

Effects of Form-Focused Instruction on the Learning of Relative Clauses

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Abstract

Problem Statement: Relativization is an important grammatical sub-system for second language learners. This study intended to explore the effects of different types of L2 instruction on the learning of English relative clauses by Persian learners.

Purpose: The differential effects of the three types of treatment (i.e., Focus on FormS, Focus on Meaning, Focus on Form) on the learning of English relativization was investigated.

Methods: Intact university classes of English learners were divided into three groups receiving different forms of instruction. Accuracy of the target form was measured by two distinct tasks of sentence combining test and grammaticality judgment test.

Findings and Results: The results of the two tests show improvement of all three groups, the focus on form treatment group outperformed the other two on both tests, however. This study

also suggests that learners' attention to detailed analysis of form facilitates the learning of relative clauses in this context.

Keywords: form-focused, focus on formS, focus on meaning, focus on form, relative clause

Introduction

English has become the international language in different fields such as business and commerce, science and technology and international relations and diplomacy (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991 as cited in Mukuthuria & Gatavi, 2011). Learning English, people can be well prepared in the international community. Looking back at the field of foreign language instruction over the past 30 years, at least two broad trends can be identified. The first trend raises the question of whether formal instruction has an effect on Second Language Acquisition (SLA), whereas the second trend raises the question of whether type of instruction makes a difference. With respect to the question of whether formal instruction has an effect on SLA, Krashen (1973) has suggested that just as there is a natural sequence in the way children acquire their L1, so for second language (L2) learners learning is less important than acquisition because 'instruction' does not contribute directly to acquisition and should be limited to a few rules that can be learned (Krashen, 1985). Although several researchers have demonstrated that formal instruction could hinder the natural acquisition process of an L2 (Krashen, 1973), some other researchers (e.g., White, 1991) have indicated that formal instruction could speed up (i.e. 'rate') the learning process (Ellis, 2006) as well as the 'route' of acquisition (Ellis, 1994).

With respect to the second question of whether some types of instruction make more of a difference than others, some researchers (e.g., Doughty, 1991) have concluded that formal

instruction has a good effect on the language acquisition of L2 learners and numerous studies have shown that form-focused instruction is more beneficial than other types of instruction (Ellis et al., 2002; Schmidt, 1990).

Since the mid-nineties a number of studies have focused on finding various methods to integrate formal instruction within a communicative framework – whether through grammar consciousness-raising tasks (Fotos, 1994), interaction enhancement (Muranoi, 2000), textual enhancement (Wong, 2003), or input and visual enhancement (Lim, 2001). Fotos (1994) found that the FonF group was as accurate as the grammar group (FonFS) on the three targeted grammatical items. The results of her study lent support to the use of grammar consciousness-raising tasks as one possible alternative to teaching with a FonM or with a FonFS approach. It integrates language use and grammar instruction in the classroom. Muranoi (2000) investigating the effect of interaction enhancement (IE) on the learning of English articles by first-year Japanese college students has concluded that guiding learners to focus on form within meaning-oriented instruction seem to be beneficial to L2 acquisition through interaction enhancement. Wong (2003) trying to draw learner's attention to formal features of L2 input through textual enhancement (TE) has concluded that since the targeted grammatical feature had no communicative value in French, it might have negatively influenced the results of the study. Lim (2001) has investigated how different types of FFI affect L2 learning of the present perfect in English. The findings of her experiment lead us to question the role of attention and awareness in the SLA process.

The present study aimed to further explore the area of form-focused approach, concentrating on the effects that different types of L2 instruction – FonF, FonFS, and FonM – have on the learning of a grammatical form – relative clause – with communicative value in

English. It is also worth mentioning that the present study attempts to follow the framework set by Long (1991), and later refined by Ellis (2001).

Form-Focused Instruction (FFI)

Recently form-focused instruction (FFI) approach has gained importance in the area of L2 in the light of classroom research that supports the need for pedagogical interventions in order to push L2 learners towards higher levels of proficiency (Doughty & Williams, 1998a; Ellis, 2006). Apparently, on their own and without teacher's help, “learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities” (Widdowson, 1990). Therefore, some form of instructional focus on linguistic and grammatical features may be required to destabilize learners’ interlanguage (Ellis, 2006). As Ellis (2001) has defined FFI as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms”. FFI includes “both traditional approaches to teaching forms based on structural syllabi and more communicative approaches, where attention to form arises out of activities that are primarily meaning-focused” (Ellis, 2001). FFI has evolved from Long’s instructional treatment that “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, 1991) into such tasks as processing instruction (VanPatten, 2002), textual enhancement (White, 1998), and linguistic or grammar problem-solving activities (Willis, 1996). Despite such variation, the key principle of FFI instruction remains: “meaning and use must already be evident to the learner at the time that attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across” (Doughty & Williams, 1998a).

Many researchers have attempted to define and name the forms of instruction which can be applied to the second/foreign language classroom and there is still some debate over the

precise terminology (Long, 1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998b; Ellis, 2001). The most widely used terms are those established by Long (1991) who has made the following distinctions: 1) *Focus on FormS* (FonFS), characterized by teaching the forms rather than the messages they convey (e.g., the grammar-translation method); 2) *Focus on Meaning* (FonM), in which no attention is paid to the forms used to convey a message, the instruction is devoted to communication only; and 3) *Focus on Form* (FonF), a balance between a *Focus on FormS* and a *Focus on Meaning*: “focus on form consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher or one or more students” (Long & Robinson, 1998). This shift occurs during communication.

Target Form

The target form selected for the study was relative clause (RC) which is a noun-modifying construction resulting in the generation of a higher level noun phrase. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) define a RC as “a type of complex postnominal adjectival modifier that is used in both written and spoken English” (p. 571). They further explain “RCs give a means to encode complex adjectival modifiers that are easier to produce than complex attributive structures and that are less wordy than two independent clauses” (p. 571). Therefore, a RC is formed based on the relationship of more than one sentence, where the relationship is the result of *embedding* (p. 572) or the creation of one clause within another higher-order clause.

Relativization is typically chosen as a target of instruction in SLA pedagogical practices. The acquisition of relative clauses by L2 learners is investigated to determine the difficulty order of different types of relative classes (e.g., Izumi, 2003; Sadighi & Jafarpur, 1994) and to examine the effects of L2 instruction on the target item (e.g., Ammar & Lightbown, 2004; Doughty, 1991). The formation of relative clauses briefly appears as a grammar item in second-year upper-

secondary schools in Iran for the first time. Relativization is often considered to be the last hurdle for students to overcome since it involves complex grammatical rules (Yabuki-Soh, 2007). Because L2 learners can carry out basic communication without relative clauses, they tend to avoid using them (e.g., Schachter, 1974). Relativization, however, is an important grammatical sub-system for L2 learners when they aspire for describing situations or expressing themselves in depth using complex, multiple-clause sentences opposed to simple, single-clause sentences.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) present four common types of RC structures that relate the function of the head noun/antecedent in the main clause with the function of the relative pronoun in the adjective clause (p. 577).

1. Subject-subject (SS): *The girl [who speaks Persian] is my cousin.*
2. Object-subject (OS): *I know the girl [who speaks Persian].*
3. Subject-object (SO): *The man [whom you met] is my teacher.*
4. Object-object (OO): *I read the book [that you mentioned].*

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study were:

1. Do differences in the three types of instructional treatments – FonF, FonFS, or FonM – lead to difference in language learning?
2. Can raising learner’s metalinguistic awareness of specific L2 forms – relative clause – facilitate acquisition?

Method

Participants

Participants were initially 112 Persian learners of English from Sari Azad University, Iran. After taking the proficiency test, a homogeneous group was formed. They were considered as intermediate since they were one standard above and below the means. Out of the initial 112 learners, 88 were exposed to three kinds of treatments in three classes in which the first one consisted of 29 learners, the second 31 and the third 28. Both males and females were involved in the study. They ranged in age from 19 to 25. The researcher was the instructor for the three groups and all the sessions.

Instruments

In this study, three different tests were carried out at three different points: one proficiency test one day before the pretest, one pretest one day before the instruction, one posttest one day immediately after the instructional treatments.

Proficiency Test (PT): In order to be assured of the homogeneity of the control and experimental groups in terms of English language proficiency, a test of NELSON, series 400B, after being piloted on a similar group of fifteen students, was administered one day before the pretest. It consisted of 50 multiple-choice items in four parts of cloze tests, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The time allotted was 40 minutes.

Sentence Combining Test (SCT): In this test, 20 sets of two sentences which could be combined into one sentence by using one of the four basic types of RCs related to each type of RC were administered. The distribution of each type of RC is at random.

Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT): GJT in this study also compensates what sentence combination cannot do to reveal what is lacking in learners' interlanguage (Gass & Selinker,

2001). The GJT consisted of 24 sentences for each test. Out of 24 items, 12 sentences were ungrammatical, while the rest were grammatical.

Procedure & Design

An experimental design was used in this research. All participants were first provided with four 50-minute presentations of the target item over a spread of four days during two weeks in summer 2011. A pretest involving two types of elicitation tasks was given to the participants in order to assess both their comprehension and production of English RCs. It was followed by four treatment sessions in which each group was provided with one of the three different types of L2 instruction – focus on form, focus on meaning and focus on forms. Each treatment session lasted 50 minutes. A posttest consisting of the same tests was also conducted to examine the progress that participants had made during the treatment sessions.

Treatment

The day following the pretest, the participants received a fifty-minute instructional treatment addressing the targeted structures of the study – ECs. All three groups received a fifty-minute instructional treatment for four days in two weeks. The researcher randomly assigned intact classes to different groups. Each group differed in the following ways for the types of input.

Focus on FormS: In the FonFS groups, the students were taught the target structures with a traditional approach to grammar instruction. Participants received explicit grammar instruction and practice about four types of RCs. The instruction was teacher-centered and rules were explained in the students' native language. The students were mostly passive learning the material presented by the researcher. Following the explanations, the participants performed drill activities and exercises designed by the researcher to help them master the target structures. The

students transformed, combined elements in slash sentences, filled in blanks, but did not answer personalized questions. In these mechanical drills, there was only one correct response each time. A formal debriefing component (explanation) and explicit negative feedback (the researcher/instructor corrects formally the mistakes of the students and provides them with metalinguistic explanations) were provided throughout the FonFS instruction.

Focus on Meaning: In the FonM group, no attention was paid to the forms used to convey a message and the instruction was devoted to communication only (in the target language). Communicative language teaching (CLT), based on the notion of communicative competence, asserts that the main objective of a second or foreign language program must be to provide language learners with the information practice needed to meet the communication needs in the second or foreign language (Canale, 1983). The focus of this approach is placed on the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning. CLT guides language learners beyond memorized patterns to take part in meaningful interaction. The participants here, concentrated on conveying a message and not on performing RCs accurately. However, to maintain a certain balance among groups, the researcher provided topics that required the students to use RCs to convey a message and negotiate meaning with their peers. Implicit feedback (recasts with the appropriate corrections but without explanation of the mistakes) was provided to the students throughout the FonM treatment.

Focus on Form: FonF instruction is a balance between a FonFS and a FonM (Long, 1991). In the FonF group, grammar instruction and communicative language use were integrated through a grammar consciousness-raising task. The researcher focused learner's attention on RCs in the course of carrying out communicative activities. The grammar consciousness-raising task was a way to make the students negotiate meaning while focusing their attention on the targeted

structures of the study. The grammar consciousness-raising task consisted of a reading passage (authored by the researcher). The students had to respond in groups of three to questions on the reading passage. These questions focused the students' attention on the use of RCs in English. Communicative activities followed. Explicit negative feedback was also provided throughout the FonF treatment.

Results

SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows was used to calculate descriptive statistics and perform reliability analyses as well as to conduct Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). In order to determine whether the various forms of instruction significantly affected the participants, the data were submitted to t-test. Reliability analyses were also performed using Cronbach's coefficient α , in order to check the internal consistency of the instruments. The reliability coefficients (the Cronbach's α) for the proficiency test, the pretest and posttest were .73, .87, and .84, respectively.

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the sentence combining test and grammaticality judgment tests for the three treatment groups. There are no significant differences across the three groups on the pretest. All three groups increased their scores on both tests. For the sentence combining test, group mean gain scores for the FonF, the FonFS, and the FonM were 24.82%, 20.54%, and 13.93%, respectively; the FonF made the most improvement, followed by the FonFS and the FonM. The group mean gain scores for the grammaticality judgment test were 24.55% for the FonF, 17.86% for the FonFS, and 15.03% for the FonM, resulting in a pattern of mean gain scores similar to that observed for the sentence combining test. The pretest mean scores of the three groups were different from one another, but there was no significant relationship between them ($p > .05$). However, results indicated a significant differential effect for

the treatment types on the sentence combining tests, $F=5.033$, $p=.009$ ($p<.05$), as well as on the grammaticality judgment tests, $F=4.601$, $p=.03$ ($p<.05$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Sentence Combining and Grammaticality Judgment Tests

Tests	FonFS (n=29)		FonM (n=31)		FonF (n=28)	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
SCT	%35.54	%60.36	%37.14	%57.68	%38.75	%52.68
SD	3.15	1.57	3.1	1.97	2.89	1.77
GJT	%43.01	%67.56	%43.3	%61.16	%40.92	%55.95
SD	3.63	3.42	3.53	3.37	3.67	3.53

SCT (sentence combining test), GJT (grammaticality judgment test), SD (standard deviation)

Discussion

With respect to the first research questions “Do differences in the three types of instructional treatments – FonF, FonFS, or FonM – lead to difference in language learning?” it can be said that whereas all groups increased their scores from pretest to posttest, the FonF made the most improvement, followed by FonFS, and then the FonM, for both sentence combining test and grammaticality judgment test.

According to the degrees of explicitness in instructional approaches presented by Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1988), it can be said that during the instructional treatment, the FonFS was provided with instruction in which the participants were led to “explicitly call attention to a grammatical feature” and “articulate an informal pedagogical *rule* as an instructional aid” in which the participants were taught how to identify head nouns and

modifying clauses and were asked to pay close attention to the structure and function of the RC in the sentence. As in Abdolmanafi (2010), Ammar and Lightbown (2004), Doughty (1991) and Yabuki-Soh (2007), the participants in this group were provided with the rules and steps necessary to combine two simple sentences into one complex sentence using a RC. The instructor's corrective feedback to participants was focused on form-related errors as well. The participants were also exposed to opportunities to explore and analyze, in detail, linguistic information about English RCs. Spada and Lightbown (1999) have suggested, in their study on the learning of ESL question forms, that "explicit instruction, including contrastive metalinguistic information, may be needed to help students move beyond apparently stable interlanguage patterns".

On the other hand, the FonM activities were designed to "implicitly call attention to a grammatical feature through calculated exposure of the learner to crucial pre-selected data" (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1988) in which the participants were given the same amount of exposure to expressions of English RCs as the FonFS or FonF participants, using sentences similar to those given to two groups. They were provided with activities that would lead to the understanding of the meaning and use of RC structures, using visual aids instead of detailed explanation of the rules of relativization. All of the FonM tasks were designed to be meaning-oriented, and the instructor's feedback to participants was also restricted to meaning-focused feedback. The FonM improved from pretest to posttest, but not as much as the other two groups. Meaning-focused practice and production of the target structure without detailed analysis of it during the FonM treatments enabled participants to contextually comprehend RC sentences but might not have been optimal in leading them to fully understand the structural and functional complexity of the grammatical subsystem of relativization.

The overall performance of FonM participants could also be related to the types of cognitive process that they were involved in during the treatment sessions. Izumi and Izumi (2004 as cited in Yabuki-Soh, 2007) who explored the effects of output on the learning of ESL RCs in an oral mode, found that their output group did not outperform the non-output group on either production or interpretation tests – a result that contrasted with Izumi’s previous study (2002) on the acquisition of relativization through the written modality. To explain this, Izumi and Izumi suggested that the L2 learners in the output group might have been engaged in mere imitative production of the target form, without necessarily being involved in matching meaning with the form that they heard. The authors concluded that “even when an output activity is intended to be a communicative task with added focus on form (via output), it may not necessarily engage learners as such and thus may not work as intended by the researchers,” and that “great care needs to be taken to ensure that genuine production mechanisms, rather than mere repetition, are engaged before output can contribute to interlanguage development”. Although the meaning-based activities in the current study were intended to promote both the comprehension and production of English RCs, some of the FonM participants might have been involved in mere production practice without actually engaging in much syntactic processing through form-meaning mapping.

The FonF group, on the other hand, was given a combination of explicit and implicit approaches during the treatment sessions. The test results show that whereas all three groups increased their scores from pretest to posttest, the FonF made the most improvement, followed by the FonFS, and then the FonM, for both comprehension and sentence-combination tests. The Participants in the FonF also increased their scores on both tests. It is possible that because the FonF activities were more effective than the FonFS and FonM activities proving the fact that

combinations of different types of instructional techniques are argued to be more useful and effective than one individual type (e.g., Ellis, 1993). The results of this study indicate that a combination of FonFS and FonM treatments which results in FonF provides students with an optimal opportunity for learning. In the present study, such FonF instruction appeared to work best for participants to accurately comprehend and produce sentences with RCs.

With respect to the second research questions, “Can raising learner’s metalinguistic awareness of specific L2 forms – relative clause – facilitate acquisition?”, the results suggest that it facilitates grammatical ability and comprehension. Referring to Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, Fotos and Ellis (1994), and Doughty and Williams (1998b), it was suggested that FonF by directing learner attention to target structures within meaning-focused contexts allows learners to notice the forms and therefore possibly learn them due to a deliberate direction of learner attention to the grammatical forms. Thus, in the present study the learners in FonF group outperformed the ones in the FonM group, who received a purely communicative treatment and the FonF group also showed better performance than the FonFS participants, who received teacher-centered grammar explanations.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the effectiveness of three different methods of instruction (FonFS, FonM, and FonF) indicating that focus on form studies are more effective than the other ones in L2 linguistic contexts as confirmed by other studies (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2002). The finding also demonstrates that differences in the types of instructional treatments lead to differences in language learning, and that raising learners’ metalinguistic awareness of specific L2 forms facilitates acquisition to a certain extent.

The study also indicates that the type of instruction plays an important role in the acquisition of L2 RCs, at least in the short term and with the measurements employed. In the context of the teaching and learning of English relativization, L2 learners' attention to detailed analysis of grammar structures facilitated the comprehension and production of RCs. Whereas all three groups received different types of formal instruction and appeared to have improved their knowledge of the target structure, the findings suggest that focus on form instruction in this context might be more beneficial for helping L2 learners to move on to advanced levels of proficiency as confirmed by some other studies (Kempees, 2011).

Further, the findings of this study are of particular relevance to language learning and teaching in general and teaching grammar in particular. The findings also have theoretical and practical considerations for syllabus designers and material developers.

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