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## **The Effect of Textual Enhancement Types on EFL Learners' Grammatical Awareness of Simple and Complex Structures**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of textual enhancement types on English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' grammatical awareness of simple and complex structures. A number of 104 learners from Ayandegan Institute, in Tehran, participated in this study. To homogenize the samples, the researchers administered a placement Michigan Test of English language to the participants. The participants were then divided into four groups, two experimental groups and two control groups. The two experimental groups went through enhanced forms of the texts containing simple and complex structures, while the two control groups experienced unenhanced forms of the texts containing simple and complex structures. Before and after the treatment, a pretest and a posttest were run and the two reading texts with enhanced and unenhanced versions were used. The findings showed that the textual enhancement had significant effect on learners' grammatical awareness of simple and complex structures. There was also a significant difference between male and females' scores in simple and complex structures.

**Keywords:** Grammatical awareness, Input enhancement, Simple and complex structures, Textual enhancement

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Textual Enhancement (TE) of input is among the procedures of the focus on form (FonF) in second language acquisition (SLA) (Doughty & Williams, 1998). TE is used to enhance the input in the written or oral texts with the aim of facilitating the learners' focus of targeted forms and promoting their acquisition (Sharwood Smith 1991, 1993; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). The concept of TE emerged in the 1990s, and since then various research designs and techniques that aimed to

investigate the effectiveness of TE have led to a wide range of contradictory findings (Han, Park & Combs, 2008; Lee & Huang, 2008; Leow, 1997). A significant reason for the contradictory outcomes of studies is that the forms varied about their communicative and semantic function. For example, in Alanen's (1995) study

“more moderate gains in accuracy were observed for the locative suffix that has a more or less clearly definable semantic content, as opposed to the other targeted form, consonant

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alternation, which is semantically empty" (p. 269).

Moreover, exposure to enhanced input can promote the chances of targeted forms (Sharwood Smith, 1993). A great number of researchers simply provided single exposure to enhanced input and no delayed posttests were conducted to estimate longer-term effects of TE (Lee & Huang, 2008). Another shortcoming of the aforementioned studies is that many of them treated the group that received textually non-enhanced input as the control group, which could help us establish the role that TE can play in fostering the acquisition in comparison with the input flood (Lee & Huang, 1993), but not the effect of textual enhancement.

Finally, more studies should be conducted to measure the gains in learners' performance dealt with the extent TE could trigger the targeted grammatical construction. Therefore, it is not easy to understand, from the former research studies, how learners' attention was drawn to the grammatical question constructions. Also to understand how effective TE could be in helping learners to establish the form to function mappings and finally to the extent students' grammatical awareness and knowledge progress in the short and long run if they are supplied with multiple exposure to the enhanced input.

Teachers are expected to consider the needs of their students by choosing and implementing a variety of instructional models and materials at classrooms. Many teachers assume that *being aware of learning* style preferences of their students could allow them to accordingly adjust their pedagogy and practice. This may especially be the case when teaching of grammar, in which many English learners seem to have difficulties understanding in (Ellis, 2008).

In addition, teaching of grammar has gone through different changes during the past years. However, Long (2000) demonstrated the need for a formal instruction for English learners to achieve high levels of accuracy. Beginning with the early stages of the language teaching, various approaches and techniques were implemented to find out the best way a language could be learnt.

Grammar oriented teaching gave rise to a linear behaviorist model consisting of explicit grammar teaching, repetitions of models, memorization of short dialogues and mastering an item at a time (Long, 2000).

As a response to the frustration and the weaknesses of grammar-oriented teaching caused in terms of communicative needs, more communication-oriented, meaning based approaches found by the second language (L2) researchers (Allwright, 1984; Prabhu, 1987). The lessons focusing on meaning were purely communicative, as the second language learning was considered implicit and incidental, not intentional like the first language learners. Learning the grammar rules were also considered implicitly and incidentally through exposure to input (Long, 2000).

Since the very early stages of language teaching, teaching grammar has been one of the most debatable issues taking place at the center of the field. Language teaching included an explicit teaching grammar and language learning referred to the learning of grammatical items of the language consciously (Richards & Rogers, 1986). Some scholars (e.g. Ellis, 2008; Long, 2000) believe that syntax and grammatical structures do not play a necessary and an important role in language learning. If the L2 students, however, are familiar with different structures, they can make more complex sentences, and they can communicate more freely and conveniently. It is worth mentioning that to become a successful learner, all of the language skills should be learnt cooperatively. In this research study, the following questions were proposed:

1. Does textual enhancement have any significant effect on EFL learners' grammatical awareness of simple structures?
2. Does textual enhancement have any significant effect on EFL learners' grammatical awareness of complex structures?
3. Are there any significant differences among all the groups in simple and complex structures?

One of the focus on form (FonF) procedures in instructed SLA is the textual enhancement (TE) of input (Doughty & Williams, 1998). TE is implemented to improve the prominence of input in written or oral texts regarding a context, which facilitates the comprehension of the targeted forms for the learners and thereby intensifies their acquisition (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Sharwood Smith 1991, 1993). Since the emergence of TE in 1990s, many distinctive research studies and various data, elicitation techniques have been designed with an aim of examining the effectiveness of TE, but they have resulted in a range of contradictory and dissimilar findings (Han, Park & Combs, 2008; Lee & Huang 2008; Leow, 2001).

Being exposed to enhanced input for multiple times could also increase the chances of noticing targeted forms (Sharwood Smith, 1993). Most of the researchers provide only single exposure to enhanced input and do not conduct any delayed post-tests, which could measure longer-term effects of TE (Lee & Huang, 2008).

One type of FonF techniques is input enhancement known as consciousness-raising (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Input enhancement refers to the use of different instruments through which “the perceptual salience of the target items could be increased” in the input (Long & Robinson, 1998, p. 24). Minor exposure to comprehensible input does not suffice for learning a language, the learners’ attention, therefore, needs the planned intervention of the teacher to be directed to the formal properties of the second language. It can be of a great help for learners when their awareness of the target structures are increased and they can process the input so that it could become intake (Sharwood Smith, 1991).

Sharwood Smith (1993) proposed that explicit discussion of target forms, metalinguistic descriptions, and negative evidence via overt error correction, input flood, processing instructions, garden-path techniques and textual enhancement could increase the input salience externally (Gascoigne, 2006). In contrast, some features of the

input may seem salient due to the learners’ internal mechanisms.

Nassaji and Fotos (2011) defined a non-explicit and external input enhancement technique, known as textual enhancement. They asserted that textual enhancement could be an external attention-drawing device for the second language learners to notice the targeted forms without any explicit metalinguistic explanation. Teachers, researchers, or material developers intentionally could apply the input enhancement technique in written or visual input, through typographical alterations such as bold facing, underlining, enlarging, capitalizing, italicizing or color coding (Gascoigne, 2006).

One way to direct the learners’ attention to targeted forms is TE, which is considered an “implicit and unobtrusive way” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011, p. 41). Text enhancement help to focus learners’ attention on the meaning of the text, and incidentally on mapping form-meaning relationships (Ellis, 2008). Therefore, the learners may not always notice forms, which are textually enhanced, because salience created externally by teachers may not be harmonious with learners’ salience, which was internally generated (Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993).

Another potential influence of textual enhancement on the acquisition of targeted forms referred to the students’ attention, which depends on the meaning of the text, they may not have attentional resources available for processing linguistic constructions (VanPatten, 1996). In a contrary, it could be probable that the forms, which are textually enhanced draw away students’ attention from the meaning, hence TE might affect the comprehension detrimentally (Lee, 2007). Discovery-based instruction and experiential learning do not lead to substantial development in performance (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006).

The apparent lack of long-term learning seemed to be caused by the same reason as the constraints on TE. It was found that when acquiring new information, there are restrictions on working memory and attentional resources (Sweller, 1988), and inductive learning might not

take place without sufficient guidance. Textual enhancement (TE) can be of great importance in terms of teaching different language skills and sub-skills. Grammar as an important sub-skill of a language can also be learned more effectively through TE techniques.

There are several ways to define grammar, and many researchers have written definitions of grammar based on their view on language. One definition, which is found in *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* includes that grammar is “the entire system of a language, including its syntax, morphology, semantics and phonology” (Chalker & Weiner, 1994, p. 177). Other definitions, often popularly used, include the structural rules of a language, but exclude vocabulary, semantics and phonology. Whether a definition of grammar comprises structural aspects only, or whether it also covers semantics and functions, depends strongly on the current view on language and learning (Nassaji and Fotos, 2011).

There is a shift in views about the teaching of grammar. These shifts are often described as pendulum swings between the two main views, i.e. the function of grammar and the forms of grammar. At the one extreme, grammar is a fundamental part of language teaching and at the other extreme, grammar has little or no place at all in language teaching. Throughout the history of grammar instruction, one extreme often has replaced the other. The two definitions of grammar presented above are written by Ur (1994) with a time span of twenty years. Although there are traces of the importance of meaning and communication in both definitions, the first is more focused on the rules and forms of grammar, whereas the second has a clearer focus on grammar as a means to express the meaning acceptably and appropriately. The overall aim of learning grammar is to be able to express your own ideas in real situations as correct, meaningful and appropriate as possible. It is the teacher’s task then to facilitate the learning of the grammatical skill with the maximum efficiency (Vanpatten, 1996).

## METHODS

### Participants

There were 104 learners invited to participate in this study from Ayandegan Institute in Tehran, Iran. After the administration of the Michigan test, 80 learners were chosen because they scored one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean score. The participants included male and female intermediate learners whose age range was between 18 and 25 years old. To homogenize the sample participants, the students went through a standard placement Michigan Test of English Language. The researchers calculated the reliability (0.87). The participants were then divided into four groups, two experimental groups and two control groups.

### Instruments

The Michigan test was used as a homogenizing test in this study. The Michigan test consists of several sub-tests that are useful for evaluating the English language proficiency of students for whom English is not the first language. Michigan Test scores serve as the basis for course placement. This sample test consisted of 10 English grammar questions, 10 vocabulary questions, and 5 reading comprehension questions.

Before and after the treatment, a pretest and a posttest were run. It should be mentioned that there was a pilot study in which 15 participants took the test and the reliability was found to be 0.84. Moreover, the researchers made sure that the construct validity of the test was attained since the modules selected for the study were the ones, which were included in the test. Then, the two reading texts with enhanced and unenhanced versions were used. A reading-based comprehension task, a noticing question, and a controlled production grammar task (fill-in-the-blanks with clues) were also used in this study to elicit data. At the end of the treatment, they were given a multiple choice grammar test including 20 items and based on the target structures to see the effect of the treatment on both groups.

This study examined the following structure: simple and complex structures were chosen for

the purpose of this study since the target group was intermediate learners and the researchers had access to these groups and these structures were presented in their books, too. The simple present tense and present continuous tense were selected for simple structures, while relative clauses were chosen as the complex structures of this study.

In the two experimental groups considered for this study, the learners worked in pairs or groups to practice the target syntax structures and discussed the target structure with the role of the teacher minimized. They themselves inferred the targeted structure in groups or pairs. Since the *English Series* is taught to the learners, the researchers chose two different levels as there were two structures in this study. *English Series Book 1* was selected as the source for simple structures and *English Series Book 5* was selected for the complex structures. Simple present and present continuous were practiced with participants as simple structures and relative clauses were chosen as complex structures. The structures were presented by the teacher and in the reading texts. There were also some fill-in-the-blanks activities. It took five sessions for the researchers to complete all the steps, which were presented in the methodology. The texts and readings were chosen based on the learners' level, which was presented in their supplementary exercise books. The supplementary texts were enhanced by boldfacing the targeted structures and italicization. At the end of each unit, there were some exercises based on what they have been taught. In the other two groups, the same instrumentation and the same materials as the experimental groups were used. However, unenhanced version of the texts was used in the control group, i.e. the same text

was given to the participants, but the text had no boldfacing and italicization in the structures of this study. The participants had to read the whole text to find and elicit the structures.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Regarding the first research question, the paired samples statistics of the pretest and posttest in simple structures is depicted.

**Table 1**  
*Paired Samples Statistics of the Pretest and Posttest (Simple Structures)*

Pair		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	pretest	13.12	40	2.06	.32
	posttest	15.97	40	1.81	.28

As Table 1 shows, the mean of the posttest scores concerning simple structures is higher than the pretest. Furthermore, a paired samples correlation was run.

**Table 2**  
*Paired Samples Correlation of the Pretest and Posttest (Simple Structures)*

Pair		N	Correlation	Sig.
1	pretest & posttest	40	.75	.00

Table 2 presents the correlation of the pretest and posttest concerning simple structures and shows a high correlation. The significance of the difference between the two tests was tested through Paired Samples t-test (Table 3 below).

**Table 3**  
*Paired Samples Test of the Process Group*

Pair		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
1	pretest & post-test	-2.85	1.36	.21	-3.28	-2.41	-13.16	39	.00

Table 3 above provides information about comparing the mean of the pretest and posttest. By looking at the figures. It is observed that sig is 0.00, that is lower than 0.05 ( $P=0.00 < 0/05$ ). Therefore, the textual enhancement was effective in simple structures and the effect was statistically important. Similar to the results of a study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig (2002), the use of 'present tense' emerges earlier than 'relative

clauses'. As a result, the findings suggest that textual enhancement without explicit information on the complexities of form-function mapping may be effective in helping learners to improve their existing conceptualizations of this grammatical construction.

Regarding the second research question, the paired samples statistics of the pretest and posttest in complex structures were studied.

**Table 4**

*Paired Samples Statistics of the Pretest and Posttest (Complex Structures)*

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	13.10	40	2.09	.33
	posttest	13.95	40	2.07	.32

As Table 4 shows, the mean of the posttest scores concerning complex structures is higher

than the one in the pretest. A paired samples correlation was also run (as in Table 5 below).

**Table 5**

*Paired Samples Correlation of the Pretest and Posttest (Complex Structures)*

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	0	.90	.00

Table 5 presents the correlation of the pretest and posttest concerning complex structures, and show a high correlation ( $r=.90$ ,  $P=.00$ ). The

significance of the difference between the two tests was tested through Paired Samples t-test (Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Paired Samples Test of the Process Group*

		Paired Differences					t	f	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair	pretest & posttest	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	-.85	.92	.14	-1.14	-.55	-5.83	9	.00

The above Table 6 depicts the paired statistic results comparing the mean of the pretest and posttest concerning complex structures. With the t-value of -5.83 and p-value of 0.00, it can be concluded that the second research hypothesis of the study is rejected which means that textual enhancement has significant effect on learners'

grammatical awareness specifically complex structures.

The findings of this study are in line the studies conducted by Leow (2001), Jourdenais et al. (1995), and Izumi (2002) which revealed that TE was effective in terms of drawing learners' attention to target forms. Even though the results of

this study are restricted to two particular groups of learners and grammatical forms, they seem to underestimate the claims of Kirschner et al. (2006) that if new information is available in a context where learners need to focus a variety of sources of information and a number of parallel processes, they may not have adequate working

memory resources left for attending to the information to be learned.

In the last phase of this study in which the third hypothesis was proposed, the difference between simple and complex structures was investigated through an ANOVA test which can be used to compare the four groups' scores.

**Table 7**  
*ANOVA Test*

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	122.93	3	40.97	12.16	.00
Within Groups	255.95	76	3.36		
Total	378.88	79			

According to table 7, the F-value equaled 12.16, and the obtained level of significance found to be .00 which is less than .05, indicating

that there is a difference among the four groups. In order to investigate the difference, an LSD test was conducted.

**Table 8**  
*LSD Test*

Dependent Variable: posttest LSD						
(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Females in Simple Structure	Males in Simple Structure	1.55*	.58	.00	.39	2.70
	Females in Complex Structure	2.15*	.58	.00	.99	3.30
	Males in Complex Structure	3.45*	.58	.00	2.29	4.60
Males in Simple Structure	Females in Simple Structure	-1.55*	.58	.00	-2.70	-.39
	Females in Complex Structure	.60	.58	.30	-.55	1.75
	Males in Complex Structure	1.90*	.58	.00	.74	3.05
Females in Complex Structure	Females in Simple Structure	-2.15*	.58	.00	-3.30	-.99
	Males in Simple Structure	-.60	.58	.30	-1.75	.55
	Males in Complex Structure	1.30*	.58	.02	.14	2.45
Males in Complex Structure	Females in Simple Structure	-3.45*	.58	.00	-4.60	-2.29
	Males in Simple Structure	-1.90*	.58	.00	-3.05	-.74
	Females in Complex Structure	-1.30*	.58	.02	-2.45	-.14

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

According to the above table, due to the obtained level of significance among the groups, we can claim that there is a significant difference between the scores in simple and complex structures. There is no significant difference between male and female scores in complex structures,

but there is a significant difference between the male scores in complex structures and female scores in simple structures. Moreover, there is significant difference between the male and female scores in simple and complex structures.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the findings of this study, a meaningful relationship was found among the variables. The findings of this study could therefore add to the literature on textual enhancement and grammatical awareness of the English learners. Based on the research findings, one could conclude that there is a relationship between the variables two by two. This study also revealed that learners' performance is a kind of practicing real communication about the real life situation holding personal meanings for them. In addition, with the teacher's encouragement, the learners made use of grammatical knowledge, took risks, and expressed their thoughts and opinions. The English as foreign language (EFL) learners' development depended largely on the teacher's encouragement. In an EFL class, when students make errors they seek for teachers' feedback to learn the correct form of what they used. This verifies the fact that feedbacks in EFL classes will result in increasing the proficiency level of pupils. Second language teachers should incorporate the grammatical structures into the classroom activities if the goal is to help EFL learners to use the language more correctly.

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