Textual Enhancement across Linguistic Structures: EFL Learners' Acquisition of English Forms

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ABSTRACT

The benefits of textual input enhancement in the acquisition of linguistic forms have produced mixed results in SLA literature. The present study investigates the effects of textual enhancement on adult foreign language intake of two English linguistic forms-subjunctive mood and inversion structures-to explore the role of the type of linguistic items in input enhancement studies. It also investigates learners' trend of development in the acquisition process of these structures. Thirty first year college-level participants were exposed to twelve enhanced texts for subjunctive mood and twelve other texts for inversion structures. The study employed a pretest-posttest-delayed posttest design to explore the effectiveness of instructional treatment in the short term and long term acquisition of the structures. Alongside a pretest and a posttest, three production tests were administered to assess the trend of development in each structure. The results revealed that textual enhancement aided the learning of the target forms. With regard to type of linguistic items, significant benefits of subjunctive mood over inversion structures were found during both short term and long term. This study revealed that textual input enhancement may have differential effects on the acquisition of linguistic forms. Theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Keywords: textual input enhancement, subjunctive mood, inversion structures

Introduction

In the recent years there has been an increasing interest in the idea that drawing learners' attention to the linguistic features of the L2 input is beneficial for second language development. Some pedagogic techniques have been developed to enhance input in a focus on form instruction. The term "input enhancement" was first used by Sharwood-Smith (1993). In this technique part of the input is deliberately enhanced to draw learners' attention to the formal features of the language to help the development of L2 knowledge. Schmidt (1990) argues that if a form stands out in the input, it will more likely be noticed. According to Schmidt (2001) noticing is an important component of successful language learning. Input enhancement is based on the premise that comprehensible input is needed for second language acquisition, and that only the input that learners notice can have an effect on acquisition (Han, Park, & Combs, 2008).

Typographical or textual enhancement is a type of input enhancement which has received some attention in the past two decades (Alanen, 1995; Jourdenais et al, 1995; Izumi, 2003; Lee, 2007; Lee and Huang, 2008; Leow, 1997, 2001; Overstreet, 1998; Shook, 1994; Simard, 2009; White, 1998; Wong, 2000, 2003). This technique involves enhancing the linguistic forms through manipulations like underlining, bolding, italicizing, enlarging the font size, changing the font color and style or combination of all these to draw the reader's attention to particular information in a text mainly to make more salient a par-

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ticular item in the written input that learners normally may not notice. According to White (1998), "textual enhancement is considered more explicit than input flooding but less explicit than rule explanation" (p. 86).

An advantage for textual enhancement is that it can be easily integrated into different instructional approaches and course materials regardless of any particular teaching approaches (Peart, 2008).

Insights from input enhancement studies

Han, Park, and Combs (2008, p. 612) draw our attention to some insights from studies of input enhancements: a) Simple enhancement can induce noticing of enhanced forms in meaning-based input; b) Learner readiness determines whether this noticing leads to acquisition or not; c) Learners notice forms that are meaningful; d) Simple enhancement of a meaningful form contributes to comprehension; e) Simple enhancement is more effective if it draws focal rather than peripheral attention; and f) compound enhancement (combining different types of enhancement, e.g., typographical enhancement with feedback) is more likely to induce deeper cognitive processing than simple enhancement.

However, the results obtained from textual enhancement studies vary greatly. While some researchers (Alanen, 1995; Leow, 1997, 2001, 2003; Overstreet, 1998; Wong, 2003) found no effect of textual enhancement, some others (Doughty, 1991; Fotos, 1994; Jourdenais et al., 1995; Lee, 2007; Shook,1994) found positive learning effects for this type of focus on form intervention. Leow (1997) investigated the effects of text length and textual enhancement on learners' text content comprehension and acquisition of the impersonal imperative forms of Spanish verbs. Eighty-four second semester college level learners of Spanish participated in the study. They were exposed to one of the four conditions of long and short enhanced, long and short non-enhanced texts. Comprehension task with short answers as well as a multiple choice recognition task were employed in order to measure intake. Textual enhancement was found to have no significant effect on comprehension or intake of the form.

In a different study, Leow (2001) investigated the effects of textual enhancement on learning Spanish formal imperatives and found no advantage for enhanced text over unenhanced text.

The literature has provided conflicting findings on the efficacy of input enhancement (e.g. Leow, 1997, 2001; Simard, 2009; Wong, 2003). Throughout the past two decades various forms have been targeted. White (1998) focused on positive determiners , Alanen (1995), and Jourdenais et al (1995) studied morphology, Doughty (1991)focused on syntax (relative clauses); Shook (1994) studied Spanish present perfect; Paribakht and Wesche (1997) investigated vocabulary. With regard to the results of these studies, it seems that input enhancement is beneficial in the acquisition of L2 morphosyntactic rules.

Lack of effect for textual enhancement was examined with structures in other languages. For example, Alanen (1995) studied on Finnish locative suffixes and consonant gradation. Sentence completion and grammaticality judgment tasks were used to measure the participants' knowledge of the target forms. Think-aloud protocols were also employed. Alanen found no significant effect for textual enhancement in his study. In some studies the effect of textual enhancement was examined on the noticing level of the learners. For example, Jourdenais et al. (1995) examined the effect of textual enhancement on the learners' noticing of the Spanish imperfect verbs by ten English-speaking learners' think-aloud protocols and a writing task which were used as data collection tools. Subjects who were exposed to textual enhancement reported more instances of the targeted forms than the subjects in the control group. White (1998) investigated the effect of textual enhancement on the acquisition of English possessive determiners by 86 French speaking children. She used passage correction task, multiple choices as well as a picture description task to determine learners' knowledge of the form. She found that textual enhancement increased the frequency but not the accuracy of use of the target form. In another study, Izumi (2003) examined the effect of textual enhancement on the noticing and learning of relative clauses by adult ESL learners. To measure the learners' noticing of the form, the researcher studied the notes the participants took as they were exposed to the experimental treatment. In order to investigate the learners' knowledge of the target structure, he used a grammaticality judgment, a sentence combination, and an interpretation task. He found that the participants noticed the target forms, but no significant learning gains from the pretest to the posttest were found.

Different methodological choices made by the researchers in textual enhancement studies might be the reason for the observed differences in the results. Measurement instruments used as well as the procedures followed differed in these studies. Moreover, the target linguistic form might be a source of contradiction (Shook, 1994). Shook examined the effect of textual enhancement on L2 Spanish learners' intake of the present perfect and the relative pronouns *que/quien* measured by a production task. Three groups were used in this study. The first group was exposed to the enhanced versions of the texts and was told to pay attention to the enhanced target forms. The second group also read an enhanced version of the text, but they were not told to pay attention to the enhanced target forms. Learners in the third group were exposed to the same texts which were not typographicaly enhanced and they were not told to pay attention to any forms in particular. Overall, the results revealed that participants performed better on the present perfect tests than on the relative pronoun tests which might be due to their contrast in saliency: the present subjunctive seems to be less salient than the present perfect form because of morphemic contrast (e.g., termin*e* "should finish") and two discrete words (e.g., *ha terminado* "has finished"). Other linguistic forms which were investigated were: Finnish locative suffixes (Alanen, 1995), English relative clauses (Izumi, 2002), Spanish imperfect and preterit forms (Jourdenais et al., 1995; Overstreet, 1998), and French past participle agreement (Wong, 2003).

Although the above-cited studies have shed some light on the literature of textual enhancement, this line of research on the effectiveness of textual enhancement across different target forms need to be pursued. To this end the present study aims at investigating the comparative effect of textual enhancement on two English syntactic structures. The typical research design in the mentioned studies comprised a pretest-intervention-posttest. Very few studies included delayed posttest in their design (e.g., Leow, 2001; Leow et al., 2003). The studies to date have been primarily concerned with the investigation of textual enhancement effect in ESL settings. The above mentioned researchers based their evaluation on the results obtained by the learners in the posttests. To the best of the researchers' knowledge there has been no research done on the trend of the EFL learners' development in the

acquisition of the target forms. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Does textual enhancement result in similar level of short-term achievement in subjunctive mood and inversion structures?
2. Does textual enhancement result in similar level of long-term achievement in subjunctive mood and inversion structures?
3. What is the pattern of learners' development in the acquisition of English subjunctive mood?
4. What is the pattern of learners' development in the acquisition of English inversion structures?

METHOD

The participants in this study were 30 freshmen majoring in applied linguistics. Two main considerations were at work when deciding to select first-semester students: (a) focus of the study, (grammar is among the first courses to be instructed), and (b) minimal prior knowledge of the target structures (determined by a pretest of structures).

Participants were first homogenized through a test of general English proficiency (Preliminary English Test). Then, they sat for a pretest of syntax prior to the onset of the experiment. The aim of the test was to homogenize the learners on the basis of their knowledge of English target structures. Four English structures, namely prepositions, modals, subjunctive mood and inversion structures, were chosen from the students' grammar course book, two structures of subjunctive mood and inversion with the lowest mean scores were chosen as the target structures and the participants who scored higher than 20% on these two structures were eliminated from the data analysis. Participants who failed to attend all the treatment and testing sessions were also eliminated from further analysis.

Treatment materials

As frequent exposure to the target forms makes the learners attend to the forms more efficiently (Lee, 2007), in each of the twelve sessions, two authentic texts of approximately 100 words each of which containing 4 instances of the target structure (subjunctive mood and inversion) were presented to the participants. Texts that lent themselves to authentic use of the target forms were chosen and they were lexically and syntactically adjusted. The target forms were authentically used in the passages but they were not unnaturally emphasized. Texts were typographically enhanced for

subjunctive mood and inversion structures. Enhancement techniques included bolding, underlining, using bigger fonts and italicizing.

Subjunctive refers to verb forms occurring in hypothetical constructions (e.g. *if he were coming*), in certain formulae (e.g. *so be it*), and in some *that*-clauses, especially in American English, preceded by such verbs as *demand*, *insist*, and *order* (e.g. *The judge ordered that he be detained indefinitely*) or by adjectives like *important*, *necessary*, and *urgent* (e.g. *It is important that you not be lazy*) (Crystal, 1991; Radford, 1997). With respect to a variety of forms under the title of subjunction, for practical purposes, only subjunctive forms occurring in *that*-clauses preceded by verbs or adjectives were chosen to be investigated. The verbs that are typically followed by clauses that take the subjunctive are:

ask, demand, determine, insist, move, order, pray, prefer, recommend, regret, request, require, suggest, and wish.

The most common adjectives that take the subjunctive mood are:

crucial, *essential*, *important*, *imperative, vital, necessary* or *urgent*.

In English there is no difference between the subjunctive and normal, or indicative, form of the verb except for the present tense third person singular and for the verb to be. This use of the subjunctive remains lively in all varieties of English. However, British English prefers to structure this sentence with *should* (Vlasova, 2010). Overall, the material in treatment phase included 48 instances of subjunctive mood, out of which 27 were examples of subjunctive following verbs and 21 following adjectives. The other target form is English inversion structures which require changing the usual word order of subject and verb. In this study, the type of inversion that sometimes takes place with certain adverbs and adverb phrases, mostly with a negative or restrictive sense is investigated. Such adverbs or adverb phrases when placed first in a sentence or clause for emphasis are followed by the inverted form of the verb. Some of the most common adverbs and adverbial expressions with negative, restrictive or emphatic meaning that are followed by inversion are:

Seldom, Rarely, Little, Nowhere, Scarcely, Hardly, No sooner, Not only … but (also), On no oc- *casion/account/condition, In/Under no circumstances Only after, Only when, Only if, Not till/until, Never, Never before, Neither/Not/So, etc.* Example: *Under no circumstances can we appoint him as director.*

Negative adverbs are formally complex, and the inversion they cause does not in itself carry much meaning.

Analysis

Each structure was tested through 10 target as well as 10 non-target items. Six tests were used: one pretest (Pre), one immediate posttest (IP), one delayed posttest (DP), and three during-treatment tests (T1, T2, and T3). To control for test learning effects, the researcher provided learners with three different distributions of the items in pretest, posttest and delayed posttest. While taking the test, learners were instructed to ask for any vocabulary help they needed.

Tests of development were parallel to the pretest and posttest. These test tasks were made to assess the participants' ability to produce English subjunctive mood and inversion structures. There were 30 items in each test of development, 10 addressing the subjunctive mood in present and past (negative, progressive, or passive); 10 addressing inversion, and 10 non-target items.

The three parallel during-treatment tests were administered after each three sessions of the treatment in order to assess the trend of development in all three groups. The items were all incomplete sentences. The participants were asked to use the correct form of the verbs provided in parentheses to fill in the blanks in the case of subjunctive mood or rewrite the given sentence by filling the missing parts in the case of inversion. An example for each structure is provided bellow:

- They demanded that he….the room. (to leave).
- He not only wrote to the prime minister but also obtained an interview with him.

Not only…. but also he obtained an interview with him.

The tests were highly structured so that only the target forms would be used by the participants. This type of items limits the range of possible answers and focuses the learners' attention. A variety of verb forms were tested so as to decrease the chance of practice effect. The participants were scored +1 for the correct supply of

each item and the total score was 10 for each structure.

Procedures

The students were presented with 24 authentic texts. Texts were selected from different websites or any other sources like English magazines and newspapers. The content was social and non-technical. The target structures were typographically enhanced in these texts utilizing various enhancement techniques (bolding, italicizing, and underlining). Simard (2009) argues that the selection of typographical cues to be used in pedagogical materials is usually based on a personal preference or the means available to the teachers. However, the use of a combination of typographical cues would certainly attract the learner's attention and might improve the quality of instructional material.

In each instructional session, learners individually read a passage within an optimal pace assigned by their teacher. Due to the individual differences in comprehension, the teacher ensured that vocabulary was not an issue. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that all the participants could understand the content of the texts, the teacher instructed the learners to circle the unknown words that might affect their comprehension. She then explained problematic vocabulary as well as key phrases to help them get the meaning conveyed by the passages, completely.

To fulfill the purpose of the task, learners were explicitly instructed to attend to the enhanced forms, while they were reading for comprehension of the text content. The teacher used examples to clarify the matter. The learners were further announced that there would be a recall task afterwards in which they would write a few sentences on what they understood about the text. Meaning was kept in focus at all times. A free-recall task in the participants' L1 followed the reading task. Using L1 in the free-recall task gave the students an opportunity to easily write about the ideas without concern for the form.

RESULTS

The first research question concerns comparing the short term effect of textual enhancement on the acquisition of subjunctive mood and inversion structures. The results of the t-test analysis (Table 1) revealed that the difference between the subjunctive and inversion pretest was not significant, $t(29) = 0.94$, $p = 0.35$.

The mean scores of the participants on the IP of subjunctives were compared to their mean scores on inversion structures to reveal differences in their performance. Table 2 reports on the IP descriptive statistics.

Comparison of the means in the IP reveals that the participants' performance in the case of subjunctive mood has been more successful than their performance in the inversion structures ($M_{sub} = 6.20$; $M_{inv} = 3.63$). T-test analysis confirmed that the difference is significant in the IP (Table 3; $t(29) = 5.1$, $p = 0.00$).

Table 1. T-test for Pretest Subjunctive in Relation to Pretest Inversion

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pretest.subjunctives pretest.inversion	.133	.776	.142	-.156	.423	.941	29	.354

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the IP

Structures	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Subjunctive	6.20	3.178	.58	5.01	7.39
Inversion	3.63	3.02	.55	2.50	4.76

Table 3. T-test for IP Subjunctive in Relation to IP Inversion

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
IP.subjunctives IP.inversions	2.567	2.750	.502	1.540	3.594	5.111	29	.000

Regarding the long term effect of the instruction on the two structures the results of the t-test analysis shows a significant difference between the performances of the learners in the DP (Table 4; *p* = 0.00).

The trend of development was analyzed using three in-between-the treatment tests (T1, T2, and T3). Combined with the pretest, IP and DP, these

tests revealed the pattern of development that participants went through as they were undertaking the acquisition process. Table 5 reports on the means and standard deviations of the tests.

Tracing the development of the means from pretest up to the posttest shows an almost linear pattern of development in both structures. The pattern is better illustrated in figure 2

Table 4. The Results of Planned Contrasts in DP

structures	*t*	*df*	*Sig.(2-tailed)*	**Mean Difference**	**95% Confidence Interval of the Difference**	
					Lower	**Upper**
subjunctive	13.105	29	.000	5.667	4.78	6.55
inversion	6.665	29	.000	3.800	2.63	4.97

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of the Tests of Development

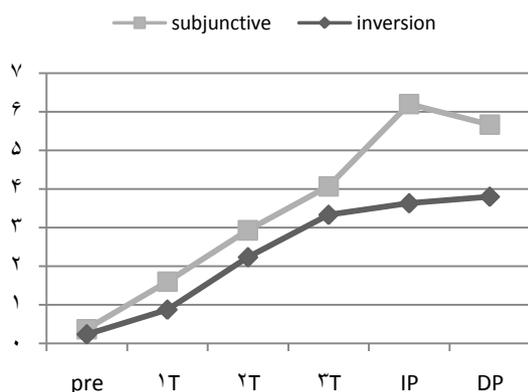| Structures	pre		T1		T2		T3		IP		DP	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Subjunctive	.37	.61	1.60	1.42	2.93	2.82	4.07	2.9	6.20	3.17	5.67	2.36
Inversion	.23	.56	.87	1.63	2.23	2.58	3.33	3.06	3.63	3.02	3.80	3.12

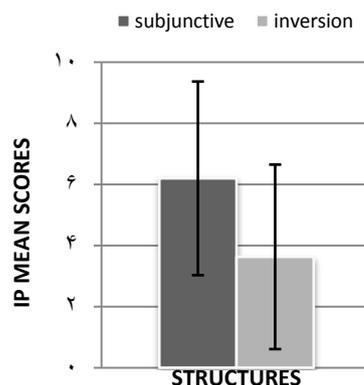*Figure 1. Learners' Performance in Two Structures*

Figure 2. Trend of Development (Subjunctive vs. Inversion)

Looking at the pattern of development, the following results can be obtained: An almost linear pattern of development can be observed in both structures.

Subjunctive and inversion acquisition show almost same patterns of development from pretest to T3.

Inversion structure line shows a gradual upward pattern of improvement from pretest up to T3, from which point it almost levels off Whereas the pick of devel-

opment in subjunctive is IP, the best performance for inversion is seen in DP.

In order to locate the sources of differences and clearly realize which pair(s) of testing times contributed to the effect for time, the mean scores of the pre, T1, T2, T3, IP, and DP were compared at each time point using paired-sample t-test statistics. Table 6 shows the significance of the differences in each pair across the structures.

Table 6. Paired Sample t-tests across the Structures

Pairwise comparison		Subjunctive			Inversion		
		df	t	Sig.	df	t	Sig.
Pair 1	Pre-T1	29	5.076	.000	29	2.21	.035
Pair 2	T1- T2	29	2.612	.014	29	3.52	.001
Pair 3	T2- T3	29	2.615	.014	29	3.08	.004
Pair 4	T3- IP	29	4.033	.000	29	.65	.520
Pair 5	IP- DP	29	.958	.346	29	.33	.737

Results of the paired-sample t-test across the structures (Table 6) are as follows:

Pairwise comparison in subjunctives shows that the differences between tests in pairs 1, 2, 3, and 4 are significant; however in pair 5 the difference is not significant ($p = 0.34$).

Inversion structures show significant difference between the adjacent tests in pairs 1, 2, and 3 but from T3 to IP and from IP to DP the difference is not significant. p values in these two pairs are 0.52 and 0.73 respectively.

It seems that T3 has been a turning point in this study after which a sharp rise in performance is seen in the case of subjunctive structure, while the line of development levels off after T3 in the case of the inversion structure.

DISCUSSION

It is clear from the findings that the performance of the participants after the provision of treatments was in some cases below chance performance. The reason for lack of effect for the treatments could be the lack of rule presentation, corrective feedback, or negative evidence or it might be due to the complexity of the target structures or lack of developmental readiness for them (Pienemann, 1989). The lack of feedback may have inhibited participants from constructing and testing hypotheses about the target structure. The learners may have simply been unable to distill the underlying rule from the examples given in the input. The effect of enhanced input in this study is not compatible with a number of previous studies (Izumi, 2002; Leow, 1997, 2001, 2003). In a series of studies, Leow found no solid evidence for the main effect of textual enhancement to promote grammatical abilities in L2 learners. However, in a more recent study, Leow (2009) argued that combining input enhancement with an instructional period or inte-

ractional session that is focused primarily on the target grammatical item in the input contributes to significantly better L2 development. Regarding the effect of instruction in a textual enhancement task, Doughty and Varela (1998) suggest that 'The teacher should draw students' attention to form rather than leaving it to chance that students will notice linguistic features without any pedagogical assistance' (p: 115).

Learners showed a decline in performance in DP in the case of subjunctive and a nonsignificant improvement in the case of inversion. Participants appear to have noticed the target structures, but not the underlying rules which caused the behavior of those structures due to the shallow processing of the input involved in textual enhancement. In other words, participants could attend to the formal aspects of the input but they were neither required to do so with a great degree of awareness, nor to understand the uses of the target structure. As the items were short enough to be successfully held in short-term memory, there was little or no need to activate long-term memory, because the task at hand did not require participants to engage in any additional processing (for example memorizing the content). By the same token, items had to be kept in mind for a short period of time, which facilitated task performance, but did not have a great effect on retention of the learned item.

Concerning the equal type of treatment that the participants received in both structures, their different performances in the IP and DP might be due to the nature of the forms. While subjunctive mood is a verb form, inversion structures require using inverse word order after negative or restrictive expressions. In this regard, Pienemann (1989; p. 23) argues, FonF instruction would seem to have a better chance of success if it is directed at simple morphological features (e.g.

verb forms, articles, or formulaic items) than at more complex syntactic structures involving permutations of word order (e.g. word order involving Spanish clitic pronouns and passive sentences). Perhaps FonF succeeds for simple morphological features because it makes such forms salient to the learner and because they can be processed; it is less successful in the case of complex syntactic features because these require more complex processing operations that can only be mastered sequentially over a long period of time. Persian is a free word order language and the sentential constituents can be moved around in the clause. Therefore, this structure seemed to be demanding for the participants in this study and was late-acquired. On the other hand, subjunctive mood seemed to be an easier structure and it was more likely that if participants paid attention to it, they would be able to find the underlying rule.

The results are inline with Reinder's (2005, p. 305) achievement that "activities that place a greater cognitive demand on learners lead to slower learning, but greater retention".

Limitations and Implications for Teaching

It is essential that teachers modify the input, which can happen either through explicit instruction or through implicit awareness raising. Learners should be exposed to language use and possibly test their hypothesis and modify their assumptions, if necessary.

The strength of this study is that it sets out to investigate the impact of textual enhancement on grammatical forms of little communicative value. To the researchers' knowledge, these forms had not been previously investigated by textual enhancement studies. The present study met some limitations that future research needs to consider. Regarding the mode of testing, it seems essential to measure learners' achievement through other types of testing instruments (e.g., think aloud protocols and GJT).

Although, the target structures were each presented a total of 48 times over a period of twelve weeks, it appears that for the chosen structures, textual enhancement was not sufficient to affect a great change in learners' interlanguage. More frequent or more prolonged exposure to less complex structures could have resulted in different findings.

In the present research it was impossible to use online measures to assess what participants were actually paying attention to when they read texts. Attention to the enhanced input was inferred from the results of the post exposure tasks. Think-aloud protocols for online measure of attention can be employed in future research.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study lend some support to the purported benefits of textual enhancement on the acquisition of two target forms by EFL learners, in general, and a significant benefit of the more salient form (subjunctive mood) over the less salient form (inversion structure), in particular.

The results may be of relevance to task designers and teachers in better understanding the potential contribution of textual enhancement task in promoting learning FL structures. According to Leow (2001), it is highly advisable to construct language instructions, classroom activities and tasks in a way that effectively promote learners' noticing of the targeted form while interacting with L2 input. It is hoped that this study will stimulate more focused research on the role of textual enhancement in foreign language acquisition.

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