

The Impact of Structured Input-based Tasks on L2 Learners' Grammar Learning

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching has received increased attention in second language research. However, the combination of structured input-based approach and task-based language teaching has not been examined in relation to L2 grammar learning. To address this gap, the present study investigated how the structured input-based tasks with and without explicit information impacted learners' grammar learning. The participants were 60 adult learners of English, assigned to two experimental groups and one control group. The two experimental groups were exposed to structured input-based tasks in two types of explicit and implicit information. A pretest-posttest design was employed in order to detect any improvement in participants' grammar learning. The results revealed that (a) the experimental groups significantly outperformed the control group, (b) participants' grammar learning significantly improved in both the experimental groups, (c) structured input-based tasks with explicit information was significantly superior to structured input-based tasks without explicit information.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, structured input-based tasks, explicit information, grammar learning

Introduction

The task-based approach to language teaching has evolved in response to a better understanding of the way languages are learnt. According to Long and Crookes (1991), task-based syllabuses do not chop up language into small pieces, but take holistic, functional and communicative tasks, rather than any specific linguistic item, as the basic unit for the design of educational activity.

Long and Crookes (1993) state that: It is claimed that (pedagogic) tasks provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples to learners _ input which they will inevitably reshape via application of general cognitive processing capacities – and for the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty. New form-function relationships in the target language are perceived by the learner, as a result. The strengthening of the subset of those that are not destabilized by negative feedback, their increased accessibility and incorporation in more intricate associations in long-term memory forms the grammar and constitutes Second Language (L2) development. (p.39)

Such a view of language learning has profound implications for language teaching and the development of various task-based approaches (for example, Long and Crookes, 1991; Prabhu, 1987). The approaches are somewhat disparate, but they share a common idea: giving learners tasks to transact or interact, rather than items to learn. They provide an environment which best promotes the natural language learning process.

Many researchers agree that learners need to notice and pay attention to linguistic form for acquisition (Ellis, 2003; Schmidt, 1990). Therefore, conditions directing the learner's

attention to linguistic form during tasks which requiring meaningful language use are believed to be among the most important programs for learners' acquisition of target language structures; consequently, given adequate opportunities, students can and do learn much of an L2 grammar incidentally, while focusing on meaning, or communication (Krashen, 1985). Research shows, however, that a focus on meaning alone is insufficient to achieve full native-like competence (Swain, 1985) and can be improved upon by periodic attention to language as form (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1991). Hence, there is currently a widespread acceptance within the communicative approach that acquisition of L2 requires that learners attend to formal elements of language form.

On the other hand, among the issues in L2 grammar, a fundamental question is which instructional approaches are most effective for teaching L2 grammar. In fact, many teachers are confused on how to teach grammar. The form-focused instruction of the audio-lingual method trained students that knew a lot about a language but could not apply what they knew to spontaneous speech. Conversely, the lack of grammar instruction in the Communicative Approach has often produced students who communicate well but lack competency. Is it possible to teach grammar in a way that will help students develop grammatical competency, even in spontaneous speech? Ellis (2008) suggests and defines input-based instruction as an instruction that "involves the manipulation of the input that learners are exposed to or are required to process" (p. 285). There are different forms of input-based instruction; one way to implement input-based instruction is to manipulate the input in some way in order to make some target features more noticeable to learners. This type of input-based instruction is called structured input-based instruction. This technique is an instruction that aim at drawing learners' attention to linguistic targets while they are primarily engaged in meaning comprehension. The interest in structured input-based instruction suggests that exposure to input alone, though necessary, but is not enough and some kinds of formal interventions are needed for learners to reach advanced levels of target like competence (Ellis, 2008).

Teachers can draw students' attention to certain language features of input through instruction, increasing the frequency and perceptual salience of the structure and designing tasks that require the students to notice a structure to complete it.

Moreover, most studies that compare the effectiveness of different teaching approaches select two types of awareness-oriented instruction: explicit and implicit instruction. Ellis (2003) emphasizes that the primary goal of explicit and focused grammar instruction is to heighten learners' awareness of grammatical features and systems, and most importantly to promote learner noticing of grammar regularities. Ellis (2008) posits that explicit knowledge results from learning that involves attention to form as contrasted with implicit learning where the focus is on meaning. Supporting the view that awareness of a level of understanding is crucial to L2 learning, and also considering the important role of structured input-based instruction in teaching L2 grammar, this study involves comparisons of the efficacy of implicit versus explicit structured input-based tasks instruction.

Research questions

Considering the points mentioned above about the significance of input-based tasks with providing explicit or implicit information, the following research questions are raised:

1. Do structured input-based tasks *with* explicit information have any statistically significant impact on the grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Do structured input-based tasks *without* explicit information have any statistically significant impact on the grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners?

3. Do structured input-based tasks *with* explicit information and those *without* explicit information have any statistically different impacts on the grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners?

Materials

Participants

In this study, there are two degrees of structured input-based tasks consisting of SIBT with EI and SIBT without EI. As a result of these classifications, there were two experimental groups under these headings as well as one control group. The samples of the present study consisted of three intact groups including 87 subjects who were pretested in order to be homogenized. After the administration of the pretest (PET), one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected for the purpose of this study. As a result, 60 homogenized subjects went through the treatment process. Following this stage, the subjects were divided into three groups including two experimental groups and a control group. Therefore, in each group there were 20 female students. On the other hand, the subjects of the present study were intermediate students whose ages were between 18 to 25 and studied English in the Language Center in Shahid Sattari Air University. The three groups of the subjects are described in detail as follows:
Experimental group 1: subjects experiencing SIBT with EI
Experimental group 2: subjects experiencing SIBT without EI
Control group: subjects experiencing no SIBT without EI

Instruments

The instruments which were used in this study consisted of the Preliminary English Language Test (PET), a grammar pretest and a grammar posttest described as follows:

Preliminary English Language Test (PET)

PET is a well-established English language test suitable for a population of intermediate level institute students. It has earned an excellent reputation as a valid and reliable instrument for measuring English language proficiency for English as a second language. According to the original source of the test, the reliability of the test is .88. In fact, the reading comprehension and listening sections of the test measure important dimensions of second language learning. Each section is of sufficient length to yield reliable results. The test includes 60 questions in which there are 25 listening items and 35 reading comprehension items. Moreover, the test has been standardized since all items have been pretested on large samples of students of diverse language backgrounds enrolled in intensive college-level and high school ESL programs.

Grammar pretest and posttest

In order to access the students' grammar knowledge and evaluate them before and after the effect of the degree of SIBT into different versions explicit and implicit information, a pretest and a posttest were prepared by the researcher. The grammatical points used in this test were selected from conditional sentences type I, II, II and also their reduced forms. The test consisted of fifty multiple choice items with approximately an equal level of difficulty. The construct validity of the test was determined through principal component and a subsequent factor analysis. Regarding the reliability of the test, the researcher had a pilot study on 15 students, and after receiving the feedback from the pilot study, the reliability analysis and item analysis were measured. In the next step, the items which were proved to be unreliable were omitted from the test and were substituted by other items. After another pilot study, the test was proved to be

reliable, and using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) procedures, the researcher found the reliability of the test as much as .89.

Table 1. Reliability statistics of PET, pretest and posttest

Test	PET	Pretest	Posttest
Reliability Method	K R-21	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha
Reliability	.88	.89	.87
Number of items	60	50	50
Number of students	87	20	20

Procedure

Among several research designs, the one which seemed to best fit the purpose of the present study was Quasi-Experimental Design. In fact quasi-experimental designs provide formal means for handling many of the extraneous variables that weaken internal and external validity. It allows comparisons within and between groups that are as similar as the way randomization can make them. The design is in such a way that can be used to infer a causal relationship between two independent variables which were two kinds of SIBT in this study and the changes that they make in dependent variable which was L2 learners' grammar learning.

Hence, the present study consisted of four phases. In the first two phases of the study, two pretests were administered, while in the third phase the treatment took place, followed by the last stage in which the posttest was administered. It must be mentioned that the research took place in a term consisting of two sessions for pretests, twelve sessions for the treatment, and one session for the posttest. The treatment took 30 minutes of each session and three types of conditional sentences as well as their reduced forms were taught. As a result, at the end of the term, all types of conditional sentences were posttested.

Phase one

The first phase of the study involved selecting three intact groups of intermediate students who were studying English at the Language Center in ShahidSattari Air University. One group served as control and the other two were experimental groups. All three groups were given the PET test. The means of the groups were compared using the one-way ANOVA test to determine the possible homogeneity of the students' knowledge of English. In case of the significant difference between the means of the groups, other groups of students had to take the test until three homogenous groups were found. Here is the schematic format of three groups:

Experimental group 1 → pretest → treatment 1 → posttest
 Experimental group 2 → pretest → treatment 2 → posttest
 Control group → pretest → → posttest

Phase two

In the second phase, the researcher attempted to determine the grammar knowledge of the intermediate students. To do that, the researcher arranged for the administration of the pretest to the students. As a result of this procedure, the mean of the scores obtained by all students served as an indication of the level of the grammar knowledge of the students. The mean scores indicated that the learners lacked the knowledge of conditional sentences, and based on this finding, the researcher could start teaching in the treatment phase.

Phase three

The third phase of the study was the experimental phase when the researcher started her treatment. As mentioned above, there were three intact groups of subjects consisted of two experimental and one control group. The first experimental group went through a treatment in which SIBT with EI was practiced to improve learners' grammar knowledge. In other words, SIBT with EI consisted of two components; 1) teacher-fronted explanation of the target grammatical points; 2) SIBT comprising some tasks. In a similar way, the second experimental group went through a treatment in which SIBT without EI was practiced to improve learners' grammar knowledge. In the other words, the treatment for the SIBT without EI group was the same as for SIBT with EI group but without the teacher fronted explanation. The control group went through a treatment in which a traditional approach was practiced to improve learners' grammar knowledge. The grammatical points were presented to the learners and some exercises were provided.

As it was stated above, this study requires some SIBT. Examples of this kind of task (SIBT) are provided here:

◇ Choose a, b, c, or d which is the best equivalent of the following sentences:

1. If I were at home, I would take a rest.
 - a. I am at home.
 - b. I may be at home now.
 - c. I am not at home now.
 - d. I do not like to be at home.

2. You would have won the prize if you had tried harder.
 - a. You did your best.
 - b. You won the prize.
 - c. You tried hard.
 - d. You did not do your best.

3. Had I gone to the airport, I would have welcomed my guest.
 - a. I welcomed my guest.
 - b. I went to the airport.
 - c. Did I go to the airport?
 - d. I did not go to the airport.

4. If I saw him, I would talk to him.
 - a. I do not see him.
 - b. I see him.
 - c. I saw him.
 - d. I do not like to talk to him.

5. Had I listened more carefully to the directions he gave me, I would not have gotten lost.
 - a. I did not get lost.
 - b. I got lost.
 - c. I knew the directions.
 - d. Did you get lost?

The teacher gives the students some sentences and they tell her what it means:

- a. Were I a doctor, I would cure patients.
- b. If I saw a burglar in my home, I would telephone to the police station.
- c. Should I see him, I will say him everything.
- d. Had tom gone home, he would have done his homework.
- e. If I saw someone shoplifting, I would say to the shopkeeper.

Finally, in the third group i.e. control group, learners improved their grammar knowledge without SIBT and also without EI. Here, the teacher improved learners' grammatical knowledge by presenting the grammatical points followed by some drills. It must be mentioned that the whole treatment took twelve sessions and in each session, thirty minutes were dedicated to the treatment.

Phase four

The fourth phase of the study began after the treatment when the researcher administered a grammar posttest consisting of fifty multiple choice items. In this way the researcher determined the degrees of success in each of the three groups, and as a result she could analyze the results.

Results

In order to test Null hypothesis I which states that there is no statistically significant difference between the grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners who do structured input-based tasks *with* explicit information and that of those who do not, the researcher made a comparison between the results of the pretest and posttest of the SIBT with EI group. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for this group.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic of Structured Input-Based Tasks with Explicit Information Group

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pretest SIBT with EI	4.35	2.498	20
Posttest SIBT with EI	42.15	3.573	20

Reading the mean column of Table 2 reveals that the participants in the SIBT with EI group performed much better on the posttest (M= 42.15) than on the pretest (M= 4.35), suggesting that providing the learners with SIBT with EI could help them improve their grammar learning.

In order to find out if the difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores in the SIBT with EI group was statistically significant, a paired sample t-test analysis was run. The results from the t-test analysis (Table 3) indicate that the mean difference between the pretest and the posttest is statistically significant, $T(38) = 38.777$, $p=.000$. Null hypothesis I is, therefore, rejected at the 95% level of confidence.

Table 3. Paired Samples T-Test of Structured Input-Based Tasks with Explicit Information

Pairs	Mean	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)

Pair 1 SIBT with EI Pretest Posttest	-37.80	.975	-38.777	38	.000
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The results presented in Table 3 concern the effect of the treatment on grammar improvement.

To test Null Hypothesis II which states there is no statistically significant difference between the grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners who do structured input-based tasks *without* explicit information and that of those who do not, the researcher made a comparison between the results of the pretest and posttest scores of the SIBT without EI group. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics related to this group.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Structured Input-Based Tasks without Explicit Information Group

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pretest SIBT without EI	4.05	2.502	20
Posttest SIBT without EI	36.10	3.323	20

As Table 4 shows, the posttest mean scores of the participants in the SIBT without EI group ($M=36.10$) was higher than the pretest mean scores ($M= 4.05$). Therefore, the treatment in the SIBT without EI group has been quite effective.

In order to evaluate the statistical significance of the difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores, the researcher used a paired samples t-test analysis. Table 5 reveals the result of the treatment in this group.

Table 5. Paired samples t-test of Structured Input-Based Tasks without Explicit Information

Pairs	Mean	Std. Error	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 2 SIBT without EI Pretest Posttest	-32.050	.930	-34.458	38	.000

As it is illustrated in Table 5, the mean difference between the pretest and posttest was statistically significant, $T(38) = 34.458$, $p = 0.000$. As a result, Null Hypothesis II is rejected at the 95 % confidence level.

According to information presented in Tables 4 and 5, the treatment in the SIBT without EI group has been quite effective in improving the subjects' grammar learning.

In order to test Null Hypothesis III which states that there is no statistically significant difference between the grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners who do structured input-

based tasks *with* explicit information and that of those who do the structured input-based tasks *without* explicit information, the researcher compared the posttest mean scores of participants in the SIBT with EI group with the SIBT without EI group. For this purpose, a paired of samples t-test and descriptive statistics were used. Table 6 presents the results of descriptive statistics for this group.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of the SIBT with EI Group and the SIBT without EI Group

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Posttest SIBT with EI	42.15	3.573	20
Posttest SIBT without EI	36.10	3.323	20

As it can be seen in Table 6, the posttest mean scores of participants in the SIBT with EI group (M= 42.15) is higher than the posttest mean scores of participants in the SIBT without EI group (M= 36.10). This indicates a considerable improvement in the grammar learning of the participants as a result of the treatment. It was, however, necessary to examine whether this difference was statistically significant. Therefore, a multiple comparison was used, the results of which are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. A Multiple Comparison of the SIBT with EI Group and the SIBT without EI group

Group	Group	Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig.
SIBT with EI group	SIBT without EI group	6.060	1.305	.000
SIBT with EI group	Control group	14.724	1.314	.000

The Findings presented in Table 7 demonstrate that the mean difference between the posttest scores of participants in SIBT with EI group and SIBT without EI group are statistically significant, $p = 0.000$. Null Hypothesis III is, therefore, rejected at the the95 % level of confidence.

According to the findings presented in Table 6 and 7, the treatment in the SIBT with EI group has been more successful than the treatment in SIBT without EI group in promoting the learners' grammar learning.

In order to examine whether the difference among the posttest mean scores of the three research groups were statistically significant, the researcher used an ANOVA. Table 8 depicts the results of the ANOVA.

Table 8.Total ANOVA of the Three Research Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	366.025	1	366.025	30.748	.000
Within Groups	452.350	38	11.904		
Total	818.375	39			

Table 8 indicates that the differences among the three groups have been significant, $F=30.748$, $p=0.000$. As a result, the research groups have not been improved in the same way.

In order to see where the differences between the three research groups lie, Turkey's post hoc tests were employed. The result of this comparison (table 9) shows that all comparisons were significant.

Table 9.Total Multiple Comparisons of the Research Groups

Group (I)	Group (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
SIBT with EI	SIBT without EI	3.18	.750	.000
	Control group	7.73	.750	.000
SIBT without EI	SIBT with EI	-3.18	.750	.000
	Control Group	4.44	.750	.000
Control Group	SIBT with EI	-7.73	.750	.000
	SIBT without EI	-4.55	.750	.000

Based on the information presented in Table 8 and 9, the research groups improved differently in general.

Discussion

Based on the information presented in Tables 2 and 3, the treatment in the SIBT with EI group has been effective in improving grammar. The results of this part of the research question are in line with the results found by Ellis (1997) who found that SIBT has a great impact on grammar learning. Regarding the necessity of teacher-fronted explicit information during structured input-based tasks, studies by Benati (2003), Farley (2003), VanPatten and Oikennon (1996) and Wong (2003) have shown that SIBT with providing proactive EI was beneficial.

The reason behind the improvement of SIBT with EI group is as Kasper and Rose (2002) argue that some forms of awareness-oriented instruction is necessary because some grammatical rules are not salient enough for learners and that mere exposure to these rules in action does not help learners notice them.

The findings of this part of the research question are similar to the results found by Ellis (1997). Based on his researches, grammar learning improves through SIBT. However, this study indicates that SIBT without EI can develop grammar learning significantly. Moreover, the results of this part of the research question are in line with what VanPatten (1996) asserts. VanPatten remarks that SIBT can significantly promote grammar learning.

The results showed that learners who received either type of instruction improved in the posttest over the pretest. Results also showed that when performing in the posttest, the SIBT with

EI group significantly outperformed the SIBT without EI in posttest. Generally, these results seemed to suggest that although both types of instruction proved effective in developing learners' grammar learning, providing EI tended to produce a larger magnitude of effects. These results are consistent with findings of previous researches by Jeon and Kaya (2006); Norris and Ortega (2000); Rose (2005) in both grammar instruction and pragmatics instruction and might be explained in the light of a number of second language acquisition theories.

First, the overall effectiveness of both types of instruction might be attributed to the fact that learners in both treatment groups were not only presented with rich input, which serves as positive evidence about the way conditional sentences may be used in the TL, but also an attempt was made to this input via SIBT for the explicit group and visual input enhancement for the implicit group which is an important condition for acquisition to take place (Gass, 1988; Schmidt, 1993; Smith, 1981).

Nonetheless, the superiority of explicit instruction over implicit instruction is not surprising. Presumably, learners who were provided with the teacher's explanation of grammatical rules within the provided input had an opportunity to process the input at a deeper level than those who received only the input without working further on it (Takimoto, 2009). Indeed, Izumi (2002) has indicated that providing input without EI may not work equally successfully for every learner, particularly if he or she is not form-conscious or does not have prior advanced linguistic knowledge.

Conclusion

As the result of this study lends support to Willis (1994), it can be concluded that traditional methods offer a very simplified approaches. It is based upon the idea that you can present language in neat little blocks, adding from one lesson to the next. However, this research showed us that we cannot predict or guarantee what the students will learn and that ultimately a wide exposure to language is the best way of ensuring that students will acquire it effectively. Restricting their experience to single pieces of target language is unnatural. Task-based language learning and teaching is frequently promoted as an effective approach, superior to 'traditional' methods, in that it pays great attention to combining form-focused approach with communicative approach.

The effect of an input-based task has been proved by a number of grammar teaching studies (e.g., Collentine, 1998; Morgan-Short & Bowden, 2006; Toth, 2006). Regarding the necessity of teacher-fronted explicit information during structured input-based tasks, studies by VanPatten and Oikennon (1996), Benati (2003), Farley (2003), and Wong (2003) have shown that structured input-based tasks by themselves effectively improved learners' grammatical proficiency level; moreover, providing proactive explicit information was more beneficial.

The results of the present study seem also to corroborate Bruner's (1961) finding that learners do better when they are told about the explicit rules rather than they have to discover underlying rules themselves. In other words, instead of designing tasks that lead learners to process linguistic resources at greater possible depth, material writers should focus on designing the best possible proactive linguistic information in a task in teaching L2 grammar.

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