second language acquisition.

From the biological viewpoint, females and males also differ fundamentally in terms of cognitive ability and learning style. These differences are derived both from basic physiological differences, such as differences in the development of brain, and from differences in higher-level cortical functions (Keefe, 1982). Males and females have somewhat different patterns of lateralization, with males being more left-hemisphere dominant than females (Banich, 1997, p. 306-312). The theorists of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) believe that female learners show possible superiority in their second language learning process (Burstall, 1975; Boyle, 1987; Ehrlich, 2001). Therefore, whether EFL students learning English with enriched input will gain or counteract the learning efficiency due to their gender difference has become a significant issue of EFL instruction.

The present study was an attempt to investigate the role of gender in grammar knowledge through enriched input. According to Trahey (1996), Trahev and White (1993) input enrichment or input flood refers to the process of seeding input with extra tokens of the target structure. In other words, in enriched input the target feature appears with high frequency but with no textual manipulation. It is believed that the increased tokens of input target forms attract learner's attention (Reinder & Eliss. 2009).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this section, a review of related literature to the topic of thesis will be mentioned. The related studies as well as the ideas and theories which are somehow concerned with the variables in the present study will be fully explained in the following sections. The explanations may be directly or indirectly related to input, enriched input, gender differences as well as grammar knowledge which are the main subjects of the present study.

A. The Effect of Gender on Language Learning

Gender is an issue with important theoretical and pedagogical assumption in L2 learning. A good number of studies found that gender can have a significant effect on how students learn a language. A large number of researches worked on topics about gender, including language learning ability, motivation, teacher perceptions, learning styles and strategies, classroom interaction, teaching materials, testing and pedagogies. Many studies that examined gender as a variable in the use of language learning strategies (LLS) reported that significant gender differences almost always are the same, and they show greater use of LLS by females (see, for instance, Green & Oxford, 1995; Noguchi, 1991; Politzer (1983) reported that females used social

LS significantly more than males. Ehrman and Oxford, (1990), using the LLSL with both students and instructors at the U.S. Foreign Institute, came to the conclusion that compared to males, females reported significantly greater use of LLS in four areas of general study strategies, functional practice strategies, strategies for communicating meaning, and self-management strategies.

B. 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 structure 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 more comprehensibility.

C. Deductive Approach vs. Inductive Approach

Deductive teaching is a traditional approach in which information about target language and rules are driven at the beginning of the class and continued with examples the principles of this approach are generally used in the classes where the main target is to teach grammar structures. For instance these principles are convenient for the classes that grammar translation method is applied (Nunan, 1991).

According to Thornbury's (1999) three basic principles a deductive lesson starts with presentation of the rules by the teacher. Secondly teacher gives examples by highlighting the grammar structures. Then students make practice with the rules and produce their own examples at the end of the lesson.

Deductive teaching begins by giving students the rules and working with them to produce language. This is more teacher-centered. It is a more student centered approach to learning. The inductive approach is generally accepted to be more efficient in the long run than the deductive approach. Inductive activities are generally more stimulating and require greater student participation. Inductive activities are generally more stimulating and require greater student participation. Since students are more actively involved in acquiring knowledge (rather than just passively sitting and receiving information) in the end they end up learning with deeper understanding. Nunan (1999) identifies inductive approach as a process where learners discover

the grammar rules themselves by examining the examples. In an inductive approach it is also possible to use a context for grammar rules. That is to say, learners explore the grammar rules in a text or an audio, rather than from isolated sentences. Thornbury (1999) notes that in an inductive approach, learners are provided with samples which include the target grammar that they will learn.

Then learners work on the examples and try to discover the rules themselves. When students obtain the grammar rules and they practice the language by creating their own examples.

D. 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 Learning 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).

E. Focus on Form vs. Focus on Forms

A different approach to grammar teaching has been proposed by Long (1991), who called for a focus on form within a communicative or meaning-based approach to language teaching, such as task-based or context-based language teaching. Instead of teaching a long list of grammatical constructions in a perceptive way, Long (2007) proposed an essentially reactive approach, whereby learners are primarily engaged in communication with only a brief digression to grammar when necessary (e.g., when learner commit errors). Since there is a limit to what learners can pay attention to, focusing on form may help learners notice constructions (Schmidt, 1990) that would otherwise escape their attention when they are engaged in communication or studying context. Long (1991) hypothesized that " a systematic , non-interfering focus on form produces a faster rate of learning and (probably) higher levels of ultimate second language attainment than instruction with no focus on form".

Researchers have distinguished between "focus on forms" and "focus on form" (Doughty, 2003) in second language instruction. " focus on forms " is the deliberate teaching of grammar in order to produce understanding of the grammar, in the hope that understanding alone will allow the language learner to use the form correctly. " focus on form" on the other hand, refers to

bringing grammar to the attention of language learners as a part of communicative language practice.

Long (1996, p.40) defines focus on form as interactional moves directed at raising learner awareness of forms by "briefly drawing student's attention to linguistic elements (words, collocation, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns, and so on), in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication".

F. The Input Hypothesis

With the publication of Krashen (1985) the input hypothesis becomes the most important part his theory of second language acquisition. This puts forward the idea that language learners acquire language when they understand messages or receive "comprehensible input".

"All other factors thought to encourage or cause second language acquisition work only when they contribute to comprehensible input and/or/allow affective filter." learners move from their current level of competence(i) to their next stage (i+1) by understanding input which contains (i+1) . These structures above the existing level of competence are understood by using context, knowledge of the world together with the existing competence. Krashen gives the example of the language teacher who uses pictures to assist in illustrating meaning and provide a context for example. Teachers need not follow an (i+1) sequence as this will happen automatically if the student gets sufficient comprehensible input.

G. Textual Enhancement versus Input Enrichment

As a kind of focus on form instruction, textual enhancement, also known as visual enhancement, is commonly operationalized by underlining bold facing, italicizing, or capitalizing (etc). Target input features under the assumption that learners are more likely to play attention and as a result acquire those aspects of input that are more noticeable and salient. Input enrichment or input flood, on the other hand, refers to the process of seeding input with extra tokens of the target structure (Trahey, 1996; Trahey & White, 1993). In other words, in enriched input the target feature appears with high frequency but with no textual manipulation. It is believed that the increased tokens of input target forms attract learner's attention (Reinders & Eliss, 2009). Input enrichment also caters to the notion of incidental learning, defined as learning that results from learners being provided L2 input including a target feature. This is done without informing that they will be subsequently tested (Hulstijn, 2003).

A number of studies investigated the effects of enriched input on L2 development (e.g., Trahey & White, 1993; Loewen & Eliss, 2009; Reinders & Eliss, 2009). The results of these studies are mixed and inconclusive. For example, while Reinders and Eliss (2009) reported beneficial effects of input enrichment on the intake and acquisition of English negative adverbs by adult ESL learners of English (exposed to 36 tokens of target form), Loewen et al.'s (2009)

study indicated no evidence for the acquisition of English third person-s by adult ESL learners (exposed to 51 tokens of this target form in written input and 23 instances in aural input). Trahey (1996) also found that the effects of input enrichment on the acquisition of L2 English are limited.

H. Research Question

Different educational domains have different claims to the gender issue. Gender has been regarded as an important affective factor that plays a specific role and influences second language acquisition. There are some differences between the language of men and that of women, and no education or social conditioning can wholly erase these differences. Therefore, whether EFL students learning English grammar will gain or counteract the learning efficiency due to their gender difference has become a significant issue of EFL instruction. So the present study aimed to answer the following question:

1. Does gender have an effective role in grammar knowledge through enriched input?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants in this study were 30 teenagers (15 male and 15 female). The researchers selected the students who had a mean age of 15 and had been studying English for 8 semesters in Tofiq institute, in Nahavand, Iran. During the previous years of school, most of them were in the same situation of education. The participants were at the same language proficiency level according to the institute chart, so they were all intermediate students.

B. Instrument

In this study the materials of teaching during sessions were reading comprehension texts in both groups in order to teach grammar through input enrichment. They were extracted from anecdotes in American English book, so they were standardized and reliable.

C. Procedure

The researchers selected 30 intermediate language learners 15 of whom were male and 15 were female. Both groups were given reading comprehension texts in order to summarize the text or to write down the topic sentence and major support sentences. The texts delivered to both groups contained a lot of specific grammatical features. For example in one text present perfect tense was salient. In other 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. The researchers gave an English achievement test at the end of semester. For the chosen grammar point, females group outperformed males group.

IV. RESULTS

The results of the study have been summarized in the following two tables. The information in each of the given tables has been described.

Table 1. Group Statistics

Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	Male	15	13.6000	1.35225	.34915
	Female	15	16.1333	1.18723	.30654

Based on table 1, it can be inferred that the two groups have had different performances. The table shows that the female participants of the study have had a better performance since the mean of the scores for them is 16.33 while that for male participants is 13.60. The standard deviation for both groups, however, is nearly similar. The information in this table shows that the two groups have had differences in their performances, but it is not clear whether the difference in their means is statistically significant or not; so the researchers ran an independent samples t-test procedure through SPSS the results of which are illustrated in table 2.

Table 2. Independent Samples 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
Scores	Equal variances assumed	.621	.437	-5.452	28	.000	-2.53333	.46462	-3.48507	-1.58160
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.452	27.539	.000	-2.53333	.46462	-3.48579	-1.58088

Table 2 shows that the observed difference between the two groups of participants who were classified based on their genders is statistically significant. Table 2 shows that the p-value is .000 which is smaller than .05. This value implies that the difference which was also seen in table 1 is statistically significant. Thus it can be safely concluded that the females in the study outperformed the males as far as the input enrichment is considered. In other words, input enrichment is more related to females while learning grammatical rules of a second or foreign language.

V. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to understand if females outperformance rather than males in their EFL achievement tests. After using the SPSS program and getting the results, we understood that the findings were same as the past results and findings. What we got from the analyses is the fact that female students had a better ability in using the grammar which taught through enriched input. The mean among females group was 16.13 respectively, while it was 13.60 among males group. Regarding the question posed in this study, the result showed that for the chosen grammar point, females group outperformed males group. The males performed less significantly than the females. These results imply that gender is a factor which is concerned with EFL learning. Gender was found to have significant effect ($P < 0.05$, Sig= 0.00) on students' EFL achievement test.

All the above findings showed that there was a small effect size between males' and females' performances. It is important that EFL instructors be informed more with the gender effects. They need to be more familiar with the differences between males and females. The findings of this study help instructors to select their instructional strategies more effectively related to gender. In view of the quantitative findings of this study, it is clear that female students in chosen grammar point outscored that of the males'. The total female students outperformed the total male students. This study indicates that however there is a significant difference between males' and females' performance, the magnitude of the difference and the strength of association between the total males and the total females is relatively small. Therefore, gender could have a small effect on students' EFL achievement tests. This study has some limitations. First of all, the number of participants was rather limited; secondly, they were all from the same city. Third limitation which can be mentioned here is related to the final test used in the article. Much more time, energy, and study are needed in order to prepare a more valid and reliable test. For further research, this study is needed to be done in different types of context students. The effects of gender could be investigated more with treatment and control groups. Some research with learners with different ages could be helpful to find the best answers to the above research questions.

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