

## Contextualizing Grammar Instruction through Meaning-Centered Planned Pre-emptive Treatment and Enhanced Input in an EFL Context

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### Abstract

This study has aimed to compare the effects of two types of form-focused instruction, i.e. de-contextualized focus-on-forms instruction versus meaning-centered contextualized focus-on-form instruction, on the development of grammatical knowledge of Iranian high-school students. Two groups of male high-school first graders participated in this study. One group was taught through de-contextualized deductive grammatical explanation, while the other group received enhanced input and contextualized grammar instruction embedded in meaning-centered activity based on dialogs. The results indicated that de-contextualized instruction as it is normally practiced in high-school contexts failed to promote successful use of the auxiliaries *do*, *does*, and *did* in a written production test. In contrast, adding the design features of meaning-based contextualization and enhanced input to instruction did result in better performance on a written production grammar test involving the use of the auxiliaries under study. In the delayed posttest, contextualized meaning-based instruction appeared to have a durable effect, but the effect was not significant enough to warrant any claim for the durable superiority of this form of instruction.

**Keywords:** contextualized FoF instruction, de-contextualized FoFs instruction, durable effects, enhanced input, grammatical knowledge

### Introduction

English language teaching has witnessed a great deal of controversy about the effectiveness of different methods of teaching grammar. Some second language acquisition (SLA) theorists clearly emphasize the role of meaning comprehension in acquiring L2 knowledge and downplay the role of explicit grammar instruction, arguing that it results only in what they call *learning*, as opposed to implicit, incidental language acquisition (e.g., Krashen, 1981, 1994). However, other SLA researchers (e.g., Ellis, 2008) justify form-focused instruction FFI on the grounds that it is one way to help learners alter the non-target-like representations. However, Saraceni (2008), taking a more balanced position, believes that "the focus-on-form approach is an alternative to, and evolution of, the focus-on-forms approach – where grammar points were taught in isolation – and the focus-on-meaning approach – where all the emphasis was placed exclusively on meaning" (p. 165).

The question has always been felt as to why so many English as a foreign language EFL learners in FFI-oriented classes in Iran fail not only to acquire the minimum level of communicative language ability but also to perform well on tests of grammatical knowledge. The answer to this question may lie somewhere in the controversy concerning the advantages and disadvantages of the above approaches, that is, focus-on-forms, focus-on-meaning, and focus-on-form.

In an EFL context like Iran, English is neither spoken as a language for communication nationwide nor used as a medium of instruction in pre-university educational settings. EFL university students usually hear it spoken by university professors and have to speak it themselves due to course requirements and classroom necessities. However, this is not usually the case at junior and senior secondary education levels. The only alternative left, to learners' disadvantage, is to explain grammatical structures without contextualizing them. Language is considered an *object* of study not a *tool* for communication. Thinking very optimistically, the only outcome of these premises would be memorized meta-lingual knowledge held by students to be regurgitated on demand. The acquisition of this meta-lingual knowledge would, in most cases, necessitate complicated mind-baffling explanations by the

teacher and very heavy overloads on the students' brains to understand such explanations.

All this probably happens because students are taught not *language* and *how to learn and use the language* but '*to learn about the language*', in Larsen-Freeman's (2000) terms. An offspring of this situation is the short durability of meta-lingual knowledge, if any, simply because students do not *use* what they might laboriously have achieved, that is, their meta-lingual knowledge. It seems that they study *anything about something except that something itself*. They almost never come to realize what language itself is and what it is like to *know* and *use* a foreign language. Focus-on-forms as "the traditional approach to grammar teaching based on a structural syllabus" (Ellis, 2008, p. 962), is almost all that they are exposed to at pre-university levels except for some reading activity which is materialized as text translation at best. Rarely does this aim at creating a two-way interaction between the text and the reader.

The theoretical rationale for FFI comes from two psycholinguistic bases (Ellis, 2003). The first relates to information-processing and skill acquisition theories. From among the different accounts of skill-automatization in cognitive psychology, Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought model is adopted in this study (Anderson, 1983). In this model, which is similar to McLaughlin's information-processing model (McLaughlin, 1987), practice resulting in automatization plays a central role (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). The basic premise of Anderson's model is that much of the language knowledge starts as declarative knowledge and that the proceduralization of this declarative knowledge results in skill development. When applied to language knowledge, declarative knowledge involves explicit knowledge of grammatical rules. Such declarative knowledge can become proceduralized when it has become fully automatized, that is, when it can correctly be used by learners without having to think about it consciously. The problem with this argument is that it is not clear whether any instructional experience in any instructional situation will lead to the formation of declarative knowledge as the starting point so that it would then trigger the process of proceduralization through practice and repeated activation. A further question is whether any declarative knowledge for any language learner in any instructional situation, if it is formed as a result of instruction at all, can be changed into implicit procedural knowledge in an EFL

context solely through repeated activation and practice in the absence of other necessary conditions such as information gap and meaning negotiation.

The second theoretical basis for justifying FFI relates to the importance of noticing in Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis. This hypothesis is a claim about how input becomes intake – that part of the input that is used for acquisition. It claims that conscious awareness (noticing) of grammar plays an important role in the process (Truscott, 1998). Schmidt (1990) claimed that attention to input is a conscious process. He views noticing and noticing the gap as essential processes in L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2008). The problem with this hypothesis, as Truscott (1998) has rightly observed, is whether one is justified in associating the notion of attention with consciousness. In other words, do consciousness and awareness necessarily entail attention? Even if they do, can one claim that this is always the case with all, or at least most, of the learners for whom many other prerequisite conditions and factors for arousing and sustaining attention to grammatical structures are non-existent? More importantly, this second theoretical basis *may*, of course, hold true in the case of CFoF instruction because the grammatical structures are, at the very least, presented in a rich enough context. However, when applied to DFoFs instruction in the absence of any focus on meaning and without necessary context, as is the case with traditional approaches to teaching grammar based on a structural syllabus, the noticing is much more unlikely to take place and make a difference.

Although the interface positions adopted by some authors, that is, explicit knowledge can become implicit knowledge by practice (Anderson, 1983; DeKeyser, 1998, cited in Doughty & Williams), is itself in doubt, still the question of interest here is whether explicit DFoFs instruction can amount to any type of linguistic knowledge which enhances learners' successful performance on grammatical tests/tasks, let alone the higher-level question of its proceduralization. This study poses the argument that unless there are opportunities for learners to actively engage in contextualized meaning-focused activities which represent, as closely as possible, real-life language use situations, teaching grammatical structures in a de-contextualized way will lead nowhere, as is the case with teaching English at high-school level in Iran. Therefore, the enhancing role of grammatical instruction embedded in a context

of meaning-centered activity and use is what the present study has aimed to explore, that is, CFoF instruction as opposed to DFoFs instruction which Ellis (2008, p.962) maintains "is evident in the traditional approach to grammar teaching based on a structural syllabus". Ellis further maintains that in this approach the underlying assumption is that language learning is a process of accumulating distinct entities. A further argument is that although meaning-focused opportunities for language use are essential for acquiring the ability to learn and use new linguistic forms communicatively, learners are likely to prioritize meaning over form while performing a communicative activity because their second language processing capacity is too limited to simultaneously attend to both meaning and form (Ellis, 2008; Van Patten, 1990). This is why Ellis (2008) believes that "...it is necessary to find ways of drawing learners' attention to form *during* [italics in original] a communicative activity" (p.828). This is achievable through CFoF instruction.

Ellis (2008, pp.827–8) distinguishes between two major types of FoF instruction – namely, incidental and planned. He maintains that incidental FoF occurs when learners' attention is drawn to form while they are performing an unfocused task (i.e., the linguistic focus is not predetermined). In this case, the FoF is typically extensive (i.e., addresses a wide range of linguistic features). Planned FoF, Ellis maintains, requires a focused task and is intensive (i.e., it is concentrated on the linguistic feature that is the target of the task). Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002) summarize the various options for inducing attention to form in the context of meaning-focused language use as follows:

- A. Reactive focus-on-form through which the teacher or another student responds to an error that a student makes in the context of a communicative activity. It is subcategorized as: (1), negotiation (conversational and didactic), (2), Feedback (implicit feedback and explicit feedback).
- B. Pre-emptive focus-on-form through which the teacher or a student makes a linguistic form the topic of the discourse even though no error has been committed. It is further subdivided as (1) Student- initiated (a student asks a question about a linguistic form), and (2) Teacher-initiated (the teacher gives advice about a linguistic form s/he thinks might be problematic or asks the students a question about the form).

In the section that follows, some studies on the effectiveness of form-focused instruction will be sketched. Also, reference will be made to some studies exploring the durable effects of form-focused instruction.

The literature on explicit FoFs instruction bears witness to inconclusive results. Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) did not find any statistically significant effect of meta-linguistic-based corrective feedback on the accuracy in using past tense *ed*. However, they did find a significant effect in a delayed test after two weeks. Takimoto (2008) found that different types of form-focused instruction significantly enhanced learners' comprehension and production of polite requests in English. Ponniah (2009) examined the learning experience of adult ESL students who depended on consciously learned knowledge for developing second language competence. The results of the study confirmed that consciously learned language competence did not help them acquire language. Some researchers (e.g., Lightbown, Spada, & Wallace, 1980, cited in Ellis, 2008, pp. 855–856; Pienemann, 1984) found that the effects of grammar instruction may not be durable. Other researchers (Harley, 1989), however, have found that such effects are durable. Ellis (2008) maintained that: "There is, however, sufficient evidence to suggest that instruction does not *always* have a long-term effect" (p.867). As a plausible possibility, he referred to Lightbown's (1992) suggestion that if form-focused instruction is not contextualized within the learners' communicative activities and needs, it will only lead to short-term effects. Tode (2007) concluded that explicit instruction of the copula *be* was effective only in the short term. He maintained that the effects of explicit instruction will be more likely to be durable if (1) opportunities are provided for the learners to experience the target structures after the explicit instruction, (2) there are repetitive contrivances to make the learners notice the feature(s) during language *use* [italics added], and (3) opportunities are provided for learners to contrast the target form with other forms.

A structural approach to language instruction in Iranian junior and senior secondary schools materialized as explanation-based and exercise-oriented grammar teaching has long dominated both language planning and language classes in our educational context. Among other things, the prevalent failure of Iranian students in acquiring adequate L2 knowledge could be attributed to this

approach to language instruction in schools. Such instruction is, to a great extent, dictated by the structure and content of English textbooks which represent a structural orientation manifested through deductive explicit grammar instruction. However, SLA literature introduces other options for teaching the grammar of a second/foreign language. Ellis (2008, pp. 869-870) proposes a four-option framework of FFI. He starts with input-based options including input flooding, enhanced input, and structured input. The second option – explicit options – includes direct explicit instruction and indirect explicit instruction. Under the third option come text-manipulation and text-creation activities which induce learners to produce the target structure. The fourth option – corrective feedback – includes implicit and explicit corrective feedback. Inspired by this framework, the present study was an empirical attempt to investigate whether planned CFoF instruction in the order of (a) provision of enhanced input through written dialogs, (b) elicited negotiation of meaning, (c) teacher- or student-initiated consciousness-raising, and (d) explicit instruction will prove a better alternative to the current de-contextualized explanation-based analysis of grammatical structures DFoFs. In other words, it aimed at providing empirical evidence about the inefficiency of the current explanation-based approach to teaching English grammar in high-school classes in Iran. This was put into perspective by comparing the current de-contextualized approach DFoFs with meaning-focused contextualized CFoF approach to grammar instruction.

The present study has been an attempt to investigate whether contextualizing grammatical points in meaning-focused activities CFoF would prove a better alternative to the commonly adopted de-contextualized approach to the teaching of grammar DFoFs. In other words, it aimed at providing empirical evidence for the inefficiency of the current explanation-based approach to teaching English grammar in high-school classes in Iran. To this end, the following questions were posed in this study.

1. Do de-contextualized focus-on-forms (DFoFs) instruction and contextualized focus-on-form (CFoF) instruction entailing meaning-centered activities and enhanced input through dialogs differentially influence the acquisition of the auxiliaries *do*, *does*, and *did*?
2. Do the two types of instruction in (1) lead to differential durable effects?

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study were 44 males first grader senior-secondary-level students. They were studying in a technical high-school in Karaj, Iran. They had enrolled in two separate classes. One class, consisting of 21 students, was randomly selected as the CFoF group and the other class, including 23 students, as the DFoFs group. They attended English classes three hours a week. They had been taught English following the DFoFs grammar instruction at junior secondary school. None of the participants had experienced any naturalistic exposure to English before.

### Instrumentation

Three written production tests specifically developed to measure the students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge of the correct use of auxiliaries *do*, *does*, and *did* were used. These tests included 16 declarative sentences that the students had to transform into interrogative sentences. One was used as the pre-test, another one as the post-test 1, and a third one as the post-test 2. Parallel-forms reliability using Pearson Correlation was calculated which indicated an acceptable degree of equivalence between the tests across the three administrations. The validity of the tests was insured through submitting them to expert judgment and content analysis.

### Procedure

The participants were given a pre-test to obtain initial information about their prior knowledge of the auxiliaries *do*, *does*, and *did*. This pre-test was a written production test in which the students were required to transform declarative sentences into interrogative sentences by using the auxiliaries under study. Then, the CFoF group received the treatment (i.e., CFoF instruction). The treatment consisted of three sessions of CFoF instruction on the auxiliaries *do*, *does*, and *did*. The reason for the inclusion of these grammatical features was that a majority of high-school students have difficulty using these auxiliaries correctly when they do the exercises in the textbook, that is, both discrete-point multiple-choice exercises and completion-type and writing exercises.



The experimental treatment each session consisted of a dialogue which was the locus of the contextualized activities. The students in the experimental group were given the written transcripts of the dialogue. They were required to think on its content silently and individually. Then, the content of the dialog was discussed to insure their understanding of meaning entailing the use of the auxiliaries *do*, *does*, and *did* in *questions and answers*. This phase continued until complete understanding of the dialogue's meaning by all the students in this group was insured. Then, the dialogue was performed by pairs of students who also asked and answered questions about it. Next, the enhanced input part of the instruction was provided for the students in the experimental group. That is, a second copy of the dialogue was given to the students in which the key parts relating to the usage of the auxiliaries had been highlighted by underlining or in bold face so that the teacher could draw students' attention to those auxiliaries either when a student asked a question or when the teacher explained or asked a question about them. As a next step, additional meaning-focused practice followed, this time encouraging the students to engage in discussion and locating pieces of information in the dialog and at the same time concentrating on the *use* and *usage* of the auxiliaries. Finally, the students were asked to concentrate on the meaning of each sentence in the dialog and on how the auxiliaries had been used in the sentences (*usage*).

The other group received DFoFs instruction which is the common approach to teaching grammar to high-school students in Iran. This type of instruction consisted of the teacher's explicit explanation of the grammatical points in the lesson and the students' answering the questions that followed. Following the treatment, another written production test with content equivalent to that of the pre-test was given to the two groups of students to answer research question 1 (posttest 1). The test was designed so as to elicit the students' correct use of the auxiliaries *do*, *does*, and *did*. Finally, to answer research question 2, a third written production test (posttest 2) was administered to both groups as the second posttest two weeks after the posttest 1.

### **Design**

This study was carried out following an intact-group pretest-treatment-posttest design, with two intact classes which were randomly assigned to the

experimental group and the control group, that is, the CFoF group and the DFoFs group, respectively. The independent variable was an instructional intervention which had two levels, namely meaning-centered planned pre-emptive treatment and enhanced input for the CFoF group and explicit grammatical explanation for the DFoFs group. The dependent variable was operationally defined as participants' accurate use of the auxiliaries do, does, and did to transform declarative sentences into interrogative sentences in written tests.

### Results

Parallel-forms reliability analyses using Pearson Correlation showed the following equivalence coefficients for the tests across different administrations. The reliability indexes are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1  
*Equivalence Reliability Coefficients*

CFoF	Posttest 1	Posttest 2	DFoFs	Posttest 1	Posttest 2
Pretest	.85	.94	Pretest	.82	.86
Posttest 1		.93	Posttest 1		.87

Parallel-forms reliability coefficients in Table 1 showed acceptable indexes of equivalence of the tests across the pretest, posttest1 and posttest 2. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2  
*Descriptive Statistics for Pretest, Posttest1, and Posttest 2*

Instruction		Mean	Standard deviation
Pretest	CFoF	2.89	4.22
	DFoFs	3.02	3.77
Posttest1	CFoF	9.68	5.12
	DFoFs	3.80	3.86
Posttest 2	CFoF	7.20	5.04
	DFoFs	4.51	2.96

As the group means in Table 2 show, unlike the pretest means of the groups which were at a comparable level, the group means on the posttest1 and posttest 2 seemed to be much more different in magnitude. However, for the sake of more precision and statistical comparison of the means across the groups, they were submitted to the mixed between-within subjects tests.

### **Mixed Between-Within Subjects ANOVA or Split-plot ANOVA (SPANOVA) for Comparing Group Means on Pretest, Posttest 1, and Posttest 2**

A between-within subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare scores on the pretest, posttest1, and posttest 2. Table 3 below displays the results of Box's Test for the equality of covariance matrices.

Table 3  
*Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices*

<b>Box's M</b>	<b>12.81</b>
<b>F</b>	<b>1.97</b>
<b>df1</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>df2</b>	<b>12476.336</b>
<b>Sig.</b>	<b>.07</b>

The assumption of homogeneity of covariance matrices – as probed through the Box's test (Table 3) – was also met (Box's M = 12.81,  $P = .07 > .05$ ). Therefore, the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables were equal across the groups. Table 4 below displays the results of the equality of error variances analyses.

Table 4  
*Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances*

	<b>F</b>	<b>df1</b>	<b>df2</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Pretest	.04	1	42	.85
Posttest1	1.45	1	42	.24
Posttest2	2.11	1	42	.15

The assumptions of homogeneity of variances and covariance were met. As displayed in Table 4, the Levene's  $F$ -values of ( $F = .04, P = .85 > .05$ ) for the pretest, ( $F = 1.45, P = .24 > .05$ ) for the posttest 1, and ( $F = 2.11, P = .15 > .05$ ) for the posttest 2 indicate that these three tests enjoy homogeneous variances, i.e. the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across the groups

### Between-subjects Comparisons

Table 5  
Multivariate Tests

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
<b>Time</b>	<b>Pillai's Trace</b>	.66	39.56	2.00	41.00	.000	.66
	<b>Wilk's Lambda</b>	.34	39.56	2.00	41.00	.000	.66
	<b>Hotelling's trace</b>	1.93	39.56	2.00	41.00	.000	.66
	<b>Roy's Largest Root</b>	1.93	39.56	2.00	41.00	.000	.66
<b>time * instruction</b>	<b>Pillai's Trace</b>	.47	17.93	2.00	41.00	.000	.47
	<b>Wilk's Lambda</b>	.53	17.93	2.00	41.00	.000	.47
	<b>Hotelling's trace</b>	.88	17.93	2.00	41.00	.000	.47
	<b>Roy's Largest Root</b>	.88	17.93	2.00	41.00	.000	.47

As shown in Table 5, there was a significant effect for time\*instruction interaction (Wilks' Lambda=.53,  $F(2, 41) = 17.93, p < .05$ , multivariate partial eta squared = .47). This indicates that there was a significant interaction effect of type of instruction and test time on learners' performance as measured by the tests on three time intervals. More importantly, the main effect for time was significant (Wilk's Lambda = .34,  $F(2, 41) = 39.56, p < .05$ , indicating a statistically significant effect for time; the multivariate partial eta squared = .66, indicating a large enough effect size). The statistically significant effect for time suggested that there was a change in grammar scores across the three different time periods. Put more precisely, the greatest effect for time was evident in CFoF group's performance from the pretest to the posttest 1, not to mention their lower performance on the posttest 2. The data in Table 5 provide the answer to the research question 2, indicating that the major effect for time was

in favor of the CFoF group on the posttest 1, and there was only a trend toward a durable effect for time on the posttest 2 in this study. That is, the CFoF group which performed well on the posttest 1 did not manage to retain a comparable level of readiness and performance on the posttest 2.

Figure 1 below shows the Instruction\*Test Interaction effect.

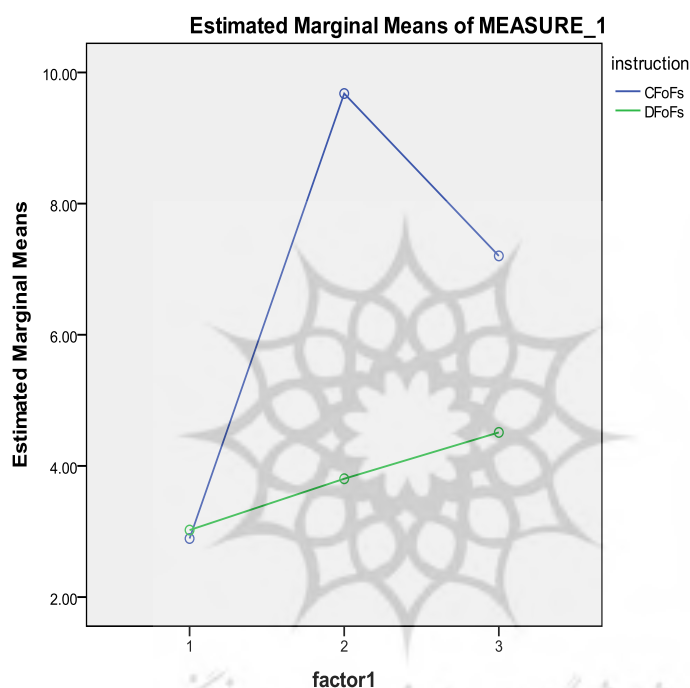


Figure 1. *The Instruction\*Test Interaction*

Figure 1 indicates that the CFoFs group outperformed the DFoFs group on the posttest1 and posttest 2 and that it made much progress from the pretest to posttest1, although it did not perform as well on the posttest 2. The DFoFs group's performance did not significantly change from the pretest to the posttest 1 and finally to the posttest 2, however. Further analyses for the between-subjects comparisons concerning the main effect of the type of instruction are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6  
*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	3541.58	1	3541.58	79.39	.000	.65
Instruction	260.46	1	260.46	5.84	.02	.12
Error	1873.69	42	44.61			

The between-subjects test in Table 6 also shows that the main effect for type of instruction was significant ( $F(1, 42) = 5.84, p < .05$ , the partial eta squared value is .12 which shows a significantly large effect size. To closely spot the source of the effect size, further consideration of the means in the descriptive statistics can clearly indicate that the difference was in favor of the CFoF group on the posttest 1, but it only shows a trend toward a large effect for this group on the posttest 2. However, the DFoFs group did not make any considerable progress from the pretest to either of the posttests. The results in Table 6 provide the answer to the first research question, indicating that the type of instruction in this study only contributed to the CFoF group's learning of the grammatical points under study, but the DFoFs instruction did not seem to benefit the DFoFs group.

### Discussion

In general, the findings are in line with previous research which endorses the effectiveness of CFoF instruction for developing linguistic knowledge. The findings of the present study suggest that even for explicit instruction to contribute to explicit linguistic knowledge, it must be contextualized and embedded in a context of meaning-centered activity. Otherwise, as Macaro and Masterman (2006) have argued, one could not simply expect de-contextualized explicit explanation to improve grammatical knowledge or lead to reduction of errors in controlled or uncontrolled production tasks. The tasks used in the present study were also of the controlled production type. The CFoF group who received explicit instruction following meaning-focused activity on dialogs which included the grammar points under study outperformed the DFoFs group who received de-contextualized grammatical explanation only. Of course, it should be mentioned here that the CFoF instruction in this study does not denote genuine focus-on-form instruction as proposed by Long (1991, cited in

de Bot, Ginsberg, & Kramersch). The learners in this study, who were representative of a large number of Iranian first grader high-school students in terms of background language education, were not at a level of general English proficiency to be exposed to genuine focus-on-form instruction. Therefore, CFoF was utilized simply as a means of contextualizing the grammatical features under study rather than implementing genuine incidental focus-on-form. This contextualization was followed by explicit instruction on the grammatical features. In fact, the only difference between the two types of instruction was the use of a meaning-centered contextualization and enhanced input in CFoF. The effectiveness of the CFoF instruction in this study is in line with Tode's (2007) argument that repetitive contrivances to make the learners notice the feature(s) during language *use* are needed to make form-focused instruction effective.

The achievement of the learners in the DFoFs group was not comparable to that of the experimental CFoF group even in the short term, that is, on the posttest 1. This finding can be explained in view of the fact that for those learners who have not touched the reality of the language within a meaning-centered activity, it would be misleadingly illogical to expect the development of much linguistic knowledge, even of an explicit type, simply through DFoFs instruction. This type of instruction introduces philosophically complex and abstract information for which there is neither background knowledge nor motivation to understand.

These findings are in accordance with those obtained by Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) who found that DFoFs instruction in the form of meta-linguistic comments was not useful in enhancing the development of linguistic knowledge. They are also comparable to those reported in a study by Tode (2007) in which explicit instruction on copula *be* was effective only in the short term, reflecting Lightbown's (1992) suggestion that if form-focused instruction is not contextualized within the learners' communicative activities and needs, it will only lead to short-term effects. What is particularly different in the present study, however, is that DFoFs instruction did not even lead to short-term effects. This part of the study supports the original argument against the effectiveness of this type of form-focused instruction. It is not claimed, however, that CFoF instruction leads to automatic implicit knowledge. What is speculated is that even for explicit learning and explicit linguistic knowledge, a traditional structural syllabus based on abstract grammatical explanations *about* the language rules will lead nowhere.

The observed effectiveness of CFoF in this study may probably be attributed to the active participation of learners in the CFoF group during the treatment. Such participation itself could be due to a new feeling of usefulness

and instrumentality of language created in the learners through being engaged in meaning-focused learning activities.

As it was argued earlier, meaning-centered activities are a better alternative for enhancing and improving students' linguistic knowledge, at least *explicit* knowledge, in an EFL context such as Iran. That is, any teaching of grammatical features must be embedded in the context of meaning-centered language use. As Clark (1987) puts it, the sentences used by the teacher to introduce a grammatical feature without proper contextualization usually do not have any illocutionary meaning so as to attract the students' attention. Such sentences, therefore, are not processed by the students and rarely reach the long-term store. As hypothesized previously, a feasible alternative is to provide an appropriate meaningful context in which both conceptual meaning and illocutionary meaning of an utterance or text attract the learners' conscious attention. CFoF instruction, at least in some contexts as the one in this study, can help language teachers provide learners with such a context. A better alternative, however, may be incidental focus-on-form FoF instruction which could not be implemented in this study.

However, the difference between the two groups on posttest 2 was not as significant as on posttest 1. This may be accounted for on the following grounds. First, this was the first time that the CFoF group had received such a meaning-centered instruction. They had not truly internalized the newly-developed linguistic knowledge because they had not been exposed to follow-up practice opportunities. Second, as Tode (2007) has rightly argued, the explicit instruction will be more likely to lead to durable effects if language learners are provided with opportunities to experience the target structures after the explicit instruction and experience repetitive contrivances where they can notice the feature(s) during language use, and finally if they find opportunities for contrasting the target form with other forms. Third, the experimental treatment in this study could probably have had lasting effects if it were followed by further opportunities for practice and restructuring during an "incubation period", in Gass's (1997) terms. That is, there should have been additional follow-up input and practice to confirm the learners' information about the linguistic elements. Macaro and Masterman (2006) also proposed similar explanations. They maintained that "the development of grammatical accuracy (i) cannot easily be hurried, (ii) is individually developed, and (iii) requires continuous exposure to both positive and negative evidence in both receptive and productive tasks" (p. 322).

The fact that the CFoF group did much better on posttest 1 right after the treatment probably could be accounted for by relating their better performance



to the explicit knowledge they had acquired during the treatment. That is, maybe the treatment could only contribute to the development of explicit knowledge because of its restricted length. A repertoire of explicit/analyzed knowledge, if not exposed to sufficient practice over a considerable period of time, is very likely to be forgotten soon. This might reflect the lack of further practice so that their analyzed knowledge could be converted into implicit knowledge (DeKeyser, 1998, cited in Doughty & Williams; Sharwood Smith, 1981). Such implicit knowledge is believed to be more systematic, consistent, and proceduralized (Anderson, 1983; Ellis, 2005). Moreover, the replacement of the CFoF with traditional de-contextualized methodology after the treatment without any contextualization and focus on meaning-centered activities seems to have reduced the initial effects of the CFoF on the delayed posttest.

However, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. In quasi-experimental designs, the internal validity is questionable (Hatch & Farhady, 1982). Because the participants were two intact classes of students without proper randomization, both internal and external validity are likely to have been jeopardized. For practicality reasons, it was not possible to administer tests of sufficient length, which might have negatively affected the reliability of the tests.

The findings of this study can be useful for English language teachers and materials writers as well as for all those who are engaged in teaching and testing language. It can help teachers realize that their de-contextualized teaching of grammar may not enhance learners' linguistic development unless they base their teaching on the elements of usefulness, instrumentality, and functionality of language activities in the context of a meaning-centered classroom context. As it was argued above, the focus of a course of language teaching must be the enhancement of language use embedded in a meaning-centered communicative context rather than a context of passively listening to tedious grammatical explanations by the teacher *about* the language rules. Materials writers can also gain insights from such studies in order to modify what they include in the text-books that they write and their orientations towards how the contents are to be taught.

A large number of students in high schools in Iran can neither use English for communication nor produce grammatically well-formed English sentences while doing the exercises in the text-books. The long-standing traditionally-oriented structural syllabus adopted in high schools for teaching languages in general and for teaching English in particular has denied the learners any motivating context in which they could *touch and feel* the language. It is unlikely that such teaching would result in the development of any linguistic knowledge, not only implicit knowledge but even explicit and meta-linguistic

knowledge which is deemed to be the off-spring of explicit instruction. A better alternative, as far as many empirical studies including the present one have shown, is engaging learners in real-life-like contextualized activities in which language *use* is encouraged. And if any grammatical points and structures are to be taught, they should flow directly or indirectly from such activities rather than being presented and prioritized for their own sake without first having been highlighted for the students as determinants of and contributing to communicative efficiency.

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### **Biodata**

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