Input Flooding: A Factor to Improve Iranian Pre-Intermediate EFL Learners' Structural Accuracy

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between these two authors. Author FN designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol, wrote the first draft of the manuscript, managed the analyses of the study and managed the literature searches and Author KM read and approved the final manuscript.

ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to investigate the effect of implicit focus on form through input flooding on structural accuracy. To fulfill the purpose of the study, 43 Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners of one of the language institutes were chosen by means of administering the homogeneity (KET) test. These learners were pretested through a structured interview to check their current accuracy level regarding the oral production of five structures. Based on the results of the pretest, two matched groups, one as the control group and the other as experimental group, were formed. Then, the two groups were provided with tasks through listening about the target structures in the study. Of course, the experimental group underwent focus on form implicitly through input flooding while the control group was not provided with it. After twenty sessions of treatment, each ninety minutes, the two groups were post tested through another structured interview. The data obtained from instruments used in the present study indicated that the instructional treatment, input flooding, did not have a significant effect on the acquisition of the target forms. The analyses of the data were done through the analysis of variance (ANOVA).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Grammar instructions, as a controversial issue in language teaching, play an important role in promotion of communicative skills and capabilities. Traditionally, grammar instructions have included a group of grammatical rules and manipulative exercises which are necessary in practicing new structures, and these set of instructions are predominantly used in all the language textbooks and classrooms [1,2], even though in these traditional approaches, students do not get involved in the interactive and communicative process of language learning. Furthermore, a language acquisition research [3,4,5,6], has illustrated that focusing on form, which is defined as considering the linguistic form in any communicative task, is essential in sustained promotion of language skills and proficiency.

As a result, focusing on form is considered as a method of teaching grammar. This method could specifically cater for the needs of those language users who apply "non-standard" grammatical forms in their communicative interactions. Williams and Evans [7] present a definition of focus on form as "…instruction that draws learners' attention to form in the context of meaningful communication…" (p. 139). Lee and Valdman [8] believe that focus on form has "…the goal of accurate as well as meaningful learner production…" (p. xi). While some people believe that focusing on form is in fact a return to traditional grammar teaching methods, Sanz [9] argues that:

Focus on Form does not mean we are going back to the drill and kill classroom because focus on form does not imply constant, indiscriminate grammar explanation and practice. Focus on form means precisely the opposite: setting limits on what is explicitly taught. (p. 17)

Another important issue in this regard is the learning input, which are all types of the linguistic data being exposed to and from which learning is done. Since no theory or approach to SLA recognizes the role of input, beginning from 1980's, the focus of studies has shifted heavily towards input analysis, especially due to formulization of input hypothesis [10, 11, 12].Doughty and Williams [3] claim that deep involvement and interactions are essential in learning processes such as carefully observing a form in the input (p. 253).

Backman and Palmer [13] argue that the required level of interpretation is to a large extent affected by the amount of input. Limited interpretation is recommended for inputs presented in limited quantities, while a more comprehensive interpretation is advised for large amounts of inputs (p.52).

Focus on form methodologies implicitly and explicitly tries to attract students' attention. In implicit focus on form, "the aim is to attract learner attention and to avoid metalinguistic discussion, always minimizing any interruption to the communication of meaning" whereas in explicit focus on form, "the aim is to direct learner attention and to exploit pedagogical grammar in this regard" [3]. Leow [14] [cited in 8] claims that "a considerable amount of SLA [second language acquisition] research indicates that implicit procedures for awareness enhancement, such as input flooding (providing numerous exemplars of the feature in the input) or writing enhancement (highlighting the targeted feature by various typographical devices), prove to be less effective in accelerating acquisition and advancing language development than a variety of types of explicit approaches…"(p. xiv). Doughty and Williams [3] possess an opposite view of this, and argue that:" …it is sometimes possible to aim more

or less implicitly to attract the learner's attention to linguistic features and promote the processing of these features without providing any sort of explicit guidance…"(p. 236).

In this research, one of the techniques of focusing on form is studied, modified input flooding. Increasing the frequency of appearance of a given feature in the input, makes such feature more prominent in L_2 grammatical input series, and this is known to be input flooding. This title suggests that the input is manipulated in a way to flood the learners, which means they are exposed more frequently to the target structures. Exposing the L_2 learners to frequent instances of a form or "flooding" the learners has been presented as a technique of implicitly attracting students' attention, and subsequently, internalization, and applying the targeted form within the classroom set of instructions [3].

In the process of input flooding, learner is exposed to a saturated version of the input with considerable amount of examples being presented, in both oral and written formats, so that while noticing the form via this flooding, the learner could in fact acquire the form [15].

The benefits of this method of flooding include: easy realization with no disruption in flow of communication. Integration of form and meaning in instructions has been suggested in some of the presented strategies in the literature. Input flooding, as an implicit technique of presenting the form, exposes the learners to a text full of target form examples, in anticipation of attracting their attention [16].

This study presented students with modified input flooding technique via listening exercises in which students were involved in repeated oral processing of some target structures. Such activities draw learners' attention to grammatical structures, and force them to concentrate on form and meaning at the same time.

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, homogeneity test was given to participants to prepare the necessary condition therefore all of the participants had the lack of ability to recognize the target structures in the study. 124 students participated in the first phase of this study but only 43 pre-intermediate EFL learners survived after homogeneity test. There were two groups of participants in the study, one group as the experimental group, and one group as the control group. The participants were all selected from at least eight English classes of English Institute located in Mashhad. Their initial language proficiency in English was at the pre-intermediate level. Mixed genders attended this study. Their mother tongue was Farsi and their average age of them was between 15 and 16.

2.2 Instrumentations

To collect the required data, some instruments were employed in this study.

2.3 KET

First, the participants' general proficiency was assessed by "KET for school" to ensure homogeneity of the groups at the beginning of study. The KET is a Cambridge Level One examination (Council of Europe level A2) which consists of four complete tests, according to

the new test format implemented since March 2004. This test has three sections including reading and writing section (9 parts, 55 items, 1hour and 10 min), listening section (5parts, 15 items,30 min) and speaking section (2parts,8 to 10 min). The participants' scores were out of 100.The reliability of test was assured by administering it to a group of similar subjects.

2.4 Structured Interviews

The other criteria used in this study were two structured interviews in order to elicit the required structure from the participants, during the pre-test and post-test period. Each interview took at least 10 minutes and it included 5 topics based on the grammatical context of the methods used. The rating criteria was based on the result of Heaton' writing English language tests. Accuracy ratios were calculated to score the interviews (by two raters) through dividing the correct uses by the sum of the total number of incorrect and zero uses [17]. It should also be reminded that the pretest scores were used to match the experimental groups and control group.

2.5 Procedure

This study required 43 homogeneous learners who lacked almost any familiarity with the structures. These learners were pretested through a structured interview, and then, on the basis of their pretest scores they were divided into two similar groups, one group as the experimental group, and one group as the control group. The final samples comprised at least 6 classes in the institute.

It should be mentioned that the ratings of the interviews in the pretest and posttest were carried out by two raters. The correlation coefficients, calculated to determine inter-rater reliability for the ratings of the interviews, turned out to be acceptable. Regarding the treatment, this study required the teachers to provide the learners with a kind of focus on form technique (input flooding) that pushed the learners to use the target structures.

Twenty passages were developed for target structures to be presented to participants through listening, in twenty sessions. Each session lasted for about 90 minutes. Three other teachers, in addition to the researcher, were instructed to present the techniques and provided the necessary focus on form in the classes in which the required participants were available. In the experimental group, the participants were provided with Input flooding through listening to the passages. Regarding the control group, everything was similar to that of the experimental group, except that they didn't receive any techniques of focus on form (input flooding). The members of the control group were only provided with listening to the passages. For the posttest, which was about 40 days after the pretest, the participants took the posttest through the same structured interview, which was again double-rated. It should be pointed out that the scores used for data analyses were resulted from getting the average of two scores given by the two raters, if the scores were ever different at all.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Reliability of Key English Test for School (KET)

Before investigating the results of this study, the researcher considered the reliability of Key English Test (KET) with Cronbach's Alpha formula. The researcher did this to make sure of

reliability of this researcher made test. For this purpose, a group of 20 pre-intermediate learners who were similar to the main sample were given the test before it was administered to the main participating in control group and experimental group. The obtained result for this 55 items test is indicated in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Case processing summary

		N	**%**
Cases	Valid	20	100.0
	Excluded[a]	0	.0
	Total	20	100.0

a. List wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 2. Reliability statistics

Cronbach'sAlpha	**N of Items**
.912	55

To stimulate the reliability, sample of 20 learners were selected (Table 2). The result in Table 3 shows that (α = .912) and it can be acceptable. Since the number is large enough and it is close to one, the Key English Test (KET) is reliable.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics of Pretest and Posttest

Before analyzing the results on the scores of pretest and posttest, descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 3 in order to summarize the available data and describe the main features of the data.

Table 3. Oral production score at pretest & posttest

		Control G. at Pretest	**Input flooding G. at Pretest**	**Control group at Posttest**	**Input flooding G. at Posttest**
N	Valid	22	21	22	21
	Missing	64	65	64	65
Mean		2.932	2.833	3.455	3.738
Std. Error of Mean		.1482	.1351	.1504	.1604
Median		3.000	3.000	3.500	4.000
Mode		3.0	2.5[a]	3.5	4.0
Std. Deviation		.6951	.6191	.7056	.7352
Variance		.483	.383	.498	.540
Range		2.5	2.0	2.5	2.5
Minimum		2.0	2.0	2.5	2.5
Maximum		4.5	4.0	5.0	5.0
Sum		64.5	59.5	76.0	78.5

According to Table 3, it seems that there is no considerable difference between the means in pretest due to the closeness of the magnitudes ($M_{Control}$= 2.932; $M_{Experimental}$= 2.833). Moreover, according to the amounts of their standard errors, it can be concluded that the distribution of scores is normal. The mean score of posttest in control group is 3.455 and in experimental group in input flooding is 3.738; it seems that there are considerable differences between the mean scores.

3.3 Tests of Normality of Pretest

To test the normality of the pretest the Shapiro-Wilk was used. The null-hypothesis of the test of normality is that the distribution of the group' scores is normal. Therefore the distribution of the scores is not normal if ($p <.05$). The results are depicted in the following table (Table 4).

Table 4. Test of normality of the pretest

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Control G. at Pretest	.916	22	.112
Input flooding G. at Pretest	.914	21	.105

Table 4 manifests the results of this normality test. Two groups are normally distributed since ($p >.05$) for all of them.

3.4 Post Hoc Tests

The following Table (5) shows the Tukey HSD method which researcher employed to ensure that the two groups are equal.

Table 5. Homogeneous subsets oral production score at pretest by Tukey HSDa,,b

		Subset for alpha = 0.05
Group	N	1
Input flooding	21	2.833
Control	22	2.932
Sig.		.796

The results gained by Tukey HSD method in Table 5 indicated that there was no significant difference between pairs of mean values. Hence, all these values were put in one group, since ($p <.05$) for all pairs of the group.

3.5 Investigation of Hypothesis

The question being asked in this research was: Whether the input flooding would have positive effects on linguistic accuracy of oral productions among pre-intermediate EFL learners? Furthermore, it was expected that learners exposed to greater input flooding, would be able to retain their levels of proficiency immediately after treatment. This superior

proficiency level would be demonstrated by a significantly higher mean test score on the post test by the treatment group.

The results presented in the previous sections failed to show these differences. The findings of the TUKEY Test demonstrate that the (p=.50> α=.05) for the comparison between the control and experimental group. Therefore the null hypothesis which holds that input flooding doesn't have any statistically significant effect on linguistic accuracy of Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral production is supported. Thus it can be safely claimed that input flooding doesn't have any statistically significant effect on linguistic accuracy of Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral production .The question arises that: Is the input flooding method inherently inadequate for L2 acquisition or are there other factors affecting the outcome?

VanPatten [18] presented a developmental pattern through which learners of Spanish were examined. Also, Geeslin [19] summarized the data from several studies which consistently found the same acquisitioned order for L2 learners of Spanish; both in instructional and naturalistic learning conditions [20,21,22,23]. Consistent with Krashen's [11] natural order hypothesis, VanPatten reported that learners progress in proficiency in the listed phases, regardless of the way or order in which a teacher presents them. One possible interpretation of the present study is that these participants were unable to maintain the same level of proficiency from pretest to posttest phases because they were not yet developmentally prepared to learn the additional functions of the target forms.

According to Table 4, both groups of participants in control and input flooding, when exposed to the target forms, were able to advance initially. They did so at an equal rate, regardless of the manner of instructions. This may suggest that learners in both groups were equally prepared to notice the forms in the normal input and that, an input flooding was not necessary.

Another interpretation, explored in the study, was that the target forms were largely ignored by the participants in both groups of control and input flooding. Therefore, it could be concluded that the amount of input did not influence their noticing process.

Studies on developmental patterns in SLA have mainly examined learners of English as a second language, though some data has also been presented for German learners. For example, learners of English pass through the same, identifiable stages in acquiring verbal morphemes and in using negation [24].The consistent findings of these studies include that learners will not acquire a grammatical form out of its order in the developmental sequence, despite different instructional conditions or techniques. Instructions may only speed up the rate of acquisition, thus aiding the overall learning process.

Williams [25] adds that 'noticing the hole implies a relatively target like and complete (interlanguage) in which the holes may be found.' Thus, a small relatively unobtrusive focus on form, beneficial to more advanced learners, may affect beginners slightly. If this line of reasoning is accepted, it may be inferred that the participants in the present study were not prepared to acquire the uses of the target forms presented in the texts and class materials.

The transient nature of the gains in test scores suggests that the participants were able to pick up some aspects during the treatment period while being engaged in the tasks requiring more intensive uses. These forms were not taught explicitly during the time between the pretest and posttest phases. Moreover, if the learners are incapable of acquiring any forms

other than the ones presented their developmental sequence, the classroom syllabus would be somewhat inconsequential. Instead, a considerable number of studies support the notion that learners benefit from, and even require in some situations, a focus on form in order to overcome some deficiencies in their language use.

The difficulty level of target forms in another area of concern in many studies. In a review of a series of studies, examining the effect of focus on form instructions, Ellis [26] found that this type of intervention tended to be more successful with simple morphological features. Focus on form with more complex syntactic rules may be helpful, but it will not be as successful as it would be with simpler target forms. Researchers have always struggled in providing a clear distinction between easy and hard rules. Rather, there are different aspects regarding the level of difficulty of grammatical forms (i.e. formal difficulty, functional difficulty, capacity to generalize, semantic complexity and scope of application are some of these classifications.) Williams and Evans [7] claim that all forms are not of the same nature from the applicability and effectiveness aspect of focus on form instruction.

3.6 Tests of Normality of Posttest

To test the normality of the posttest the Shapiro-Wilk was used. The results are depicted in the following tables. Tables 6 and 7 manifest the results of this normality test.

Table 6. Test of normality of posttest

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	**df**	**Sig.**
Control Group at Posttest	.939	21	.210
Input flooding G. at Posttest	.945	21	.268

Table 7. Homogeneous subsets oral production score at posttest by Tukey HSD[a,,b]

Group	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05		
		1	**2**	**3**
Control	22	3.455		
Input flooding	21	3.738		
Sig.		.503	1.000	1.000

The null-hypothesis of the test of normality is that the distribution of the group' scores is normal. Therefore the distribution of the scores is not normal if the $p<.05$. Two groups are normally distributed since the P-value is more than .05 for all of them.

3.7 Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficients

The researcher used Pearson Correlation Coefficient to calculate if there is any significant difference between the scores given by different raters. Tables 8, 9, 10, 11 show the results, respectively.

Table 8. Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for control group in pretest

		Control G. at Pretest-R1	Control G. at PretestR2
Control G. at Pretest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.824[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	22	22
Control G. at PretestR2	Pearson Correlation	.824[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	22	22

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The researcher calculated the correlation coefficient between the scores given by the two raters in control group. The obtained result in Table 8 was a correlation of .824. The gain scores were compared and the results (p-value=0.0001< α=0.05) showed that there is a strong relationship between the lists of scores each participant received.

Table 9. Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for input flooding group in pretest

		Input flooding G. at Pretest-R1	Input flooding G. at Pretest-R2
Input flooding G. at Pretest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.812[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	21	21
Input flooding G. at Pretest-R2	Pearson Correlation	.812[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	21	21

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In the case of inter-rater reliability in Table 9, an estimate of .812in input flooding group between two raters was obtained.

Table 10. Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for control group in posttest

		Control Group at Posttest-R1	Control Group at Posttest-R2
Control Group at Posttest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.791[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	22	22
Control Group at Posttest-R2	Pearson Correlation	.791[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	22	22

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In the case of inter-rater reliability, in Table 10, an estimate of .791in control group between two raters was obtained.

Table 11. Correlations between scores of rater1 & rater2 for input flooding group in posttest

		Input flooding G. at Posttest-R1	Input flooding G. at Posttest-R2
Input flooding G. at Posttest-R1	Pearson Correlation	1	.849[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	21	21
Input flooding G. at Posttest-R2	Pearson Correlation	.849[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	21	21

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The researcher estimated the correlation coefficient between the scores given input flooding group in posttest in Table 11. The raters gained an estimate of the .849which shows a high reliability of the scores. The analysis showed no significant difference between the scores given by two raters.

4. CONCOLUSION

In order to test this null hypothesis, 43 Iranian EFL participants of an English Language Institute, who lack familiarity with the five target structures (the simple present, especially third person 's' morpheme, present continuous, simple past, past continuous and present perfect), were selected through a homogeneity test. These participants were also pretested through a structured interview, and were put into experimental and control groups by means of matched sampling on the basis of their pretest scores. This was to make sure that the two groups, one group as the experimental group and one group as the control group, were all experiencing similar conditions from the very beginning. The two groups were later given special treatments to evaluate the group; i.e. in these implementations experimental group was exposed to input flooding technique and control group was not forced to face any focus on form technique. The participants of the experimental group were exposed to focus on form through input flooding while the control group was not faced with this technique. Afterwards, the participants were post tested through another structured interview to examine their accuracy gains after treatment.

A comparison of the accuracy gains in control and experimental group was conducted via a variance analysis (ANOVA). The mean pretest scores for two groups were not significantly different. However, there was considerable variation within each group. This pattern was repeated on the posttest in which the mean scores were not found to be significantly different between the input flooding and control groups. The data obtained from instruments used in the present study indicated that in input flooding experimental group, the instructional treatment, an input flooding, did not have a significant effect on the acquisition of the target forms. Participants in this group receiving texts via listening with an input

flooding performed at essentially the same level as the control group. These results differ from those obtained from studies with a positive effect for input flooding [17,7].

Although there have been a lot of research studies in the literature regarding the comparative examination of the implicit effects of focus on form, the present study could be considered as an additional support for implicit focus on form through input flooding. Finally, it is worth mentioning that this technique led to better accuracy levels in both experimental and control groups, but after comparing the gains in the two groups, the above-mentioned findings were observed. Thus, it could be further concluded that these findings correspond to the suggestions of Long and Robinson [27] on the need to implement focus on form implicitly and explicitly so that fossilization is prevented. Moreover, an alternative to focus on forms is recommended which is against communicative language teaching techniques.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
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