

# The Impact of Focus on Form Instruction on Second Language Vocabulary and Grammar Learning

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## Abstract

The teaching of vocabulary and grammar has long been an area of dispute in the field of second language acquisition (Brown, 2001). This study investigated the effect of focus on form instruction on vocabulary learning through the medium of visually enhanced reading texts. Sixty four Intermediate EFL learners were assigned to two experimental groups including a vocabulary and grammar group. After taking a pretest based on the enhanced forms, the learners received ten reading texts with visually enhanced lexical items for the vocabulary group and grammatical structures for the grammar group. In order to investigate the effect of visual enhancement of forms on participants' vocabulary learning, they took a posttest based on the enhanced forms. Paired sample t-test and ANOVA were used for the analysis of the data gathered from the learners' performance on the pretest and the posttest. The results revealed positive effects of visual enhancement of forms on learning vocabulary and grammar. This research can provide L2 teachers and syllabus designers with useful information about the effectiveness of visual input enhancement as a technique for vocabulary and grammar learning.

**Keywords:** Focus on form instruction, visual input enhancement, noticing.

## Introduction

Vocabulary teaching has always been an important issue in the field of second language acquisition.

For a long time, language was taught explicitly because it was believed that explicit instruction was the basis of all second language learning. However, this view changed to a great extent by the emergence of the behavioristic view which claimed that the acquisition of language is possible through the formation of habits.

None of these approaches received enough satisfaction and support as teachers always complained about the usefulness of the instructional practices, reflected in methods, applied in their classrooms.

There came a big change when Krashen (1981) proposed his 'Comprehensible Input Hypothesis,' suggesting that language is acquired via comprehensible input and not by the way of explicit instruction because it doesn't aid in spontaneous production of language. According to Krashen, for language to be acquired, it is only enough to understand the language. But Krashen's theory, despite its appeal, did not go unopposed. It had been mentioned that those learners who do not have the advantage of language instruction, though fluent, developed wild vocabulary and produced untarget-like output (Poole & Sheorey, 2002).

Due to the criticisms directed toward Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, Schmidt (1990) introduced the term 'noticing,' a conscious awareness of a previously unlearned L2 vocabulary form, as the necessary and sufficient condition for language acquisition to take place. General findings of most SLA investigators (Dekeyser, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001a, 2001b; Fotos, 1993; Nassaji, 2000) also indicate that for language

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learning to take place, it is necessary for learners to notice the target form in input in order to be able to process and acquire them. That is, they think that people learn about things that they attend to and don't learn about things that they do not attend to. Therefore, second language learners need to attend to form rather than to be simply engaged in communicative language use (Farrokhi 2005; 2007).

Moreover, Schmidt (1990) believes that one of the most important factors which affect noticing is language instruction. According to him, instruction provides structured, differentiated input that assists noticing by focusing attention on and enhancing awareness of language features. He also proposed that, since there is a limit to what humans can pay attention to at any one time, and since attending to features of language may be necessary for learning them, language vocabulary may enhance learners' ability to notice aspects of language that might otherwise escape their attention while engaged in communication.

Following this view, Ellis (1990) introduced formal vocabularies as a view of language instruction which helps learners to develop awareness of target language features. According to Ellis, once consciousness of a particular feature has been raised through formal instruction, learners remain aware of the target language feature and notice it in subsequent communicative input events which are considered to be crucial for further language processing, leading to the acquisition of the feature.

One of the pedagogically sound and empirically grounded types of language instruction is focus on form instruction. Focus on form instruction does not only pay attention to the importance of the communicative language teaching, but it also maintains the value of occasional and overt study of L2 vocabulary and grammar forms (Poole, 2005). It is considered a more promising pedagogical choice than focus on forms and focus on meaning because of its communicatively need oriented attention to form and its saliency in the language acquisition process (Huang, 2008). Focus on form may be essential to push learners beyond communicatively effective language toward target-like second language ability. It may also be part of a more efficient language learning experience in that it can speed up natural acquisition processes (Doughty and Williams, 1998). It also tries to maintain a balance between focus on forms and focus on meaning through motivating teachers and learners to

attend to form when necessary, yet within a communicative classroom environment. It has a dual, simultaneous focus on form and accuracy as well as meaning and fluency. It is also seen as a psycholinguistically plausible approach as it emphasizes the kind of attention to form that occurs in real-world situation, as it addresses learners' linguistic problems and as it motivates noticing which is considered necessary for acquisition (Seedhouse, 1997).

One specific pedagogical approach to draw the learner's attention to form which received considerable attention in recent SLA research is input enhancement which has its basic premise on focus on form instruction. Sharwood Smith (1993) found out that L2 learners usually lack sensitivity to vocabulary features of target language input, as the result they might not benefit much from the available input. He further acknowledged that certain grammatical features in the input to which the learners are exposed are inherently non-salient, and therefore learners usually fail to notice them (Sharwood Smith, 1993).

He further concluded that failure to benefit from the input may be the result of a combination of the lack of noticing ability on the learner's part and poor input characteristics such as lack of perceptual salience. Accordingly, Sharwood Smith (1993) hypothesized that a way to stimulate input processing for form as well as meaning is through improving the quality of input. He, further, proposes input enhancement, an operation whereby the saliency of linguistic features is increased.

Input enhancement can come in many different forms. Color coding or boldfacing would be an unelaborated form of salience, with no appeal to metalinguistic knowledge. The oral equivalents to this would be special stress and intonation and use of gesture. Pointing out and explaining a construction using metalinguistic terminology would also be a highly elaborate form of enhancing the input (Han, Park, Combs, 2008; Sharwood Smith, 1993).

#### *Experimental studies on Focus on Form Instruction*

Harley (1998) presented evidence from a classroom experiment showing the long lasting impact of instructional focus on form on second language proficiency of learners as young as 7 or 8 years of age.

The empirical evidence presented below provides a rationale for proposing that learners need to attend to form, rather than to be simply engaged in communicative language use.

Doughty and Varela (1998) investigated the feasibility and effectiveness of focus on form technique in a communicative classroom. Students were asked to complete their science class reports which encourage them to use past time reference. Then the teacher interviewed each student individually, audio-taping their responses to the same questions asked in the written reports. Analysis of the written and oral data showed significant gains in the target-like use of past time reference.

White (1998) in his study tried to draw students' attention to forms through visual enhancement. The study was carried out over five month period in a French elementary school near Montreal. The findings suggested that drawing learners' attention to a specific vocabulary form through visual enhancement would speed up acquisition of that specific form.

Williams and Evan (1998) studied the effects of input enhancement (in the form of input flooding and explicit instruction) on the acquisition of participial adjectives and passive voice among thirty three university students of Illinois. For the participial adjectives, the input flooding helped students notice the forms but explicit instruction led to greater gains. For the passive voice, both treatments had similar effects and produced similar performances.

Williams (1999) in her study investigated the effectiveness of learner-generated focus on form. The results suggested that learners attend to form relatively infrequently, but the learners' generated attention to form increased considerably with rising proficiency, leading to less reliance on teachers' help. It was also found that most of the episodes containing learner-generated attention revolved around lexis.

Izumi (2002) examined the effect of internal and external attention-drawing devices output and visual enhancement- on learners' noticing and acquisition of English relativization by EFL adult learners. Though the positive effect of both devices on noticing, no support was found for the hypothesis that the effect of input enhancement was comprehensible to that of output. That is, output was found to be more effective on learners' acquisition of relativization in comparison to visual input enhancement.

Jensen and Vinther (2003) investigated the effect of input enhancement (i.e. exact repetition and speech rate reduction) on learners' listening comprehension, acquisition of listening decoding strategies, and linguistic features. The input consisted of video recording of native speakers' quasi-spontaneous dialogues. Comparisons of pretest and posttest

scores showed significant effects for all three parameters.

Previous studies on the effect of focus on form on language learning mostly used short term treatment with rather limited exposure to the input. Although various differences in these studies make direct comparison among them difficult, an examination of several factors is instrumental in identifying the directions for future research. The present study takes these considerations into account by investigating the effectiveness of visual input enhancement on the vocabulary and grammar learning of sixty four Iranian Intermediate EFL learners during two months.

### *Research Questions*

Based on the purposes behind this study, the following research questions were raised:

Q1: Does visual input enhancement in reading texts have any effect on learning vocabulary?

Q2: Does visual input enhancement in reading texts have any effect on learning grammar?

Q3: Is there any significant difference between the effect of visual input enhancement in reading texts in vocabulary and grammar learning?

### *Methodology*

Many foreign language students consider vocabulary learning as one of their most important goals. To help them meet this goal, language teachers usually face issues regarding the most effective methods of teaching. Teaching vocabulary to nonnative speakers of English involves certain problems and challenges at all levels of instruction. With the introduction of focus on form instruction (Long, 1991) and the advent of visual input enhancement technique (Sharwood Smith, 1993) and the good deal of theoretical and empirical research done on the subject (Jensen & Vinther, 2003; White, 1998; Williams, 1999), one may wonder how and why formal instruction incorporated into communicative language teaching promotes interlanguage development (Muranoi, 2000). To obtain significant data for this issue, the present study is intended to examine whether visual input enhancement of forms in reading texts affects vocabulary learning at intermediate level in Iranian EFL classrooms.

### *Instruments*

General English Proficiency Test: The TOEFL proficiency test was used for evaluating the subjects'

level of proficiency in English. This test included 40 multiple-choice vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension items. The researcher did a pilot test with 15 students with the same level and similar characteristics to those of the subjects of this study. The reliability of this test which was calculated by Cronbach was .71. An item analysis was done to calculate the level of difficulty of all items in both contexts. Then, based on the results of this analysis, some items were modified, deleted, or replaced by some new ones.

**Pretest and posttest:** It included two parts including vocabulary and grammar, each followed by 50 multiple-choice questions. The reliability of the tests was calculated using the KR-21 formula, and was within an acceptable range (the pretest was 0.70, and the posttest 0.75). Regarding the validity of the test, the researcher asked three EFL teachers to express their opinions about the test. Their comments were taken into account for revising the final sample of the test.

### Procedure

Focus on form instruction consists of a pretest, exposure to the L2 form to be learned, and a posttest, designed to see whether learners attend to the L2 form or not (Leow, 2001). In this study, in order to accomplish the objectives of this study and also increase its validity, the use of randomization, pretest/posttest administration and treatment were essential. The following steps were taken to do the study:

In this study effort was made to select the samples randomly. For the samples to be homogeneous, a TOEFL proficiency test was used. After the homogeneity test determined the level of participants' language proficiency, attempts were made to assign the participants in the two groups randomly. Then, 44 students from 3 classes were assigned to two groups including 22 learners in vocabulary group, and 22 learners in grammar group. But, before the administration of the pretest, the treatment, and the posttest, all of them were piloted with 20 intermediate students to detect any problems. Some misspellings and wrong structural forms were found and corrected before the main administration. Then, a pretest was administered to provide the researcher with the necessary information about the participants' at the time knowledge of the enhanced forms before they were exposed to the enhanced forms in the treatment reading texts. After the pretest, they received the treatment. During the treatment phase, the participants in two groups were ex-

posed to the visually-enhanced lexical items and grammatical structures in ten reading texts during five weeks, two sessions each week, each session one text. For the last phase of this study, the two groups took a 100-multiple choice item posttest, including the lexical and grammatical forms enhanced in the treatment texts. This posttest was designed to examine the effectiveness of the visual enhancement of forms on participants' vocabulary and grammar learning.

## Results

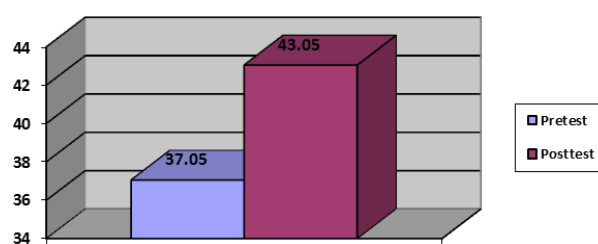
Based on the research questions and the design of the study, paired-sample t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used for data analysis.

**Question 1:** Does visual input enhancement have any significant effect on learning vocabulary?

With regard to the effect of visual input enhancement on learning new words, results of data analyses (t-test) in the table 1 indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between students' performance before enhancement (pretest) and after that (posttest) ( $t= 5.537$  ;  $P =.000$  ). In other words, subjects scored higher in posttest ( $M=43.05$ ,  $SD= 3.51$ ) than pretest (without visual input enhancement) ( $M=37.05$ ,  $SD= 3.39$ ). With respect to these results, we can verify the effect of visual input enhancement on vocabulary learning among Iranian EFL learners.

**Table 1. Paired sample statistics for vocabulary group.**

Vocabulary group	Mean	SD	t	Sig
Pretest	37.05	3.39	5.537	.000
Posttest	43.05	3.51		



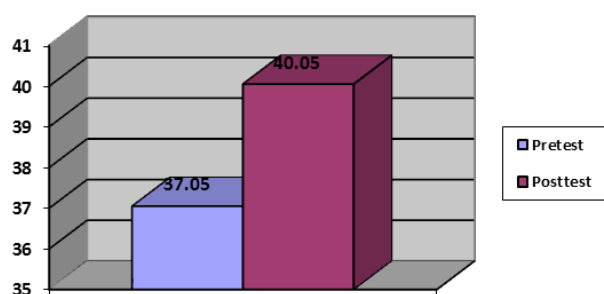
**Figure 1. Mean Pre- and Posttest in vocabulary group.**

Q2: Does visual input enhancement in reading texts have any effect on learning grammar?

As far as it is concerned with the effect of visual input enhancement during reading, as it is clear from Table 2 and Figure 2, a significant increase in mean scores was found between pretest to posttest (37.05 and 40.05 respectively). Paired sample 't' test revealed a significant difference in pre- and posttest with 't' value of 5.899 and P value of .000, which indicates the positive effect of visual input enhancement during reading in learning grammar. Therefore, by taking the above results into account in Iranian EFL context, visual enhancement of grammatical structures led to better grammar learning.

**Table 2. Paired sample statistics for grammar group.**

Grammar group	Mean	SD	T	Sig
Pretest	37.05	3.391	5.899	.000
Posttest	40.05	2.314		



**Figure 2. Mean Pre- and Posttest in grammar group.**

**Table 3. Mean pre- and posttest gain scores of samples in vocabulary and grammar group.**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Vocabulary	22	5.77	5.06	1.079
Grammar	22	2.73	2.29	.489

Q3: Is there any significant difference between the effect of visual input enhancement in reading texts in vocabulary and grammar learning?

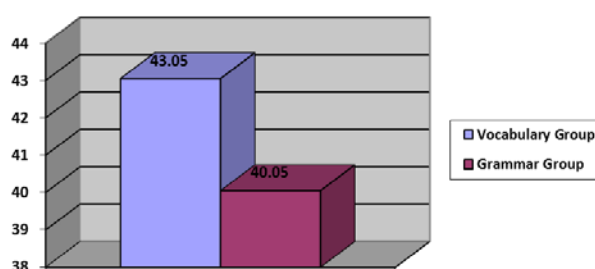
In order to see which group took more advantage

of visual input enhancement, ANOVA was used for data analysis.

The results of data analysis (ANOVA) in table 4 indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between vocabulary and grammar group because obtained F value of 6.610, was found to be significant at .001 level (P=.014). By looking at Table 3 and Figure 3, we can see that the students in vocabulary group took more advantage of visual input enhancement (Mean= 5.77; SD=5.06) in comparison to grammar group (Mean= 2.73; SD= 2.29). In other words, visual enhancement of forms was more effective for the vocabulary group, resulting in better vocabulary learning in comparison to grammar learning.

**Table 4. Results of ANOVA for pre- and posttest gain scores of samples in experimental and control group.**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	102.023	1	102.023	6.610	.014
Within Groups	648.227	42	15.434		
Total	750.250	43			



**Figure 3. Mean pre- and posttest of vocabulary and grammar group.**

## Discussion and Conclusion

It is believed that integrating attention to form into communicative activities increases the probability that learners will attend, notice, detect and be able to use the information (Lightbown, 1998). On the basis of the findings, visual enhancement of forms was found to be effective for both vocabulary and grammar learning. They also show that learners in vocab-



ulary and grammar groups made considerable developmental progress over the study period, that is, typographical input enhancement increased the likelihood that learners detect the target lexical and grammatical structures in the input, for some learners a necessary condition for the conversion of input to intake.

Regarding the comparison of the effect of visual input enhancement on learning vocabulary and grammar, results also revealed that enhancement of vocabulary led to better vocabulary learning in comparison to grammar learning. That is, visual enhancement of vocabulary was found to be more effective for vocabulary group.

It is believed that an input has dual relevance. In the first stage, the learner's main aim is to extract meaning and survive or succeed in given interchange of messages. In this sense, the learner will interpret for meaning. But at the second stage, there will be linguistic input which is relevant to the current state of the learner's competence. It may contribute to the substantiation or reflection of some current hypotheses about the target language system (Sharwood Smith, 1998).

Focus on form instruction seems to have a better chance of success if it is directed at morphological features than syntactic structures (Ellis, 2002). This might be because of the fact that learners have preference for semantic processing over morphological processing; that is, they prefer to extract semantic information from lexical items rather than grammatical items. This could be the reason behind the better performance of vocabulary group in comparison to grammar group (Mitchell and Myles, 2004).

Even though the findings of the study indicated that all participants in the two experimental groups improved in their ability to use the lexical items and grammatical structures correctly, the following section examines the factors that may have contributed to reducing the between groups differences in this study.

In spite of the general agreement on the key role of attention in the conversion of input to intake, the level of attention and awareness needed for L2 acquisition is still open to debate. According to Schmidt (1990), noticing (i.e. awareness of the linguistic form) is the necessary and sufficient prerequisite for acquisition to take place. So he believes that for acquisition to occur, it's only enough to direct the learners' attention to the language form so as to increase the learners' awareness of the form, leading to form noticing, and consequently, this would lead to acquisition.

However, this view was countered by introducing the fact that though awareness may play a role in facilitating acquisition, it is not enough for acquisition to occur (Poole and Sheorey, 2002; Tomline and Villa, 1994). In this study, too, though visual input enhancement of forms might increase the learners' ability to notice the forms, it's not sufficient for acquisition to take place.

Individual characteristics differences may also account for the reduced differences among groups. Some learners in the two groups may have been more comfortable with explicit instruction and less able than other individuals to figure out the patterns in the input on their own. This finding, along with the quantitative analyses, indicates that many of the learners in this study might have benefited more from a more explicit type of enhancement. For example, a different typographical technique involving the use of arrows or color-coding could have increased the between groups differences. An even more explicit pedagogical technique would have included a brief rule explanation, either at the beginning of the input enhancement period or part of the way through it, to help learners structure the input.

Finally, in order to ensure that enhancement was at the implicit end of focus on form continuum (Doughty and Williams, 1998; White, 1998), care was taken not to focus the participants' attention on the target forms in more explicit ways, such as rule presentation, corrective feedback, or discussion of the typographical enhancement. It may seem, however, that the typographically enhanced input might look more similar to unenhanced input as it may not provide to the learners about the enhanced forms. It is also possible that many learners were uncertain about the purpose of the typographical enhancement and that it wouldn't be useful in helping them figure out the enhanced forms usage.

Therefore, it would appear that a number of factors, including multiple test administrations, individual characteristic differences and characteristics of the enhanced/unenhanced input may contribute to reducing the differences between the groups. The findings suggest that, although drawing the learners' attention to a linguistic feature may be sufficient to speed up acquisition of that feature, implicit focus on form techniques such as visual input enhancement may not be adequate for acquisition to occur. Visual input enhancement alone is not often enough to prompt the learners to go beyond the simple detection of forms, and additional assistance of some sort may be required to trigger further cogni-

tive processing (Izumi, 2002). Thus, while noticing may be the necessary condition for acquisition, it is not the only condition. If learners want to learn language forms effectively, they have to act on it, building it into their working hypothesis about how language forms are structured. The basic philosophy behind this is that, according to Van Patten (1990), individuals can process two types of information (i.e. form and meaning) simultaneously and effectively only if the processing of one of the information types is automatized and requires little, if any, conscious attention. He also argues that simultaneous processing of two types of information which are not automatized can lead to inadequate processing of either or both of information. This may not happen unless the learners are exposed to continued and sustained noticing activities as well as ample opportunities for producing the target form in order to ensure that learners are not engaged only in semantic processing but also in syntactic processing. In such cases, learners may also need some more explicit information about the forms to be able to acquire them (Fotos, 1993).

### Suggestions for further research

However, before wide-reaching conclusions about focus on form instruction can be made, more of such studies need to be done using learners in different instructional settings, investigating the cultural, affective, and proficiency-related factors that contribute to learner's decision to focus or not to focus on form. Further investigations in this line of research are still needed to shed more light on the issues addressed in this study. For instance, future studies involving larger samples and both male and female learners of various L2 proficiency levels would allow for the findings of the current study to be more generalized. This way, researchers and teachers may be better able to develop conditions under which learners will focus more on form. They should also investigate whether or not more focus on form leads to more language acquisition. This seems crucial, since no matter how often students are exposed to form during a focus on form instruction, the true value of it lies in its ability to increase the quantity and quality of second language acquisition.

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