

## The Effect of Form-Focused Instruction and Feedback on Iranian EFL Learners' Learning of Determiners

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### ABSTRACT

One of the current concerns of language teachers and researchers is centered on the most effective form of grammar instruction in the communicative classroom. Recent research has shown there is a need for approaches and activities that consistently create an environment which pushes students to focus their attention on form in the process of language learning. Taken this reason into account, this study aims to investigate the effect of form-focused instruction (FFI) and corrective feedback in the form of recasts on Iranian EFL learners' learning of certain English determiners. The participants of this study were 32 male high school students in Ardebil province, Iran. Since they had been placed in two different intact classes in advance by their educational program, one class was assigned as the control and the other as the experimental group. There were 16 students in each group. Both groups were administered a pretest to ascertain their homogeneity. The form-focused instructional treatments designed to draw learners' attention to certain English determiners. Then, the experimental group received FFI and corrective feedback in the form of recasts and the control group of the learners received neither FFI nor feedback. After three weeks of instruction both groups were post tested. Data were submitted to a T-Test analysis and the results indicated that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group with respect the variable under investigation. This study suggests that FFI and corrective feedback can be a worthy option in EFL classrooms. Finally the pedagogical implications of this study are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** Form-focused instruction, corrective feedback, recasts, English as a foreign language, determiners

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning foreign language is regarded nowadays as an essential component in the curricula at different educational levels. In particular, learning the English language has become necessary given its widespread use throughout the world (House & kasper, 2000). Considering the worldwide importance of the use of English, in order to make learners become communicatively competent in the English language, there is a need for a shift from previous theoretical frameworks, which considered language as a formal system based on grammatical rules, toward a more communicative perspective. Over the centuries, second language educators have alternated between two types of approaches to language teaching, i.e., those who focus on analyzing the language and those who focus on using the language. As approaches in language teaching have changed, methodologies of teaching language skills and elements have undergone modifications. Among all skills and elements, modifications in grammar teaching have held and continue to hold a central place (Canal & Swain, 1980; Campbell, 1970; Celce-Marcia, 1991; Ellis, 2006, 1985; Fotos, 1994).

One of the current concerns of applied linguists is centered on the most effective forms of grammar teaching in the communicative classroom (Doughty and Williams, 1998; Lightbown, 2000; Noris and Ortega, 2000). Taken these concerns into account, in recent years much has been written, on both theoretical and empirical aspects of the form-focused instruction and feedback in second language learning (ESL) and foreign language learning contexts. Traditionally grammar teaching was viewed as the presentation and practice of discrete grammatical structures. It contributed to learning but this was of limited value regarding development of communicative ability and fluency (Long, 1991). One of the shortcomings of this approach (focus on forms approach) is that it sacrifices fluency in the cost of accuracy. It is nowadays a consensus among researchers and practitioners that input alone is insufficient for

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learners to learn knowledge to high level of target like precision and some kind of form-based instruction and feedback should accompany in L2 or FL classrooms(e.g., Doughty & Williams,1998; Long and Robinson,1998).

Under communicative language teaching (CLT), too much emphasis on communicative competence and too little attention to linguistic knowledge has led to unfavorable language teaching results. So, the attention has shifted back towards combining focus on form and meaning. This idea has led to the method of focus on form (Long, 1997; Long and Robinson, 1998).This instructional method provides a way for researchers and language teachers to balance the development of both teaching priority between fluency and accuracy and at the same time to reconsider the teaching priority between fluency and accuracy .Focus on form refers to instruction that engages learners' attention to form while they are primarily focused on message content (Long, 1991).

In addition, many observational and experimental studies of different types of feedback have shown the effectiveness of feedback used by teachers in wide range of instructional settings in ESL/EFL classrooms.

### 1.1 The notion of Form-Focused Instruction

In the last years the role of grammar has gone through three main stages : absolute prominence , exclusion , and re-introduction with caution .These three stages have been associated with three different approaches to instruction namely , "focus on forms(F on Fs)", "focus on meaning (F on M)" ,and "focus on form(F on F)".

Several studies and reviews in recent years on SLA research have shown that focus on form instruction (FFI) has potential for learners and develop learners' awareness of target language (Chan and Davis, 2002,). FFI is generic description to draw the attention of learners to target language forms either explicitly or implicitly, or by planned or unplanned activities (Mayo, 2002). In FFI we should distinguish between focus on forms and focus on form. Focus on form (F on F) has provided a shift of attention towards grammar instruction in second language acquisition research. Long (1991) conceptualized F on F as a type of instruction which mainly focuses on meaning or communication with the learners' attention being briefly drawn to linguistic elements only as they arise incidentally. R.Ellis (2001) defines FFI as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form". Although the majority of FFI studies have focused on the domain of grammar, the term form in FFI actually refers to all formal aspects of language: to grammar, but also to pronunciation, spelling, intonation, and etc. Many have a vague conception of this term and many mistakenly believe that it just refers to syntactic structures. But the story goes beyond mere syntactic values. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001, 2002; Doughty and Williams, 1998 extend the notion and range of form to include not only phonological, lexical, grammatical rules but also to discourse. In a similar way, Ellis (2002)states that "the term“ form” is intended to include phonological, lexical , grammatical and pragmalinguistic aspects of language" .F on F theory suggests that when students brings their attentional resources to bear on language input in specific ways ,language acquisition is enhanced and more durable .F on F enables learners to take time out from a focus on meaning and notice linguistic items in the input, thereby overcoming a potential obstacle of purely meaning-focused lessons in which linguistic forms may go unnoticed (Loewen,2003). Doughty and Varela (1998) suggest that the aim of FFI is to add attention to linguistic properties of a communicative task rather than to depart from the communicative objective, so it is effective. Spada (1997) believes that FFI can be preplanned or incidental; and this is different from Long's original definition in which F on F is incidental. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006) FFI is an instruction that draws attention to the forms and structures of language within the context of communicative interaction. This may be done by giving metalinguistic information, simply highlighting the form, or by providing corrective feedback.

According to Long "F on F is in sharp contrast with traditional grammar instruction or F on Fs instruction, which places a focus on forms themselves in isolation" (Long, as cited in Muranoi, 2000, p. 618). F on Fs is an approach equated with the traditional method of language teaching which entails teaching discrete linguistic structures in separate lessons in a sequence determined by the syllabus (Laufer and Girsai, 2008). According to Ellis (2001), in an F on Fs approach, students view themselves as learners of a language and the language as the object of study. This methodology does not enable learners to develop communicative competence. Long (2000) believes that F on F instruction is advantageous over F on Fs instruction because F on F is learner- centered , is tuned to the learner's internal syllabus , and occurs when needed . However, F on Fs does not match learning processes, is not needs-based, and often results in boring lessons (cited in Fotos and Nassaji, 2007, p.12).

There are three broad types of FFI: F on Fs, planned focus on form, and incidental focus on form (George, 2008). The following table taken from Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2002) shows the tripartite classification of FFI.

**Table 1**  
Types of FFI

Types of FFI	Primary focus	Distribution
Focus on forms	Form	Intensive
Planned F on F	Meaning	Intensive
Incidental F on F	Meaning	Extensive

By “planned” is meant preselected forms, by “intensive” is meant focusing on a single pre-selected form or a few forms, by “incidental” is meant un-preselected forms, by “extensive” is meant candidacy of many un-pre-selected forms for focus.

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## **1.2 Feedback**

Feedback that a teacher or learner provides in response to a learner utterance containing an error. The feedback can be implicit as in the case of recasts or explicit as in the case of direct correction or meta-lingual explanation (Ellis, 2005). Corrective feedback is a necessary part of learning a language, especially in a F on F model. Students are not able to learn from their mistakes if those mistakes are not pointed out to them or if they are not given the tools to correct them. According to the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), corrective feedback plays a beneficial role in facilitating the acquisition of certain forms, which may be otherwise difficult to learn or master through exposure to comprehensible input alone (Long & Robinson, 1998). Corrective feedback, moreover, can be used to draw learners' attention to mismatches between the learner's production and the target like realization of these forms. According to Ellis direct corrective feedback refers to when the instructor indicates where a mistake has been made and immediately provides the correct answer for students. On the other hand, indirect corrective feedback occurs when the instructor indicates that there has been a mistake but does not give the student the correct answer. This form of feedback is helpful in long-term acquisition of grammar and concepts, and it also creates a problem-solving environment in the classroom (Anderson and Beckwith, 2010). corrective feedback is defined by Sheen (2001) as "a teacher's reactive move that invites a learner to attend to the grammatical accuracy of the utterance which is produced by the learner".

The most comprehensible taxonomy of corrective feedback has been provided by Roy Lyster and Leila Ranta (1997). Lyster and Ranta developed an observational scheme which describes different types of feedback teachers give on errors and also examines student uptake- how they immediately respond to the feedback. This resulted in the identification of six feedback types defined below:

1. Explicit correction: refers to the explicit provision of the correct form.

S: The dog run fastly.

T: "Fastly" doesn't exist. "Fast" does not take -ly. You should say 'fast'.

2. Recasts: involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterances, minus the error. Recasts are generally implicit in that they are not introduced by 'You mean', 'Use this word' or 'You should say'.

S1: why you don't like Mark?

T: why don't you like Marc?

S2: I don't know, I don't like him.

Note that in this example the teacher does not seem to expect uptake from S1. It seems she is merely reformulating the question S1 has asked S2.

3. Clarification requests: The teacher indicates to students that their utterance has been misunderstood by the teacher and a repetition or reformulation is needed.
4. Metalinguistic feedback: contains comments, information, or questions related to the correctness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form, (for example, 'can you find your error?')
5. Elicitation: refers to techniques that teachers use to directly elicit the correct form from the students.
6. Repetition: refers to the teacher's repetition of the student's erroneous utterance.

Among these categories, recasts will be considered in this study. A considerable amount of recast research, both in and out of classrooms, has concerned recasts: implicit reformulation of learners' non-target like utterances (Ellis & Sheen, 2006).

S: There was fox.

T: There was a fox. (Sheen, 2007, p.307)

S: The boy have many flowers in the basket.

T: Yes, the boy has many flowers in the basket (Nicholas et al, 2001, p.721).

Recasts are among the most frequently studied types of corrective feedback. Lyster and Ranta found that all teachers in the content-based French immersion classes they observed used recasts more than any other type of feedback. In addition, in a descriptive classroom study with adult learners of English as a second language, Rod Ellis, Helen Basturkmen, and Shown Loewen (2001) observed that most of the teachers' responses to the learners' errors came in the form of recasts (cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

Regarding theoretical perspectives, Long (1996) and Doughty (2001) argued that recasts create ideal opportunities for learners to notice the differences between their inter-language forms and target-like reformulations. They argued that recasts are beneficial and at the same time have the potential to enable learners to focus on form and to notice errors in their inter-language production.

The current study aims to investigate the effect of FFI and corrective feedback in the form of recasts on Iranian EFL learners' learning of certain English determiners. Determiners in English form a closed class of words that number about 50 and include:

- Articles : a, an, The ( definite & indefinite articles)
- Demonstratives : This , That , These , Those
- Possessives : my , your , his , her , its , our , yours , their
- Quantifiers: few, many, several, some, no, any...

In this study we mainly focus on certain English determiners which are as follow:

Basic article usage (indefinite and definite articles : a , an , the ), zero article , one , some, a few , few , little, a little .

According to Vivian Cook (2008, p.42) several ways exist of drawing the students attention to grammar without actually explaining grammar explicitly. Grammatical items or structures may be brought to the students' attention by some graphic or auditory devices, stressing all the grammatical morphemes in speech to draw attention to them. SLA research by Joanna White (1998) drew the learners' attention to grammatical forms such as pronouns by printing them in italic or bold face. It should be noted that there are various F on F instructional options and activities. One of the most implicit types of F on F is input flood (also known as enriched input). According to Shawn Loewen in this option communicative tasks are seeded with specific grammatical structures or vocabulary in the hope that the increased frequency of the forms will be salient to learners or those learners will produce errors in the targeted forms that can then receive corrective feedback. A slightly more explicit option than input flood is input enhancement, which involves increasing the visual (or auditory) effect of specific linguistic items in the input (Sharwood Smith, 1993). Enhanced input is a common name for visually highlighting certain elements, such as grammatical constructions. As White describes it, this involves techniques such as bolding, italics, underling, capitalization, coloring, or oral enhancement, such as raising the intonation of the specific feature in order to increase the likelihood that students' attention will be drawn to certain grammatical forms. This will help students use their attentional resources efficiently because it causes them to focus on the grammar that the instructor has pre-determined needs their attention most of all. In the present study we use input enhancement option especially bolding and underlining treatments in order to increase student's attention to certain English determiners.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims at answering and analyzing the following research question and hypothesis:

### 2.1 Research Question and Hypotheses

1. What is the effect of FFI and recast feedback on Iranian EFL learners' learning of certain English determiners?

H0: FFI and recast feedback have no effect on Iranian EFL learners' learning of certain English determiners.

H1: FFI and recast feedback have significant effects on Iranian EFL learners' learning of certain English determiners.

### 2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 32 male high school students who are studying English in grade 1 in Dr. Beheshty School in Ardebil province, Iran. Their ages ranged from 15 to 16. They were all Turkish native speakers and at the same time all of them were fluent in Persian, as the official language in Iran and had learned English chiefly in formal EFL classroom contexts at school. Since they had been placed in two different intact classes (Mackey and Gass, 2005, p.141) in advance by their educational program, it was impossible to group them randomly to two classes. Consequently, one class was assigned as the control and the other as the experimental group. There are 16 students in each group. This study was designed during winter 2011 with class meeting three hours per week.

### 2.3 Instrumentation and Research procedure

In order to collect data from the participants, students of the two classes (control group and experimental group) were administered a general English proficiency test (Nelson 050 D) as a pretest at the outset of the experiment in order to ascertain their homogeneity. As for their language proficiency, all participants were roughly at the same level of proficiency based on the results of pre-test.

With regard to F on F techniques, a variety of possibilities are adopted in classrooms. Long and Robinson (1998) suggested the use of input enhancement and feedback, which are the two most frequent used techniques in F on F classrooms. The F on F treatments and techniques (as mentioned before in the present study we use input enhancement options especially bolding and underlining treatments) designed to draw and increase students'

attention to above mentioned determiners. For conducting the current research, the experimental group (N=16) received input enhancement, which involved typographical enhancement in combination with recast feedback to enhance the perceptual saliency of the preselected English determiners. On the other hand, the participants that were assigned to control group (N=16) received a traditional grammar teaching method such as Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) and no recast feedback. Instructional materials are those which are used in ordinary English classes in Iran. English textbooks administered by Ministry of Education should be taught in the two classes. In addition, two frequently used F on F techniques including bolding and underlining of preselected English determiners were employed.

**Table 2**  
**The design of the study**

Sessions	Activity
Week1	Both EG and CG were pre-tested
Week2	EG received FFI and recast feedback on "definite and indefinite articles (the, a ,an)", CG received GTM and no feedback
Week3	EG received FFI and recast on "zero article, one, some" , CG received GTM and no feedback
Week4	EG received FFI and recast on " a few , few , a little , little" and CG received neither FFI nor feedback
Week5	Both EG and CG were post-tested

EG= Experimental Group; CG= Control Group

Each class session lasted for 75 minutes. Both of the groups received the same learning materials, including books, drills, quizzes, and so on. With the experimental group, the instructor had to keep in mind that the main goal was to convey the meaning, followed by linguistic features to ensure the implementation of FFI. Therefore, to draw students' attention to certain English determiners, the instructor stressed the intonation of these determiners, as well as bolding and underlining them in an appropriate way. As mentioned earlier, corrective feedback in the form of recast was provided to the students. Recast used mostly by the teacher and less by other learner with the help of the teacher. In the recast condition, the instructor responded to errors by using recast feedback that reformulates the wrong grammatical form, as in the following example:

T: Ali what did you do last night?

S: I watched news on TV last night?

T: You watched the news on TV last night.

To sum up, the instructor tended to draw the attention of the participants in the experimental group by various focus-on-form techniques. On the other hand, the control group received traditional teaching, in which the target determiners were treated in an isolated way.

After three weeks of instruction both groups were post-tested (each test takes 45 minutes. It was in the form of multiple choice items and in every case students have to choose the correct answer from four choices. Answers should be given on separate answer sheets).

### 3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

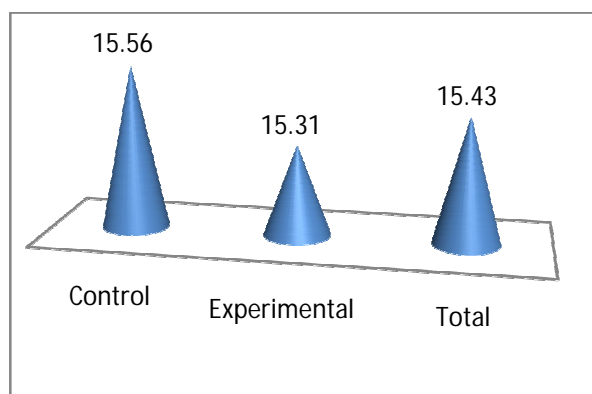
In order to investigate the effect of FFI and recast feedback on Iranian EFL learners' learning of certain English determiners, 32 male high school students participated in this study. One group named the experimental group (N=16) and the other one is called control group (N=16).Both groups were given a pretest to assure that they are equal at the onset of the study. Then the experimental group received FFI and recast feedback and the control group received neither FFI nor any special feedback treatment, continuing with its regular program of study (minus the instructional treatments designed for this research).

After 3 weeks of instruction, a posttest was employed by researchers to see whether any significant difference take places regarding the variable under investigation. The raw data were analyzed by a computer program, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 13.0 and the data were submitted to a T-Test analysis to verify the hypotheses proposed. The results are reported below:

Descriptive results of pretest for two groups are displayed at the table 3.1 and figure 3.1.

**Table 3.1** report pre CE (pretest for Control & Experimental Group)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	16	15.56	2.75
Experimental	16	15.31	3.66
Total	32	15.43	3.19

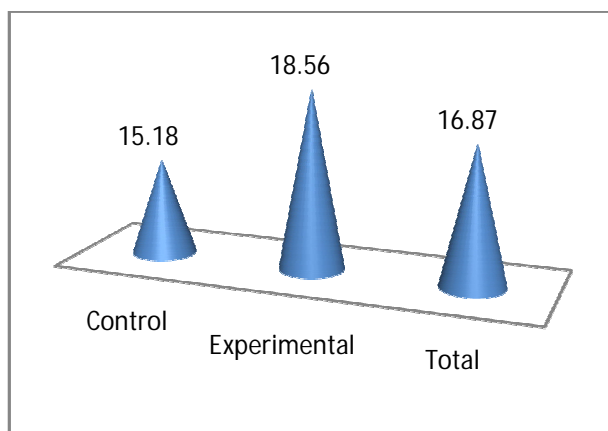


**Figure 3.1** Means report for two groups on pretest

As above table and figure show two groups are homogenous in terms of pretest. The mean score for experimental group is  $M=15.31$  and  $SD=3.66$ . The mean score for control group is  $M=15.56$  and  $SD=2.75$ . In other words the results show that there are not meaningful differences between two groups at the beginning of the experiment, even though the control group scored higher than the experimental group. Table 3.2 and figure 3.2 show the results of descriptive statistics for posttest.

**Table 3.2** report post CE (posttest for Control & Experimental Group)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	16	15.18	2.40
Experimental	16	18.56	3.79
Total	32	16.87	3.56



**Figure 3.2** Means report for two groups on posttest

As above table and figure show two groups' performance on posttest is different. The mean score for experimental group is  $M=18.56$  and  $SD=3.79$ . The mean score for control group is  $M=15.18$  and  $SD=2.40$ . As is clear that there are meaningful differences between means of experimental and control groups in posttest (the mean score of the experimental group was higher than the control group).

For hypothesis testing purpose, T-Test analysis was employed, as a means of inferential statistical analysis and the results obtained as illustrated in the following tables:

**Table 3.3** summary for pretest & posttest scores of the Control Group

**Paired Samples Statistics**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 pre	15.5625	16	2.75605	.68901
post	15.1875	16	2.40052	.60013

As can be seen in the table 3.3, the mean scores of the control group before instruction was M=15.5625 and after instruction was M=15.1875.

**Paired Samples Correlations**

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pre & post	16	.497	.050

**Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 pre - post	.37500	2.60448	.65112	-1.01283	1.76283	.576	15	.573

As shown in the tables, the P-value for 95% confidence interval of the difference is higher than .05 (Sig= .573), so this confirms that there is no significant difference between the scores of the control group before and after instruction.

**Table 3.4** summary for pretest & posttest scores of the Experimental Group

**Paired Samples Statistics**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre	15.3125	16	3.66458	.91615
	post	18.5625	16	3.79418	.94855

As shown in the table 3.4, the experimental group's pretest and posttest mean scores were 15.3125 and 18.5625 respectively.

**Paired Samples Correlations**

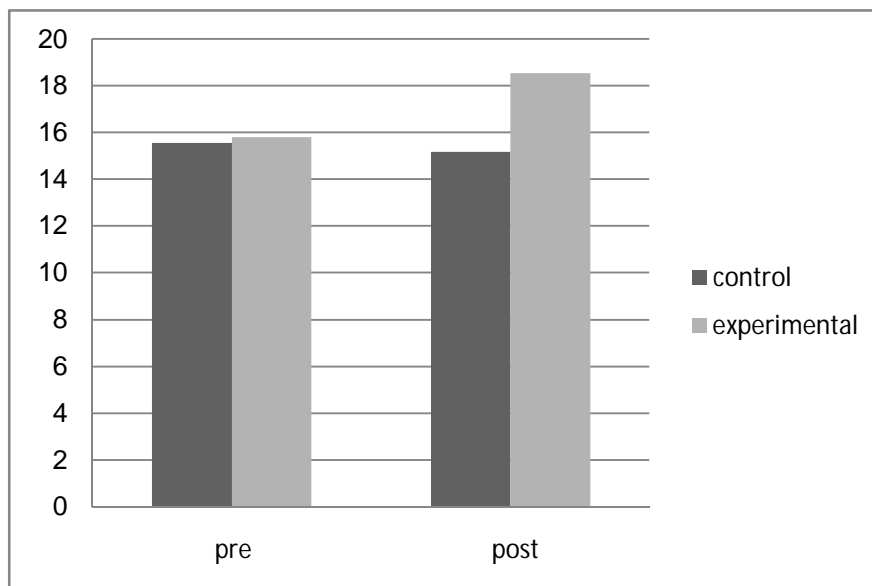
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pre & post	16	.643	.007

**Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 pre - post	-3.25000	3.15172	.78793	-4.92943	-1.57057	-4.125	15	.001

The tables indicate that the mean scores for experimental group in pretest and posttest are clearly significant. With these pieces of information, the researchers try to test the hypothesis. In order to test the hypothesis, the researchers should obtain an observed t value about the differences between the two means and compare it with the theoretically developed value, i.e., the critical t value. If the value of t-observed is greater than the value of t-critical for an appropriate degree of freedom, the null hypothesis will be rejected ( $|t\text{-observed}| > t\text{-critical}$ ). Accordingly, the observed t is significantly higher than the value of t-critical (in this case the value of t-critical is about 2.1), in order

to support the alternative hypothesis (in other words as it is clear the P-value for 95% confidence interval of the difference is lower than .05, sig= .001). The above result provides evidence for the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis that FFI and recast feedback have significant effect on the experimental group.



**Figure 3.3** Graphic Representation of the Means for CG & EG on pretest and posttest

It is clearly recognizable in figure 3.3 that the experimental group improved their mean score more (+3.25) than did the control group (-.375). Moreover, the experimental group started from a lower point at the pretest ( $M=15.31$ ), compared to the control group ( $M=15.56$ ), but ended at a higher point ( $M=18.56$ ), compared to the control group ( $M=15.18$ ). Therefore, the results of this research demonstrated that the EG performed significantly better than the CG after 3 weeks of instruction.

#### 4. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

As mentioned earlier, according to Long "F on F is in sharp contrast with traditional grammar instruction or F on Fs instruction, which places a focus on forms themselves in isolation" (Long, as cited in Muranoi, 2000, p.618). In order to teach grammar to language learners, there is no need to present the grammatical rules and elements and then practice target structures in single isolated sentences. As the experience of language teachers demonstrates, this method is neither effective nor encouraging language learners to be enthusiastic about grammar. There should be some alternative methodologies, one of which is FFI. We can conclude from the results of the present study that FFI in terms of bolding and underlining target forms and recast feedback have significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' learning of certain English determiners which in this research had been realized on the post-test scores of the experimental group. Several studies have been conducted which are similar in terms of their results to this study. In other words, it can be stated that the current study contributed to previous research on the positive effect of FFI and corrective feedback in the form of recasts on second and foreign language learning. For example, Nina Spada (1997) finds broad empirical support for the view that FFI (including focus on form) is beneficial for SLA. In addition, Catherine Doughty and Jessica Williams (1998) have completed a book for Cambridge University Press which contains several new empirical studies documenting the efficacy of focus on form with children and adults in a variety of classroom settings. The fact that EFL/ESL methodologists have not offered consistent advice to teachers about the role of grammar in language teaching has frustrated teachers who cannot decide between many conflicting positions in the methodological literature. The extensive review of the related literature revealed that grammar cannot be discarded from foreign language pedagogy and form and meaning do not have to be mutually excluded. Adopting a F on F approach as a modification of communicative language teaching which is in line with the learners' needs to communicate meaningfully and effectively is being accepted as the preferred option by many ELT scholars. As proved in this study, FFI can be successful in EFL classrooms, even for learners whose proficiency level is intermediate or below.

The findings of this research project could be of use to most language learning centers, and schools in EFL contexts. Some pedagogical implications can be derived from this research. One implication is that teachers should



encourage learners to pay attention to form in a meaningful context of language use and to modify their incorrect utterance upon receiving corrective feedback in the form of recast from teachers or other learners.

Finally it is better to mention that, as most of other research, this research is not exhaustive one and it is not able to include all aspects of a given problem. We should be cautious in generalizing of our finding to other areas because of the limited scope of our study. Therefore, it is recommended that further research and further focus on form techniques and feedback types utilized to observe the obtained result.

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