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THE IMPACT OF INPUT ENHANCEMENT TYPE ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH TENSES ACROSS GENDER

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ABSTRACT

The present study evaluated the potentially relative effectiveness of visual/textual input – based treatment on the acquisition of English tenses by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To this end, the Oxford Placement Test was given to 100 EFL students in order to homogenize the sample. Out of this 60 participants whose score fell one standard deviation above and below the mean were regarded as intermediate and, therefore, were chosen and randomly assigned to four equal groups according to their gender ,containing 15 students in each group. Then the pre-test which was based on the objective Tests in English as a Foreign Language Book was administered to all the four groups to assess their knowledge of English tenses. The result of the pre-test demonstrated that the four groups did not differ significantly with regard to their knowledge of target items (i.e., English tenses). Next the four groups separately attended 8 sessions of the intervention in which computerized programs was used to introduce English tenses to the two experimental groups and the traditional way of using chalk and board for the two control groups. In fact, the experimental groups were taught visually/textually enhanced input, but the students in control groups received no specific instruction and the students were simply exposed to the materials without any typographical enhancement. Later in this study, the four groups took a post-test that measured the learners' acquisition of English tenses(as the same as the pre-test),which in turn, revealed the effectiveness of the teaching methods applied. Finally, T-Test and Pearson correlation were used to analyze the obtained data.

Keywords: Grammar, Tense, Input, Intake, Input enhancement, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the efficacy of visual input enhancement for teaching English tenses. The field of second language acquisition (SLA) is witnessing an increasing interest in the idea that drawing learner's attention to the formal features of second language (L2) input is beneficial, and in some cases, necessary, for optimal L2 development (Schmidt, 1990; Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993).This interest has challenged researchers to develop pedagogic techniques that enhance input, has resulted in a large body of research on input enhancement. The idea behind input enhancement is that by making formal aspects of L2 input more salient learners will be more likely to notice targeted forms, resulting in more intake, the subset of the input data that becomes available for further language processing.

Within the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research and teaching, Sharwood Smith (1991) proposed input enhancement as a theory-based second language (l2) teaching methodology designed to draw L2 learner's attention to target language form-lexical items or grammatical morphemes and structures. Drawing learners attention to form counters their

natural tendency to allocate attention to L2 meaning at the expense of form (Vanpatten,1996).Input enhancement is grounded theoretically in models of SLA, such as Gass (1997) that maintain cognitive-linguistic noticing of L2 input is prerequisite to the further processing of that input. Input noticing permits input intake leading to the establishment of form-meaning associations and the ultimate integration of these associations in to the learner emerging grammar, in other words, acquisition. In this study the enhancement of the input was done by using computerized programs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The last decade witnessed substantial increases in psycholinguistics- based studies that attempt to draw learner's attention to specific grammatical information in the input in order to promote subsequent processing of such information. The theoretical foundation underlying these studies is the crucial role attention plays in promoting further processing of grammatical information in learners' second/ foreign language(L2) development (e.g., Robinson 1995;Schmidt 1995; Tomlin and Villa 1994). Schmidt's noticing hypothesis that conscious attention is indeed necessary for learning to take place provides the theoretical foundation for many such studies.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Mastering the grammar of a second language and being able to correctly implement this knowledge is a challenging task to accomplish. That is why most ESL/EFL learners often have problems using language forms accurately in oral and written production. They may have a good knowledge base of the L2 structures but might find it difficult to implement their declarative knowledge when it comes to practice. This very deficiency is what makes grammar instruction open to research (Ellis, 2006). In foreign language teaching process, teaching grammar is one of the stressed points that teachers can't disregard .Despite the various views whether it should be presented or not, there is a general agreement that a systematic and purposeful teaching of it is vital to master the target language.

The very mentioned of the word grammar strikes fear in to the heart of the staunchest language learner. Many English EFL and ESL teachers also feel the pit of their stomach churn at the thought of preparing and giving a grammar lesson. But what are we to do? If lexis and vocabulary are the building blocks of language, then certainly grammar is the mortar or structure that holds them together. Teaching it and learning it are therefore inescapable. The only thing to do then is to make it as interesting, pleasant or at least as painless as possible.

There are several problems that students have been encountering in their English lesson especially among the non-English native communities; students find it confusing to use the different tenses in its proper form. On when or where it's going to be read, written or spoken. While English tenses can be one of the most useful parts of their lesson, it can also be one of the most difficult parts of the study, so students and teachers may need more time to study their lessons to master its use. Verb tenses includes present tense, past tense and future tense but there are also present perfect, past perfect, and so on, that needs additional clarification and examples that these students point of view may need to discuss to further enhance and develop their use of this so called tenses.

In fact in a deeper thought even an English speaking student may have difficulty in.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

There are two questions in this study to be investigated:

1. Does input enhancement type affect Iranian EFL learner's knowledge of English tenses?
2. Does input enhancement type affect Iranian EFL learner's knowledge of English tenses across gender?

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

There are two null hypotheses in this study .The first one states that input enhancement type does not affect Iranian EFL learner's knowledge of English tenses, and the second one which deals with students gender, states that input enhancement type does not affect Iranian EFL learner's knowledge of English tenses across gender.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Input enhancement is a concept in second language acquisition 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 as to facilitate acquisition (Sharwood Smith 1991, 1993).

Input enhancement was a term designed to replace the term grammatical consciousness-raising (CR) (Sharwood Smith, 1981) since the newer term did not necessary imply that any changes in the mind of the learner would necessarily result from any changes in the external environment that may have been deliberately devised by language teachers or textbook writers.

L2 learning involves selecting and encoding the information which is available in the environment. Schmidt (1990, 1994, &1995) argues that paying attention to the input received and also having momentary subjective experience of noticing facilitate learning. Noticing is necessary for changing input to intake and refers to conscious attention to the occurrence of an event and hence its storage in the long term memory (Schmidt, 1995).Thus, in order for learning to take place, learners must attend to and notice certain language features that are relevant to the target system. Schmidt (1995) distinguishes between two levels of awareness: awareness at the level of noticing and awareness at the level of understanding. Noticing, for Schmidt, entails conscious registration of an event; understanding implies recognition of a general principle, rule, or pattern. It is awareness at the level of noticing that, according to Schmidt, is crucial for language learning. Conscious noticing to the linguistic input facilitates the restructuring of the learner's interlanguage system (Schmidt, 1995).

According to Doughty & Williams (1998) input enhancement has two forms; a) typographical (written input) enhancement and b) intonational (oral input) enhancement. The former relates to providing learners with textual input-enhancement through bolding, underlining, and highlighting the target features. This form of input-enhancement is easy to manipulate because the burden of enhancement process is taken through text itself and less effort is needed on the side of the instructor, teacher, or competent addressee. The latter relates to providing oral input-enhancement through the use of pronunciation such as intonational changes or pitch.

The abbreviation CALL stands for Computer Assisted Language Learning. It is a term used by teachers and students to describe the use of computers as part of a language course. It is traditionally described as a means of 'presenting, reinforcing and testing' particular language

items. The learner is first presented with a rule and some examples, and then answers a series of questions which test her/his knowledge of the rule and the computer gives appropriate feedback and awards a mark, which may be stored for later inspection for the teacher. Jones & Fortescue (1987) indicate that the traditional description of CALL is unfortunate and they present the computer as flexible classroom aid, which can be used by teachers and learners, in and out of class, in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. However, work with the computer, as any other teaching aid, needs to be linked with ordinary classroom work and CALL lessons, like the other lessons, need to be planned carefully.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 60 Iranian male/female students who were studying English at intermediate level in two of the Shokuh institutes of Guilan. They were between 12-15 years old who were selected randomly based on the result of an OPT administered. These students had already at least two years of training in English throughout their schooling. They were also familiar with different types of English tenses since they had been thought these forms before as part of the curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education. In other words, the participants already knew about the tenses. Yet the treatment given by the researcher was an attempt to consolidate their knowledge and contribute to their accurate use of the target structure. The students were placed in four classes. 15 females and 15 males for the two experimental groups, and 15 females and 15 males for the two control groups in order to regard the gender .In order to make sure about the homogenity of the groups an OPT test was given to all the participants. Then a pretest included 20 items was given to all the participants in order to measure their knowledge of English tenses. The two experimental groups, from now EG1 (N=15) and EG2 (N=15), were given the treatment for a period of 8 sessions, while the remaining students, from now CG1 (N=15) and CG2 (N=15) were given a placebo.EG1 and EG2 were presented English tenses through PowerPoint programs and using some visual cues like highlighting, underlining and bolding and etc in order to increase students awareness and focus on the distinctive features of different tenses of English. In other words the input was enhanced for the Experimental groups and not for control groups.

Design

The method used in this study is quantitative research and the quasi –experimental design was used in this study, in the way that there were both the experimental and the control groups. There was a pretest and a post test for all these groups and the treatment in this period of time (between the pretest and posttest). The gender of the participants was also focused in this research by dividing the experimental and control groups in to two male/female groups, involved 15 in each group.

Materials

The materials used in the current study were of four sorts: the OPT material for proficiency, the material for the pretest of the study, the material for the treatment of the study and finally, the material for the posttest of the study.

Procedure

At first the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered among 100 students in two of the Shokuh institutes in Guilan in order to make sure about the homogeneity of the participants. Prior to the treatment session, a pretest was given to the participants, which included 20 number of recognition items. The recognition items were comprised of multiple-choice

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questions examining how far the participants would be able to recognize the appropriate choice from among four given alternatives. This section was adopted from objective tests in English as a foreign language by Bloor, Bloor ,Forrest, Laird, and Relton (1970).Then the treatment was began in the way that the materials used during the treatment sessions differed across the two groups(EGs and CGs).The English tenses was thought to EG1 and EG2 by using computerized programs , PowerPoint. The teacher clarified some of the specific features of different tenses in English, for example, 'ed' for past tense, 'will' for future tense and 's' for the present. He underlined, highlighted, bolded them through PowerPoint programs in ordered to increase students awareness and noticing. The teacher followed this procedure in teaching different types of English tenses with different markers for 8 sessions. He gave them extra explanation about the differences between different tenses and focused students attention. But for the two control groups there was not any PowerPoint program. The researcher only used the chalk and board without clarifying and specifying different features of English tenses. He only explained them the overall structure of English tenses, without providing any extra visual/textual information about the distinctive features. At the end of the 8 session, a post test as the same as the pretest was given to all the participants in order to measure their progress in learning English tense. At the end of the 8 sessions a posttest which was as the same as the pretest was administered in order to measure students progress from pre to post test and the effectiveness of the treatment materials on different groups.

Scoring

The OPT was used in this study was scored on the basis of the standard criteria introduced by the test itself. The criterion for scoring the pretest and the posttest of the study was the maximum of 20.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from testing the hypothesis of the study were analyzed via calculating a t-test between the pre- posttest sores of the experimental and control groups of the study and Pearson product moment correlation.

RESULTS

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-Post Scores of Males and Females in Control Groups

Gender	*Time*	*Maximum*	*Minimum*	*Std. Deviation*	*Mean*
Male	Pretest	19	11	2/36	15/00
	Posttest	19	11	2/33	15/13
Female	Pretest	19	13	1/84	15/67
	Posttest	19	12	2/31	15/73

According to the above table, it was clear that the mean score of the post-test in both male's and female's groups was a little higher than the mean of their pre-test scores. But the mean score remained at a subtle level. In the way that the lowest mean score was 15 and the highest was 15/73.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-Post Test Scores of Males and Females in Experimental Groups

Gender	*Time*	*Maximum*	*Minimum*	*Std. Deviation*	*Mean*
Male	Pretest	19	11	1/86	15/80
	Posttest	19	12	2/15	16/73
Female	Pretest	19	13	1/79	16/07
	Posttest	19	14	1/65	17/00

The above table showed that the mean score of post-test in males and females in experimental groups were higher than the mean of pre-test scores. This improvement was high in contrast to control groups.

Hypotheses Testing

According to the aforementioned hypotheses, four comparisons among participant's scores were investigated:

a. The comparison between pre- and post-test mean score of males in control group.
b. The comparison of pre- and post-test mean score of females in control group.
c. The comparison of pre- and post-test mean scores of males in experimental group.
d. The comparison of the pre- and post-test mean score of females in experimental group.

For each of the comparison stated above, there were two dependent variables (pre- and post-test scores) which were compared with each other. Pearson product correlation as was shown in the following tables showed that there was significant correlation among the scores in the four stated hypotheses:

Table 3. Correlations between the Pre-Post Tests of Males in Control Group

		con.male.pre	*con.male.post*
con.male.pre	Pearson Correlation	1	.885**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	15	15
con.male.post	Pearson Correlation	.885**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	15	15

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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Table 4. Correlations between the Pre-Post Tests of Females in Control Group

		con.female.pre	*con.female.post*
con.female.pre	Pearson Correlation	1	.784**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	15	15
con.female.post	Pearson Correlation	.784**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	15	15

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5. Correlations between the Pre-Post Tests of males in Experimental Group

		con.male.pre	*con.male.post*
con.male.pre	Pearson Correlation	1	.669**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004
	N	15	15
con.male.post	Pearson Correlation	.669**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	
	N	15	15

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 6: Correlations between the Pre-Post Tests of Females Experimental in Group

		con.female.pre	*con.female.post*
con.female.pre	Pearson Correlation	1	.823**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	15	15
con.female.post	Pearson Correlation	.823**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	15	15

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

According to these tables, in the four investigated groups, there were significant correlation between the pre- and post-test scores (P<0/05)

Table 7. Paired Samples Test for Pre-Post Test of Males in Control Gruop

		Mean	*N*	*Std.Deviation*	*Std.ErrorMean*
Pair 1	Con.male.pre	15.0000	15	2.36039	.60945
	Con.male.post	15.1333	15	2.32584	.60053

Table 8. Paired Samples Test for Pre-Post Test of Males in Control Group

		Paired Differences							
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
		Mean	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*	*Lower*	*Upper*	*t*	*df*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*
Pair 1	con.male.pre–con.male.post	-.13333	1.12546	.29059	-.75659	.48993	-.459	14	.653

According to tables 7 and 8 the mean score of pretest was 15 and the mean score of the post-test was 15/73.Although there was numerical differences between these two mean score (15 & 115/73) but this differences was not significant at the level of 0/05 (P>0/05). So the hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relation between the pre and post-test scores of males in control group was accepted.

The results for females in control group were shown in the following tables:

Table 9. Paired Samples Test for Pre-Post Test of Female in Control Gruop

		Mean	*N*	*Std.Deviation*	*Std.ErrorMean*
Pair 1	Con.female.pre	15.6667	15	1.83874	.47476
	Con.female.post	15.7333	15	2.31352	.59735

Table 10. Paired Samples Test of Pre-Post Test of Females in Control Groups

		Paired Differences							
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
		Mean	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*	*Lower*	*Upper*	*t*	*df*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*
Pair 1	con.male.pre–con.male.post	-.06667	1.43759	.37118	-.86278	.72944	-.180	14	.860

Tables 9 and 10 showed that the differences between the mean score of pre –test (15/67) and post-test (15/73) in control group of females is not significant (P > 0/05), so the hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relation between the pre- and post-test scores of females in control group was accepted. This investigation had been done for the participants in experimental groups too.

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Table 11. Paired Samples Statistics of Pre-Post Test of Males in Experimental Gruop

		Mean	*N*	*Std.Deviation*	*Std.ErrorMean*
Pair 1	Con.male.pre	15.8000	15	1.85934	.48008
	Con.male.post	16.7333	15	2.15362	.55606

Table 12. Paired Samples Test of Pre-Post Test of Males in Experimental Group

		Paired Differences							
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
		Mean	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*	*Lower*	*Upper*	*t*	*df*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*
Pair 1	con.male.pre–con.male.post	-.93333	1.57963	.40786	-1.80810	-.05856	-2.288	14	.038

The above tables showed that the mean score of pre-test (15/80) and the post-test (16/73) of males in experimental group was significant at the level of 0/05.(P<0/05), so the hypothesis which stated that there is no relation between the pre- and post-test scores of males in experimental group was rejected. According to the following tables there was significant differences between the mean score of pre-test (16/07) and post-test (17), (P<0/05), so the hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relation between the pre- and post-test scores of females in experimental group was rejected too.

Table 13. Paired Samples Statistics of Pre-Post Test of Females in Experimental Gruop

		Mean	*N*	*Std.Deviation*	*Std.ErrorMean*
Pair 1	Con.female.pre	16.0667	15	1.79151	.46257
	Con.female.post	17.0000	15	1.64751	.42538

Table 14. Paired Samples of Pre-Post Test for Females in Experimental Group

		Paired Differences							
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
		Mean	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*	*Lower*	*Upper*	*t*	*df*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*
Pair 1	con.male.pre–con.male.post	-.93333	1.03280	.26667	-1.50528	-.36139	-3.500	14	. 004

Table 15. Independent Samples Test for Male and Female in Experimental Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		*t-test for Equality of Means*						
		F	*Sig.*	*t*	*df*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*	*Mean Difference*	*Std. Error Difference*	*95% Confidence Interval of the Difference*	
									Lower	*Upper*
score	Equal variances assumed	.793	.381	-.381	28	.706	-.267	.700	-1.701	1.167
	Equal variances not assumed			-.381	26.206	.706	-.267	.700	-1.705	1.172

According to table 15 there was no significant differences between the mean score of post-test of males and females at the level of 0/05 (P > 0/05), so the hypothesis that there is not significant differences between the post-test scores of males and females in experimental group was accepted.

DISCUSSION

According to the findings obtained in the light of running different statistical tests, it was deducted that the subjects in Experimental Groups, who were taught English tenses via visual input enhancement, appeared to have benefited from this Input enhancement technique. This was based on the assumption that using typographical/visual cues to enhance the targeted items would increase their perceptual salience, which in turn would push participants to notice the enhanced structures and select them as intake, leading to better performance on the post-test.

The most convincing explanation for such a finding may come from the works of Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993, and 1994) who is the originator of input enhancement. Sharwood Smith (1994) contends that "the most obvious way to try to affect the subconscious processes beneficially is by making relevant evidence in the input especially salient" (p.178). Therefore, it can be claimed that findings of this study lend support to Sharwood Smith's speculations (1994) that input enhancement has a positive impact on the rate and accuracy of L2 acquisition. Besides, the results of the research question provide further empirical support for (Doughty, 1988; Shook, 1994; Williams, 1999). However, the use of explicit instruction in foreign/second language teaching has been recommended by researchers who believe in the insufficiency of implicit instruction as a means of inducing changes in the learners' interlanguage system (White, 1998; Izumi, 2002).The significantly advantageous effect of input enhancement observed from this study suggests that the processing of L2 form can be aided by such a preemptive type of instructional technique. Importantly, the benefit of enhancement was significant and substantial when compared to the Control Groups condition. It may have been that L2 participants in this study were able to successfully draw their attention to the perceptually manipulated input materials. The findings, therefore, confirm the theoretical expectation in the focus-on form regarding the favorable role of added salience in garnering more attention from L2 learners.

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CONCLUSION

This study to some extent has been successful in exploring the relationship between an instructional approach and English tenses acquisition and in proposing that the input enhancement approach was more effective than the traditional approach .With this procedure, the teacher could promote activation of such cognitive processes as noticing, cognitive comparison. This study also showed that there is a significant effect of the use of a computerized program on the achievement of students. Computers are becoming more appealing to teachers because of their huge capabilities and extensive effectiveness .The idea of using computers for teaching purposes in subjects like modern languages arouses mixed feelings and meets with a variety of reactions. The fact that computers are used in the teaching of other subjects and are put to a great many applications in society makes one suspect that no field lies completely outside their scope and that they might indeed be of some use .To many, the prospect of using computers is not without appeal; it is the kind of challenge which one feels drawn to respond to. At the same time the technology frightens us; we are afraid that it may come to dominate us, we have qualms about dehumanization in a subject who is concerned above all with human communication, and we may even be afraid of losing our jobs.

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