

## Improving Learner Performance in Producing Grammatical Structures

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### ABSTRACT

This experimental study examined the effectiveness of using focused and unfocused tasks on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' performance in producing noun, adjective, and adverb clauses. In addition, the aim of this study was to explore the effects of form-focused instruction and the feedback students received from their teacher after doing focused grammar tasks. Data consisted of the scores of the pre-test and posttest as well as the data obtained through the administration of the tasks of translation to undergraduates at Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch over a period of one semester. After the administration of the Nelson proficiency test, 60 participants out of 106 were selected. Then all groups were given a sample TOEFL, which stood as pre-test and posttest to assess the clause performance of all groups. The focused and unfocused tasks were administered to the experimental groups, while the control group followed the exercises in the course book. Analysis of the data pointed to a strong correlation between implementing focused tasks, attention to form, and finally the performance of the learners in different types of clauses. The study also pointed out the relationship between the role of correcting errors and the subsequent consciousness-raising (C-R) on the part of the students. In conclusion, practicing focused tasks had an important role to play in promoting learners' grammar performance.

**Keywords:** *task-based instruction; focused and unfocused tasks*

### Introduction

Subsequent to the rise of communicative language teaching, the status of grammar in the curriculum was rather uncertain. Today, however, it is accepted that grammar is essential in using language communicatively. The major components of a new paradigm of methodology should be communicative activities and consciousness-raising activities. Long (1991) has rejected both a pre-planned focus on specific forms on the one hand, or purely general meaning on the other, while defending a reactive Focus on Form within communicatively negotiated interaction (Bruton, 2007).

Focused task, "an activity that has all the qualities of a task but has been designed to induce learners' incidental attention to some specific linguistic form when processing either input or

output" (Ellis, 2003 a, p. 342); and unfocused task, "a task that is designed to encourage the comprehension and production of language for purposes of communication, *i.e.* it is not designed to elicit attention to any specific linguistic feature; it contrasts with focused task" (Ellis, 2003 a, p. 352) were considered in designing materials for teaching grammar. So with the advent of modern approaches to language teaching and learning, the attention of language teachers and researchers has turned from purely grammatical and structural exercises or only communicative tasks towards more focused grammar tasks.

### Review of Related Literature

Concerning explicit teaching of grammar, studies suggest that the difficulty of grammatical structures vary according to whether one is con-

sidering implicit or explicit knowledge of the structures; structures that are easy in terms of implicit knowledge may be difficult in terms of explicit knowledge and vice versa; structures vary as to whether it is implicit or explicit related to general language proficiency; measures of both implicit and explicit grammatical knowledge predict general language proficiency; and together, implicit and explicit measures of grammatical structures can predict a substantial amount of the variance in general language proficiency scores (Ellis, 2006a; Chen, 1995). "Implicit knowledge arises out of explicit knowledge, when the latter is proceduralized through practice" (DeKeyser, 1998, p. 49).

According to Ellis (2004), discussion and studies of explicit knowledge have largely focused on grammar. This reflects the centrality of grammar in such fields as linguistics and language teaching and also, perhaps, the fact that grammar, in contrast to pronunciation and vocabulary, is more amenable to conscious reflection and manipulation. Some researchers have investigated the effects of implicit and explicit instruction on simple and complex grammatical structures and concluded that teaching does make a significant difference in learning, that explicit instruction is significantly better than implicit for the complex rule, that both methods are equally effective for the simple rule, and that structures do not have to match proficiency levels or be sequenced by complexity for significant learning to take place (Andrews, 2007). The evidence obtained from the studies supports the effectiveness of focus on form instruction on the acquisition of language aspects; learners who received more focus on form were most accurate in their language use (Williams 2001; Norris and Ortega cited in Johnstone 2002; Burgess 2002; Garcia Mayo 2002; DeKeyser 2003; & Macaro & Masterman 2006).

One of the main aims of communicative language teaching is to provide opportunities for learners to participate in interaction where the primary goal is to exchange meaning rather than to learn the L2. A task-based approach to language pedagogy can provide opportunities for the kinds of interaction which have been suggested to promote acquisition (Fotos and Ellis, 1991). Attention to form, in one way or another, can occur in any of the phases of a task-based lesson. All designs of task-based lessons have three main phases in common, pre-task, during task and post-

task. These phases reflect the chronology of a task-based lesson. In the pre-task and post-task phases the focus will be on forms while in the during-task phase it will be on form (Ellis, 2006b).

The challenge for a task-based pedagogy is to choose sequence and implement tasks in ways that will combine a focus on meaning with a focus on form (Foster, 1999 cited in Lynch & Maclean, 2000). The view that grammar instruction is important in raising learners' conscious awareness of a particular feature has also been proposed in the context of developing the theoretical framework for a task-based approach to the study of grammar, an approach aimed at integrating grammar instruction with the provision of opportunities for meaning-focused use of the target language (Fotos, 1994). The design of task-based units, distinguishing between exercises and tasks and looking at ways to enhance the effectiveness of focus on form during tasks, is an attempt to respond to this need (Nunn, 2006). If balanced treatment of the goals of fluency, accuracy, and complexity is achieved, this maximizes chances that there will be an effective balance between a focus on form and a focus on meaning (Skehan, 1998).

Fotos and Ellis (1991, cited in Skehan, 1998) advocated structure-oriented task-based instruction. They reported on a study in which specific structures (dative alternation, adverb placement) were forced by particular tasks, that is, there was no alternative but to use such structures as a result of task design. They compared this task-based approach with a more conventional explicit presentation. They were exploring the possibility that learners who formulate their own hypotheses from structured materials are able to achieve the same generalizations, as efficiently as students receiving explicit presentation of language. They concluded that such a version of task-based instruction is both effective and practical; it produces results and lends itself to adaptation to whatever structures it wants to focus on.

A review of literature reveals some facts about the nature and characteristics of the studies which investigate the designing of focused tasks. We learn from the studies about structure-based production tasks (Tuz 1993, Sterlacci 1996, and Mackey 1999 cited in Ellis 2003 a) that first, it is possible to design tasks that successfully target the use of specific grammatical structures, second, it seems to be easier to elicit some fea-

tures than others, third, there is likely to be individual learner variation. Whereas some learners use the structure that has been targeted, other learners do not, and fourth, there is evidence from all three studies that when performing structure-based communicative tasks learners treat them as opportunities for communicating rather than for learning. Thus, any learning that does occur as a result of performing a structure-based task is likely to be incidental.

Ellis (2003b) referred to two approaches to incorporating a focus on form into a task-based syllabus. He believes that in an integrated approach, content-obligatory and content-compatible language forms are identified for each task. In a modular approach, the syllabus is conceived of as two separate modules, one consisting of unfocused tasks and the other utilizing a traditional structural syllabus taught through a focus-on-forms approach and/or through focused tasks. He adds that in such a modular syllabus consideration needs to be given to the staging of the two components. Figure 2:1 outlines one possible way. The beginning stages of the course would be devoted entirely to a module consisting of unfocused tasks. The code-based module would be introduced from the intermediate stage onwards, gradually assuming more of the total teaching time. Ellis (2003b) pointed that the rationale for such a model lies in the claim that early L2 acquisition is lexical in nature and largely looks after itself as long as learners have access to input and opportunities to use the L2. At this stage errors abound in learner language and there is little point in trying to address them as many of them will be eliminated fairly rapidly in natural ways. The need for a focus on form arises later, when learners have acquired some communicative ability and when they run the risk of fossilizing. The code-based module kicks in at this time with the goal of drawing attention to form in order to destabilize learners' interlanguage. In effect, this reverses the sequence found in traditional language curricula, where form is taught first and opportunities to communicate introduced later.

The two studies (Jourdenais et al. 1996 and White 1998) cited in Ellis, (2003b) suggested that enriched input (a kind of comprehension task) where the target structure is highlighted and where it is not highlighted can assist acquisition. She compared the effects of three types of enriched input: (1) a typographically enhanced

input flood plus extensive listening and reading, (2) a typographically enhanced input flood by itself, and (3) a typographically unenhanced input flood. White concluded that the target structure was probably equally salient in all three types of input.

The value of Consciousness Raising (CR) tasks, according to Ellis (2003a), lies not just in whether they are effective in developing explicit knowledge and subsequently promoting noticing but also in the opportunities they provide for learners to communicate. C-R tasks do promote communicative behavior and also its quality by examining whether C-R tasks lead to the negotiation of meaning. Fotos and Ellis (1991) found that the information-gap C-R tasks they used did result in quite extensive negotiation but that much of this was very mechanical in nature, a point that has also been made of the negotiation that arises in unfocused tasks. Fotos (1994) compared the amount and quality of negotiation in unfocused tasks and C-R tasks that shared the same design features and found no significant differences. She also noted that the negotiations were not as mechanical as those observed in Fotos and Ellis and suggested that this was because in the later study the students were more familiar with performing tasks in groups.

Recent studies (Fotos, 1994; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Williams, 2001; Garcia Mayo, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2005; Barbieri & Eckhardt, 2007) have focused on methods for integrating grammar instruction within communicatively focused language teaching that could enable learners to recognize the properties of target structures in context, and to develop accuracy in their use. Fotos (1994) examined one classroom event, grammar C-R tasks. In a quantitative investigation of an EFL classroom context, Fotos compared the communicative and grammar gains of Japanese university students involved in three types of instructional contexts: teacher-fronted grammar lessons, grammar tasks, and communicative tasks. Based on her findings, she concluded that grammar C-R tasks can be a valuable technique in promoting grammatical competency in communicative classrooms.

The present study aimed at viewing language as a dynamic and intuitive process, gradually developed by the learners. Concerning the principles and objectives of focused tasks, Ellis (2003a) stated that "Focused tasks require learners to comprehend and process specific grammat-

ical structures in the input, and/or to produce the structures in the performance of the task” (p. 12).

A task is also defined as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end (Nunan, 2006). Thus the main concern of this study was to demonstrate that it is possible to integrate the teaching of grammar with the provision of opportunities for focused tasks which they promote the clause proficiency interactively.

### Research Questions

Studies conducted on the effectiveness of focused tasks in second language acquisition context emphasize the importance of the implementing the tasks in grammar teaching classes. However, in the context of foreign language learning, little has been done to find out the role of focused tasks in developing grammatical knowledge. So, the present study was designed to primarily identify and describe whether focused or unfocused tasks have any significant impact on developing grammatical knowledge by intermediate EFL learners. Moreover, the study attempted to find out whether there was any statistically significant difference between the grammar performance of the learners who were taught grammar through focused tasks and those taught through unfocused tasks.

### Methodology

The study had a pre-test-posttest nonequivalent-groups design of quasi-experimental designs. Thus, two types of grammar teaching tasks, focused and unfocused, were conducted respectively to the two experimental groups during their language courses. The results of the treatment were compared with the control group through one-way ANOVA statistics.

### Materials

The instruments used in this study included the Nelson English Language Test, a sample TOEFL, and the focused and unfocused tasks.

### The Nelson English Language Test

The Nelson English language Test 200 A, adapted from Fowler & Coe (1976), and devised for intermediate level, was used as a proficiency test in this study to assure the homogeneity of the groups. Since the study investigated the role of focused grammar instruction, only the grammar part of the test was selected. The test included 50 multiple choice items comprising different grammar structures that were given at the beginning of the term to the participants and standardized through some statistical procedures as estimating item difficulty, item facility, and discrimination index. The test rescored after standardizing and deleting 7 items, so that its reliability through KR<sub>20</sub> statistics estimated as 0.83.

### TOEFL

The sample TOEFL test, used as pre-test and posttest in this study, was adapted from Broukal (2001 & 2002). The test included 40 items in a multiple choice format. Based on the four (12, 13, 17, and 18) relevant chapters of the course book, the test consisted of two sections. The grammar section contained 20 questions namely noun, adjective, and adverb clauses, and the reading comprehension section also contained 20 questions with three reading texts including those clauses. The test was standardized and its reliability through KR<sub>20</sub> was estimated as 0.81.

### The Tasks

Two kinds of grammar teaching tasks were utilized for the purpose of this study: focused tasks and unfocused tasks. The two types of tasks were selected from different language teaching course books and the Internet, some of which were revised by the researchers. Focused tasks were designed in the form of structure-based production tasks and involved text-reconstruction tasks, revising incorrect sentences, among others.

The unfocused tasks were, however, mostly designed in the form of the comprehension tasks including the target structures. The tasks were evaluated by the experts, the researchers conducting the study, and the teachers of the classes. The criteria for the selection of the tasks were questioned through a tentative checklist, asking experts if the tasks were appropriate to administer in the classes. Moreover, the important criteria to select the tasks were the content of them to be relevant to the three kinds of the investigated clauses. Nevertheless, fourteen different types of tasks (seven focused and seven unfocused) were utilized in the study:

### Focused Tasks

- Grammatical judgment task for noun clauses (Sharpe, 2001, p. 249)
- Combining two sentences into one, using noun clause relative pronouns (Hopkins & Cullen, 2007, p. 103-4)
- Rewriting sentences in correct forms and combining two sentences into one, using adjective clause relative pronouns (Sharpe, 2001, p. 248)
- Asking students to select correct relative pronouns and identify the restrictive and nonrestrictive of the clauses (ESL Program San Jose City College site)
- Combining the sentences using subordinators (ESL Program San Jose City College site)
- Asking students to underline the target structure in the text (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 2005, p. 77 and Molinsky & Bliss, 1997, p. 40)
- Asking students to underline the adjective and adverb reduced clauses (Molinsky & Bliss, 1997, p. 40)

### Unfocused Tasks

- A text followed by comprehension questions (Doff & Jones, 1997, p. 62)
- A reading text followed by a writing practice (Molinsky & Bliss, 1997, p. 18)
- Asking students making decision and matching them (Howe, McArthur, Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 1993, 153)

- Asking students to match two parts and make a decision about a number of statements (Wallwork, 1997, p. 13)
- A reading text followed by writing practice (Wallwork, 1997, p. 103)
- A reading text followed by comprehension questions in matching items (O'Connell, 2002, p. 89)
- Reading comprehension (O'Connell, 2002, 137)

### Participants

The participants were 106 translation undergraduates, both male and female, ranged in age from 18-27. The subjects were in their second semester of education at the university, studying Grammar II. After the administration of the Nelson placement test, 60 students were selected. The classes were randomly assigned to two experimental and one control groups. The groups were taught by three different lecturers, but used the same book: "Understanding and Using English Grammar" by Azar (1999). The reason behind the selection of students taking grammar course was that they were thought to be better suited for the grammar proficiency test than other possible candidates. Thus, for achieving more realistic results it was thought to choose students from only learning grammar classes. And, of course, the researchers' focus was only on the chapters of the book including the instruction of noun clauses, adjective clauses, and adverb clauses (namely, chapters 12, 13, 17, and 18). Upon the termination of each chapter, the relevant tasks were administered by the researchers to the experimental groups.

### Procedure

The following procedures were followed for the purpose of this study: First, to have homogeneous groups, the Nelson English language Test was given to 106 English translation undergraduates in the form of a multiple-choice test at the beginning of the semester. The test included 50 multiple-choice standardized grammar items. The reliability of the items and the whole test was calculated through KR<sub>20</sub> (reliability 0.83). Sixty students (20 participants in each class) were assigned randomly as two experimental (focused and unfocused tasks) and 1 control groups. But

there was 1 missing participant in the unfocused group at the posttest stage and therefore the sum of the participants was reduced to 59. All groups were given the “Structure and Written Expression” and “Reading Comprehension” sections of the TOEFL test as the pre-test to check for the participants' clause proficiency prior to instruction. The Structure and Written Expression section included 20 items on clause constructions and the Reading Comprehension section included 20 items on clause constructions.

After teaching the target structures to the students, the researchers held seven sessions for each of the two experimental groups separately to administer the relevant tasks. The focused tasks (including structure-based and C-R tasks) comprised the target structures and were administered to experimental Group 1 (Exp. I) to look for the effect of such a method.

The unfocused tasks comprising comprehension tasks again included the target structures and were administered to experimental Group 2 (Exp. II). The two types of tasks were administered by the researchers after the students were taught the structures (noun, adjective, and adverb clauses) during the course. In the case of the focused tasks, students corrected their errors with the help of the instructor after accomplishing the tasks, so they became aware of the correct forms of the structure and their errors. It should be mentioned that some of the tasks were simplified and revised by the researchers to make them suitable to administer to the classes. For example, the text of the last focused tasks belonged to Molinsky & Bliss (1997, p. 40), which was set as adjective and adverb reduction practice, asking students to underline the clauses. Each task administration session took 15-20 minutes to finish. Meanwhile, the control group only did the practices of the course book, a combination of focused grammar tasks and also grammatical exercises. The TOEFL test was administered again at the end of the semester to all groups as the posttest. Students in the focused task group corrected their errors after doing the task and were called attention to the form.

## Results

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this study was to identify whether focused or unfocused tasks have any significant impact on the grammar performance of intermediate EFL learn-

ers. It also aimed to find out whether there was any statistically significant difference between the grammar performance of the learners who were taught grammar through the focused and those through the unfocused tasks. The results of the study are shown in two different parts as descriptive and inferential statistics.

## Descriptive Statistics

To assure the homogeneity of the three groups participating in the study, the Nelson test was used as a proficiency test. First, the reliability of the test was estimated ( $r = 0.82$ , with 50 items). After validating the test, 7 items were deleted and the test was scored again. The reliability of the test was estimated through  $KR_{20}$  ( $r = 0.83$ ). Table 1 shows the summary of descriptive statistics for validating of the Nelson test.

## TOEFL

At the pre-test and posttest stages, all groups were given a modified TOEFL test for the sake of assessing participants' clause proficiency. The reliability of the test with 40 items was 0.81. After validating the test, none of the items were deleted. The reliability of the test, estimated through  $KR_{20}$ , was 0.81. Table 2 shows the results for validation of the TOEFL test.

### Performance of the Groups in Pre-test and Posttest

The descriptive statistics parameters of pre-test and posttest scores were calculated and compared at the end of the course of the study. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 3-4.

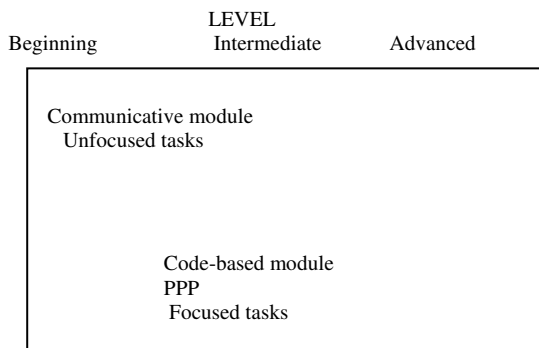
Tables 3-4 shows that the mean score of the performance of the control group at pre-test stage was 20.80, changing to 21.70 at the posttest stage. However, the mean score of the performance of the focused group in pre-test was 24.30 and increased to 28.25 in posttest. For the unfocused group, this score was 21.05 in the pre-test stage and changed to 22.16 at the posttest stage.

### Difference Scores of the Groups in Pretest and Posttest

Figure 1 shows the differences of the means of the three groups (focused tasks, unfocused tasks, and control groups) at pre-test and posttest stages in which the mean of the focused tasks group was

significantly different in posttest from pre-test. However, there were no significant differences in

**A modular approach to designing a task-based syllabus (Ellis 2003b)**



comparing means of the pre-test and posttest stages of the unfocused tasks and the control group.

As seen in Table 5, the mean score of the achievement of the control group was 0.90 at posttest stage; however, the mean in focused and unfocused groups was 3.95 and 1.11, respectively. Moreover, the standard deviation of the achievement of the control group was 4.09 at posttest stage and in both groups the standard deviations were 4.54 and 3.38, respectively. The statistical results of comparing achievements of the group in posttest stage are shown in Figure 3 as well. The figure indicates that the focused task group outperformed the unfocused task and control groups at the posttest stage.

Table1: Statistical calculation for validating the Nelson test

Variable	Descriptive Statistics (SolatiFinal.sta)							
	Valid N	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Variance	Std.Dev.	Standard Error
NELSON Final Score	106	25.39	25.00	7.00	41.00	45.69	6.76	0.66

Table2: Statistical calculation for validating the TOEFL test

Variable	Valid N	Mean.2: Statistical	Standard Deviation	Cronbach alpha= KR <sub>20</sub>
TOEFL Final Score	60	22.28	6.24	0.81

Table3: Statistical results in pre-test stage

Breakdown Table of Descriptive Statistics (SolatiFinal.sta)							
N=59 (No missing data in dep. var. list)							
Group	Score-Pre Means	Score-Pre N	Score-Pre Std.Dev.	Score-Pre Variance	Score-Pre Std.Err.	Score-Pre Minimum	Score-Pre Maximum
Control	20.80	20	4.49	20.17	1.00	9.00	28.00
Focused	24.30	20	7.11	50.54	1.59	9.00	35.00
Unfocused	21.05	19	5.96	35.50	1.37	10.00	32.00
All Grps	22.07	59	6.07	36.79	0.79	9.00	35.00

Table 4: Statistical results in posttest stage

Breakdown Table of Descriptive Statistics (SolatiFinal.sta)							
N=59 (No missing data in dep. var. list)							
Group	Score-Post Means	Score-Post N	Score-Post Std.Dev.	Score-Post Variance	Score-Post Std.Err.	Score-Post Minimum	Score-Post Maximum
Control	21.70	20	3.83	14.64	0.86	14.00	28.00
Focused	28.25	20	5.57	31.04	1.25	12.00	35.00
Unfocused	22.16	19	5.53	30.58	1.27	12.00	31.00
All Grps	24.07	59	5.80	33.62	0.75	12.00	35.00



Table 5: Difference scores of the groups in pre-test and posttest

Breakdown Table of Descriptive Statistics (SolatiFinal.sta) N=59 (No missing data in dep. var. list)							
Group	Score-Dif Means	Score-Dif N	Score-Dif Std.Dev.	Score-Dif Variance	Score-Dif Std.Err.	Score-Dif Minimum	Score-Dif Maximum
Control	0.90	20	4.09	16.73	0.91	-7.00	9.00
Focused	3.95	20	4.54	20.58	1.01	-1.00	18.00
Unfocused	1.11	19	3.38	11.43	0.78	-6.00	7.00
All Grps	2.00	59	4.21	17.76	0.55	-7.00	18.00

Table 6: Sum of statistical results for calculating ANOVA

Analysis of Variance (SolatiFinal.sta) Marked effects are significant at $p < .05000$								
Variable	SS Effect	df Effect	MS Effect	SS Error	df Error	MS Error	F	p
Score-Dif	115.46	2	57.73	914.54	56	16.33	3.53	0.04

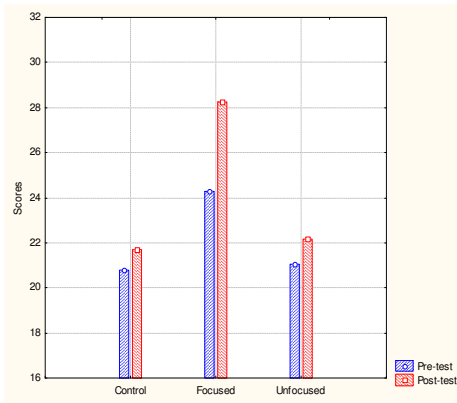


Figure 1: Difference scores of the groups in pre-test and posttest

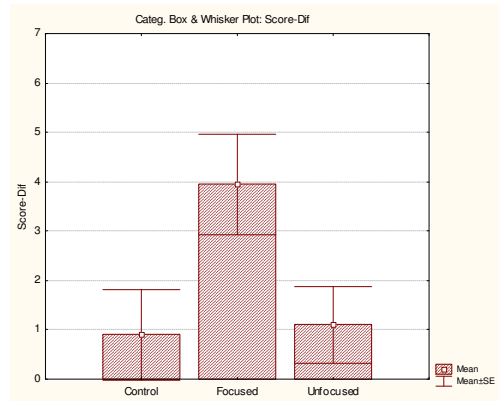


Figure 3: Achievement of the groups in posttest

**Inferential Statistics**

Inferential statistics of the study dealt with calculating the one way ANOVA and Post-Hoc analysis for the purpose of the study.

**ANOVA results**

This study looked at the amount of variability (the differences) between the means of the groups compared with the amount of variability among the individual scores in each group. Table 6 shows the group's variance. As Table 6 shows, F observed was 3.53 (95% confidence and 5% error). As shown in Table 6, the probability level (P) for the rejection of the null hypothesis of the study was 0.04. So the null hypothesis could be rejected at df 2. ANOVA results were utilized in the case of the means of the groups in pre-test

and posttest stages to reject the null hypothesis. As shown in Table 6, the differences in the means of the focused group in pre-test and post-test stages were significant.

**Post-Hoc Results**

Because there was a statistically significant difference between the achievements of the control group and the experimental groups, Post-Hoc analysis was used to see the place of the differences. Referring to Table 7, since the authors were able to reject  $H_0$ , they knew that at least one group was significantly different from another group. To check this, the authors started with the first group, Group 1 versus Group 2, to reject the first  $H_0$  that P was 0.02, smaller than 0.05 level of error. Then they checked Group 1 versus Group 3





to reject the second  $H_0$  that  $P$  was 0.87, larger than 0.05 level of error. Finally, Group 2 versus Group 3 was checked to reject the third  $H_0$  that  $P$  was 0.03, smaller than 0.05 level of error.

As Table 7 shows at 0.05 of significance, the mean of the focused group (Group 2) at posttest stage was significantly larger than that of the unfocused and control groups (Groups 3 and 1). However, the mean of the unfocused group was not significantly greater than that of the control group at posttest stage. So the three null hypotheses of the study were rejected at 0.05 level of error and 0.95 level of confidence.

### The Focused Tasks

When the means of Group 1 (control) versus Group 2 (focused) were compared, the mean of the focused group at posttest stage was larger than either unfocused or the control groups at the  $P$  level of 0.02 (Tables 3-4). It might be concluded that using focused tasks have a more significant impact on the grammar performance of the learners in the focused group.

### The Unfocused Tasks

To determine their impact, unfocused tasks relating to the structures being taught were administered to Group 3 (unfocused group). It might also be concluded that using unfocused tasks did not have any significant impact on the grammar performance of the learners in the unfocused group. The means of Group 1 versus Group 3 were compared; the mean of the unfocused group was not much greater than that of the control group at posttest stage (0.87).

### Difference between Focused and Unfocused Tasks

To identify the difference due to the implementation of focused and unfocused tasks, ANOVA and Post-Hoc analysis were used. It might be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the grammar performance of the learners who were taught grammar through focused and those through unfocused tasks (Tables 5-6). Analyzing the focused tasks used in the experimental group (Group 2), revealed some facts about learners' errors in understanding the target structure, noun, adjective, and adverb clauses. As it is no place to discuss the subject here in detail, the authors prefer to briefly point out some of them. Analyzing practice 1 of focused tasks showed that learners had few errors in the grammatical judgment tasks but they had some problems with embedding sentences. Half of the answers were incorrect and most of the errors were in the word order of the question form of the noun clauses. They did not change the question's order of words into the statement form when embedding the clauses. In doing practice 3, the subjects had difficulty in correcting the wrong sentences into the correct one; they did not distinguish the phrases from the clauses and forgot some essential parts of the clauses, e.g. verbs. In practices 6 and 7, in underlining clauses and identifying their restricted or complete form, learners could not consider the clauses which come one after another. They also had problems with recognizing the restricted forms of the clauses. Instructors could find the error areas of the learners by implementing focused tasks and provide remedies.

Table 7: Sum of statistical results of Post-Hoc analysis

Unequal N HSD; Variable: Score-Dif (SolatiFinal.sta)			
Marked differences are significant at $p < .05000$			
Group	Control M=.90000	Focused M=3.9500	Unfocused M=1.1053
Control {1}		0.020405	0.874595
Focused {2}	0.020405		0.032150
Unfocused {3}	0.874595	0.032150	

## Discussion and Conclusion

Students learning English grammar through the structural approach seem unable to transfer their knowledge of language structures to real communication. This is a view which is also shared by Richards & Rodgers (2001) who believed that formal instruction of grammar through structural practice can be boring and unsatisfying on the part of the learners and even sometimes the teachers themselves.

Ellis (2003a) pointed out that cognitive theories of language acquisition suggest “the need for conscious attention to specific linguistic forms while learners are attempting to communicate” (p. 172). Focused tasks, according to Ellis (2003a), constitute “a device for inducing such attention. They can be seen to serve three major purposes. They can be (1) language activating/fluency stretching or (2) knowledge-constructing. Focused tasks can also (3) contribute to the development of explicit linguistic knowledge” (p. 172).

Regarding implementing focused tasks, Ellis (2003a) argues that some of the difficulties in achieving a language focus can be overcome methodologically, i.e. by the way in which the task is implemented. He refers to implicit and explicit ways of drawing attention to form. A number of studies in Ellis (2003a) suggest that focused tasks work, both in the sense that they force processing (or understanding) of the targeted features and contribute to language acquisition. As cited in Ellis (2003a), Doughty and Varela (1998) reported a study of the effects of implicit feedback that consisted of repetitions and recasts of the utterances students produced in a series of tasks involving oral and written science reports. The grammatical focus here was the English simple past tense. It resulted in clear gains in accuracy in the use of this structure and also in greater use of more advanced interlanguage forms, while a control group showed little improvement.

Explicit feedback may play a crucial role in enabling learners to make new form/meaning connections. In a review of the research on recasts, Nicholas, Lightbown, and Spada (2001), cited in Ellis (2003a), concluded that in general, recasts appear to be most effective in contexts where it is clear to the learners that the recast is a reaction to the accuracy of the form, not the content, of the original utterance, i.e. recasts work best when they function as explicit corrections of

learner utterances. Doughty and Williams (1998) also expressed that form-focused techniques (in the forms of error correction and giving feedback) are likely to be the most useful. Due to the existence of these issues the researchers were concerned with devising and utilizing tasks for teaching language structures, i.e. focused tasks, in order to change the passive, receptive, and uncreative nature of grammar teaching into a productive, communicative and creative one. Therefore, the main purpose of the study was to discover an efficient approach to teaching grammar by implementing focused tasks to induce conscious knowledge of grammar of the learners.

The main purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of using focused and unfocused tasks on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' performance in producing noun, adjective, and adverb clauses. Focused tasks are designed and implemented to induce conscious knowledge of grammar of the learners. In this study, it might be claimed that using focused tasks had a significant impact on the acquisition of grammar features by the learners in the focused group. In addition, using unfocused tasks did not have any significant impact on the acquisition of grammar features by the learners in the unfocused group. There was also a statistically significant difference between the grammar performance of the learners who were taught grammar through focused and those who were taught unfocused tasks.

## Pedagogical implications

This study has theoretical implications for the field of language teaching. The findings of the study may help EFL teachers assist learners in better comprehending the grammatical points of their course books. The task-based approach may help EFL teachers motivate learners to participate in class activities, and hence enhance learning. Moreover, it may improve student interaction in the classroom. The research was highly productive in knowing how to design and implement focused tasks. The findings informed us about the effectiveness of focused tasks in the acquisition of language skills in general and the grammar aspects in particular. The finding might alert language teachers to become more cautious in selecting their methods of grammar instruction, in planning their strategies of presenting the grammatical rules, and finally in designing the class-

room tasks and activities to provide the opportunities for reinforcement of the rules taught. The results are also extremely informative for materials developers and textbook designers to take students' attitudes, needs, and wants into consideration when planning the materials, especially the ones in which grammatical forms are targeted.

In addition, the results of this study shed light on the possible impact that focused tasks might have on students' overall performance and accordingly on their future success in language learning. The above-mentioned point is undoubtedly a great cause for concern for the whole system of language teaching in Iran. Moreover, it allows us to effectively investigate the potential reasons for Iranian students' lack of improvement in language proficiency, especially grammatical accuracy. This would inspire the whole system in language teaching to take action and seek remedies for the lack of success in Iranian students' attempts to achieve an acceptable level of grammatical accuracy in their linguistic outputs.

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