Impact of FFI Instructional Techniques on the Acquisition of English Articles in Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study was aimed at investigating the differential effects of three types of form-focused instruction (FFI) procedures on the learning of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To do so, 90 intermediate undergraduate students at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran, were selected to participate in the study. They were assigned to three experimental groups, namely input enhancement (IE), metalinguistic explanations (ME), and information structure (IS). Textual input enhancement was employed to instruct the participants in the IE group, and two popular English grammar books, namely '*Essential Grammar in Use*' (Murphy, 1998) and '*Oxford Practice Grammar*' (Eastwood, 1999), constituted the instructional material in the ME group. The third group was instructed on the effect of given and new information on the choice of appropriate article in English sentences. The data collected through the pretest-posttest design underwent paired-samples t-test and one-way ANCOVA for statistical analysis. The results showed that the three groups of IE, ME, and IS improved significantly from pretest to posttest. However, on the posttest, the IS learners significantly outperformed the ME learners, who were in turn found to be meaningfully higher than their counterparts in the IE group. The findings of the study have important implications for the teaching of English articles to L2 learners.

Keywords: form-focused instruction, input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, information structure, English articles

INTRODUCTION

Form-focused instruction (FFI) has been recognized as one of the effective approaches to acquiring linguistic features in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). According to Spada (1997) and Loewen (2020), FFI is a kind of instruction in which some degree of explicit or implicit attention has been paid to the language form. A number of techniques in FFI can be employed to convey linguistic properties to language learners. Among these techniques, input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure, regarded as the most important techniques in SLA, help L2 learners attend to the form of the language (Master, 2002; Ranta & Lyster, 2018). The effects of the practice of these techniques

have been studied separately by a number of researchers such as Alsadoon and Heift (2015), LaBrozzi (2016), and Sato and McDonough (2019) as well as collectively by Gooch et al. (2016) and Lee and Lyster (2016).

Input enhancement, an implicit focus-on-form teaching technique, focuses on "making learners aware of the new target language features and rules by highlighting them in the input more or less concisely or elaborately, and with greater or lesser explicitness and intensity" (Sharwood-Smith, 1994, p.179). A group of researchers, such as Poole (2005), Berent et al. (2007) and Afitska (2012), favored these techniques. They maintain that providing learners with meaning and use help in drawing their attention to the form and as a result they develop communicative competence through the instruction.

Metalinguistic explanations technique is based on the provision of facts and rules about a linguistic target, referred to as 'declarative knowledge'—a kind of knowledge that learners are aware of and can verbalize— in Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 1998, 2001, 2015; Lyster & Sato, 2013), through the application of explicit metalanguage or overstated models of target language forms. The declarative knowledge of the linguistic target created through metalinguistic explanations contributes to the awareness phase of Lyster's (2007, 2017) instructional sequence, in which learners "reflect on and manipulate the target forms in a way that helps them to develop or restructure their explicit knowledge representations" (Ranta & Lyster, 2018, p. 49).

Lastly, the information structure technique is another important FFI technique which has been the subject of scrutiny. At the core of information structure is the concept of givenness originally proposed by Chafe (1976), who coined the terms 'new' and 'given' information. Generally, there are two types of givenness: one is 'referential' givenness and the other is 'relational' givenness. The former "involves a relation between a linguistic expression and a corresponding non-linguistic entity in the speaker/hearer's mind, the discourse mode, or some real or possible world" (Gundel, 2012, p. 587). The latter, on the other hand, "involves a partition of the semantic-conceptual representation of a sentence into two complementary parts, X and Y, where X is what the sentence is about and Y is what is predicated about X" (Gundel, 2012, p. 589).

According to Banks (1999), a listener always presumes certain structure that help him/her to understand the whole discourse. Normally, in the writing mode, given information appears at the outset and the new information at the end of the sentence. This type of presentation is technically called 'end-focus' presentation which, according to Leech and Svartvik (2003), creates a kind of climax at the end of the sentence rendering it more effective. However, they admitted that this pattern is not always invariable, and there are some exceptions. Along the same lines, Holliday (1994) posited that new information is something that is unexpected while the old/given information is something that is expected.

Due to the fact that canonical information structure is observed approximately in two thirds of the noun phrases (Lloyd, 2022), it might be a useful instruction for EFL/ESL learners to use this technique in choosing appropriate articles in their writings. For example, according to Pica (1983), the instruction of the definite article could be explained in terms of the rule that it always occurs along with a qualifying noun. At the beginning, students can be taught the noun phrases to the left of the verb identified by the definite article and sometimes by null article Ø, while noun phrases to the left of the verb are identified by indefinite article or zero article Ø. Such rules are most of the time correct and can be demonstrated via examples and practiced through exercises.

Since the English article system has proven to be difficult to acquire by second and foreign language learners, and, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, few studies have tackled the relative impact of form-focused instruction techniques on the acquisition of English article system, the present study

was aimed at determining which of the FFI instructional techniques described above is more facilitative in the learning of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A topic of interest in second/foreign language pedagogy, form-focused instruction has fueled extensive research in multiple related domains, including vocabulary (Laufer & Girsai, 2008; Shintani, 2013; Sippel, 2019; Tsai, 2020), pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2012; Sánchez-Hernández & Martínez-Flor, 2022; Takimoto, 2006), grammar (Akakura, 2012; Shintani, 2015; Sippel, 2021; Xu & Li, 2021; Xu & Lyster, 2014; Yang & Lyster, 2010), and pronunciation (Gooch et al., 2016; Lee & Lyster, 2016; Saito & Lyster, 2012; Wisniewska & Mora, 2020). Furthermore, the effectiveness of FFI has been documented by a meta-analysis of 54 studies over 35 years (Kang et al., 2019).

Acquisition of English Article System

Apart from input enhancement and metalinguistic explanation techniques, elaborated above and generally applied to the instruction of English articles, the patterns of information structure, which can be affected by numerous restatement procedures as observed in the following instances, have the potential to draw EFL/ESL learners' attention and, hence, lead to acquisition. According to Master (2002), information structure can be impacted through the use of existential *there,* e.g. 'A cat is in the yard.' versus 'There is a cat in the yard'. Another pattern is in pseudo-cleft sentences, e.g. 'We need money.' versus 'What we need is money'. The choice of direct and indirect object also affects the information structure of a sentence, illustrated by 'He gave Amir the book.' versus 'He gave the book to Amir'. Moreover, it can be found in separable phrasal verbs, evidenced by 'She put on the coat.' versus 'She put the coat on'. Furthermore, the choice of pre-modification versus post-modification along with relative clause affects the information structure of a sentence, e.g., 'The factory will make the lazy workers redundant.' versus 'The factory will make workers redundant who are lazy'. Finally, the reduction of relative clauses has some degree of influence on the information structure. For example, 'The man who was walking in the street was a famous doctor.' versus 'The man walking in the street was a famous doctor'. In all these cases, there are changes in the given and new information moving from the original to the restated sentence.

Regarding the placement of the English articles, Yule (1998) stated that given information is preceded with definite article *'the'* and new information with 'a' or zero/null article *'Ø'*. According to Chafe (1976, 1994), given information can be expressed with pronoun and new information with the full noun phrase. For instance, 'He bought **a** new house. **The** house is **an** old one. **It** looks like **a** castle.' In this example, the subject expresses given information and the predicate represents new information. In an extended discourse, however, this fixed structure might be violated. According to Yule (1998), the importance of some elements of the story affects the choice of the appropriate articles. Mostly, the violation of rules at discourse level appears in the new information part and the given information is less likely to have these violations.

According to Master (2002) the canonical information structure is determined by zero article 'Ø' or indefinite article *'a'* or the definite article *the*; central determiners such as *my*, *her*, *their, some, any*; demonstrative such as *this* and *that*; negative determiner *no,* universals like *every* and *each*; duals such as *either…or* and *neither…nor*; and WH determiners such as *what*, *which*, and *whose*. Violation of accepted rules governing the canonical information structure may occur both in main and in subordinate clauses. There are violations also in the post-modification clauses (where the definite article is necessary), e.g. 'I found the book that you gave me' versus 'I found a book'. Other violations can be seen in cases where the

noun is being identified by a person in a narrative or discourse, in idiomatic expressions or superlative application of the definite articles, and in topic focus.

Empirical Work on FFI Procedures

According to Ranta and Lyster (2018), three main classes of FFI instructional techniques, including input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and practice, could be distinguished. Input enhancement, whose positive results have been reported by a number of studies (Alsadoon & Heift, 2015; Labrozzi, 2016; Lee & Révész, 2018, 2020; Rassaei, 2020), has been the target of criticism for restricted effectiveness by a body of research on L2 (Chung & Révész, 2021; Cintrón-Valentín & García-Amaya, 2021; Lee, 2021; Lee & Huang, 2008). Furthermore, in a meta-analysis conducted by Leow and Martin (2017), the majority of studies reviewed did not prove any meaningful supremacy of enhanced over unenhanced input. However, in related research lengthier gazed durations and rereading times evidenced the noticing of target forms as a result of input enhancement (Alsadoon & Heift, 2015; Issa & Morgan-Short, 2019; Lee & Révész, 2018, 2020; Winke, 2013). Thus, although input enhancement is effective in stimulating noticing, noticing on its own "does not guarantee [the target forms] will be incorporated into [learners'] developing interlanguage" (Ellis, 2001, p. 8). The same conclusion has been reported by numerous other studies (e.g., Meguro, 2019; Labrozzi, 2016; Rassaei, 2020; Szudarski & Carter, 2016; Winke, 2013). Also, diverse parameters, like the format of textual enhancement (i.e., kind and frequency of typographical signals) (Labrozzi, 2016; Simard, 2009) as well as the learners' first and second language background (Révész et al., 2021) may impact the efficacy of input enhancement.

The effectiveness of metalinguistic explanations as another FFI procedure has been largely corroborated by past research. Besides the original meta-analyses carried out by Norris and Ortega (2000) and Spada and Tomita (2010), both accentuating the facilitative role of explicit instruction in L2 learning, a plethora of later research (e.g., Akakura, 2012; Hu, 2011; Indrarathne & Kormos, 2017; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Shintani et al., 2014, 2016; Snape et al., 2016; Umeda et al., 2019) strongly proved the effectiveness of metalinguistic explanations in enhancing explicit knowledge of L2 in learners. Still, it remains worthy to mention that in only three of them clear durable gains were observed (Akakura, 2012; Shintani et al., 2016; Snape et al., 2016). The majority of the other studies reported that the resulted knowledge and learning gains remained mostly explicit and transitory in nature. Put another way, while awareness appears to be fostered through metalinguistic explanations, whether awareness alone suffices for the development of implicit permanent L2 knowledge remains a matter of conjecture. Following the same lines, Shintani (2019) compared the relative effect of practice along with metalinguistic explanations with that of the latter alone. The findings revealed that supplementing metalinguistic explanations with practice led to both enhanced performance and persistent gains in learners. This is right in line with Ranta and Lyster's (2018) assertion that practice aids in bolstering learners' metalinguistic awareness through fostering productive language which, in turn, increases proceduralization of the target language knowledge.

The third, and the last, FFI procedure in Ranta and Lyster's (2018) taxonomy, practice is intended to maximize learners' engagement in recurrent interactional activities demanding them to use the target linguistic items. The temporal distribution of practice, i.e., whether it is conducted in one whole part or divided into multiple sessions, has been a major concern of research in this area. The findings have proved contradictory inasmuch as they have partly revealed the preference of distributed over mass practice (Li & DeKeyser, 2019) and partly demonstrated no meaningful advantage of either of them (Bird, 2010; Rogers, 2015). Furthermore, although researchers like Suzuki (2017) found that the more frequent the practice, the more persistent its effect, others such as Serrano and Huang (2018) found out that more frequent practice leads to more immediate gains, and less frequent counterpart has more durable results.

The distribution of target items in practice has been investigated by other researchers, including Nakata and Suzuki (2019) proving interleaved practice beneficial as well as Suzuki and Sunada (2020) finding a mix of blocked and interleaved practice yielding maximum benefit.

Most recently, the relative effect of different combinations of FFI procedures was measured in an attempt to investigate their benefits as well as the cognitive processing taking place within learners' mind as provoked by each of them in a study by Lloyd (2022). For doing so, four groups of participants were each assigned to one of the conditions providing different combinations of the FFI techniques and to a control condition. A grammaticality judgment task, a metalinguistic knowledge task, an elicited imitation task, and a picture-description task were employed to gauge their knowledge of English articles. The findings depicted vivid and persistent gains in the second task following the lessons in the group receiving input enhancement and metalinguistic explanations. Moreover, it was revealed that having article-less native language and enjoying a considerable amount of participation during the lesson were the two commonalities found among the participants to whom the instructional treatment was of the greatest benefit.

To continue the line of research outlined above and to provide more insight into the subject, the present study endeavored to examine the effect of FFI instructional techniques, namely input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure, on the acquisition of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The following research questions were formulated in line with the objectives of the study.

RQ1. Does input enhancement have a significant effect on the acquisition of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

RQ2. Do metalinguistic explanations have a significant effect on the acquisition of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

RQ3. Does information structure instruction have a significant effect on the acquisition of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

RQ4. Is there a significant difference between input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure instruction regarding their effect on the acquisition of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

METHOD

Design

The current quasi-experimental research took a pretest-posttest design in its administration. Since true randomization was not feasible for the study, which was conducted within the context of pre-established English classes at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran, the classes were assigned to three experimental groups, namely input enhancement (IE), meta-linguistic explanations (ME), and information structure (IS). The independent variables were these three procedures of FFI, and the dependent variable was acquisition of English articles by Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Participants

      The participants of this study were a group of ninety undergraduate students, selected and homogenized through an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) to correspond to intermediate level of English proficiency, at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran, majoring in English translation. They were both male and female and within the age range of 20 to 35 years old. They were assigned to three experimental groups, each receiving FFI instruction based on one of the three techniques of input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure. The treatment was given by the same instructor, an experienced teacher of English grammar. To cater for ethical considerations, the participants filled in a consent form to take part in the study, and the confidentiality of their identity was maintained throughout the study.

Materials and Instruments

Instructional Materials

      Two popular grammar books, namely '*Essential Grammar in Use'* by Murphy (1998) and '*Oxford Practice Grammar'* by Eastwood (1999), conventionally taught in English Department of Islamic Azad University for grammar courses, were used to teach English articles in the metalinguistic explanations group. Also, a number of reading passages were used in the input enhancement group in which the English articles were made salient via bold typing.

Pretest and Posttest

      Before the treatment, a researcher-made pretest was administered to the participants in the three groups on articles. The test included thirty fill-in-the-blank items in which students had to provide either definite or indefinite articles in the spaces provided. Following the treatment, a similar test, a posttest including thirty fill-in-the-blank items on definite and indefinite articles, was administered to measure students' achievement in the three groups of input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure instruction. Both instruments were validated through piloting to a group of thirty EFL learners similar to the participants of the study. The reliability indices of the pretest and posttest determined through Alpha Cronbach were 0.71 and 0.74 respectively, and their content validity was approved by two expert instructors in the field of SLA.

Procedures

      A cohort of ninety undergraduate students at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran, majoring in English translation were selected through the administration of Oxford Quick Placement Test to ensure their correspondence to intermediate level of English proficiency. They were assigned to three equal-size groups of FFI instruction, namely input enhancement (IE), metalinguistic explanations (ME), and information structure (IS). Prior to the treatment, the participants were given a researcher-made pretest including thirty fill-in-the-blank items on English articles. Subsequently, the three groups were instructed for a period of eight weeks as the treatment of the study. The IE group was implicitly instructed on English articles based on textual enhancement. A number of reading passages with bold-faced articles were given

to them, yet no direct comments on the highlighted articles were provided by the teacher. The second group (ME) received metalinguistic explanation on English articles. Explicit grammatical explanations and rule applications on English articles were provided to them in an attempt to directly draw their attention to their use within sentences. The third group (IS) received instruction on was instructed on the impact of given and new information on the choice of appropriate article in English sentences from a linguistic perspective. Following the treatment, a posttest, similar to the pretest in item number and type, was administered to the students in the three groups. It deserves to be mentioned that both pre- and posttests were validated in a pilot phase; the reliability of the tests was calculated through Alpha Cronbach, and the content validity of them was checked by two expert teachers in SLA. The quantitative data collected via the pretest and posttest were analyzed through paired-samples t-test and one-way ANCOVA to provide answers to the research questions of the study.

RRSULTS

The results of data analysis presented here include those of both within-group and between-group comparisons of the performance of the three groups.

Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Scores in IE, ME, and IS Groups

To find out whether input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure instruction had significant effect on the participants' knowledge of definite and indefinite articles, their pretest and posttest scores in each group were compared. The descriptive statistics of these comparisons are presented below in Table 1 for the three groups.

Table 1

Results of Descriptive Statistics Comparing the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the IE, ME, and IS Learners

Groups	Tests	*N*	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	*Std.* Error Mean
IS	Pretest	30	9.63	2.41	.44
	Posttest	30	19.46	1.71	.31
ME	Pretest	30	9.70	1.89	.34
	Posttest	30	14.50	1.73	.31
IE	Pretest	30	9.36	1.84	.33
	Posttest	30	9.96	1.62	.29

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal that the IS learners improved in their knowledge of articles, moving from the mean score of 9.63 on the pretest to the mean score of 19.46 on the posttest. In a

similar vein, the ME learners showed an improvement from the pretest ($M = 9.70$) to the posttest ($M = 14.50$). Lastly, the IE learners also elevated their mean score from 9.36 to 9.96 from the pretest to the posttest. To see whether the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the participants in each group was statistically meaningful or not, the researcher ran paired-samples t-test the results of which are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Results of Paired-Samples t-test Comparing the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the IS, ME, and IE Learners

| | Paired Differences | | | | | | | |
| | Mean | *Std.* Deviation | *Std.* Error Mean | 95% Interval Difference | Confidence of the | *t* | *df* | *Sig.* (2-tailed) |
				Lower	Upper			
IS pretest-posttest	-9.83	1.91	.34	-10.54	-9.11	-28.14	29	.00
ME pretest-posttest	-4.80	.84	.15	-5.11	-4.48	-31.04	29	.00
IE pretest-posttest	-.60	.67	.12	-.85	-.34	-4.87	29	.00

It could be understood from Table 2 that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the learners was statistically significant in all the IE, ME, and IS conditions. Based on Table 2, all the IS, ME, and IE learners had a significant improvement from the pretest to the posttest. The next question is whether there were significant differences between the IS, ME, and IE groups in terms of the knowledge improvement of English articles in the participants.

Comparison of Posttest Scores of IS, ME, and IE Groups

In order to find out whether there were significant differences between the IS, ME, and IE learners in terms of their knowledge of English articles, the posttest scores of the learners in these three groups were compared. The descriptive statistics of this comparison are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the IS, ME and IE Learners

Groups	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	*N*
IS	19.46	1.71	30
ME	14.50	1.73	30
IE	9.96	1.62	30

Total	14.64	4.24	90

According to Table 3, the posttest mean score of the IS learners ($M = 19.46$) was the highest mean score, the posttest mean score of the ME learners was 14.50, and that of the IE learners equaled 9.96. To find out whether the differences among the three mean scores were statistically significant or not and to control for any possible pre-existing differences among the three groups, one-way ANCOVA was conducted. The results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the IS, ME, and IE Learners

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1510.72	3	503.57	461.21	.00	.94
Intercept	277.88	1	277.88	254.51	.00	.74
Pretest	156.03	1	156.03	142.90	.00	.62
Groups	1303.93	2	651.96	597.12	.00	.93
Error	93.89	86	1.09			
Total	20906.00	90				
Corrected Total	1604.62	89				

Based on Table 4, the differences among the three groups of IS, ME, and IE on the posttest of English articles were statistically meaningful. To pinpoint the exact location of the differences, the post hoc test was administered (see Table 5).

Table 5

Results of Post Hoc Test for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the IS, ME, and IE Learners

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
IS	ME	5.01*	.27	.00	4.35	5.66
	IE	9.32*	.27	.00	8.66	9.98
ME	IS	-5.01*	.27	.00	-5.66	-4.35
	IE	4.31*	.27	.00	3.65	4.97

IE	IS	-9.32[*]	.27	.00	-9.98	-8.66
	ME	-4.31[*]	.27	.00	-4.97	-3.65

Table 5 reveals that the difference between the IS and ME learners, between the IS and IE learners, and between the ME and IE learners were all of statistical significance ($p < .05$). It can be observed that the learners receiving information structure instruction got the highest mean score, and that there was a considerable difference between the IS and ME learners, who were instructed based on metalinguistic explanations. The ME learners, in turn, significantly outperformed their counterparts in the IE group.

DISCUSSION

Four questions were formulated and sought answers to in line with the objectives of the current research. The first, second, and third research questions examined whether input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure instruction are meaningfully influential in the acquisition of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The results of data analysis revealed that all the three techniques were effective in developing the learning of English article system. However, they differed in the degree to which they proved effective. This was evident as providing response to the fourth research question, which interrogated whether there was a significant difference between the three FFI procedures regarding their effect on the acquisition of English articles in the participants. Based on the data analysis carried out, information structure instruction, metalinguistic explanations, and input enhancement had respectively the highest to the lowest impact on the participants' learning of articles. It is both insightful and interesting to note that the first two procedures are explicit in nature, whereas the last technique is built upon implicit learning.

The results of the present study conform to those of Schmidt (1995) and Hunt and Beglar (2005), who maintained that more direct, goal-oriented, and explicit instruction leads to more effective and beneficial learning than implicit instruction does. Following the same lines, Ellis (2002) maintained that explicit instructions may help the learner to notice features in the input that would otherwise be ignored. The findings of the present study are also harmonious with those of the research by Doughty and Williams (1998), Long and Robinson (1998), and Norris and Ortega (2000) implying that attention to form though either explicit teaching or explicit error correction would prove conducive to efficient learning. Furthermore, numerous researchers, including Ellis (1994, 2001), Lynch (2009), and Nassaji and Swain (2000) among others, acknowledged explicit grammar instruction on the grounds that there do exist a number of grammatical forms which are challenging to learn even if enhanced via contextualization and are, hence, more facile to learn provided they are explicitly instructed.

Further justification for the observed results is gained with regard to the fact that implicit views maintaining that un/sub-conscious exposure may lead to language learning are inherently defective and can be criticized from a theoretical perspective. Based on research by Schmidt (1993, 2001), language learning necessitates a reasonable degree of conscious attention (noticing) to be drawn in learners. A number of other researchers, including Bialystok (1994), Dekeyser (1998), Robinson (1995), Nassaji and Swain (2000), Swain and Lapkin (2001), Zhisheng (2008), and Al-Hejin (2009), are of the same opinion.

Moreover, it can be speculated that in the context of the present study, the group which received implicit instruction through input enhancement, in contrast with those receiving explicit instruction via either metalinguistic explanations or information structure, could not declaratively explain what they have grasped via a grammar test, while naturalistic language use through other language skills, such as speaking, could demonstrate their long-term implicit knowledge of language items.

Besides, the findings of the study are consistent with a massive bulk of previous research indicating limited effects of input enhancement on L2 learning (Chung & Révész, 2021; Cintrón-Valentín & García-Amaya, 2021; Lee, 2021; Lee & Huang, 2008). As asserted by Ellis (2001), while noticing may be efficiently provoked through input enhancement, it alone does not ensure that the target forms will be absorbed by learners and integrated into their interlanguage. Also, in line with researchers like Labrozzi (2016) and Simard (2009), the effectiveness of input enhancement can be influenced by a variety of factors, including the format of textual enhancement, i.e., types and number of typographical cues. Envisaged through this lens, the relatively minor influence of input enhancement through highlighting the target forms via sheer bold typing with a limited frequency barely arouses much surprise. More frequent, eye-catching highlighting of the target forms could have possibly led to different results.

Another issue worthy of attention is the observed outperformance of the learners in the information structure instruction group compared to those in the metalinguistic explanations one. Explicit instruction essentially promotes awareness, but it seems that different explicit procedures raise differing degrees of awareness within learners leading to a continuum of learning outcomes. This finding is harmonious with that of Master (2002), who found out that instruction based on information structure framework leads to more significant gains than traditional explanation of article use does. Justification for the observation could be earned when one takes the concept of level or depth of processing, rooted in cognitive psychology, into consideration. Information structure instruction engages learners in a deeper level of processing in comparison with traditional metalinguistic explanation which typically triggers a shallow processing, and this, in turn, leads to more fruitful results in the learning of the target items. The reason for this provoked deep processing is, according to Zimmermann and Fery (2009, p. 126), the fact that information structure, by nature, constitutes an "interfacing level of mental representation [at which] linguistic rules and constraints on structure-building, interpretation, and processing interact with general cognitive processes involved in belief formation, such as memory, attention, pragmatic reasoning, and general inference processes".

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to investigate the differential effect of three FIF instructional techniques, namely input enhancement, metalinguistic explanations, and information structure, on the acquisition of English articles in Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In line with the majority of the literature, the results generally revealed the superiority of the two explicit techniques over the implicit one. Moreover, within the explicit camp, it was observed that information structure instruction culminated in more fruitful gains. The findings suggest that an understanding of canonical information structure may help non-native speakers to gain control of the article system. Like any other human research, the present study suffered from inadequacies and limitations. To illustrate, the focus of the study was on adult EFL leaners; other research with focus on different age groups might have yielded different useful results. Alternative scenarios could take place due to different language processing strategies employed by children and adults. Aside from age,

other variables, such as gender, proficiency level, and number of participants, might influence the results and can, hence, be the subject of future research in the area under investigation.

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