

The Comparative Effect of Explicit Focus on Form and Dictogloss Task on Learning English Tenses

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Abstract

This study intended to compare the impact of two output-oriented focus-on-form types of instruction namely explicit focus on form (EFF) and dictogloss (DG) tasks on helping beginning EFL learners learn English tenses. The participants were 64 female EFL learners randomly assigned to two groups with each group receiving a different kind of instruction. Their knowledge of grammar was assessed through the placement test of the language school which showed that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their language proficiency. Besides, a test of English tenses proved that the participants had little knowledge of tenses. Accordingly, the grammatical points were taught to both groups throughout the course. Teaching style in each group differed according to the type of technique used in each class. After the treatment period, the two groups took a posttest, the results of which showed that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. One highly probable pedagogical implication of the study is that both EFF and DG are effective pedagogical tools in helping beginning EFL learners learn target grammatical forms.

Keywords: dictogloss task, explicit focus on form, English tenses

Introduction

The role of grammar is perhaps one of the most controversial issues in language teaching. In the early 20th century, grammar teaching formed an essential part of language instruction, so much that other aspects of language learning were either ignored or downplayed. The argument according to Richards and Renandya (2002) was that knowing grammatical rules of language contributes to the communicative ability of language learners. This concept was strongly challenged in the early 1970s. Knowledge of the grammatical system of language was one of the many

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components which underlay the notion of communicative competence (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

During this period, grammar teaching became less prominent, and in some cases, was abandoned. In recent years, grammar teaching has regained its appropriate place in the language curriculum. Researchers now agree that grammar is too important to be ignored and that without a good knowledge of grammar, learners' language development will be severely constrained (Hedge, 2000). There is a widespread agreement among language practitioners and theoreticians on the importance of developing learners' grammatical accuracy (Dickins & Woods, 1988 cited in Storch, 2001). There is also ample evidence and support for the view that in order to develop learners' grammatical accuracy, we need classroom activities which encourage learners to have explicit focus on form (EFF) within a communicative and meaningful context (Lighthown & Spada, 1990).

Focus on Form Instruction

Over the past few decades, the focus of classroom instruction has shifted from an emphasis on language forms to use of language within communicative contexts. This has brought about the question of the place of form-focused instruction (FFI) in classroom activities (Brown, 2000). As Lightbown and Spada (1990) argue, any explicit or implicit pedagogical attempt to draw the learners' attention to language form is considered to be FFI. The definition implies a range of approaches to form. On one side of a long continuum are explicit explanations and discussions of rules and their exceptions and on the other end of the continuum are implicit references to form. This includes drawing the learner's attention to certain linguistic features in input or what Ellis calls "noticing" and inclusion of forms in communicative tasks, or "grammar consciousness raising" (1997, p. 119).

Focus on form (FonF) 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, pp. 45-46) into such tasks as processing instruction (Van Patten, 2002), textual enhancement (Sharwood Smith, 1993; Harley, 1998; White, 1998), and linguistic or grammar-problem solving activities (Willis, 1996; Thornbury, 2001). Despite such variation, as Doughty and Williams (1998) maintain, the key tenet of FonF instruction is meaning and use being present when the attention of the learner is drawn to the linguistic device which is necessary for comprehension of meaning. The call

for FonF is often triggered by learner problems or difficulties usually resulting in a breakdown in communication (Shake & Gardner, 2008). The problematic linguistic features come into instructional focus to help learners get back on track. Apparently, when learners are left to their own resources, they do not try to pay attention to linguistic characteristics of their communicative activities (Widdowson, 1990). Thus some form of instructional focus on linguistic features may be required to destabilize learners' interlanguage (Ellis, 2006).

The positive role of FonF in second language acquisition (SLA) has often been recognized over the past two decades. Qin (2008) refers to a number of comprehensive reviews (e.g. Doughty & Williams, 1998; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Ellis, 2002) and indicates that such studies have demonstrated evidence that FonF facilitates second language (L2) learners' acquisition of target morpho-syntactic forms or features. He further maintains that current concern has shifted to what constitutes the most effective pedagogical techniques in specific classroom settings, considering the choice of linguistic forms, the explicitness, and the mode of instruction (p. 62).

However, in this study two output-based instructions were compared with each other. EFF involves an explicit explanation of target forms, followed by mechanical, then meaningful, then communicative output-based practices. The other output-oriented FonF technique, which is the concern of this study, is dictogloss (DG) tasks. DG, which has its roots in traditional dictation exercises, typically consists of four procedures: preparation, dictation, reconstruction, and analysis with correction (Wajnryb, 1990). According to Qin (2008), different adaptations of this task have now become popular in order to meet specific classroom contexts.

Many researchers argue in favor of the advantages of the use of DG over FonF (e.g. Thornbury, 1997; García Mayo, 2002; Jacob, 2003). Qin (2008, p. 63) elaborates that DG, in its various forms, has been popularized recently in EFL methodology with a discourse-oriented view of language because of its emphasis on the meaning of a whole text. Moreover, different researches (e.g. LaPierre, 1994; Swain, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2001; Williams, 2001; Qin, 2008) have shown that, similar to explicit FonF's main function of prompting learners to pay attention to target features, DG can provide multiple opportunities to draw L2 learners' attention to target linguistic forms in meaningful contexts. Qin (2008) also maintains that Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) holds that learners' striving to produce comprehensible output would prompt internalization and thus acquisition of target forms. He then explains that when reconstructing a text in DG, learners use their current linguistic competence to produce output which is very likely to fall short of the

target model. Then, their incentive to pay attention to relevant language forms in the future can be stimulated. During the final stage of DG (i.e. analysis with correction), learners are provided with an opportunity to expose themselves to the target model and compare it with their reconstructed pieces (p. 63). This process is particularly crucial for 'noticing the gap' (Schmidt & Frota, 1986) or 'cognitive comparison' in Ellis' terms (1995), where L2 learners are prompted to notice the gaps or possibly deficiencies in their developing linguistic competence and then restructure it after being exposed to the target model.

Among the advantages of DG, the one that is most empirically investigated is 'meta-talk' or 'language related episodes' (LREs). Qin (2008) defined LREs as "occasions where L2 learners discuss or question their language use while carrying out a reconstruction task in L2" (p. 63). A number of studies have indicated that meta-talk facilitates L2 acquisition. For example, LaPierre (1994, cited in Qin, 2008) studied eighth-grade early French immersion students in Canada and found a positive relationship between correctly solved linguistic problems during DG and correctly answered items in the tailor-made posttests that followed. However, concerning the question of what particular linguistic forms learners mainly focus on during meta-talk, recent research has proved that less attention is given to grammatical features than lexical meanings (Toshiyo, 1996; Williams, 1999; García Mayo, 2002). García Mayo (2002) explains that learners' attention is mainly devoted to producing a coherent meaningful text in DG, and thus they deal with grammatical features to a lesser degree. Hence, Toshiyo (1996) emphasizes that it is better to ensure, especially beginning-level learners' comprehension of a reconstruction text so that during the reconstruction stage of DG they can allocate their attention to the discussion of forms instead of arguing for the accuracy of meaning of the text.

As discussed above, both EFF and DG are well-researched techniques of FonF but they differ in prompting L2 learners to notice target linguistic features in meaningful contexts as well as in the mode of instruction. Consequently, comparing their instructional effects can open up interesting horizons in the domain of task-based language teaching.

Therefore, the present study focused on teaching simple present tense, simple past tense, and present continuous tense to a group of elementary EFL learners. The aim was to examine the effectiveness of using FonF instruction on their acquisition of the mentioned English tenses. Accordingly, two FonF techniques were chosen (EFF and DG) and the following research question was posed:

Is there any significant difference between the impact of using dictogloss and explicit focus on form instructions on elementary EFL learners' achievement of the past, present, and present continuous tenses?

Method

Participants

This study was conducted in two elementary classes in a language school in Tehran. The participants were 64 female beginning EFL learners aged between 15 and 22 who were selected from among 70 students based on the scores they obtained on the placement test of the language school and were divided into two homogeneous groups. Their knowledge of grammar was assessed through the placement test of the language school. It is worth mentioning that the students were not aware that they were participating in a research.

Instrumentation

Two tests were used in the course of this study which are described below.

At the very outset of the research, the placement test of the language school was administered to 70 language learners as a proficiency test. It contained 60 multiple-choice questions: 20 vocabulary, 20 grammar, and 20 reading comprehension questions. The purpose of this test was to enable the researchers to select a sample which was as homogeneous as required regarding their general English proficiency and that all further changes in the learners' performance would be attributable to the received treatment. The reliability of the test estimated through the Kuder Richardson (KR21) formula was 0.82 and its content validity was approved by two experienced English teachers.

The second instrument used in the study was a multiple-choice achievement test containing 40 items on the three aforementioned English tenses. This test served both as a pretest and a posttest and was administered to the participants before and after the treatment to determine whether there was any gain in the scores of the participants as a result of the treatment. In the process of these two administrations, the B-index of the test was computed by comparing the answers of the learners in the pretest and

posttest. The results showed that the items of the test met the B-index (0.7 and 0.11). The agreement of the achievement test was computed by estimating the threshold loss agreement through the Subkoviak approach (1988, cited in Brown, 2005) which requires only a single administration. The estimated agreement coefficient of the test was 0.78 which demonstrated sound evidence for the test having been used justifiably. In order to determine the content validity of the test, a table of specifications was prepared and its content was approved by three English teachers who had 10 years of experience in teaching English.

In addition to the above instruments, the *New Interchange* was used as the course book for both control and experimental groups.

Procedure

Two tests and two different treatments were applied in the process of this study which are described in detail below.

Pretest

In this study, two intact classes with 35 learners in each were chosen and a proficiency test (described above) was administered to all of the participants. Statistical analysis of the scores enabled the researchers to select 64 learners whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean. Since the learners were beginners and were all almost at the same level of language proficiency, only six of them manifested significant difference and were thus excluded from the study. The 64 learners were subsequently divided into two groups for the experiment. A comparison of the variances of the two groups revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the proficiency levels of the two groups prior to the treatment.

Following the administration of the proficiency test, the grammar test (also described above) was administered to both groups as the pretest to make sure that the students were not familiar with the grammar items to be taught during the treatment.

Treatment

Once the two groups were established, one was chosen to undergo the DG instruction while the other the FonF procedure. The classes in both groups met three times a week with each session lasting 105 minutes for a treatment period of 16 sessions. Three variables were controlled in this study in order to safely conclude that any changes at the end of the course were due to the treatment received. First, the materials used in both of the groups were the same. Second, the researchers tried to provide the same metalinguistic explanations on the target grammatical features to both groups in order to restrict the differences of treatments between the two groups to EFF and DG only. Finally, the time allocated to conducting the DG activities in one group was similar in length to that of the FonF in the other.

As shown in Table 1, there were 4 steps in each DG activity which the DG class followed. All the stories were taken from the learners' textbook.

Table 1 – Dictogloss activities (Adapted from Qin, 2008)

Step	Task	DG principle
1	The teacher introduces the main idea of an English story.	Preparation
2	The teacher reads the story or text for the participants twice and asks them to think about the meaning of the story or text.	Preparation
3	The teacher asks them to reconstruct the passage as closely to the original passage as possible. The teacher stresses the usage of appropriate tense.	Reconstruction
4	The teacher gives back the original passage to the students and asks them to compare their constructed passage to the original passage and make notes on places that are different from the original passage.	Analysis with Correction

In step 3, the participants were asked to use the target tenses. The rationale for this step was derived from the findings which propose that L2 learners tend not to attend to the target grammatical features during DG activities (Toshiyo, 1996; Williams, 1999; García Mayo, 2002; Qin, 2008). Therefore, it

is reasonable to use this awareness-raising technique to refine the DG task (Thornbury, 1997). Another awareness-raising strategy to complete the DG task occurred in stage 4 where the participants were asked to make notes on the differences between their reconstructed passages and the original passage.

Alternatively, in the EFF or FonF group, grammatical features were taught one at a time. At first, the grammar rule was taught and then the learners were asked to do some exercises and apply the rules they had learned. The next activity was to ask the students to make sentences applying the rules they had learned. As the last step, the teacher checked the exercises. The procedure is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Explicit focus on form activities

Step	Teacher	Student
1	Introducing the grammar rule	Listening
2	Asking students to answer the exercises in their books	Doing the exercises
3	Asking students to generate some sentences in the introduced tense	Making sentences
4	Checking their answers	Correcting their mistakes

Posttest

Once the treatment was over, the same achievement test used in the pretest was administered as the posttest to determine any possible gain difference in the scores of the participants. The interval between the pretest and the posttest was therefore a period of more than five weeks.

Results

The first step in the data analysis comprised of analyzing the data obtained from the proficiency test that was used for selecting the participants. As was mentioned before, 64 participants from among the 70 participants of two intact classes whose scores fell within one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected and then randomly divided into the two

experimental groups. Table 3 below shows the group statistics for the DG and EFF classes.

Table 3 – Group statistics for the proficiency test

Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
EFF	32	30.81	4.47	.78
DG	32	31.46	4.79	.84

In order to ensure the two groups were homogeneous with respect to their language proficiency before receiving the treatments, their mean scores and variances on the proficiency test were compared. As it is shown in Table 4, the results of the Levene’s test indicated that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their variances ($F_{(2,64)} = 0.70, p = 0.40 > 0.05$). Moreover, the results of the independent *t*-test also indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t = 0.56, df = 62, p = 0.57 > 0.05$). Thus, it was concluded that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their language proficiency (Table 4).

Table 4 – The results of the *t*-test for the proficiency test

	Levene’s test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.70	.40	.56	62	.57	.65	1.15

Following the proficiency test, the grammar achievement test was administered before and after the treatment. The descriptive statistics for the pretest administration are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 – Group statistics on the achievement pretest

Group	Pretest	
	Mean	SD
EFF	6.68	4.31
DG	7.50	3.19

Table 6 illustrates the results obtained from the comparison of the groups' mean values on the achievement pretest.

Table 6 – The results of the t-test for the achievement pretest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	2.093	.153	.85	62	.395	.812	.947

The comparison of the means indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean score of the EFF group and the DG group on the achievement pretest ($t = 0.85$, $df = 62$, $\rho = 0.39 > 0.05$). Therefore, the two groups were homogeneous in their knowledge of the three tenses in question. And accordingly, the researchers could confidently claim that with no significant difference in this aspect of the learners' knowledge at the outset of the study, any probable difference in their achievement at the end of the treatment could be attributed to the variation in the treatment.

Table 7 below shows the descriptive statistics.

Table 7 – Group statistics on the achievement posttest

Group	Posttest	
	Mean	SD
EFF	22.28	8.27
DG	23.75	8.00

Table 8 illustrates the results obtained from the comparison of the mean values of the two groups on the achievement posttest.

Table 8 – The results of the t-test for the achievement posttest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.008	.929	.715	62	.477	1.46	2.05

The comparison of the mean values of the two groups on the posttest indicated that the difference between the means of the two groups was not statistically significant ($t = 0.71$, $df = 62$, $p = 0.47 > 0.05$, two-tailed). Therefore, it could be deduced that the existing difference between the means was not due to the impact of the two independent variables or treatments.

Conclusion

The result of this study demonstrated that there was no significant difference between elementary EFL learners undergoing DG instruction and those undergoing EFF instruction in terms of their achievement of the past, present, and present continuous tenses. In other words, using EFF and DG had no significantly different impacts on the achievement of the three English tenses by elementary EFL learners who participated in this study. This could be due to the fact that the participants of this study were beginners and could not benefit very much from the reconstruction phase of DG instruction.

Taking into account the proficiency level of the participants of this study, the findings are in line with the findings of a study conducted by Leeser (2004) who investigated whether L2 Spanish learners in a content-based course would spontaneously focus on form (i.e. produce LREs) during a DG task and whether the overall Spanish proficiency of the dyad members would influence the number, type, and outcome of their LREs. The results of his study revealed that overall the learners did focus on form but that the proficiency level of the learners in the dyad not only affected the amount and type of form they focused on but also how successful they were at doing so.

The details of the findings of Leeser (2004) indicated that when dyads were formed of high proficient learners (H-H), they obtained the highest mean on the grammatical focus in the LREs. Lowest mean on the grammatical focus in the LREs was obtained when the dyads were formed of low proficient learners (L-L) and finally the grouping of high and low proficient students (H-L) performed better than L-L but worse than H-H dyads. It is important to note that this difference was less when the focus in the LREs was on lexical items. This indicates that low levels of proficiency benefited less from DG tasks especially when focus was on grammatical features.

Therefore, it can be assumed that language learners at this level may similarly benefit from different types of output-oriented FonF instruction. In other words, FonF instruction is useful for teaching grammatical forms to the

students at this level irrespective of the technique used. The finding of this study is in favor of the centrality of the role of explicit grammar instruction for elementary level.

This study showed that besides explicit FonF, there are other teaching techniques, such as DG which can help beginning EFL learners acquire English grammatical forms. Although the results of this study were not in favor of DG tasks, teachers may still consider them as an alternative way for teaching grammar. Since they include all four language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), they can be of great use in language classes not only for teaching grammar but also as a supplementary practice in language components.

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