

Can Focus on form Instruction Make a Difference on EFL Learners' Accuracy?

Zahra Talebi*, Javad Gholami,

¹Islamic Azad University, Iran, Urmia Branch

²Urmia University, Iran

ABSTRACT

This study was an attempt to examine the effects of two types of corrective feedback, namely recast and metalinguistic feedback on the acquisition of past tense-ed by Iranian EFL learners. A pretest-posttest control group quasi-experimental design was used. To this end, 45 Iranian EFL learners comprising three intact classes participated in this study. Learners in two intact classes designated as feedback groups received feedback during meaning-focused tasks, while the learners in the control group received no feedback. The results showed that the experimental groups who received corrective feedback outperformed the control group who did not receive any feedback. The findings revealed that there were no significant differences between the two types of corrective feedback as far as their accuracies are concerned.

Keywords: corrective feedback, implicit corrective feedback, explicit corrective feedback, metalinguistic feedback, recast, regular past tense.

1. INTRODUCTION

A pervasive and controversial issue in second language acquisition (SLA) has been devoted to the role of input and classroom interaction in the acquisition of a second language. This orientation was a reaction to language teaching methods which stressed the mastery of language forms (Hedge, 2000). It is increasingly hypothesized that creating opportunities for students to interact has essential consequences for second language acquisition (Long, 1996; Pica, 1994). However, gradually waves of criticism revealed that, meaningful communication and communicative activities which focus solely on meaning processing are not adequate for learning a second language and a certain amount of focus on form and corrective feedback is needed (e.g., Hatch, 1978; Long, 1996; White, 1987). Corrective feedback (CF), a reactive form of form-focused instruction, is considered effective in promoting noticing and is thus conducive to L2 learning (Mackey & Philip, 1998; Philip, 2003; Sheen, 2007). Corrective feedback is defined as the form of responses to learner utterance that contain error. The responses can consist of (a) an indication that an error has been committed, (b) provision of the correct target language form, or (c) metalinguistic information about the nature of the error, or any combination of these (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). While various studies on corrective feedback have examined the effects of different types of corrective feedback in second language classrooms to determine which types are more or less effective for language learning (e.g., Mackey & Philip, 1998; Braid, 2002; Loewen, 2004). There is still debate over what types of corrective feedback are more influential. Accordingly, the current study builds on previous studies to shed more light on the effectiveness of two types of corrective feedback (recast & metalinguistic) treatment in Iran that influence learners' interlanguage development. The present study involves the observation of form-focused classroom tasks and the identification and comparison of two types of corrective feedback (recast & metalinguistic) on the development of learners' L2 development. The extent to which corrective feedback type help the learners' development of L2 grammatical accuracy was explored in this study.

The following tentative research questions have been formed for which the current study seeks to find answer.

RQ1: Does types of corrective feedback, have any significant effect on EFL learners' grammar knowledge of past tense-ed ?

RQ2: Is there any significant difference between types of corrective feedback, in the extent they contribute to L2 learners' grammar knowledge of past tense-ed?

*Corresponding Author: Zahra Talebi ,Department of English, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Salmas Road, Urmia, Iran, Email: mtaleghiar@yahoo.com

The following hypotheses are put forward for the above-cited research questions:

H1: Type of corrective feedback has no significant effect on EFL learners' grammar knowledge of past tense-ed

H2: There is no significant difference between, recast and metalinguistic in the extent they contribute to EFL learner's grammar knowledge of past tense-ed?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1990s, researchers began to pay more attention to grammar instruction in the classroom where it has taken on various roles in second and foreign language instruction. In the style in which the classical languages (Latin & Greek) were taught, grammar teaching formed an essential part of language instruction which lead to focus on forms. Focus on forms is defined as "an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features- by the teacher and/or one or more students- triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (Long & Robinson, 1998, P.23). Within this type, there is obviously no communicative context. However a glance through the last decades of language-teaching practices in the field of second language acquisition reveals a shift of attention from purely linguistic to more communicative approaches (Brown, 2001).

During the last decades some researchers attempt to abandon the grammar-accuracy tenet in favor of more communicatively-oriented approaches that focused on language use and functions, without any form of grammar instruction. According to Nassaji & Fotos (2004) traditional methods on isolated grammar forms were not sufficient to promote learners' acquisition in second language. The communicative language teaching (CLT) proponents advocated that second language acquisition is driven by exposure to positive evidence and comprehensible input without any need for corrective feedback (e.g., Allwright, 1975; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Krashen, 1985, 1994, 1998; Prabhu, 1987; Dulay & Burt, 1973; Gass, 1997). however, most of the researchers, consider positive evidence and communicative activities which focus solely on meaning processing are not adequate for learning a second language and a certain amount of focus on form and corrective feedback is needed (e.g., Hatch, 1978; Long, 1983, 1996,1997; White, 1987; Ellis 2001; Schmidt, 1983).

Therefore communicative approach helped learners to become fluent, but was inadequate to insure comparable levels of accuracy as well (Swain, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Schmidt, 2002). According to Hendrickson (1978) focus on form has emerged as a way to integrate grammar instruction events into a communicative language teaching context.

Long (1991) believes that attention to form should be incorporated with meaning-focused activities, and calls this approach focus on form. He offers the following definition of focus on form: "Focus on form . . . 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. cited in Ellis et al., 2001). He claims that focus on form takes place when learners participate in interactions in which communication problems arise, and this leads them to negotiate for meaning. Doughty & Varela (1998) suggest that the aim of focus on form instruction is to add attention to linguistic properties of a communicative task rather than to depart from the communicative objective, so it is effective. Long & Robinson (1998) further expanded its definition and claimed that "focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features- by the teacher and/or one or more students triggered- by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (p. 23).

Focus-on-form is defined by Ellis (2001, pp.1-2) as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms". Long (1991) claims that focus on form takes place when learners participate in interactions in which communication problems arise, and this leads them to negotiate for meaning. Long (1991) made a comparison to differentiate focus on form from focus on formS, such as grammar instruction, formal instruction, form-focused instruction and code focused instruction. According to his explanation, in the focus on form, learners' attention is drawn to the target form as the linguistic forms arise incidentally in a meaningful and communicative context. On the other hand, the grammatical features are treated in isolation in the traditional notion of focus on formS.

Long (1991) emphasized that focus on form should ideally occur as part of negotiation for meaning, as Doughty & William (1998) described focus on form "entails a prerequisite engagement in meaning before attention to linguistic features can be expected to be effective" (p.3). These findings suggest therefore that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback has received much attention in the second language

acquisition and is still a topical issue (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Ellis et al., 2006). The role of negative evidence or corrective feedback (i.e. information about what is unacceptable in a given language) is an issue of growing concern in SLA research because it has implications that are equally important for both theory and practice (Lyster, 1998).

Several empirical studies have been done to compare which type of corrective feedback is more effective for L2 learners. Carroll & Swain (1993) found that those learners who received explicit corrective feedback (direct metalinguistic feedback) outperformed the control group. Sheen (2006) also demonstrated that those learners who received metalinguistic feedback outperformed those who received recast.

The aforementioned studies demonstrate that explicit feedback may be of value (Ellis, 2006). Previous studies have shown that explicit feedback, specifically, metalinguistic feedback, outperformed various types of implicit feedback, mostly recasts (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Nagata, 1993; Carroll, 2001; Lyster, 2004; Ellis et al., 2006).

The effectiveness of recasts has also been tested in multiple ways. Leeman (2003) found that Recast group and enhanced salience with no feedback, outperformed the control group on any measure. So, the recast group outperformed the control group.

Sometimes with previous studies regarding the effectiveness of implicit and explicit feedback, little to no difference occurs between recasts and metalinguistic error correction. Kim & Matches (2001) used a target structure of dative verbs with 20 Korean adult ESL learners. Their study examined two groups: group (A) received metalinguistic feedback and group (B) received recast feedback. Both were presented in two sessions one week apart from each other. Although learners said they preferred explicit feedback, the gains between the two production tasks were not that dramatic.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 45 Iranian EFL learners, all male students ranged in age from 14-17. The type of teaching approach they received in their program emphasis on developing communicative skills in English. The students were divided into three groups. Each of these three intact classes was assigned to a treatment condition (i.e., recast, metalinguistic) and a control group.

3.2 Target structure

The target structure used in this study was regular past tense-ed in English. This target grammar structure (regular past tense-ed) was chosen for the present study because of several reasons: first, it is a structure that is easy to elicit from students in meaning-focused tasks (Ellis et al., 2006); second, this target grammar structure would be relatively new to the learners. Regular past tense-ed is typically taught in elementary and lower intermediate textbooks. However, it is not among the morphemes acquired early (Dulay & Burt, 1974); I wanted to see if increased interaction and corrective feedback might help learners in the future when learning this misused structure. And third, although the past tense is introduced early on in textbooks, learners demonstrate difficulties in gaining full control of this structure, even at advanced levels (Ellis et al., 2006).

3.3 Procedure

Three intact classes were divided into the two experimental groups whose classes were held in the morning and the control group whose class was held in the afternoon. Both experimental groups were asked to stay for an extra thirty minutes during which they received their treatment. Each group received the same amount of instruction. The students were divided into two groups within two classes. One group received implicit feedback in the form of recast and the other received explicit feedback in the form of metalinguistic feedback. All groups took the oral imitation test and the written metalinguistic feedback test one day after the instructional procedures. In total, they participated in seven sessions of instruction, five of which (session two to session six) were devoted to instruction and two (sessions one and seven), to conducting pretest and posttest. The learners received corrective feedback while completing the task. Moreover, all treatment sessions were audio taped and afterwards inspected by the researcher to ensure the uniformity of treatment procedures across groups and also inter-interlocutor and intra-interlocutor consistencies. No series flaw or inconsistency which may threaten the validity of the results was found.

In this study, recast is operationalized as the teachers' reformulation, either particular or full (Sheen, 2007), of the students' ill-formed utterances that contained past tense errors. The teacher provided the correct reformulation of the error in response to learners' utterance as extracts adapted from (Loewen & Philip, 2006) are shown below.

L: to her is good thing

T: yeah, for her it's a good thing

L: because she got a lot of money there (Loewen & Philip, 2006).

Metalinguistic feedback contains either comments or information related to the well-formedness of the students' utterance, without providing the correct form (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). The teacher reminded the learners to use past tense after an error occurred and indicated that there is an error somewhere. The following extract is adapted from (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006).

L: yesterday Joe and bill ah went to ah ah Bills' grandmother and visit their grandmother.

T: and *visit*, you need past tense

L: visited, yes (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006).

The current study used 'picture description task' in order to elicit learners' knowledge of regular past tense-ed form during treatment sessions. This task consisted of sets of picture sequences that were given to students in the treatment sessions. They constituted what Ellis (2003) called focused tasks; in other words, they were designed to encourage the use of particular linguistic form and to this end, learners were provided with certain linguistic prompts (see Appendix A and B).

During the task-based interaction, when there was an error in the use of regular past tense-ed, feedback was provided. Groups received feedback in the form of either recasts or metalinguistic information.

4. RESULTS

Two separate means and ANOVAs were calculated for the groups on two tests. Group differences were considered significant when $p < .05$. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide visual representations of learners' performances across two treatment groups.

Table 4.1: Means of the groups for (oral-imitation) post-test

participant groups	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
control group	15	5.50	
recast group	15		6.93
meta group	15		7.13
Sig.		1.00	.92

In oral imitation, there was not a significant difference between the recast and metalinguistic groups ($p > 0.05$). However, both groups were significantly different from control group ($p < 0.05$). In other words, the performances of recast and metalinguistic groups (mean scores of 6.93 and 7.13) were better than and different from that of the control group (mean score of 5.5).

Table 4.2: means of the groups for (Metalinguistic) post-test

participant groups	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
control group	15	4.67	
metalinguistic group	15		7.20
recast group	15		7.33
Sig.		1.00	.94

In metalinguistic test, again, there was not a significant difference between recast and Metalinguistic groups ($p > 0.05$). But both of them were significantly different from control group ($p < 0.05$). The following table shows that the mean scores of the recast (7.2) and Meta (7.33) groups were higher than the mean score of the control group (4.67).

The findings seem to add to the evidence contributed by many studies (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Nagata, 1993; Carroll, 2001; Lyster, 2004; Ellis et al., 2006) on the effectiveness of CF in comparison to no corrective feedback in EFL learners' grammatical accuracy.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the effects of two types of corrective feedback on the acquisition of English regular past tense-ed. The results of data analysis revealed that recast and metalinguistic feedback had a significant effect on learners' performance on the post-test. In other words, there was significant difference between control and experimental groups. The findings of this study lend support to the view that implicit as well as explicit types of feedback assist low-intermediate EFL learners in learning grammar. These results seem to support the conclusions from several previous studies in the EFL context (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Nagata, 1993; Carroll, 2001; Lyster, 2004; Ellis et al., 2006) proposing that corrective feedback has a significant effect on learner' performance.

Regarding the second research question, however, comparison of the results indicated that the significant difference between recast and metalinguistic groups was blurred. In other words, ANOVA showed no significant effects for groups, meaning that the groups did not differ significantly from each other in performance on either of the post-tests. The findings of this study is in line with DeKeyser (1993) who found no difference between the group receiving extensive explicit feedback and the group receiving limited explicit feedback. The results of the present study also confirmed Kim & Mathes (2001), Carroll (2001) findings, who also failed to find any statistically significant differences in the scores of the explicit and implicit groups. Moreover Sanz (2003) indicated that both implicit and explicit groups considerably increased ability to supply the target structure with no differences between the groups.

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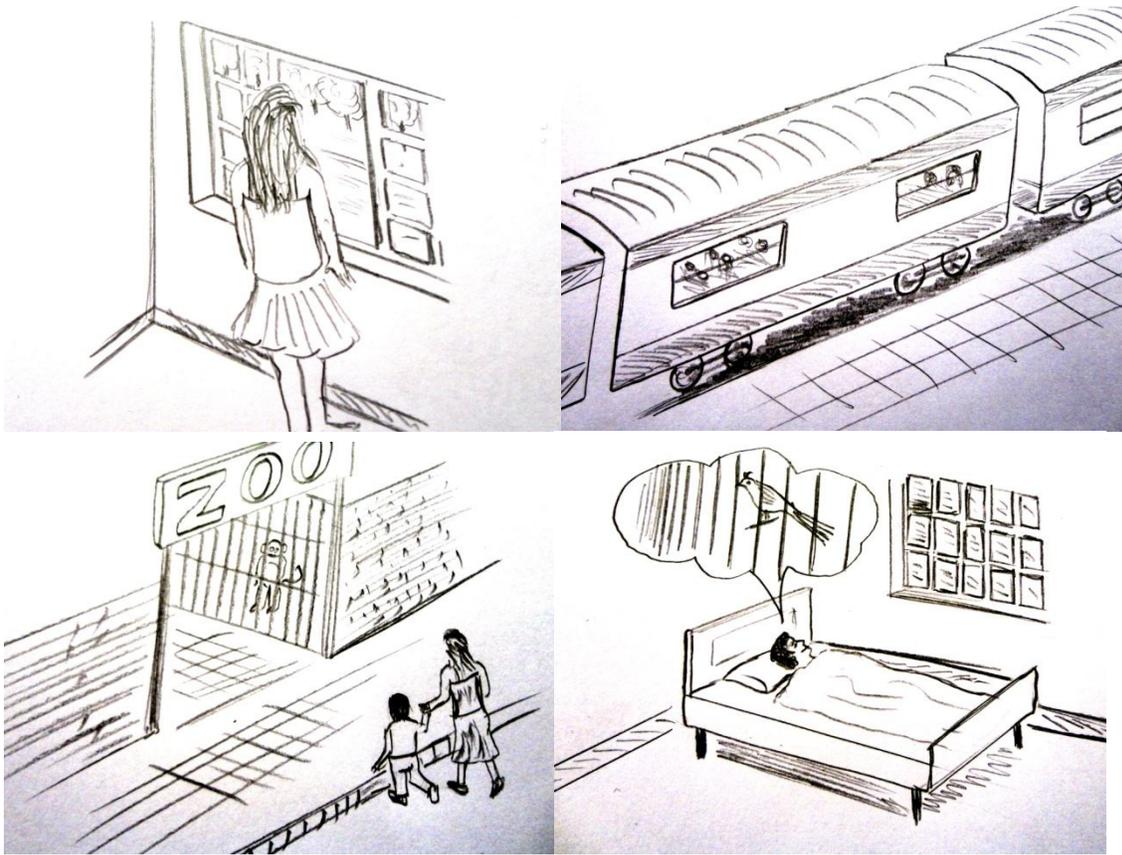
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APPENDIX A: oral-imitation test

Last week Peter had a day off. What did he do?



APPEDIX B: picture- description task



open look smile decide like dream stop laugh answer

The zoo

Yesterday, when Mrs. Edwards opened her curtains and looked out, she smiled and said, "It's going to be a beautiful day". She decided to go to the zoo with her boy. He was very happy, because he liked going to the zoo very much, and she also liked going by train. She said "I dreamed about the zoo last night, mommy". His mother was in hurry, but she stopped and smiled at her small son. What did you see? "She said". Teddy laughed and answered, "You know, mommy! You were there in my dream too".