

NOTICING: A FACTOR TO IMPROVE IRANIAN PRE-INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS' STRUCTURAL ACCURACY

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Abstract: The present study was conducted to investigate the effect of noticing, explicit focus on form on linguistic accuracy. To fulfill the purpose of the study, 44 Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners of one of the language institutes were chosen by means of administering the KET homogeneity test. These learners were pretested through a structured interview to check their current accuracy level regarding the oral production of five structures. Based on the results of the pretest, two matched groups, one as the control group and the other as experimental group, were formed. Then, two groups were provided with tasks through listening about the target structures in the study. Of course, the experimental group underwent focus on form explicitly through noticing, while the control group was not provided with it. After twenty sessions of treatment, each ninety minutes, the two groups were post tested through another structured interview. The data obtained from instruments used in the present study indicated that the instructional treatment, noticing, had a significant effect on the acquisition of the target forms. The scores of the participants demonstrated that in experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of the average accuracy gains. Finally, it was concluded that explicit focus on form, noticing, can lead to higher accuracy in oral production in comparison to control group

Keywords: *explicit focus on form, noticing, accuracy*

INTRODUCTION

Grammar instructions, as a controversial issue in language teaching, play an important role in promotion of communicative skills and capabilities. Traditionally, grammar instructions have included a group of grammatical rules and manipulative exercises which are necessary in practicing new structures, and these set of instructions are predominantly used in all the language textbooks and classrooms (Aski, 2003; Wong & VanPatten, 2003), even though in these traditional approaches,

students do not get involved in the interactive and communicative process of language learning. Furthermore, a language acquisition research (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Swain, 1995, 1998, 2005), has illustrated that focusing on form, which is defined as considering the linguistic form in any communicative task, is essential in sustained promotion of language skills and proficiency.

As a result, focusing on form is considered as a method of teaching grammar. This method could specifically cater for the needs

of those language users who apply "non-standard" grammatical forms in their communicative interactions. Williams and Evans (1998: 139) present a definition of focus on form as "... instruction that draws learners' attention to form in the context of meaningful communication...". Lee and Valdman (2000: 12) believe that focus on form has "...the goal of accurate as well as meaningful learner production...". While some people believe that focusing on form is in fact a return to traditional grammar teaching methods, Sanz (2000: 17) argues that: Focus on Form does not mean we are going back to the drill and kill classroom because focus on form does not imply constant, indiscriminate grammar explanation and practice. Focus on form means precisely the opposite: setting limits on what is explicitly taught".

Consciousness-raising and input enhancement as scientific definitions of the process of attracting students' attention, alongside with concepts such as awareness, detection, attention, consciousness, and noticing are among research topics in focus on form studies. Doughty and Williams (1998) claim that deep involvement and interactions are essential in learning processes such as carefully observing a form in the input (p. 253). Schmidt (1990), in his "noticing" hypothesis, believes that for realization of a target form in L_2 , first the learners' attention must be drawn to it. Tomlin and Villa (1994: 190) argue that "Having attention oriented toward some aspects of language increases the likelihood of, but does not guarantee the activation of detection".

In this statement, "detection" is applied synonymous to "noticing". Smith (1991: 121) presents a similar point of view. He claims that focus on form, instead of a linguistic side, might have a perceptual aspect and continues: "Although learners may notice the

signals, the input may nevertheless be no salient to their learning mechanisms".

Backman and Palmer (1996) argue that the required level of interpretation is to a large extent affected by the amount of input. Limited interpretation is recommended for inputs presented in limited quantities, while a more comprehensive interpretation is advised for large amounts of inputs.

Focus on form methodologies implicitly and explicitly tries to attract students' attention. In implicit focus on form, "the aim is to attract learner attention and to avoid metalinguistic discussion, always minimizing any interruption to the communication of meaning" whereas in explicit focus on form, "the aim is to direct learner attention and to exploit pedagogical grammar in this regard" (Doughty & Williams 1998: 232). Leow (2000) as cited in Lee & Valdman (2000: xiv) claims that "a considerable amount of SLA [second language acquisition] research indicates that implicit procedures for awareness enhancement, such as input flooding (providing numerous exemplars of the feature in the input) or writing enhancement (highlighting the targeted feature by various typographical devices), prove to be less effective in accelerating acquisition and advancing language development than a variety of types of explicit approaches..." Doughty and Williams (1998: 236) possess an opposite view of this, and argue that: "...it is sometimes possible to aim more or less implicitly to attract the learner's attention to linguistic features and promote the processing of these features without providing any sort of explicit guidance..."

In this research, one of the techniques of focusing on form is studied, noticing. This study presented students with noticing techniques via listening exercises in which students were involved in repeated oral

processing of some target structures. Such activities draw learners' attention to grammatical structures, and force them to concentrate on form and meaning at the same time.

METHOD

To accomplish the objectives of this study, homogeneity test was given to participants to prepare the necessary condition therefore all of the participants had the lack of ability to recognize the target structures in the study. 124 students participated in the first phase of this study but only 44 pre-intermediate EFL learners survived after homogeneity test. There were two groups of participants in the study, one group as the experimental group, and one group as the control group. The participants were all selected from at least eight English classes of English Institute located in Mashhad. Their initial language proficiency in English was at the pre-intermediate level. Mixed genders attended this study. Their mother tongue was Farsi and their average age of them was between 15 and 16.

To collect the required data, some instruments were employed in this study. First, the participants' general proficiency was assessed by "KET for school" to ensure homogeneity of the groups at the beginning of study. The KET is a Cambridge Level One examination (Council of Europe level A2) which consists of four complete tests, according to the new test format implemented since March 2004. This test has three sections including reading and writing section (9 parts, 55 items, 1 hour and 10 min), listening section (5 parts, 15 items, 30 min) and speaking section (2 parts, 8 to 10 min). The participants' scores were out of 100. The reliability of test was assured by administering it to a group of similar subjects.

The other criteria used in this study were two structured interviews in

order to elicit the required structure from the participants, during the pre-test and post-test period. Each interview took at least 10 minutes and it included 5 topics based on the grammatical context of the methods used. The rating criteria was based on the result of Heaton' writing English language tests. Accuracy ratios were calculated to score the interviews (by two raters) through dividing the correct uses by the sum of the total number of incorrect and zero uses (White, 1998). It should also be reminded that the pretest scores were used to match the experimental groups and control group.

This study required 44 homogeneous learners who lacked almost any familiarity with the structures. These learners were pretested through a structured interview, and then, on the basis of their pretest scores they were divided into two similar groups, one group as the experimental group, and one group as the control group. The final samples comprised at least 6 classes in the institute.

It should be mentioned that the ratings of the interviews in the pretest and posttest were carried out by two raters. The correlation coefficients, calculated to determine inter-rater reliability for the ratings of the interviews, turned out to be acceptable. Regarding the treatment, this study required the teachers to provide the learners with a kind of focus on form technique (noticing) that pushed the learners to use the target structures.

Twenty passages were developed for target structures to be presented to participants through listening, in twenty sessions. Each session lasted for about 90 minutes. Three other teachers, in addition to the researcher, were instructed to present the techniques and provided the necessary focus on form in the classes in which the required participants were available. In the experimental group, the participants

were provided with noticing through listening to the passages. Regarding the control group, everything was similar to that of the experimental group, except that they didn't receive any techniques of focus on form (noticing). The members of the control group were only provided with listening to the passages. For the posttest, which was about 40 days after the pretest, the participants took the posttest through the same structured interview, which was again double-rated. It should be pointed out that the scores used for data analyses were resulted from getting the average of two scores given by the two raters, if the scores were ever different at all.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reliability of Key English Test for School (KET)

Before investigating the results of this study, the researcher considered the reliability of Key English Test (KET) with Cronbach's Alpha formula. The researcher did this to make sure of reliability of this researcher made test. For this purpose, a group of 20 pre-intermediate learners who were similar to the main sample were given the test before it was administered to the main participating in control group

and experimental group. The obtained result for this 55 items test is indicated in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 <i>Case Processing Summary</i>			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	20	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	20	100.0
a. List wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.			
Table 2 <i>Reliability Statistics</i>			
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items		
.912	55		

To stimulate the reliability, sample of 20 learners were selected (Table2). The result in Table3 shows that ($\alpha = .912$) and it can be acceptable. Since the number is large enough and it is close to one, the Key English Test (KET) is reliable.

Descriptive statistics of pretest and posttest

Before analyzing the results on the scores of pretest and posttest, descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 3 in order to summarize the

Table 3
Oral Production Score at Pretest & Posttest

		Control G. at Pretest	Noticing G. at Pretest	Control Group at Posttest	Noticing G. at Posttest
N	Valid	22	22	22	22
	Missing	0	0	0	0
	Mean	2.932	2.864	3.455	4.341
	Std. Error of Mean	.1482	.1148	.1504	.1411
	Median	3.000	3.000	3.500	4.500
	Mode	3.0	3.0	3.5	4.0 ^a
	Std. Deviation	.6951	.5386	.7056	.6616
	Variance	.483	.290	.498	.438
	Range	2.5	2.0	2.5	2.5
	Minimum	2.0	2.0	2.5	3.0
	Maximum	4.5	4.0	5.0	5.5
	Sum	64.5	63.0	76.0	95.5

available data and describe the main features of the data.

According to Table 3, it seems that there is no considerable difference between the means in pretest due to the closeness of the magnitudes ($M_{\text{Control}} = 2.932$; $M_{\text{Experimental}} = 2.864$). Moreover, according to the amounts of their standard errors, it can be concluded that the distribution of scores is normal. The mean score of posttest in control group is 3.455 and in experimental group in noticing is 4.341; it seems that there are considerable differences between the mean scores.

Tests of normality of pretest

To test the normality of the pretest the Shapiro-Wilk was used. The null-hypothesis of the test of normality is that the distribution of the group's scores is normal. Therefore the distribution of the scores is not normal if ($p < .05$). The results are depicted in the following table (Table 4).

Table 4
Test of Normality of the Pretest

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Control G. at Pretest	.916	21	.112
Noticing G. at Pretest	.922	21	.134

Table 4 manifests the results of this normality test. Two groups are normally distributed since ($p > .05$) for all of them.

Post Hoc Tests

The following Table (5) shows the Tukey HSD method which researcher employed to ensure that the two groups are equal.

The results gained by Tukey HSD method in Table 5 indicated that there was no significant difference between pairs of mean values. Hence, all these values were put in one group, since ($p < .05$) for all pairs of the group.

Table 5
Homogeneous Subsets Oral Production Score at Pretest by Tukey HSD^{a,b}

		Subset for alpha = 0.05
Group	N	1
Noticing	22	2.864
Control	22	2.932
Sig.		.796

Investigation of Hypothesis

The findings of the TUKEY Test illustrates that ($p=0 < \alpha=.05$) for the comparison between the control and noticing group. Therefore the null hypothesis which reads that noticing doesn't have any statistically significant effect on linguistic accuracy of Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral production is strongly rejected. Thus it can be safely claimed noticing has statistically significant effect on linguistic accuracy of Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral production.

Although participants of the experimental group (noticing) were instructed extensively on the target structures, especially verb tenses, they still failed in identifying their tense problems despite having sufficient processing time. Interestingly, in the case of third person singular, the participants corrected those verbs which appeared right after the pronoun and if there were intervening words between the verb and the pronoun, they would rarely mention this problem. Furthermore, this reveals the cognitively demanding nature third person singular morpheme since this grammatical form is one of the last grammatical forms to be learned in the row of inflectional morphemes. Since the participants did not correct half of their mistakes, they are believed to be at the controlled stage of processing and have not reached the automatic processing stage at the intermediate level yet, based on McLaughlin's (1987) conception of automaticity.

Tests of Normality of posttest

To test the normality of the posttest the Shapiro-Wilk was used. The results are depicted in the following tables. Tables 6 and 7 manifest the results of this normality test.

Table 6
Test of normality of posttest

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Control Group at Posttest	.939	22	.210
Noticing G. at Posttest	.923	22	.101

Table 7
*Homogeneous Subsets Oral Production
Score at Posttest by Tukey HSD^{a,b}*

Group	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
Control	22	3.455	
Noticing	22		4.341
Sig.		.503	1.000

The null-hypothesis of the test of normality is that the distribution of the group' scores is normal. Therefore the distribution of the scores is not normal if the $p < .05$. Two groups are normally distributed since the P-value is more than .05 for all of them.

Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficients

The researcher used Pearson Correlation Coefficient to calculate if there is any significant difference between the scores given by different raters. Tables 8, 9, 10, 11 show the results, respectively.

The researcher calculated the correlation coefficient between the scores given by the two raters in control group. The obtained result in Table 8 was a correlation of .824. The gain scores were compared and the results ($p\text{-value} = 0.0001 < \alpha = 0.05$) showed that there is a strong relationship between the lists of scores each participant received.

Also, the researcher estimated the correlation coefficient between the scores given noticing group. In Table 9, the raters gained an estimate of the .858 which shows a high reliability of the scores. The analysis showed no significant difference between the scores given by two raters.

In the case of inter-rater reliability, in Table 10, an estimate of .791 in control group between two raters was obtained.

Table 8
Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for control group in pretest

		Control G. at Pretest-R1	Control G. at PretestR2
Control G. at Pretest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.824**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	22	22
Control G. at PretestR2	Pearson Correlation	.824**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	22	22

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 9
Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for noticing group in pretest

		Noticing G. at Pretest-R1	Noticing G. at Pretest-R2
Noticing G. at Pretest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.858**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	22	22
Noticing G. at Pretest-R2	Pearson Correlation	.858**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	22	22

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 10
Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for control group in posttest

		Control Group at Posttest-R1	Control Group at Posttest-R2
Control Group at Posttest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.791**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	22	22
Control Group at Posttest-R2	Pearson Correlation	.791**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	22	22

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 11
Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for noticing group in posttest

		Noticing G. at Posttest-R1	Noticing G. at Posttest-R2
Noticing G. at Posttest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.820**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	22	22
Noticing G. at Posttest-R2	Pearson Correlation	.820**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	22	22

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In the case of inter-rater reliability, in Table 11, an estimate of .820 in noticing group between two raters was obtained.

CONCLUSION

In order to test this null hypothesis, 44 Iranian EFL participants of an English Language Institute, who lack familiarity with the five target structures (the simple present, especially third person 's' morpheme, present continuous, simple past, past continuous and present perfect), were selected through a homogeneity test. These participants were also pretested through a structured interview, and were put into experimental and control groups by means of matched sampling on the basis of their pretest scores.

This was to make sure that the two groups, one group as the experimental group and one group as the control group, were all experiencing

similar conditions from the very beginning. The two groups were later given special treatments to evaluate the group; i.e. in these implementations experimental group was exposed to noticing technique and control group was not forced to face any focus on form technique. The participants of the experimental group were exposed to focus on form through noticing while the control group was not faced with this technique. Afterwards, the participants were post tested through another structured interview to examine their accuracy gains after treatment.

A comparison of the accuracy gains in control and experimental group was conducted via a variance analysis (ANOVA). The mean pretest scores for two groups were not significantly different. This pattern was repeated on the posttest in which the mean scores were found to be significantly different between the noticing and control group.

The null hypothesis was rejected because the experimental group outperformed the control group in average accuracy gains significantly.

Although there have been a lot of research studies in the literature regarding the comparative examination of the implicit and explicit effects of focus on form, the present study could be considered as an additional support for noticing, as an explicit focus on form implementation. Thus, it could be further concluded that these findings correspond to the suggestions of Long and Robinson (1998) on the need to implement focus on form implicitly and explicitly so that fossilization is prevented. Moreover, an alternative to focus on forms is recommended which is against communicative language teaching techniques.

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