

The Impact of Textual Input Enhancement on Iranian Elementary EFL learners' Vocabulary Intake

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Abstract

Nowadays, there has been a lot of emphasis on L2 vocabulary learning in the language teaching curriculum. Due to the emergence and prevalence of growing methods in the area of second language teaching, lots of researchers have tried to take advantage of these methods in enhancing L2 learning vocabulary. Thus, the present study investigated the effect of textual input enhancement as a focus on form method on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary intake from reading. Ninety one elementary EFL learners in Tabriz Azad University participated in a study for eight sessions. A quasi-experimental design with a randomized control and an experimental group was used. Both groups were given five reading texts and comprehension questions to complete. While the participants in experimental group read the textually enhanced input through bolding, the participants in the control group read the same texts without input manipulation. Multiple-choice recognition tests were used to measure the intake of vocabulary. The results showed a significant difference between control and experimental group. The study concluded with some pedagogical implications.

Keywords: textual input enhancement, vocabulary intake, Iranian Elementary EFL learners

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is not only one important component of language system but also a part of the language competence which is necessary for communication. For Birjandi, Mosallanezhad & Bagheridoust (2003) vocabulary cannot be taught but it can be presented and then learned by the learners. For some researchers (Knight, 1994, Schmitt, 2008) vocabulary learning is the most important aspect of second language learning and a necessary part to master a second language. For Wilkins (1972) without grammar very little is conveyed, while without vocabulary nothing is conveyed. For some researchers (Nagy & Herman, 1987; Sternberg, 1987) incidental vocabulary intake from reading is a major mode of vocabulary acquisition in a first language. For some other researchers (Hulstijn, 2001; Karp, 2002; Krashen, 1989; Pulido, 2007; Prichard, 2008; Schmitt, 2008; Waring & Takaki, 2003; Webb, 2008; Zhang, 2001) it is the same about second language learning agreeing on the idea that second language learners might gain knowledge of meaning through reading incidentally. In the vocabulary acquisition literature, incidental learning has often been defined as the accidental learning of vocabulary without any intention of learning it. To put it in other words, it is a process that occurs naturally, during reading, when the learner's attention is focused on overall text comprehension. However, it has been claimed that incidental vocabulary learning through reading is not always effective (Laufer, 2003), resulting in small gains of vocabulary presented only in reading texts without any explicit attention on them (Min, 2008) as learners usually fail to notice unfamiliar words, especially while they are dealing with the global message of the text without knowing those words. For Schmidt (1993, 2001) such small gains can be attributed to lack of noticing. Schmidt (1995) states that conscious attention is essential for learning to take place with noticing being the first stage of learning.

In Iranian context, the most frequent way of vocabulary instruction includes first pronouncing the new word, followed by its defining and spelling and finally through explaining new words' grammatical functions which has been proved ineffective by many EFL teachers (Zoghi & Mirzaei, 2014). Thus, presenting vocabulary through lists of unknown words with their L1 equivalents in a passive manner does not lead to any beneficial

consequence. Since 1980s or so, visual input enhancement studies have been conducted to achieve the goal of teaching L2 morphosyntax implicitly, mainly through reading activities almost to the exclusion of L2 vocabulary (Cho, 2010; Combs, 2008; Gascoigne, 2006; Kelly, 2008; Lee, 2007; Lee & Haung, 2008; Mueller, 2010; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013; Rezvani, 2011; Sarkhosh, 2012; Simard, 2009; Song, 2007; Wong, 2005). Nowadays, a shift of interest from the teacher to the learner (Nahavandi, 2011; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2012) as well as shift of focus from product oriented learning to process oriented one (Nahavandi, 2013; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013a, Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013b; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013c; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2014a; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2014b) has put more responsibilities on the learners' shoulders. In summary, most of the conducted researches in the area of TE have been on grammatical forms, reporting a small-sized positive effect, but different researchers have come to different conclusions on the effectiveness of such implicit type of teaching method. Therefore, due to the wide discrepancies in methodological features, reliable comparison across studies has been an extremely difficult task (Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013d). As such, because of contradictory results, more research in this area especially in EFL context seemed necessary.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Noticing Hypothesis

Recently, the role of conscious processes has occupied a central place in every second language acquisition (SLA) research, focusing on the Noticing Hypothesis of Schmidt (1993, 2001) which has been adopted by a large and probably growing number of researchers. For Schmidt (1994) questions related to the role of consciousness in second language (L2) learning are necessary to practical concerns in applied linguistics, involving the appropriateness of grammar instruction techniques in language pedagogy ranging from attention focusing devices to decontextualized explanations of grammar, as well as to attempts to construct theories of SLA. Schmidt continues to claim that questions related to the role of conscious and unconscious processes in applied linguistics are also connected to current discussions in experimental psychology, linguistics, connectionist modeling, and other disciplines of cognitive science, as well as philosophy. Schmidt (1990) emphasizes the importance of conscious processes but he does not deny the contribution of unconscious processes in the interlanguage development. In his Noticing Hypothesis, he suggests that "subliminal language learning is impossible, and that noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input into intake" (Schmidt 1990, p. 129). He continues to claim that this requirement of noticing can apply equally to all aspects of language whether lexicon, phonology, grammatical form, or pragmatics, meaning some kind of noticing has to happen in advance in order to learn from input. However, he claims that noticing must not be equated with acquisition, as it only facilitates the process. In addition, Schmidt (1995) claims that, structures of the target language in the input can become more salient through instruction so the likelihood of noticing these structures can increase as well.

2.2 Textual Input Enhancement (TIE)

O'Bryan (2004) claims that three ways of TIE or textual input manipulation are 1) making linguistic characteristics salient (typographical or textual enhancement), 2) providing elaborated input, and 3) providing modified input, with TIE being the most major type of input enhancement. For Chapelle (2003) the use of repetition of marked input which is also called typographical input enhancement can make the input more salient. For Doughty and William (1998) the basic method of TIE includes increasing the perceptual salience of the target form through using a combination of various formatting techniques such as bolding, underlining of target forms and capitalizing. Urano (2000) having the same idea with Doughty and William (1998) claims that TIE is the written mode of input where the intended target is highlighted; italicized; bolded, or the combination of these techniques is used.

Visual or textual input enhancement (TIE) is based upon the idea that mere exposure to certain L2 structures is insufficient for language acquisition or a mastery of SL to occur (Smith, 1993). Lightbrown and Spada (1990) claim that, it is possible that the L2 learners fail in perceiving certain structures in naturalistic input even after undergoing long exposure to them. In other words, the input does not become intake. Furthermore, Widdowson (1990) claims, when learners are left to their own resources they "do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities" (p.167). TIE involves highlighting special features of input that may go unnoticed under normal circumstances through typographically manipulating them (Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013d). Therefore, based on the main objective of the study which was enhancing learners' vocabulary knowledge, the present study aimed at understanding if TIE as an implicit method of teaching would bring about any changes in Iranian elementary EFL learners vocabulary knowledge or not. To address some of the gaps in the existing literature reviewed above, the present study tries to examine:

1. Whether textual input enhancement can affect Iranian elementary EFL learners' vocabulary intake or not.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

The present study employed a quasi- experimental design with pretest, treatment, and posttest design. After the pre-test the participants were randomly assigned to the treatment and control group. The participants in the treatment group read the textually enhanced input, while the control group read the same texts without any input manipulation. Each treatment session lasted for about 70 minutes. A post test was given in the last treatment session lasting 30 minutes.

3.2 Participants

102 elementary EFL learners in Azad university of Tabriz, Iran registering in General English course during July 2012 participated in a study for eight sessions. The age range of participants who were both male and female students was from 19 to 26 with the average mean of 19.7. In order to make sure that the participants were all at the same level of proficiency regarding their vocabulary knowledge, Cambridge Placement Test of Vocabulary, was administered. The results didn't show a significant difference between two groups. Furthermore, to ascertain that the words were completely new for them, a researcher made test including 30 recognition tests were given to both groups. The results of the pre-test revealed no significant difference between these groups as well. After the pre-test the participants in class 1 (N= 50) were assigned to a control group, and participants in class 2 (N= 52) to experimental group. The division was done randomly. However, 11 students who were not present in all treatment sessions and posttest session were eliminated from the population pool. Thus, the results of only 91 students, control group (46) and experimental group (45) have been reported here.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Demographic Questionnaire, Reading Texts & Multiple-Choice Recognition Tests

In order to obtain necessary demographic information about the participants such as gender, age, educational level, and major of study first a demographic questionnaire was given along the pre-test in the first session. Then, five reading comprehension passages consisting 270 words from Active skills for reading (1) were selected. The participants in the experimental groups read the text with some highlighted words. However, participants in the control group read the same texts in plain. Furthermore, in order to check the students' intake of vocabulary both in pre and posttests multiple-choice recognition tests were used. The reason for using this kind of tests was based on (Leow, 1997; Overstreet, 1998; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013d) who ascertained the effectiveness of these kinds of tests in exploring the impact of TE on intake. First, two researcher made parallel versions of a multiple-choice recognition test namely as (A & B), one for pretest and one for posttest, with 30 questions each scoring 1 were developed. Besides, In order to ascertain the equality of these two sets, a pilot study was conducted in which all questions of pretest and posttest (60 questions) were put together into one test with even numbers being assigned to pretest questions and odd numbers to posttest questions. Worthy of noting that, with the face validity of the tests being checked by two lecturers of Tabriz Azad University, the new test was administered to one elementary class (30 students) of EFL learners with similar characteristics as those of the target groups at Jihad-e- Daneshgahi institute. In this phase of the study the poor items were either revised or replaced by better items. In order to check the reliability, Cronbach's alpha test was used. The results of the pilot tests indicated reliability indices of 0.792.

3.4 Data Analysis

In the present study, the independent variable was the instructional method while the dependent variable was the participants' intake of vocabulary. The design to carry out this study was a quasi-experimental, with a pretest, different treatments for experimental and control groups, as well as a post-test. Independent and paired t-test were used to answer the research question regarding the difference between two different instructions. The obtained results in the present study were analyzed by SPSS version (20). From 91 students, 58 (63.7) were male, and 33 (36.3) were females. The age range of participants was from 19 to 26 with average mean of 19.7.

4. Results of the Study

4.1 Test of Normality

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test the normality of the distribution of the data. The results indicated a normal distribution of the scores at both levels of pretest, and posttest (Significant level > 0/05).

Table 1. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

	N	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
pre	91	1.072	.201
post	91	.864	.445

4.2 Comparing Pretest in Both Groups

Based on the obtained results parametric statistics was used. First mean score and SD of both groups were calculated.

Table 2. Results of Independent t-test for pre-test in both groups

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
					F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
pre	control group	46	8.478	4.246	.072	.789	.509	89	.612
	experimental group	45	8.933	4.287					

As it can be seen in table 2, mean of control group is 8.478, and experimental group is 8.933. As mean score of experimental group is higher than control group, Levene Statistic test was run to see whether the difference in mean score in these two groups is significant or not. Based on the significant level of Levene test $0.789 > 0.05$, homogeneity of variances is confirmed. As the level of significance is $0.612 > 0.05$; it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between the groups in pretest. Therefore, it can be claimed that any change in the posttest is unlikely to be the effect of preexisting differences between the groups and, instead, can be attributed to the different treatments that the these groups experienced.

4.3 Comparing posttest in both groups

Table 3. Results of Independent t-test for post-test in both groups

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
					F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
post	control group	46	9.456	4.183	1.691	.197	4.043	89	.000
	experimental group	45	13.33	4.940					

In order to compare post tests in both groups, independent t-test was used. As it can be seen in table 3, mean of control group is 9.456, and experimental group is 13.33 with the level of significance of .000. As the level of sig is smaller than 0.05, $0.05 > .000$ it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between experimental and control groups in the post test. It means that experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in the post test.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

Decontextualized vocabulary training makes vocabulary learning a dull and extremely difficult task for learners. Therefore, if teachers try to employ contextualized materials for teaching vocabulary, rather than presenting it in isolation, the lexical items can be maintained much longer in learners' minds (Zoghi & Mirzaei, 2014). For some researchers (Mitchell, 2000; Williams, 2005, Ellis, 2006) TIE has attracted lots of attention in Second Language (SL) literature in the light of classroom research that supports the need for pedagogical interventions to push learners towards higher levels of proficiency in L2. For Sharwood Smith (1991) TIE helps learners in noticing certain linguistic forms in the input that have been forgotten or ignored. Elsewhere he claims that TIE help learners in input to intake process as it underlines linguistic forms which usually go unnoticed (1993). For many researchers, the enrichment of the context in which language learning takes place, might have great impact on learners' development of vocabulary (Read, 2004). In TE vocabulary learning occurs incidentally not because the learner is trying to learn the new words but because the learner is trying to understand the meaning of the

context. The results of the present study indicated a positive effect of TIE on vocabulary intake with the experimental group outperforming the control group significantly.

Based on the results of the present study some pedagogical implications can be made. Teachers can increase L2 learners' vocabulary learning through reading enhanced texts. As intentional learning requires more effort, energy and, motivation on the part of L2 learners, and time, it seems necessary that teachers and material developers provide materials that the learners consider relevant and interesting and easy to learn and remember. The present research may encourage other interested researchers to do further research in the area of TE among EFL learners. However, worthy of noting that caution must be taken while interpreting the results of the present study or trying to make generalizations of the findings to larger populations in Iran or to other populations with different ethnic, linguistic, or educational backgrounds as the present study was conducted with only 109 elementary EFL engineering students.

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