The Impact of Audio Input Enhancement on EFL Learners’ Grammar Learning from Varying Proficiency Levels

Kobra Seyedtajaddini*

Abstract

The present study explored the use of audio input enhancement in grammar learning among Iranian EFL learners. For the purpose of the present study, 30 participants, aged 16 to 23, were selected from the intermediate and advanced EFL learners at Goldis institute in Salmas, Iran. The participants were divided into two groups of low and high proficiency levels. The data was collected through taking two tests consisting of selected TOEFL multiple choice grammar tests. After conducting a pretest, the participants were taught the grammar points with the aid of listening materials chosen from Headway books for five sessions. Afterwards, a post test was conducted. According to gathered data, the p-value is lower than 0.05, so it can be said that there is a significant difference between the performance of two groups depending on the use of audio input enhancement indicating that the highly proficient learners outperformed the low proficient learners.

Keywords: Input; Input enhancement; Audio input enhancement; low proficient learner; high proficient learner; grammar learning

1. Introduction

In spite of the fact that including appropriate vocabularies in speech or writing is still of utmost importance, teaching grammar has continually been considered as a significant element in the field of second or foreign language teaching (S/FLT). However, there have been controversial ideas on how input can best be presented to the language learners although many kinds of teaching methods are applied by researchers. Among these various methods is the notion of input enhancement.

Input enhancement is a concept in second language acquisition (SLA), coined by Mike Sharwood Smith that is commonly used to signal methods, that an instructor uses to make selected features of a second language more salient for learners in such a way so as to facilitate acquisition (Sharwood Smith 1991, 1993).

In another study, Sharwood Smith (1981) presented consciousness-raising prior to input enhancement by which he believed that most of the problems of focus on form(s) approaches in second or foreign language teaching or learning could be eliminated. In addition, Sharwood Smith (1991) stated that consciousness-raising would not guarantee the internalization of the new target form(s) by the learners.

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Later, Sharwood (1991, 1993) replaced the consciousness-raising term with input enhancement that the teacher could control. Sharwood Smith (1993) also proposes two types of positive and negative input enhancement. In positive input enhancement, the correct forms in the input are emphasized whereas in negative input enhancement, the incorrect forms are highlighted. An example of positive input enhancement would be visual input enhancement of a reading text in which the new forms are bolded, underlined, capitalized, or italicized. An example of negative input enhancement would be the use of error flags which would draw learners’ attention on their mistakes (Rashtchi & Gharanli, 2010).

According to Ellis (1993, 1995), input enhancement is an effective option in language teaching. Its role is to make learners become aware of some specific target form(s) in learning situation and to draw their attention to them. Two other researchers, called Lee and Benati (2007), claimed that input enhancement is useful for language development; however, input enhancement does not guarantee that input becomes intake unless language learners are able to notice the input. The idea behind input enhancement is that frequent forms are noticed more than infrequent forms and this increases the chance of learning to take place (Wegner-Gough & Hatch, 1975). In other words, language learners, when exposed to some particular forms more than some other forms, will get noticed and the chance of changing input into intake will be increased. This could be carried out in both oral and written input. In written situation, language teachers could present the learners with a passage that contains several usages of the new target form(s). In an oral situation, the teacher could include the new target form(s) in the speech more frequently than the other forms (Alssadan, 2011). Due to the restrictions in traditional classes, in foreign language situations, applying written input enhancement is more convenient than oral input enhancement which can be conducted either with the aid of audio materials or by the teacher using special forms frequently within the classroom. Regarding audio materials as a means of input enhancement, the integral role of listening in language development can be perceived once more.

All too often, listening has been overlooked by its elder sister-speaking. For most people, being able to claim knowledge of a second language means being able to speak and write in that language. As Nunan (1997) argues “listening and reading are therefore secondary skills-means to other ends, rather than ends in themselves” (p. 48). Brown (1990) was able to demonstrate the importance of developing oracy (the ability to listen and speak) as well as literacy in a school. Knowledge of the grammatical system of the language, it was argued, was but one of the many components which underlay the notion of communicative competence. However, to be considered a component user to language, one needs to know not only the rules of grammar, but also how the rules are used in real communication (Zhong, Wu, Wei & Wang, 2011).

Krashen (2004) concludes that, learning grammar through explicit instruction cannot beat the natural process of acquiring grammar through comprehensible input. Acquired, as opposed to learned, grammar will enable learners to apply it intuitively in the actual performance without paying conscious attention to forms (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012). Learners can acquire the grammar through comprehensible input.

In order to investigate the effectiveness of consciousness-raising in grammar learning, a number of studies have been carried out. Fotos and Ellis (1991) compared the effects of direct consciousness-raising by means of grammar explanation and of indirect consciousness-raising by means of a task on Japanese learners’ ability to judge the grammaticality of sentences involving dative alternation. They found that both methods of consciousness-raising resulted in significant gains in understanding the target structure (Rashtchi, Nourozi Khiabani & Roumiani, 2012).

Fotos (1993) conducted an experimental research to investigate the amount of learner noticing produced by two types of grammar lessons and interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks (Zhang & Wu, 2011a, 2011b). He involved 160 Japanese college students of English in his study and divided them into three different treatment groups, which were taught indirect object placement, adverb placement and relative clause usage in communicative input. The findings revealed that the two types of grammar consciousness-raising are effective in promoting significant level of noticing the target language structures in subsequent communicative input (Rashtchi, Nourozi Khiabani, Roumiani, 2012).

Lee and Haung (2008) synthesized 16 studies (12 published articles and four unpublished dissertations) to examine the effect of textual input enhancement on grammar learning of second/foreign language learners through presenting them with reading tasks. They chose experimental and quasi-experimental studies in which some post tests were used to measure the performance. The chosen studies compared the performance of textual enhancement groups with comparison or control groups. The results showed that the enhanced groups in the synthesized studies outperformed the unenhanced groups by a very small-sized effect ($d = 0.22$) (Rasha, Alsadhan, 2011).
The purpose of the present study is to investigate the impact of audio input enhancement on EFL learners’ grammar learning with varying levels of proficiency levels. The criterion for choosing audio input enhancement was drawing the learners’ attention on using the new target forms in communicative situations.

The study attempts to find out the answer for the following questions:
1. Does audio input enhancement have a significant effect on acquiring grammatical forms?
2. Do highly proficient learners benefit from audio input enhancement more than low proficient learners?

Given the above mentioned studies, it was hypothesized that audio input enhancement has a significant effect on acquiring grammatical forms. However, a null hypothesis was proposed as there is no difference between the proficiency levels of the learners and their benefiting from audio input enhancement, and the alternative hypothesis was that the highly proficient learners benefit from audio input enhancement more than low proficient learners.

2. Method

a. Participants
The participants in this study were 30 EFL learners at Goldis English institute in Salmas, Iran. The participants aged 16 to 23 were all females whose native language was Turkish. They were from 2 different classes who were taught by the same English teacher. Based on the duration of their studies, 15 students were considered as high proficient learners who had been studying English for 3 years, and the remaining 15 students were considered as low proficient ones who had been studying English for 2 years.

b. Instruments
As stated earlier, the participants belonged to the group of EFL learners who had similar experiences receiving instruction in EFL. However, in order to get more homogeneous groups, a pre-test, including 20 multiple-choice TOEFL tests, was used to measure the grammar knowledge of the learners.

As a treatment, the researcher used selected listening parts from American Headway 2, published in 2001, which was different from the course books of the participants. As a means of audio input enhancement, the selected listening parts from American Headway 2 included different usages of second conditional in different situations such as conversations using “If I were” for giving advices, talking about imaginary situations, and expressing desires.

For the purpose of data collection and to draw a conclusion on the progress of the participants after the treatment, the researcher used a post-test at the end of the treatment consisted of 20 multiple-choice TOEFL tests in which the participants were supposed to identify the incorrect section for each test.

c. Procedures
After administering a TOEFL test to a population of 30 EFL learners, the learners were divided into two groups of 15, one as low proficient learners who were studying Summit 1A and the other one as highly proficient learners who were studying Summit 2A. The participants of both groups received the audio input for five sessions. An individual usage of the second conditional was introduced for the learners in each session. Following the instruction was a ten-minutes listening activity which included different usages of second conditional. The learners were supposed to identify the conversation which matched the instructed usage in each session. During the last two sessions, the learners received no instructions; however, they listened to the audio material including the three different types of usages. The learners were supposed to explain the type of the usage after listening to each conversation.

3. Results

The present study was designed to investigate the use of audio input enhancement on EFL learners’ grammar learning with varying proficiency levels. The research question was that whether there is significant difference between the students’ proficiency levels and the use of audio input enhancement in grammar learning. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics in which the number of the learners, mean and standard deviation are presented.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>13.33</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since an independent samples t-test, the results of which are presented in table 2, was used to determine whether the possible differences were statistically significant, to show whether the data enjoyed normal distribution, one sample Kolmogrov-smirnov test was used.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Sig.(2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rational for selecting the t-test for comparison was that the main assumptions regarding normal distribution and homogeneity of variances were clearly met. As illustrated in Table 3, the p-value (sig.) is lower than 0.05, it can be said that there is a significant difference between the performance of two groups. Besides, according to table 1, the highly proficient learners scored significantly higher than less proficient learners. Therefore, we can assume that we are safe in rejecting our null hypothesis. Also, the histogram of high and low groups, clearly represent the normal distribution of the data in figure 1 and 2.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High: 0.64</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low: 0.82</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1

Figure 2
4. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the effect of input enhancement on grammar learning among EFL learners with varying levels of proficiency. It was hypothesized that there is no difference between the learners with varying levels of proficiency and their benefiting from audio input enhancement.

The results showed significantly greater effect of audio input enhancement on high proficiency level students. These results seem to support the findings of several studies in both second and foreign language learning (Ellis 1991, Fotos 1993, Lee and Huang 2008) proposing that frequency and range of noticing new target forms within audio input and therefore grammar learning increase as students become more proficient. Although the methods to measure the levels of proficiency and the impact of input enhancement on grammar learning are different, the result that input enhancement has a positive effect on EFL learners’ grammar learning is the same. Therefore, the results of the present study are in line with the previous research findings demonstrating that proficient students show greater awareness and higher tendency to benefit from increasing amount of audio input for grammar learning than low proficient students. One possible explanation for such difference would be the differences between the high and low proficient students in terms of their awareness and knowledge of input. Audio input enhancement can be, therefore, seen as central to effective learning.

The findings of the present study have pedagogical implications for instruction and curriculum development. First, learners of English as a foreign language should learn to recognize the nature and the purpose of audio input enhancement. So, effort should be put on raising their awareness of the potential benefits of employing this type of input enhancement. This is especially true in Iranian context, given the fact that audio input enhancement is a very important method for learners to be aware of how new target forms are used in real life situations and therefore can be a unique way for them by using which they can change input into intake. In this context, successful language learners may serve as informants for students experiencing less success in language learning regarding using different forms in different situations. Through monitoring each other, students can take an active part in not only learning but also teaching process. Teachers should be more aware of importance of audio input enhancement and of that whether the students are or are not aware of the purposes of noticing the different usages of the new forms in real contexts rather than just listening to the materials. Also it must be pointed out that the development of new materials for the purpose of increasing audio input in traditional classes should be taken into consideration by material designers.

Since finding two homogeneous groups learners taught by the same teacher was a kind of difficult job, the selected participants were limited. It is suggested that the stated method in using audio input enhancement for grammar learning can be carried out with larger groups of participants in order to better generalize the findings.

References


