THE EFFECT OF TASK REPETITION AND NOTICING ON EFL LEARNERS' ORAL OUTPUT

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Teaching grammar is still a topic of heated debate in second/foreign language teaching. One major approach to teaching grammar holds that the learners should receive reactive focus on form in the context of communicative language teaching. The present study is an attempt to examine the effect of task repetition along with reactive focus on form on learners' subsequent accurate output. To achieve this end, four Iranian intermediate EFL students participated in this study by volunteering to present lectures while their voices were being recorded. After transcribing their voices at home, the participants corrected their mistakes and submitted the draft to their teacher for additional corrections. The revised draft was returned to the participants to prepare themselves for a second oral presentation. The comparison of the number of erroneous utterances made in the first and the second presentations confirmed the positive effect of task repetition on the participants' more accurate second oral performance.

Key Words: focus on form, output hypothesis, noticing, task repetition, oral output, teaching grammar, language teaching, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Since the recognition of language teaching as a field which deserves careful study, there have been controversies over how to teach linguistic components in language pedagogy. Scholars belonging to different schools of thought have expressed their views on teaching grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. by raising questions as to whether these components should constitute the basic units of the instructional syllabus, whether they should be taught explicitly or implicitly, or whether they should be instructed in isolation or integration with language skills. Still considered to be the backbone of language knowledge, grammar and grammar teaching have gained favour over other linguistic

components and thus many studies have been conducted by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and practitioners in this respect. One of the controversial issues which still remains unresolved is whether and how to include grammar in second language (L2) instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2006; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Such questions along with the pervasive notions and beliefs in vogue have yielded a couple of options for teaching language forms. Each proposition is naturally subjected to criticism and further revision.

Literature Review

Long (1991) suggested that the old modes of language instruction which laid emphasis on teaching language bits are not fruitful. He contended that language learning is not such a simplistic matter as against a complex process of cognitive development. On the other hand, Long (1991) did not approve of the strong version of the communicative approach, as it ignored grammar. What he put forward, instead, was a focus on form as a way of paying heed to forms while communicating. Long (1991) recommended the use of an indirect, context-based presentation of grammar forms, rather than overt, teacher-led instruction. Since its publication, Long's seminal work has stimulated extensive research on methods of integrating grammar instruction with communicative language teaching. According to Long (1991), "Focus on form … overtly draws learners' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (pp. 45-46).

Reactive focus on form

Being inadequate to provide language learners with enough evidence for language learning, positive evidence should be presented to learners along with negative evidence. One option to present negative evidence is reactive focus on form, which involves the treatment of the learners' erroneous utterances upon their occurrence and is therefore a priori. This appears to be what Long (1991) had in mind in conceptualizing focus on form. Reactive focus on form could be either conversational or didactic. According to Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002), the former occurs when there is a breakdown in the flow of conversation resulting in the teacher addressing an error through negotiating of meaning. On the other hand, sometimes the problem may not be serious and hence does not impede communication; however, the teacher chooses to fix the error, as when a learner leaves out a definite article. The focus-on-form episode that grows out of this type of error treatment constitutes a kind of pedagogic 'time-out' from meaning-focused communication and for this reason can be considered didactic (Ellis et al., 2002).

Noticing

Based on his input hypothesis, Krashen (1981, 1982, 1985) has consistently argued that comprehensible input is the only causative factor in second language acquisition. He believes that input converts into intake as learners connect form to meaning and notice gaps between their present competence and the input. Later, Swain (1985, 1995, 2005) claimed that input should be complemented with output and thus offered the output hypothesis, according to which, the production of language by a learner is not merely the result of acquisition, but is rather a critical contributor to acquisition. In fact, when second language learners are exposed to large amounts of input but have inadequate opportunity to produce the target language, acquisition is short circuited to some extent in terms of morphosyntactic accuracy (Jernigan, 2007). Swain (1995) proposed three roles for output in second language learning: the noticing function, the hypothesis-testing, and the metalinguistic function. With regard to the noticing aspect of output, Swain (1995) asserts that:

in producing the target language (vocally or subvocally) learners may notice a gap between what they *want* to say and what they *can* say, leading them to recognize what they do not know, or know only partially. In other words, under some circumstances, the activity of producing the target language may prompt second language learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems; it may bring to their attention something they need to discover about their L2. (pp. 125–126).

Noticing introduced as one of the three functions of output in SLA can be considered to have several levels. In what Schmidt and Frota (1986) called *noticing the gap principle* learners notice how their interlanguage is different from the target language. On another level, learners notice that they cannot say what they want to say precisely in the target language. Doughty and Williams (1998) refer to this level as *noticing the hole*. It is obvious that noticing happens during the process of production when learners find a deficiency in their present level of competence and thus go after filling the gap. However, there are voices of dissent among scholars on the role and amount of awareness in learning (Izumi, 2002). While Schmidt (1995) pronounces the significance of focal attention and awareness, Tomlin and Villa (1994) maintain that mere *detection* which does not require conscious awareness, is crucial for learning. But an important consideration is how we can draw the learners' attention to certain forms?

Promoting noticing of form

Being unanimous on the importance of drawing the learners' attention to linguistic forms, researchers have tried different strategies and compared their

differential effects on learners' attentional processes. Within the second/foreign language classroom context, there are several ways of drawing learners' attention to form, two of which are textual input enhancement and output stimulation (Izumi, 2002). The difference between these two approaches is that the former draws attention externally while in latter attention arises internally.

Doughty and Williams (1998) define textual input enhancement as an implicit and unobtrusive means to draw the learners' attention to form. Input enhancement can be achieved through flagging, bolding, highlighting, underlining, etc. The results of a number of studies (Alanen, 1995; Jourdenais, et al., 1995; Leow, 1997) on the influence of enhanced input are inconclusive, though they generally tend to support input enhancement.

Playing a vital role in language learning, output requirement is posited to present learners with unique opportunities to process language (Swain, 1995). Learning takes place when learners find difficulty in producing an intended structure or produce it in a non-target-like manner and are subsequently provided with the related input to overcome these problems. According to Thornbury (1997), the tasks which promote noticing allow learners to attend to form and provide them with the incentive to make comparison between interlanguage output and target language models.

Task-based instruction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the configurations of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which puts pedagogic tasks as the core unit of planning and language teaching practice. Task-based instruction emphasizes classroom interaction, learner-centered teaching, and authentic language use (Ellis, 2003). Various definitions have been proposed for task. Ellis (2009) refers to the following as the common key features:

- The primary focus should be on meaning, which means that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterance.
- There should be some kind of gap, i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion, or to infer meaning.
- Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.
- There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language, i.e. language serves as a means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).

Tasks have been investigated by scholars from cognitive point of view in terms of attentional resources used during task completion, the influence of task

characteristics on performance, and the impact of different conditions under which tasks are completed (Skehan, 2003). Within the realm of the influence of task condition, one line of investigation is task repetition. Bygate (1996) has argued strongly for the value of task repetition. In his study, 11 participants orally retold a video story and then retold the same story 10 weeks later. After reviewing participants' comments, he argued that task repetition has a beneficial impact on performance, with the repeated performance producing a more syntactic engagement. Similarly, Lynch and McLean (2001), working with students taking English for academic purposes (EAP) courses, realized that being able to improve one's second description of an event varied from learner to learner, with the more advanced learners feeling more confident of their improvement. Finally, using a range of measures, Gass, et al. (1999) demonstrated that task repetition results in improvement in overall proficiency, selected morphosyntax, and lexical sophistication.

The Present Study

Given the fact that tasks affect learners and their production, it is important to investigate task characteristics that invoke noticing and hence promote learning. Obviously, in oral presentation, learners are faced with time constraint and simultaneous processing of both form and meaning, which reduce their attentional capacity. The purpose of the present study is to investigate whether giving learners a second chance to reproduce a story orally, after their errors have been reacted to, would improve their subsequent performance. Hence, the study is intended to answer this research question: Does reactive focus on form coupled with task repetition improve learners' oral accuracy?

METHOD

Participants

Four Iranian English language students volunteered to participate in the study. The participants, all females, were members of a class of 12 learners who, on average, had been taking courses for 2 and a half years at a language teaching center in Tehran, Iran. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 25 and at the time of the study they were at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The class was taught by the second researcher in the present study.

Materials and procedure

As part of their final grades, the participants were supposed to read a story book. The assigned book to read was the simplified version of *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, which is a stage-5 book in terms of difficulty and number of words from *Oxford Bookworms Library Series*. The participants were supposed to read the story chapter by chapter and then present it orally to

the class. They were told to talk about the general course of actions and plot of the story and were allowed to use the notes they had already made at home. Each chapter of the book was about 10 pages and it usually took the participants 4 or 5 minutes to present each chapter. Since they were taking part in a semi-intensive course, every session two chapters were covered. The rationale behind using a story book for the purpose of this research was that the participants would not have to deal with the burden of selecting a topic.

The four students who had volunteered to take part in the experiment were told about the procedure. For the first session, two of them read two chapters of the story at home and talked about them one by one in front of the class for four minutes while their voices were being recorded by two voice recorders. Then they transcribed their presentations at home and made corrections to their errors. The corrected draft was e-mailed to the second researcher and he made further corrections to the transcriptions. For example, "In Farsi we say به کسی حمله کردن while in English they say "attack each other, with no prepositions". Given that the participants were at the intermediate level of language proficiency and the points focused on were not complicated grammatical points, detailed explanation was unnecessary. As the researchers' interest was didactic focus on form, they did not analyse the content. For this reason the areas of focus were *verb* and *preposition usage*, *direct translation*, and some other less occurring errors entitled *others*.

In the case of verbs and given the fact that the participants made many mistakes, for example, on verb tenses, some explanations were given by the teacher. An example is "Since you are narrating a story, you should use past simple". In the case of prepositions, sometimes the sources from which the participants may have restored their choices were mentioned and a brief explanation was added. For example, "you should say *in July* not *at July*; *at* is used for exact times and certain expressions (e.g., at midnight, at 8:00) and *in* is used for longer periods such as months, years, and seasons". In the case of direct translations, all first language (L1) sources of the errors were mentioned, the correct forms were provided, and the learners were cautioned to avoid such false comparisons. In the case of modifiers, again comments were given. For example, "*people* is countable and thus you should have used *few* instead of *little*."

This second draft was e-mailed back to the participants so that they could work on it again and prepare themselves for the second speech. The next session their voices were recorded again, while they were delivering their speech based on the revised draft, and this time the recordings were taken home by the second researcher for transcription and further analysis. In the second session, the second pair of the participants delivered their first lectures and they underwent the same procedures described above. After the second pair of the participants

had gone through the procedure thoroughly, the second researcher analyzed the four final transcriptions (two transcriptions from the first pair and two from the second pair).

RESULTS

The mistakes corrected by the participants and the second researcher fall into the following categories:

Verbs

The most frequently occurring errors were made in verb usage. Though learners had already had enough practice on verb tenses, they were very inconsistent in using the correct form and wavered between simple present and simple past:

David got up at 7. He went to Mr. Strong's office and work there for two hour, then he went Mr. Spenlow's office and worked there hard and again go back to Mr. Strong's office ……

The second common area of mistakes was with grammatical morphemes. Sometimes the participants added past morpheme *-ed* to irregular verbs and even worse was the case of third person singular morpheme, which was absent in a great proportion of present tense verbs. In addition, the instances of negation using *do* instead of *does* were observed frequently.

Other problematic areas for learners were sequence of verbs and verb forms after modals. The following examples are taken from transcriptions:

He wanted to does …

You must showed me …

Totally, the participants made 47 mistakes almost half of which were corrected by themselves. In their presentations, they showed better improvement in verb usage compared to other categories (see Table 1).
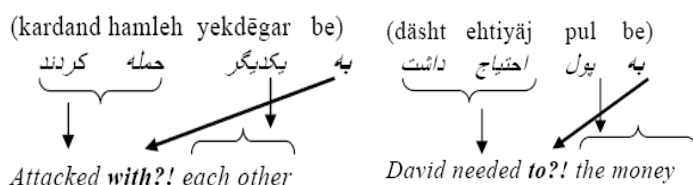
Table 1. Number of mistakes and corrections made to verbs

Participant	number of mistakes	number of corrections made in transcript	number of corrections made in speech
A	13	6	5
B	10	7	6
C	12	5	6
D	12	5	7

Direct translation

One of the sources of error was direct translation. There were many instances in which learners translated what they had in mind directly into English based on

Persian structure. Verbs and prepositions were the parts of speech which had the highest frequency. Below are some such instances:

(kardand hamleh yekdēgar be)   (däsht ehtiyäj pul be)

به یکدیگر حمله کردند   به پول احتیاج داشت

*Attacked **with?!** each other*   *David needed **to?!** the money*

In the examples above, the bold pointers signal the errors. In the first example, the verb *attack* in Farsi is followed by به which is falsely translated into *with*. Another instance is the case of *need* which in Farsi is accompanied by به and erroneously translated by learners into *to*.

Totally, 16 errors were made on direct translation. The participants spotted only a few errors and fixed them in their speech (see Table 2).

Table 2. Number of mistakes and corrections made to direct translations

Participant	number of mistakes	number of corrections made in transcript	number of corrections made in speech
A	4	2	2
B	4	1	2
C	5	0	0
D	3	0	1

Noun modifiers and prepositions

This happened partly due to direct translation as in *very better*. In this example, the difficulty could be traced to the sixth level of Prator's (1967) grammatical hierarchy, or *split* (cited in Brown, 2007). According to Prator, split occurs when one item in the native language becomes two or more in the target language. In Farsi, بسیار has the three equivalents *very, many* and *much* in English. Since *very* enjoys higher frequency, learners may substitute *very* for *much* and *many*. Totally, 13 mistakes were made and more repairs were made in oral presentations (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of mistakes and corrections made to noun modifiers and prepositions

Participant	number of mistakes	number of corrections made in transcript	number of corrections made in speech
A	3	1	3
B	3	2	2
C	4	0	2
D	3	2	2

Others

There was a plethora of other mistakes which did not have a high frequency and came from different areas. Some of these categories were the improper use of parts of speech as in *he dead because he was …*, the improper use of singular/plural nouns and verbs as in *one people …*, the absence of parallel structures, etc. In this area, 29 mistakes were made.

Table 4. Number of mistakes and corrections made to other mistakes

Participant	*number of mistakes*	*number of corrections made in transcript*	*number of corrections made in speech*
A	8	5	4
B	5	3	2
C	10	5	5
D	6	4	2

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A total of 105 mistakes were made in 15 to 20 minutes of speech. Of course, corrections on semantic and phonological features could have been made; however, since the researchers were concerned with didactic focus on form, those mistakes were ignored.

By referring to the statistics, we can clearly see that the participants had the most difficulty in producing the correct form of verbs, though this might have been due to the high frequency of the verbs in their speech. In spite of the extensive instruction they had received on verb tenses, the participants still fell short of detecting their tense problems even when they had enough time for processing. In the case of third person singular, it was interesting to see that the participants corrected those verbs which appeared right after the pronoun and if there were intervening words between the verb and the pronoun, they would rarely mention this problem. This further shows that learning the third person singular morpheme is cognitively demanding and is one of the last grammatical forms to be learned in the row of inflectional morphemes. Not fixing more than half the number of their mistakes, the participants could be said to be at the controlled stage of processing and not to have reached the automatic processing stage at the intermediate level based on McLaughlin's (1987) conception of automaticity.

In the case of these participants, the use of direct translation cannot be taken as a manifestation of strategic competence. Firstly, they detected very few of their mistakes (3 out of 16), and secondly, they were not successful in using the corrections made by the teacher in their speech. Had it been strategic competence, they should have used them in their speech.

Prepositions were another category ignored by the participants as there is no categorical rule for their application (except for some prepositions whose explanation was provided by the second researcher while making corrections), which the participants had to learn. Preferring to use monolingual dictionaries, which do not provide much information on the use of prepositions use might have been the source of this problem. One of the areas where the participants had problems with prepositions was the case of L1 influence on L2 as in *needed to* which was previously discussed.

Although there is no guarantee that the participants did not memorize some parts of the revised draft on their second presentation, it seems they benefited from the repetition of the task. After the oral production, the participants were asked to revise their output transcription and give it a careful consideration. This was further supplemented by the teacher's comments. According to Doughty and Williams (1998), by focusing learners' attention on form, the researchers had them allocate their focal attention to form and thus notice their deficiencies. The fact that the participants had an opportunity to produce language, notice the errors in the output, and correct them points to the substantial noticing function of the output. Task repetition provided the participants with further opportunity to use the correct forms and thus had a positive effect on their accuracy.

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