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The Effect of Textual Input Enhancement and Metalinguistic Explanations on Learning Simple Past and Past Progressive Tenses by Iranian EFL Learners

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abstract

The present research was an attempt to examine the effectiveness of three techniques for teaching two target structures (simple past and past progressive) in English grammar. The participants were 90 Iranian students randomly assigned to three groups: Group A as the control group, Group B as the first experimental group (receiving enhanced input), and Group C as the second experimental group (receiving enhanced input plus metalinguistic explanations). To make sure the participants did not possess any background knowledge of the target structures, a pretest was administered. Then, three techniques were utilized to present the grammatical input to the three groups. A posttest was also administered after implementation of the treatment. Statistical analysis revealed the participants in the first and the second experimental groups experienced the largest improvement in recognition and intake of the structures. Given the higher mean of the scores for the participants in Group C and the integrated nature of the technique, typographically enhanced input plus metalinguistic explanations seems to be more effective in teaching grammar.

Keywords: Consciousness-raising, Input Enhancement, Metalinguistic Explanations, Noticing

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Introduction

During the past few decades, the Input Hypothesis advanced by Krashen (1981) has created a number of controversies among language teaching scholars. The hypothesis suggests in order to achieve effective language learning, learners should receive rich and comprehensible input which encompasses certain linguistic features essential for linguistic development. The features should be only a step beyond the learners' current level of language proficiency.

The hypothesis posits the centrality of provision of naturalistic input and assumes the first and second language acquisition processes similar and instruction of grammar redundant and peripheral. Its main argument is that as children acquire their first language primarily by listening and receiving the constant positive evidence or the naturalistic and grammatically correct language on a daily basis, the same conditions need to be provided for second language acquirers. However, the question is whether mere exposure to naturalistic and comprehensible input is sufficient for achieving ideal learning. As a reaction to the Input Hypothesis, second language acquisition (SLA) scholars and researchers are showing increasing interest in the role attention and noticing play in second language development (Doughty, 1991; Schmidt, 1990, 1995; Shook, 1994; Williams, 1999).

The weakness of many students in acquiring new grammatical structures seems to originate from lack of conscious attention to new target structures in the input. This has created the major problem that a large number of second language learners tend to overlook many significant target features embedded in the second language input and continue to display a poor language performance. Sharwood Smith (1981) believes that second language learners lack enough sensitivity to second language (L2) grammatical features in the input and when exposed to a large amount of evidence, they cannot benefit much from it. He also points out some of the formal properties learners are exposed to in the input are insignificant and as a result, learners do not pay much attention to them. Therefore, the learners' poor noticing and the input's weak perceptual salience lead to lack of attention toward the target features essential for better input processing and intake.

The present study follows three main purposes. First, it aims to help introduce the optimal technique(s) of presenting grammatical input to foreign language teachers and materials developers. Second, it intends to investigate the role of attention and conscious awareness in SLA to see if attention and noticing facilitate input-to-intake process. Third, it sheds light on the effects and benefits (if any) of L2 instruction.

Literature review

Sharwood Smith (1991) defined consciousness-raising as "a deliberate focus on the formal properties of language with a view to facilitating the development of the L2 knowledge. This focus can be initiated by the teacher or it can be self-initiated, i.e., by the leaner" (p. 118). As consciousness-raising involved the concept of consciousness that referred to mental processes occurring in learners' minds whose nature was not clearly defined, he preferred to use the safer term "input-salience-creation", or more concisely "input enhancement."

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Input enhancement refers to operations carried out to the input in a variety of forms from written highlighting to metalinguistic explanations clarifying an elaborate grammatical rule. Its aim is to draw the learners' attention to formal properties of language to the extent that it leads to ultimate linguistic development (Sharwood Smith, 1991). He later carefully pointed out that "input enhancement implies only that we can manipulate aspects of the input but make no further assumptions about the consequences of the input on the learner" (Sharwood Smith 1993, p. 176). In other words, increasing the salience of certain features in the input does not entail a change in the learners' mentality but it may increase the likelihood of the conversion of that manipulated input (or parts of it) into intake. Input enhancement aims at increasing the learners' noticing threshold by augmenting the salience of critical features of linguistic input provided to learners. It is expected that they are processed in such a way that learners can "fill out, tune, or reset an already existing set of linguistic principles and parameters" (Sharwood Smith, 1993, p. 170). The rationale behind input enhancement is the idea that mere exposure to second language forms and structures is not conducive to learning or at least long lasting mastery. Lightbown and Ranta (1991) believe that it is quite possible that second language learners, even though exposed to certain structures, will fail to perceive them in naturalistic input.

Sharwood Smith (1991) introduces two types of input salience. They are internal and external salience. In internally derived salience, certain formal properties of language become naturally salient because of learners' internal cognitive processes and readiness for growth in knowledge while in externally derived salience, noticing the enhanced forms is facilitated by deliberate changes in the manner of exposure.

Maybe the best way to comprehend input enhancement is by attending to the role noticing plays in language learning. The Noticing Hypothesis posits that attention is at the heart of noticing and intake is impossible without sufficient noticing. Schmidt and Frota (1986, cited in Richards 2002) state that learners use the forms that they had already noticed in the speech addressed to them and the forms that are present but not noticed are not utilized. Emphasizing the role of noticing and voluntary selective attention in language learning, Schmidt (1990) proposed some grounds for the assumption that the availability for noticing and stages of L2 acquisition are closely related. He suggested some factors influencing noticeability. They are as follows.

(1) Expectations: they are key factors leading to perceptibility and noticeability by the activation of particular psychological pathways.

(2) Frequency: it raises the chance of noticing certain features in the input. It also predicted the order of acquisition of English morphemes in second language development.

(3) Perceptual salience: it is also a basic determinant of first language acquisition. Children experience a particular difficulty with bound, contracted, asyllabic, unstressed, or varying grammatical morphemes.

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(4) Skill level: it includes the automaticity of processing ability and may be a factor affecting noticeability. The acquisition of a new syntactic structure in first language development depends on the routinization of previous structure.

(5) Task demands: they offer one of the basic arguments that what is learned is what is noticed. The information committed to memory is essentially the information that must be heeded in order to carry out a task.

The purpose of input enhancement (IE) is to increase the chance of noticing target language features embedded in the L2 input. The advantage of IE is to highlight target forms while keeping the focus on message. That is why it is widely used in reading texts.

The idea that input enhancement facilitates second language learning by drawing learners' attention to certain language features is the reason why many researchers have carried out numerous studies to further investigate the effect of input enhancement in teaching English. However, the results of these studies have yielded contradicting results.

Shook (1994) investigated the effect of input enhancement on the participants' intake of two Spanish linguistic forms Present Perfect and Relative Pronouns. Two typographical cues, uppercasing and bolding were used to enhance two modified passages of nearly 185 words. Four assessment tasks were also given to elicit the participants' recognition and production abilities of the two grammatical structures after receiving the treatment. The results showed significant effect of input enhancement on learners' intake and production of grammatical information. Besides, a significant effect for the attention condition across the entire data was found.

Leow (2001) selected 36 participants, 20 for the unenhanced group and 16 for the enhanced group to see if there is a meaningful difference between the two groups in noticing and learning of linguistic forms (Spanish formal imperatives) while reading an enhanced or unenhanced text. Their immediate and delayed performances were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed in the form of recognition and written production tasks. The results revealed "no significant benefits of written input enhancement over unenhanced written input for (1) the amount of reported noticing of Spanish formal imperatives, (2) readers' comprehension, or (3) readers "intake" (p.496).

Hsu (2007) investigated the effect of textual input enhancement on the performance of indirect wh-questions. The participants were randomly assigned to three groups. The first experimental group received a sample text with all indirect wh-questions in a typographically enhanced form. The second experimental group received typographically modified sample in addition to grammatical rules and explanations. The control group merely received an unenhanced sample text. As a posttest, the participants were given 20 direct wh-questions and were asked to change these questions into indirect ones. The results indicated the enhancement participants made fewer errors in terms of subject identification and indirect whquestion formation. It was concluded that "textual enhancement may lead to better foreign language production of the target forms" (p. 73).

As there is a growing concern for the proposal of the pedagogical techniques that optimally facilitate language learners' input-to-intake process, numerous techniques such as input flood, garden-path, and corrective feedback have been proposed by SLA scholars. However, since their effectiveness in

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language classroom has not been sufficiently studied by rigorous research designs, there is not any consensus over the most effective technique(s) of teaching English grammar. The present study aims to help introduce the optimal technique(s) of presenting grammatical input to foreign language teachers and materials developers by comparing the effect of typographical alterations of the target L2 features and oral/written metalinguistic explanations of grammatical structures on learners' grammatical intake, as two implicit and explicit input enhancement techniques in an experimental design.

An academic discussion in ELT is over the underlying attentional processes and mechanisms that facilitate language learning whose focus is on the role of noticing and conscious awareness. While some scholars (e.g., Schmidt, 1990) believe that attention, noticing, and conscious awareness are essential for optimal L2 development, other researchers (e.g., Tomlin & Villa, 1994) maintain that learners can acquire linguistic forms with minimum levels of, or even without, attention. Likewise, some other disagreement over attention and noticing exists in input enhancement research. A number of researchers (e.g., Shook, 1994) point out that input enhancement draws learners' attention and improves recognition and intake of linguistic features, while other academics (e.g., Leow, 2001) maintain the position that input enhancement is ineffective as a pedagogical technique to raise language learners' noticing threshold and foster linguistic development. The present study aims to investigate the role of attention and conscious awareness in SLA to see if attention and noticing facilitate input-tointake process by comparing the performance of the participants whose attention was implicitly and explicitly drawn to target grammatical features by using different input enhancement techniques through making a comparison with the performance of the participants who did not have such conditions.

Finally, since the late 70's, some L2 teaching scholars (e.g., Krashen, 1981) have minimized the benefits of explicit instruction by arguing that a second language is acquired more efficiently through natural exposure to comprehensible input. Although their claims were well reacted to by Long's (1983) meta-analytic review suggesting language instruction's wide benefits, the dispute is still a matter of controversy among SLA scholars. The present study aims to shed light on the effects and benefits (if any) of L2 instruction by comparing the performance of the participants who were naturally exposed to L2 forms, without any explicit instruction with the performance of those who received instruction through metalinguistic explanations.

The research questions of the present study are twofold:

1. Do unenhanced input, typographically enhanced input, and typographically enhanced input and metalinguistic explanations contribute to the development of grammatical knowledge among Iranian second grade junior high school EFL learners?
2. Do unenhanced input, typographically enhanced input, and typographically enhanced and metalinguistic explanations contribute differently to the development of grammatical knowledge among Iranian second grade junior high school EFL learners?

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Method Participants

The study was carried out in an average size, urban, middle socioeconomic status junior high school called “Shahid Fakhaar” in Kashan. The participants were ninety 12 year-old, second-grade students who had been already categorized in classes A (30), B (30), and C (30) according to their last year's average scores in a stratified sampling fashion. Although this type of student sampling cannot necessarily represent participants' foreign language proficiency, any exclusive sampling for the study was impossible.

The reason behind choosing second graders was, first, their greater knowledge of English language and cognitive development compared to first graders and second, their lack of experience of language instruction in English institutions and consequently, approximate homogeneity in terms of general English and grammatical knowledge.

Target forms

The choice of Simple Past and Past Progressive tenses as the two target structures had two main reasons. The first reason was after presenting To Be Verbs, Simple Present, and Present Progressive in previous lessons, the next structures to teach would sequentially be Simple Past and Past Progressive. The second reason was that as both structures refer to events happening in the past, second-grade students do not seem to face much difficulty acquiring them.

Design

The experimental design of the study is control group pretest posttest whose schematic representation is as follows.

G_1: X_1 T_1 X_2 G_2

X_1 T_2 X_2

G_3 X_1 O X_2

The independent variable of the research is techniques of presenting grammatical input to the participants with three levels. They are Unenhanced (Naturalistic) Input, Typographically Enhanced (bold, italic and underlined) Input and Typographically Enhanced Input supplemented by Metalinguistic Explanations. Besides, the scores the participants would get on the posttest represented their grammatical knowledge that is the dependent variable of the study.

Instruments

Although Simple Past and Past Progressive as the tenses having a considerable communicative value had not been taught to the participants previously, in order to make sure the three groups were homogenous in terms of lack of knowledge in the two target grammatical items, a pretest was developed. Five level-appropriate (beginner) 100-word stories with Flesch Reading Ease of higher than 80 representing "Very Easy" texts were used to match the proficiency level of the participants.

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The next step was developing a cloze test by taking out four instances of target structures in each text and giving three choices for each blank. In total, the participants had to answer 20 multiple-choice items in the pretest. The same procedure was followed for developing the posttest. The only minor difference lay in the number of passages. This time four passages were used and there were five blanks in each of them.

Procedure

After giving the first cloze test as the pretest, four treatment texts were provided and given to the participants in four successive sessions in 10 days. The control group received the treatment texts in the original and naturalistic format. That is, they were without any typographical cues or metalinguistic explanations. The first experimental group was provided with textually enhanced input. In other words, instances of Simple Past and Past Progressive in the text were made bold, italic, and underlined. The participants of the second experimental group, in contrast received typographically enhanced texts with bold, italic, and underlined target forms and metalinguistic explanations on Simple Past in the first session including a short list of main irregular verbs. Besides, the beginning of the third session was devoted to metalinguistic explanations on Past Progressive, as the instances of the tense were embedded in the last two treatment texts. Since the participants' aural comprehension of English language was not sufficiently developed at the time, the participants' mother tongue (Persian) was utilized for presenting metalinguistic explanations. All the examples written on the board were also translated into Persian.

The participants in the three groups were asked to focus their primary reading of the text in each session only on text comprehension without any further attempt to analyze the target structures. In the meantime, if there were any confusion or questions regarding the meaning of the texts, they were responded to by clarification. In subsequent readings, the participants were expected to utilize their intellectual resources in order to identify and figure out the embedded target structures alongside the meaning. Each of the four treatment texts was followed by three comprehension questions as a post-reading activity whose answers were in the text itself. The participants had 20 minutes to read each text carefully and come up with proper answers. Finally, in the first session after the end of the treatment period, the participants were given the second cloze test as the posttest.

Data Analysis

Three statistical procedures including paired samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, and Scheffé test were run by using SPSS software to analyze the participants' scores on the pretest and the posttest. In order to prevent the possibility of type I error while conducting multiple comparisons, we applied Bonferroni adjustment to the typical alpha level (0.05). To achieve this, we divided the alpha level (0.05) by 3 since we intended to make three comparisons. This led to setting a more stringent and reasonable level (0.017) for each comparison.

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Results

Within-Groups Comparisons (Paired Samples T-Tests) Using paired samples t-test, the researchers aimed to compare the participants' scores in the pretest with the posttest in order to find out if the effect of different treatments on the participants' performance was significant.

Group A (Unenhanced Input)

Based on the results of paired samples t-test illustrated in Table 1, since the p-value is 0.00, which is smaller than 0.017 ($p \leq 0.017$), the difference between the pretest and the posttest for Group A is significant.

Table 1

Paired samples T-test for Group A

		Paired Differences							
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Unenhanced Input Time 1 – Unenhanced Input Time 2	-2.86667	3.48131	.63560	-4.16661	-1.56672	-4.510	29	.000

Group B (Enhanced Input)

According to Table 2, since the p-value equals 0.00, which is smaller than 0.017 ($p \leq 0.017$), it is concluded the participants' performance in Group B is significantly different before and after receiving typographically enhanced treatment.

Table 2

Paired samples T-test for Group B

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	Paired Differences							
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 Unenhanced Input Time 1 – Unenhanced Input Time 2	-2.86667	3.48131	.63560	-4.1666	-1.56672	-4.510	29	.000

Group C (Enhanced Input and Metalinguistic Explanations)

As the results of paired sample T-test for the participants' performance in Group C show (Table 3), the p-value equals 0.00, which is smaller than 0.017 ($p \leq 0.017$). Therefore, the difference between the pretest and the posttest is quite significant.

Table 3

Paired sample T-test for Group C

	Paired Differences							
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 Enhanced + Explanation Time 1 – Enhanced + Explanation Time 2	-7.06667	2.53164	.46229	-8.01209	-6.12134	-15.289	29	.000

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Between Groups Comparisons (One-Way ANOVA)

In order to see if the participants' final performance in the three groups

Table 4

One-way ANOVA for the means of the scores in the groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	358.422	2	179.211	19.994	.000
Within Groups	779.800	87	8.963		
Total	1138.222	89			

was significantly different from each other, the researchers applied A one-way ANOVA to compare the results of the posttests of the three groups. The results of the one-way ANOVA are illustrated in Table 4.

As the results of one-way ANOVA in Table 4 clearly show, the level of significance for the means of the gains of the three groups is .000, which is less than 0.017 ($p \leq 0.017$). Therefore, it is concluded given the provision of different treatments, the performance of the three groups'

participants in the posttest is significantly different from each other.

Between Groups Comparisons (Scheffé Test)

Conducting a statistical procedure called Scheffé test, the researchers found the three groups' final performance on the posttest was compared in order to figure out where the significant difference lay. The results of the Scheffé test are illustrated in Table 5.

The results of the Scheffé test displayed in Table 5 show the significant difference between the means of the gains of the participants of group A compared with both of group B and group C as the p-value is 0.00 less than 0.017 ($p \leq 0.017$). The Scheffé test also rejects any significant difference between the performance of the participants in group B and C as the p-value for these groups is 0.85 larger than 0.017 ($p \geq 0.017$).

Table 5

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Scheffé test for the means of the gains in the three groups

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1.00	2.00	-4.00000*	.77301	.000	-5.9252	-2.0748
	3.00	-4.43333*	.77301	.000	-6.3585	-2.5081
2.00	1.00	4.00000*	.77301	.000	2.0748	5.9252
	3.00	-.43333	.77301	.855	-2.3585	1.4919
3.00	1.00	4.43333*	.77301	.000	2.5081	6.3585
	2.00	.43333	.77301	.855	-1.4919	2.3585

Discussion

Statistical analysis of the study does not show any meaningful difference between the performance of the two experimental groups in the sense that that there is no significant difference between the means of the gains of the participants merely receiving typographically modified input with the performance of those receiving modified input in addition to metalinguistic explanations. However, higher mean of scores, the integrated nature of the enhancement technique and more favorable feedback from the participants of the second experimental group indicate textual input enhancement supplemented by metalinguistic explanations is a more efficient and effective technique for presenting grammatical input.

Given the improved performance of the participants in groups B and C who received different types of enhanced input, the first implication is that input enhancement is effective in drawing learners' attention, raising their noticing threshold, and finally facilitating the input to intake process. Providing learners with rich, comprehensible, and level-appropriate input is not sufficient by itself. The program should predict certain techniques for drawing learners' attention toward target linguistic features. This strategy will raise the chance of noticing as the necessary condition for language acquisition.

The second implication is to combine implicit and explicit techniques of input enhancement in presenting grammatical materials. Teachers should not underestimate the significance of instruction and should allocate due time and focus teaching target L2 forms because language learners need

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detailed metalinguistic explanations to test their grammatical hypotheses formed during the extended exposure to implicitly enhanced data to formulate the underlying structures. Only then do language learners arrive at metalinguistic knowledge. Explicit explanations of grammatical rules can help learners to concentrate their attention on critical attributes of FL structures and affect the rate of acquisition.

Given the positive learning outcomes of textual manipulation of linguistic features such as improved performance in the recognition test and facilitating the input-to-intakes process, another implication for language teachers is to ask learners to adopt the techniques like underlining or highlighting while reading the material. This induced salience can improve their gains by drawing attention toward certain forms in the input. Likewise, textbook developers should also employ different visual IE techniques like boldfacing, italicizing, in addition to adequate examples and detailed metalinguistic explanations in presenting foreign language materials.

Conclusions

Input enhancement and grammar pedagogy as important areas in English language teaching have still so much to be explored. The present study only focused on two English grammatical forms and two techniques of input enhancement among many others. Further studies need to be conducted to investigate the acquisition of more demanding structures and the use of other IE techniques such as negative evidence, input flood, and corrective feedback. The research was conducted on second grade junior high school male participants while more studies can be administered on senior high school or college students across different grades and genders to examine the consistency and generalizability of the results. As the last suggestion, a wide range of other variables such as ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds may be included to attain more inclusive results. For instance, a replication of the present study may be conducted on participants for whom English is the third language after their native tongue (e.g., Kurdish) and the official language (e.g., Persian).

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