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Iranian Advanced EFL Learners' Awareness and the Use of Marked Word Order: Discourse-pragmatically Motivated Variations

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ABSTRACT
The present investigation was designed to study the production and comprehension of specific means for information highlighted by advanced Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language. The study focused on the discourse-pragmatically motivated variations of the basic word order such as inversion, preposing, *it*- and *Wh*-clefts. After taking the Nelson test, a homogeneous group was settled. For measuring the learners' comprehension, a set of meta-linguistic tests was administered consisting of an acceptability judgment task along with an error identification task. In the case of investigating the learners' production, they were supplied with a test of production consisting of discourse completion items. A total of 30 males and females who were all MA EFL learners served as the participants of this study. First, the production task was administered, and the learners went through the comprehension task in another session. Descriptive analysis and Pearson tests were performed on the data to test the hypotheses of the study. The results indicated that the advanced Iranian learners of English are aware of the syntactic options for structuring the information; however, they avoid producing these structures in their use of language to convey their proper pragmatic functions. Furthermore, there is no meaningful relationship between the learners' awareness and their use of marked structures.

Keywords: word order, information structure, focus constructions, Interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatics-syntax interface, and discourse-pragmatics

Introduction

The issue of word order and word order flexibility has remained one of the most problematic areas for theories of grammar. Word order variation within English has traditionally been captured with respect to focus-constructions by various movement processes like *topicalization, inversion, it-* and *wh-clefting* from a basic structural position. However, learners of English even at advanced levels are not always aware of these different markers. Even at the cases in which they are aware, there is a tendency to use the simplest form possible that is the overuse of unmarked structure or fronting. In other words, the focusing of sentence constituents using specific syntactic constructions in English is a rather unexplored area in second language research and a potential learning problem even for advanced Iranian learners. Accordingly, by examining English marked/unmarked word order, this study intends to shed some light on the interface between syntax and discourse-pragmatics in second language learning.In other words, as far as SLA theory is concerned, this study aims at exploring the interrelationship of grammatical and pragmalinguistic abilities in an L2, that is the interplay of principles of information structure and pragmalinguistic means in an L2. To pursue such purposes,

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this research focuses on discourse-pragmatically motivated variations of the basic word order such as inversion, pre-posing, it- andWh-clefts, which are specifically useful in writing where information cannot be highlighted by prosodic means.

Background Word order pattern of a language is one of the most obvious features of a language one encounters for the first time, whether as a linguist or a language teacher. In other words, there are so many problems which may be arisen due to the cross-linguistic impact of the differences existing in word order as well as the variability in basic word orders which each language assumes to have, called the *unmarked* word order. As for English, this basic word order is SVO (Subject-Verb-Object).However; particularly interesting are those word order patterns which deviate from the canonical SVO word order in English. They can be understood as discourse-motivated variations of an underlying or basic word order, and represent more or less marked syntactic devices definable to emphasize a sentence element, to indicate *modality* (such as interrogative modality), or for other purposes of focus and contrast. These syntactic means of information focusing, also called focus constructions are specifically useful in writing where information cannot be highlighted by prosodic means.

However, very few studies were dedicated to focus-constructions in English. Research adopting a functional approach focusing on the pragmalinguistic side of syntactic constructions in learner language is almost non-existent. Therefore, L2 learners' knowledge of syntactic device to highlight information in discourse has never been emphasized in SLA. There is just one study by Callies (2002) thoroughly devoted to focusing devices in advanced German learner English in which it has been argued that successful second language research needs to gather "as much information as possible" (Tarone, 1994, p. 335). As a result, by combining research methodologies, Callies argues for the use of various data collection procedures to obtain data of a higher quality and gain more valid research findings. Regarding the production data, the major findings are that even advanced learners have no conscious awareness of syntactic means of information focusing.

Up to now, sparse research is done on this area. Studies adopting a functional approach, focusing on pragmalinguistic side of syntactic constructions in learner language, are virtually non-existent. L2 learners' knowledge of syntactic devices for intonation highlighting in spoken and written discourse is rather an unexplored area in SLA research. In Klein's (1998) contrastive analysis of focus phenomena in English and German, German university students were given English it- and Wh-clefts along with potential German equivalents, including German clefts but also left- and right dislocations, as well as sentences with scalar particles and typographical marking of the focused constituent. Participants were asked to rank the German sentences according to their "semantic equivalence" to the English cleft construction. The main outcome of the study was that learners ranked only Gennan clefts as real syntactic equivalents.

Plag and Zimmermann (1998) used acceptability judgments supplemented by error identification, correction of unacceptable sentences, and translation to investigate fronting and inversion in German-English interlanguage. They observed significant differences between learners and native speakers. The major findings were that advanced learners were not fully competent as to the grammatical restrictions of inversion and fronting. With regard to production data, learners tended to avoid marked structures. Actually they did not use the respective structures productively, but rather relied on canonical SVO word order. If they used marked word order types, they tended to use fronting.

Zimmermann's (2000) study of it- and Wh-clefts in German-English interlanguage employed acceptability judgments, only. Again, the data showed deficits as to the learners' competence of the grammatical restrictions of it- and Wh-clefts.

Review of the Literature

Word Order

According to Wikipedia, in linguistics**,** word order **typology** refers to the study of different ways in which languages arrange the constituents of their sentences relative to each other, and the systematic correspondences of between these arrangements. Some languages have relatively restrictive word orders, often relying on the order of constituents to convey important grammatical information. Others, often those that convey grammatical information through inflection, allow more flexibility which can be used to encode pragmatic information such as *topicalization* or

focus. Most languages however have some preferred word order which is used most frequently. For most languages that have a major class of nouns, it is possible to define a basic word order in terms of the finite verb (V) and its arguments, subject (S) and object (O). There are six theoretically possible basic word orders: subject verb object (SVO), subject object verb (SOV), verb subject object (VSO), verb object subject (VOS), object subject verb (OSV) and object verb subject (OVS). The overwhelming majority of the world's languages are either SVO or SOV, with a much smaller but still significant portion using VSO word order. The remaining three arrangements are exceptionally rare, with VOS being slightly more common than OVS and OSV being significantly rarer than two preceding ones.

Marked versus unmarked word order

In many languages, changes in word order occur due to topicalization or in questions. However, most languages are generally assumed to have a basic word order, called the *unmarked* word order; other, *marked* word orders can then be used to emphasize a sentence element, to indicate *modality* (such as an *interrogative modality*), or for other purposes.

For example, English is SVO (subject-verb-object), as in "I don't know this", but other orders like OSV is also possible: "This I don't know." This common process is called *topic-fronting* (or topicalization). In English, OSV is a marked word order because it emphasizes the object, and is often accompanied by a change in intonation.

Research Questions

In order to investigate the issues discussed above, the following research questions were formed.

1. Are advanced Iranian learners of English fully aware of syntactic options of structuring information in discourse?
2. Do advanced Iranian learners use marked word orders systematically to convey their proper discourse-pragmatic functions?

Is there any relationship between the learners' awareness and their accurate use of marked word orders?

Method

Participants

Participants of this study were initially 50 male and female MA students of TEFL in Tehran, Iran. In order to be included in the final subject pool, participants had to be present in all three phases of test administration. Besides, meeting the purpose of the study, there should not have been any items unanswered. Accordingly, 20 participants did not qualify to be included in the analysis based on the conventional SD criterion and were excluded. Finally this study was conducted by 30 participants, males and females, who were all MA students majoring in TEFL.

Instrumentation

In this study the following instruments were used:

1. A Nelson test was used for the purpose of achieving homogeneity and assessing participants' language proficiency level at the beginning of the study.
2. A set of *metalinguistic tasks* consisting of an *acceptability judgment test* along with an *error identification task* administered in the form of a 50-item task to measure learners' comprehension of certain focus constructions in English. In this set of tests, there were 10 paragraphs in which one last sentence was written in five different ways. The participants' task, in *acceptability judgment test*, was to see which sentences were more appropriate in the given context. If they thought that a sentence was not acceptable in English, they were also supposed to indicate the reason for their judgment in *error identification task*.

A *Production task* including a *discourse-completion task* administered to evaluate participants' production of focus-constructions. Here the same 10 paragraphs used in metalinguistic tasks were presented with an interval of two weeks. However, the last sentence of each paragraph was left unwritten for students to produce. Participants were supposed to complete the sentences by using words given in brackets. The word printed in bold type was supposed to receive special emphasis.

Procedure

First, the Nelson test was administered to assess the homogeneity of the participants. This general proficiency test was adopted from Nelson English Language Test: Book 3 advanced (1976), test: 350 A (pp. 4-7). The participants were given 45 minutes to answer the questions. The results were then used to select those learners who were supposed to be the final participants of the study. The range of scores was determined based on the mean and the standard deviation of all the scores on the test. In another

administration, learners were provided with the production task. The participants had 20 minutes to produce 10 sentences of their own according to the10 contexts to which they had been introduced. In another session, the metalinguistic task was administered to determine the learners' awareness of marked word orders in English. The participants were provided with a brief explanation in order to follow the directions accurately. The time allocated to this part was one hour and forty minutes for scaling 50 acceptability judgment items from one to four; and also identifying the error if they thought of one sentence to be unacceptable English.

Scoring Procedure in Acceptability Judgment Task

Since each scale possessed a different value in this task, a table was made for each participant. In this table, all four marked orders used for every paragraph along with the unmarked one were classified. The ten paragraphs were presented in each row from letter A to J. Each cell included the participant's chosen scale (scale number one to scale number four) as well as the real scale. For a better illustration of the matter, the table for participant1 (P1) is presented here.

Table 1. *P1's Scores in Acceptability Judgment Task*

	It-cleft	Wh-cleft	inversion	fronting	Unmarked					
	S1	true scale	S1	true scale	S1	true scale	S1	true scale	S1	True scale
A	1	**4**	4	**3**	1	**2**	1	**1**	3	**4**
B	3	**3**	4	**4**	3	**3**	2	**2**	2	**2**
C	2	**4**	2	**3**	2	**2**	2	**4**	4	**2**
D	4	**2**	3	**3**	3	**2**	2	**4**	3	**2**
E	3	**2**	4	**2**	4	**4**	4	**1**	4	**1**
F	3	**2**	4	**4**	3	**4**	1	**1**	4	**2**
G	2	**2**	4	**2**	4	**4**	4	**4**	4	**3**
H	2	**3**	1	**2**	1	**4**	2	**2**	1	**2**
I	4	**4**	4	**4**	3	**1**	4	**1**	4	**2**
J	4	**4**	3	**2**	1	**2**	4	**4**	4	**2**
Total	10	8	9	10	15					

For obtaining P1's real score, the researcher subtracted the participant's chosen scores from the real scores printed boldly beside each. Then the researcher added the total number of subtractions for different constructions in each column. Since there were 10 paragraphs, this total would be a number between the range of 0 and 30. When this number tended to 0, it indicated that the learner had a better knowledge of that focus structure.

Results on Acceptability Judgment Task

Regarding the descriptive statistics, a comparison was made between the scores the participants obtained for each marked word order as well as the unmarked one. As can be seen in this table, no one scored above 15 in any category. As a result, the learners performed well in their judging of acceptable sentences which indicated their good knowledge of marked word orders.

Table 2 **.***Descriptive Statistics for Acceptability Judgment Task*

FRONTING	UNMARKED	INVERSION	WH_CLEFT	IT_CLEFT		
30	30	30	30	30	Valid	N
10.1333	14.6667	10.8667	9.3333	7.8000	Mean	
10.0000	15.0000	11.0000	9.0000	8.0000	Median	
10.00(a)	16.00	12.00	8.00	9.00	Mode	
.89955	1.68836	1.47936	3.31489	2.29542	Std. Deviation	
8.00	11.00	8.00	3.00	3.00	Minimum	
11.00	17.00	13.00	15.00	13.00	Maximum	
10.0000	13.0000	10.0000	8.0000	6.0000	25	Percentiles
10.0000	15.0000	11.0000	9.0000	8.0000	50	
11.0000	16.0000	12.0000	12.0000	9.0000	75	

Scoring Procedure in Error Identification Task

It should be recalled here that the learners were considered to go through the *error identification task* in the case they thought one sentence was not acceptable English. However, only the second option was considered to be an appropriate choice, that is, 'the sentence was pragmatically not acceptable in the given context', and other options were actually distracters. Accordingly, through the following procedures the learners either scored 1 or 0 depending on their appropriate or inappropriate answers: the ones who thought the sentences to be acceptable, choosing the scales 3 or 4 in acceptability judgment task, scored 1 since they were not expected to answer the error identification task. The learners who considered the sentences to be unacceptable English, selecting between the first two scales in acceptability judgment task, scored 1 in the case they had chosen the second option; they scored 0 in the case they had chosen the distracters. These gains were classified, and the percentages were separately calculated for each of the 50 items included in error identification task.

Results on Error Identification Task

According to table 3, the lowest percentage is 63.33 which has happened only once, whereas the highest percentage is 96.66 with the frequency of 5. Accordingly, it can be interpreted that a very low percentage of the answers being chosen by the learners in acceptability judgment task were accidental, and they truly possess the knowledge of focus constructions in English.

On the other hand, in order to compare the learners' preferences and reasons they had chosen, the researcher extracted the data on the four options being included in every test item.

Table 3 .Results on Error Identification Task

Que.	Percentage of True Answers	Percentage of False Answers	Que.	Percentage of True Answers	Percentage of False Answers	Que.	Percentage of True Answers	Percentage of False Answers
Q1	70	30	Q16	80	20	Q31	93.33	6.66
Q2	83.33	16.66	Q17	96.66	3.33	Q32	80	20
Q3	80	20	Q18	93.33	6.66	Q33	86.66	13.33
Q4	73.33	26.66	Q19	76.66	23.33	Q34	63.33	36.33
Q5	76.66	23.33	Q20	73.33	26.66	Q35	76.66	23.33
Q6	66.66	33.33	Q21	83.33	16.66	Q36	83.33	16.66
Q7	93.33	6.66	Q22	80	20	Q37	83.33	16.66
Q8	96.66	3.33	Q23	96.66	3.33	Q38	96.66	3.33
Q9	80	20	Q24	76.66	23.33	Q39	80	20
Q10	93.33	6.66	Q25	83.33	16.66	Q40	80	20
Q11	86.66	13.33	Q26	80	20	Q41	80	20
Q12	86.66	13.33	Q27	73.33	26.66	Q42	70	30
Q13	93.33	6.66	Q28	76.66	23.33	Q43	93.33	6.66
Q14	70	30	Q29	93.33	6.66	Q44	96.66	3.33
Q15	76.66	23.33	Q30	93.33	6.66	Q45	86.66	13.33
						Q46	86.66	13.33
						Q47	93.33	6.66
						Q48	80	20
						Q49	83.33	16.66
						Q50	76.66	23.33

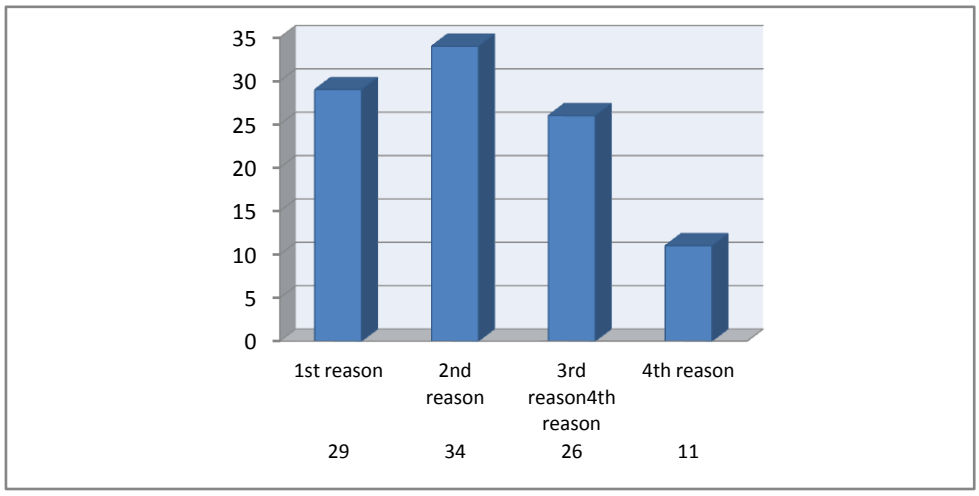

Figure 1. Learners' reasons in Error Identification Task

According to figure1, 29 percent of the participants assumed that 'the word order is wrong', 34 percent believed that 'the sentence is pragmatically not acceptable in the context', and 26 percent thought that 'the meaning of the sentence is unclear'; finally, 11 percent stated their own reasons, that is, the learners either considered the sentences to be grammatically incorrect, or they presumed that the sentences sounded weird to them.

Scoring Procedure in Discourse Completion Task

A table was made for each participant indicating his/her use of the focus construction. For example, Participant 1 (P1) has produced the following results in his/her production task:

Table 4 *.P1's Scores in Discourse Completion Task*

It-cleft	Wh-cleft	inversion	fronting	unmarked
2	3	0	0	5

The above table indicates that P1 has used it-cleft structure twice; he/she has used wh-cleft structure three times; he/she has not used any inversion and fronting structures; and finally this learner has produced five unmarked sentences. Therefore, P1's total number of using the marked structures is 5 out of 10.

Results on Discourse Completion Task

Comparing the scores obtained from the participants, the following results were achieved:

Table 5**.** *Descriptive Statistics for Discourse Completion Task*

USE_FRON	USE_UNMA	USE_INV	USE_WH	USE_IT		
30	30	30	30	30	Valid	N
1.1333	5.4000	.1333	2.0667	1.2667	Mean	
1.00	3.00(a)	.00	3.00	.00	Mode	
1.22428	2.45792	.34575	1.36289	1.14269	SD	
.0000	3.0000	.0000	1.0000	.0000	25	Percentiles
1.0000	5.0000	.0000	2.0000	1.0000	50	
1.0000	7.0000	.0000	3.0000	2.0000	75	

Table 6: *The Result of Pearson Correlation Test*

COMPUTE use	COMPUTE awareness		
.046	1	Pearson Correlation	COMPUTE awareness
.811	.	Sig. (2-tailed)	
30	30	N	
1	.046	Pearson Correlation	COMPUTE use
.	.811	Sig. (2-tailed)	
30	30	N	

Since the mean is very low for all marked categories except for the unmarked one, it is inferred that the learners had a tendency to use the unmarked structure more, which is evidence to their unsystematic use of marked word orders.

The Relationship between the Learners' Awareness and Use of Marked Word Orders The Pearson Product Moment correlation was conducted in order to examine the relationship between the learners' awareness and use of marked word orders.

Here, r is 0.046 and the P-value is 0.811. Since P-value is more than 0.05level, no correlation is found between the general use and the awareness of focus constructions, and consequently, there is no significant relationship between the advanced Iranian learners' comprehension and their production of marked constructions in English.

Nevertheless, this lack of relationship may be due to the small sample size of the participants. Regarding the ranking tables of the use and the awareness of marked structures, interesting results were observed. In both tasks, cleft constructions were the learners' most preferred marked category; proposed constructions (frontings) were the second ones; and finally inverted structures were less preferred by all learners. In other words, although no correlation was seen between the production and comprehension tasks, it can be interpreted that the more the learners are aware of one particular marked structure, the more they produce that structure in their use of language.

Table 7. *Mean Rank for Comprehension Task*

Mean Rank	
4.53	IT
3.43	WH
2.80	INV
1.10	UNMARKED
3.13	FRO

Table 8. *Mean Rank for Production Task*

Mean Rank	
2.80	USE_IT
3.47	USE_WH
1.43	USE_INV
4.67	USE_UNMA
2.63	USE_FRON

Conclusion

The results of *acceptability judgment task* along with the *error identification* one indicated that Iranian learners of English are aware of syntactic options of structuring information in discourse**.** However, the learners did not perform very well in the discourse completion task in that they did not use marked constructions frequently and systematically to convey their proper discourse-pragmatic functions. Regarding the fact that the learners are aware of focus constructions, there might be some reasons they do not use the constructions systematically:

- Most probably, the learners may have some knowledge of the structures but lack the confidence to use them. As a result, most learners were likely to use unmarked structure rather than using a marked one which fits properly into the context.
- They can more easily paraphrase difficult syntactic patterns.
- It could also well be that the structures were just, accidentally, not used.

In general, it can be concluded that "high levels of grammatical competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence" (Bardovi-Harling, 1999, p. 686).

As far as the relationship between interlanguage pragmatic and grammatical development is concerned, the findings of this study support the second scenario depicted by Kasper and Rose (2002) which says that grammar precedes pragmatics because the learners acquire certain L2 grammatical forms before they acquire their pragmalinguistic functions. In particular, the findings of this study provide evidence for one of the three shades of the "grammar precedes pragmatics" scenario (Kasper &Rose, 2002).It is, therefore, inferred that grammatical knowledge does not enable pragmalinguistic use evidenced by the learners' non- and under-use of marked constructions.

Finally, although the result of the Pearson test indicated that there was no relationship between the awareness and use of marked word orders in English, The findings showed correspondence between the comprehension and production of marked constructions in that there is a tendency in the learners to represent subject-prominent sentences specially it-clefts while inverted sentences were underrepresented in both tasks. This is explained in terms of a typological parameter (subject-prominence), a factor constraining productive learner output: learners experience a need

for the subject to occur in canonical position.

This is also in accordance with markedness assumptions that in relation to other syntactic focus constructions, clefts and other subject-prominent sentence types show a comparatively low degree of structural markedness because SVO word order is retained. Except for the Wh-clefts which received a good acceptability rating and the highest mean rank, inversion as a structure without a canonical sentence-initial subject had the least comprehension and production on the part of the learners. This overrepresentation of Wh-clefts may be due to the cross-cultural influence (negative transfer), and may possibly enforce by transfer of training.

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