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The Effects of Implicit and Explicit Focus on Form on Oral Accuracy of EFL Learners

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Abstract—The current study was an attempt to reexamine the effectiveness of two kinds of form-focused instruction on oral accuracy of EFL learners. Participants of the current study were 41 male students in two experimental groups and a control group. During twelve sessions of treatment, to the first experimental group (class A), the target forms were taught implicitly through input enhancement (Implicit teaching). In the second class (class B), the grammatical structures were taught in explicit manner through metalinguistic explanation. However, to the control group (class C) no focus on form instruction was applied. A pre-test and a post-test were designed in interview model to test the oral accuracy of the learners both before and after treatment. In order to analyze the obtained scores from pre-test and post-test, paired sample T-Test was used to study the scores within each group, while one-way ANOVA was employed to study the mean variance between groups. The results showed that although both methods were beneficent, post-test scores of the students to whom the forms were taught explicitly were significantly higher than students to whom the forms were taught implicitly.

Index Terms—form-focused instruction, oral accuracy, implicit teaching, input enhancement, explicit teaching, metalinguistic explanation

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the major issues raised by classroom SLA research is the controversial question of whether and how to include grammar in second language classrooms (Doughty and Williams, 1998). The question is reexamined in the role of focus on form in second language learning and teaching. The term *form* has often been used to refer to grammar and structural rules, but this is not the case. As Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, (2001) argue, focus on form can be aimed to phonology, vocabulary, discourse, grammar, or even spelling. There have seen a debate in foreign language (FL) teaching concerning the relative merits of focusing on formS (accuracy) as opposed to focusing on meaning (fluency). The proponents of audiolingualism argue that grammar is the main focus in FL teaching and immediate error correction is necessary and errors should be avoided at all costs (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). On the other hand, the theorists of natural approach such as Krashen and Terrell (1998) persist that explicit grammar teaching and error correction should be regarded as marginal components in the FL instruction. They maintain that overemphasizing on grammatical forms will interfere with the communicative purposes. Teachers who focus only on forms and accuracy may sacrifice learners' fluency. However, if teachers only put emphasis on meaning and no attention is paid to accuracy, then learners will not be accurate enough in using language in real context. Some drawbacks of these two theoretical approaches: The proponents of form-based and grammar-based instruction maintain that foreign language should be taught on the basis of pieces of grammatical parts, and learners have to put each part together by deductive learning; then they try to apply the rules to oral production (Nishimura, 2000). However, Krashen and Terrell (1998), and Fotos (1998) state that teaching grammatical rules usually fails to develop the ability of learners to communicate effectively. The other teaching strategy, meaning-based approach, is based on the way in which almost all children can naturally learn their first language successfully, and the proponents of this theory insist that even adults should be able to master their second/foreign language if they follow the natural principles of first language learning (Long & Robinson, 1998). According to Fotos (1998), purely communicative instruction alone is equally inadequate as long as grammatical instruction is neglected. Considering these two theoretical extremes, both theories have their own merits and deficiencies. It is now the crucial issue for FL teachers to develop effective teaching strategies to balance and combine both form and meaning. To do so, Long (1991), proposed Focus on Form (FonF) as medium to *focus on formS* and pure communicative approaches. He suggested that one way to encourage accuracy is through the concept of focus on form that target student's accuracy and focus on form "overtly draws students" attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose over-riding focus is on meaning or communication. Such attention, according to Schmidt (1990), is necessary for acquisition to take place. Accordingly, focus on form can be considered as a useful means which facilitates the process of communication development and increases the accuracy during real interaction. In another definition, focus on form is defined as "an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features - by the

teacher and/or one or more students - triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production” (Long & Robinson, 1998, p.23).

Furthermore focus on form is graded into explicit and implicit categories, which was the central scope of this study. Input enhancement, as an implicit focus on form, can be implemented through drawing learners' attention to the target grammatical item through typological methods such as underlining and italicizing. However, it has been argued that learners may fail to notice the target form which is present in the input. In addition, Swain and Lapkin (1995), in discussing the positive role of output, questioned whether input, though clearly essential, is sufficient to enable learners to notice the mismatch between their interlanguage and the target language. Advocating the positive role of output, Swain (1998) discussed the role of output in terms of metatalk or metalinguistic explanation, which may serve as deepening learner's awareness of forms and rules and make links between form, meaning, and function. On the basis of this discussion on more explicit teaching of target language forms, explicit focus on form emerged.

In addition to these theoretical views about focus on form instruction, many empirical studies have been conducted by several researchers to find out the effectiveness of the implicit and/or explicit focus on form. In a key article, Park (2005) claimed that effectiveness of focus on form instruction depends on two factors. The first one is Learner Readiness and the Target Form. It is important to note that learner readiness speaks to the learner's internally-created saliency whereas the target form speaks more to externally created saliency. The second factor is target form and the focus on form method. Once again, attentional capacity speaks to learner internal factors whereas the focus on form method speaks to external factors. Hence, it is evident that factors that correspond to internal saliency and external saliency necessarily go hand-in-hand. In other words, the target form should echo the learner's built-in syllabus (thereby generating internally-created saliency), and the FonF method should echo the learner's attentional constraints (thereby enhancing externally-created saliency) in order to culminate in successful focus on form. In this regard, and based on the results of this study, it may be speculated that achieving successful focus on form is largely dependent upon: 1- a sound understanding and respect for the learner's built-in syllabus, 2- gauging the learners' developmental readiness with regard to their learner-generated syllabus, and selecting a linguistic feature which is developmentally appropriate for a given group, and 3- employing an appropriate means to increase the perceptual salience of the target form.

What can be inferred from this study is that first, the strategy of eliciting required information from a written text or oral productions should be learnt; and then the tasks of this kind should be involved in syllabus designing process. Next, according to the type of target form and learners' attentional capacity, we should choose whether to present the target form implicitly or explicitly. If we decide to teach it implicitly, we must utilize an appropriate technique to increase the saliency of the target form.

Several experimental researches also have been conducted to compare the effectiveness of these two kinds of instruction. Ellis, Loewen, and Erelam (2006) have shown that the learners learn forms better when explicit form-focused instruction is utilized. In their study, based on the findings, they have stated that delayed explicit focus on form through metalinguistic feedback and meta-talk seems to be more effective than implicit focus on form through input enhancement and recast in L2 learning. In line with their study, Dabaghi (2008), found explicit attention to form through feedback and meta-talk to be more effective than implicit focus on form by the means of recast and implicit attention to form in terms of grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, Nguyen, Pham, and Pham (2012) claimed that although both methods (implicit and explicit Form-focused instruction) are effective in L2 learning, explicit one seems to be more effective on all measures.

However, Afshari and Oroujlou (2012) found implicit instruction to be more conducive to learners' overall accuracy in all aspects and to their oral accuracy in particular. Moreover, they found that though both focus on form techniques develop students' linguistic accuracy, implicit technique through the combination of clarification request plus recast turned out to be more effective than explicit post-task technique. Moreover, Siyyari (2005) have done a research about effectiveness of implicit focus on form in communicative tasks. In his research, he has reported implicit focus on form to be more effective than explicit one. He has stated that: 'Since one of the responsibilities of materials developers is to provide and sequence the content of teaching materials, especially the tasks, designing communicative tasks to provide opportunities for focus on form in one of the recommended ways, especially implicitly, seems very much advisable' (Siyyari, 2005).

Since little work have been done to determine the relative effects of implicit and explicit focus on form on oral accuracy of EFL learners, especially in Iranian context of situation, this research was conducted to show whether and to what extent these two categories of form-focused instruction affect the oral accuracy among Iranian EFL learners. So, the research question of this research is as follows:

RQ) whether and to what extent implicit and explicit focus on form instruction affect the oral accuracy of Iranian EFL learners?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of the current study were 41 low-intermediate EFL learners in a foreign language institute in Tabriz, Iran. They were divided into three different classes. Their ages were ranging from 14 to 22, and their first language was Azeri Turkish. 15students participated in class A (N=15), where the forms were taught implicitly; 14 students

participated in class B (N=14), in which explicit instruction was employed; and in class C as a control group, 12 students participated. Furthermore, according to the results obtained through proficiency test, all three groups found to be approximately at same level of proficiency.

B. Instruments

To accomplish the objectives of the study, a pre-test and a post-test was designed in interview format. Additionally, for the treatment stage, some tasks of different types (decision making, problem solving, jigsaw, dictogloss, and etc.), were designed or taken from some English language teaching books in order to introduce and practice the targeted form. Furthermore, a test of English proficiency was administered to the learners in two experimental groups before beginning the treatment to minimize the effects of differential proficiency levels on the results.

C. Design

This study included two independent variables (implicit and explicit focus on form), and a dependent variable (grammar knowledge enhancement of the students). This research was conducted in true experimental mode with use of two different kinds of treatment for two experimental groups, while another group was taken as control group. For the first group (class A), implicit focus on form was used, while for the second group (class B), explicit focus on form was utilized. In class C, which was considered as the control group for the study, no attempt was made to focus on form.

D. Procedure

The study was conducted in three English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes, where the classes took place three times a week and the researcher himself was the teacher of all three classes. Few days before starting the treatment, a proficiency test was given to the students to ensure that they were approximately at same level of English language proficiency. The results revealed that the classes were more or less at the same proficiency level. Afterwards, a pre-test of grammar was taken by the student. Next, twelve sessions (four weeks) of treatment was done in all three classes. In class A, the grammatical structures were taught implicitly through input enhancement by use of some techniques such as underlining, bolding, and abundance without any explicit explanation of forms; while in class B, the same structures were explained and mentioned explicitly by the teacher after doing the task or through metalinguistic explanation. It should be mentioned that the explanation of the structures in explicit instruction was given after doing the tasks. That is to say, while doing the task, learners' attention was drawn to form completely incidental and without any explicit mentioning. In class C as a control group, no attempt was made to focus on form neither in implicit, nor in explicit manner. After 12 sessions of treatment, a post-test was given to the students to assess the oral accuracy of the learners.

E. Tasks

For the aim of present study, it was important to design or find the tasks in such a way that the task itself would in natural way encourage the use of the target structure, but not forces it in any obligatory manner, therefore, minimizing task essentialness (for further information, see Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993). Different kinds of tasks were given to the learners during the treatment sessions (decision making, problem solving, jigsaw, dictogloss, and etc.). Some tasks were designed by the researcher, while some others were taken from some English language teaching books such as *Second Language Teaching & Learning* (Nunan, 1990); *Task-Based Language Teaching and Learning* (Ellis, 2003). Some examples of the utilized tasks are as follows:

In a jigsaw task, for first session of the treatment, a reading comprehension text which was divided into two halves was given to the learners and after reading it, they were asked to work with their partner who had read the other half of the story. The title of the story was 'Living in Zoo' which was about observing the acts of a tiger at a cage for two days. Learners were trying to negotiate meaning with each other and find out what the tiger have done during the first and second day. The purpose of the task was practicing simple past tense. In the fifth session, a decision making task was given to the learners through which some information was given to the students about educational, social, and cultural background of 5 persons. Subsequently, the learners were required to discuss on the given information in pairs and choose one of the guys as their English teacher and support their ideas. The purpose of this task was to focus on past perfect tense. For example, one the student produced these sentences in a teacher-student interaction:

Teacher: What is your idea Armin? Which person do you choose as your English teacher?

Student: I choose Mr. Johson.

Teacher: Can you tell us why?

Student: Because he has been in England for 23 years and he can speak English very well. He has received his certificates from famous universities and he has taught English for a long time.

Teacher: Hum, good idea.

Furthermore, some dictogloss tasks were presented to focus on aimed structures. For tenth session, a text was orally presented to the learners by teacher and then they were supposed to reproduce the text in written form and convey the overall meaning as accurate as possible. The text was about a person who has 100,000 Dollars and wants to buy a house. The form which was focused in this task was 'can' structure and that we should employ bare form of verb after using 'can'. However, these are just samples of the employed tasks and other tasks also were used in both experimental groups. During each session, one task was presented to students which aimed at the new target form.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In order to analyze the gained scores from pre-test and post-test, SPSS software (version 19) was utilized. Moreover, the scores were ranging from 0 to 20. Firstly, the observed scores were analyzed through paired sample T-Test to identify if there is a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores within each group; the results are shown in Table.1 below:

TABLE1.
PAIRED SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS (THE MEAN DIFFERENCE IS SIGNIFICANT AT THE 0.05 LEVEL).

Students of each class	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Class A post-test - pre-test	1.7	1.97	.51	.61	2.79	3.36	14	.005
Class B post-test - pre-test	4.11	2.35	.63	2.75	5.46	6.55	13	.000
Class C post-test - pre-test	.21	.58	.17	-.16	.58	1.24	11	.241

Paired sample T-Test was conducted to evaluate the impact of implicit and explicit instruction on students' score on a pre-test and post-test of oral accuracy through interview. The results showed that there is statistically significant increase in both implicit and the explicit instruction scores from pre-test to post-test since p factor (sig) in both experimental groups found to be less than .05. However, in class C, which was considered as control group, no significant difference was found between pre-test and post-test scores. Furthermore, one-way ANOVA method was utilized to study mean variance between groups in terms of pre-test and post-test scores. That is to say, results obtained through ANOVA, helps to find out if there is any significant difference between groups according to pre-test and post-test scores. The results are shown in Table.2 below:

TABLE2.
MEAN VARIANCE RESULTS BETWEEN GROUPS (THE MEAN DIFFERENCE IS SIGNIFICANT AT THE 0.05 LEVEL).

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	(I) CLASSES OF THE STUDENTS	(J) CLASSES OF THE STUDENTS	MEAN DIFFERENCE (I-J)	STD. ERROR	SIG.	95% CONFIDENCE INTERVAL	
						LOWER BOUND	UPPER BOUND
PRE-TEST SCORES	CLASS A	CLASS B	.74	.88	.682	-1.41	2.88
	CLASS A	CLASS C	.08	.92	.995	-2.15	2.32
	CLASS B	CLASS C	-.65	.93	.763	-2.93	1.62
POST-TEST SCORES	CLASS A	CLASS B	-1.67	.61	.025	-3.16	-.18
	CLASS A	CLASS C	1.58	.64	.046	.027	3.12
	CLASS B	CLASS C	3.24	.65	.000	1.67	4.82

According to the findings shown in Table.2, no significant difference was found between pre-test scores of the three classes since p factor (sig) between groups found to be more than 0.05 ($p > .05$) in terms of all three comparisons. In addition to the findings of proficiency test, this finding also supports the approximate equality of proficiency level of the groups in terms of oral accuracy.

However, in terms of post-test scores, a significant difference was found between scores of the three classes. Scores of class A, compared to class C, showed significant difference since p (sig) found to be .027, which is less than .05 ($p < .05$). Similarly, in the case of class B, significant difference found in comparison with the control group, class C, whereas p factor (sig) between these two classes found to be .000 which is again less than .05 ($p < .05$). These findings show that both approaches (implicit and explicit) are effective, because of the fact that students who had received focus on form instruction, whether in implicit or explicit manner, did better on the post-test of oral accuracy than students who had not received focus on form instruction at all. Additionally, and maybe as the most important finding of this research, in terms of the two experimental groups (class A, and class B), when compared with each other, significant difference was found whereas p (sig) found to be .006, which is less than .05 ($p < .05$); and due to the fact that mean score of class B, where the grammatical structures were taught explicitly, was significantly higher than mean score obtained in class A, in which the grammatical structures were taught implicitly (mean difference=1.67), explicit instruction seemed to be more effective and suggestible.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results revealed that although both methods of form teaching were effective, there is a significant difference between post-test scores of the experimental groups and students who received explicit form-focused instruction seemed to get higher scores than those who received implicit form-focused instruction. Therefore, explicit focus on form seems to be more effective than implicit one in terms of developing oral accuracy. The findings of this study is in line with those of Ellis, Loewen, and Erelam (2006), who has reported the delayed explicit focus on form and feedback to be more effective compared to implicit instruction. Similarly, Dabaghi (2008), based on his findings, has indicated that explicit focus on form is better than implicit one in terms of grammatical accuracy. Moreover, the outcomes of the study is consistent with results gained from the research conducted by Nguyen, Pham, and Pham (2012), who have found that explicit focus on form instruction is more profitable than implicit focus on form in all aspects.

However, the results of present research is in contrast with those of Afshari and Oroujlou (2012), in that they have claimed that implicit instruction is more useful to develop learners' accuracy in all dimensions. Additionally, there is opposition between the findings of the current study and those of Siyyari (2005), who has also found implicit focus on form to be more effective.

V. CONCLUSION

In sum, this research was a contrastive study which aimed to find out whether and to what extent two different approaches of focus on form (implicit and explicit) affect EFL learners' oral accuracy among Iranian EFL learners. The results of the study showed that both focus on form categories were effective in enhancing oral accuracy of EFL learners; however, explicit focus on form seemed to be more profitable than the implicit one. For further studies, it is recommended to investigate the effect of other categories of form-focused instruction on different skills or subskills of learners. Moreover, studies can be conducted to reexamine the probable effects of implicit and explicit focus on form on different learners in different proficiency levels, ages, areas, and cultural and educational background.

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