The Effects of Textual Enhancement on Learning English past Tense

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Abstract: Textual Enhancement (TE) is a form of modifying visually those parts of a printed text which includes a targeted syntactic structure for the purpose of instruction. The aim is to bring the learner's attention, while s/he is focusing on the meaning of a stretch of discourse, to the targeted structures and to how they are used. It is hoped that textual enhancement will promote the learner's noticing of the form and will help them acquire or comprehend them. In the present study TE (bold-faced and italicized letters) was used for 53 male learners in the context of an Iranian language institute, to measure their learning of English past tense. Theoretical rationales for textual enhancement are reviewed and the statistical discussions are treated next. Results show that both bold-faced and italicized letters increase learners' learning of form, though bold-faced group displayed a better performance than the italicized group. Practical as well as theoretical implications are finally discussed.

Key words: English Past Tense · Input Enhancement · Learning of Form · Noticing · Textual Enhancement

INTRODUCTION

The earliest days of the field of applied linguistics were the heyday of methods that primarily dealt with language teaching through form-oriented instruction. Methods such as Grammar Translation Method, Audiolingual Method and Total Physical Response of the 1970s and 80s are typical examples of the preoccupation with such thinking. The growing doubts of later years over the justifiability of such inclination resulted in a shift of general preference from form-to meaning-centered instruction. Examples are the Natural Approach and Communicative Teaching. The result of this shift of attention was for experts to urge researchers and practitioners to follow the goals of communicative teaching, whereas grammar and form-related issues were deemed unnecessary and even destructive to language acquisition. Later in the 1990s a number of studies brought the whole idea of focusing primarily on meaning under question. These studies were inspired by their observations of French immersion programs, in which the learners experienced difficulty in putting their knowledge, which was the result of meaning-centered instruction, into performance [1*4].

An outcome of the recognition of learners' inability to function in natural contexts was for researchers to consider ways through which instruction on form could be integrated with meaning-centered pedagogy, without affecting its principles. Among proposals made for such integration was directing learners' attention to form, simultaneously with their attention to content [5, 6]. Schmidt's noticing hypothesis posits that in order for a learner to master a form-related point, s/he must notice it in the context it occurs [7]. This theory also deals with the salience of a point to the learner and the degree to which it captures his/her attention. According to Schmidt noticing an item is an essential but insufficient condition for the acquisition of that item. Later attempts were made to incorporate grammar into material that primarily focused on meaning. However, these attempts did not produce satisfactory results. A number of researchers started to observe the fact that despite the inclusion of grammar points in content-oriented material, learners mostly failed to notice and consequently acquire them. After noticing learners' inability to acquire linguistic form despite their exposure to such forms, Sharwood Smith noticed the non-saliency of linguistic forms for learners, along with other factors such as their failure to pay attention to forms and the presence of their first language. To overcome these barriers, Smith proposed his Input Enhancement Hypothesis [8, 9]. It necessarily deals with techniques to improve the visual and aural properties of input, related to

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a certain linguistic form, to make it salient for learners, in order to assist them notice and, consequently, learn that item.

Textual Enhancement is a specific form of Input enhancement Hypothesis proposed by Sharwood Smith. It is related to techniques used to increase the visual appearance of texts, in terms of the targeted linguistic forms. It includes using boldface letters, using different font types, underlining, color-coding, *italicization*, CAPITALIZATION, etc, to direct learners' attention to the aimed linguistic form. The assumption behind these techniques is "…to make a target form perceptually salient to the extent that processing that form is facilitated" [10] pp. 308.

Review of Literature: The research studies carried out on the issue of Textual Enhancement, (TE hereafter), display widely varying results. A number of the studies report effects, in terms both of noticing and intake, for TE. Other studies speak of the effects TE had on noticing or on comprehension of the items only. Still other studies report the failure of their treatment to produce positive results. Therefore, in terms of the results the studies have produced, they can be put in three groups; studies that report full effects for TE, those that point to partial effects of TE and those that claim TE has no effects or negative ones. A review of the research done on TE under the shadow of the above classification follows.

Studies That Report Full Effects for TE: Shook [11] attempted to investigate the effects of TE on 125 Spanish learners' intake of Spanish present/perfect and relative pronouns. Employing two production tasks accompanied by two recognition tasks, he found that participants who were exposed to TE (bold and capital letters), outperformed the control group. He intentionally provided his participants with instructions to read the enhanced text for meaning, prior to the treatment phase of the study. Therefore their study employed what Han *et al*., [12] call sequential processing.

Jourdenais *et al*. [13] also report an effect for TE. Their subjects were English native learners of Spanish, who were exposed to Spanish preterit and imperfect structures to measure acquisition of that forms. Data were composed of think aloud protocols and an immediate output-based writing task. Results indicated that the participants who received treatment displayed an improvement in performance over that of the control group members and also that participants displayed overuse of the target form.

Simard [14] attempted to investigate the effects of different TE formats on learners' intake. His participants were one hundred and eighty grade eight native speakers of French, who enrolled in a regular English as a second language course. His study used different forms of TE each for one experimental group, along with one control group. His participants were exposed to different TE versions of the same text; the control group also was required to read the un-enhanced version of the same text. Employing an *information transfer task* (p. 129) and a multiple choice recognition test, he found that different formats of TE have different effects on learners' intake.

Studies That Report Partial Effects for TE: White [15] examined the effects of TE on learners' intake of English third person singular possessive determiners. Through using oral picture description, multiple choice and passage correction task he measured the participants'- eighty six sixth-grade ESL learners with L1 French-ability to use the targeted structures. The researcher also gave instructions to the participants to attend to the forms while reading the enhanced text for meaning. It was found out that TE resulted in an increase in the frequency of usage of the forms, without improving the accuracy of usage.

Izumi [16] investigated the effect of TE (bold, shadow, different fonts and sizes) on 61 ESL adult students who were given five passages with approximately 180 words to evaluate relativization. He put his subjects to four groups of a) the +output-enhancement group, (b) the +output +enhancement group, (c) the-output-enhancement group and (d) the-output +enhancement group. Adopting a mostly output-based approach [12], Izumi, also, employed a sequential mode of processing by requiring his participants to read the text for meaning first. Data were collected by picture-cued sentence completion test, a text reconstruction task accompanied by post-treatment recall summaries. He reports a positive effect for noticing the targeted items, while no effect was found for acquisition.

Lee [17] investigated the relationship between TE and topic familiarity on the one hand an acquisition and comprehension on the other. Using a reading proficiency pretest and a free recall and a form correction task post test, he attempted to measure his 259 participants' acquisition and comprehension. He came to the conclusion that TE aided learning of forms, affecting comprehension; topic familiarity, on the other hand, had a positive effect on comprehension, while deterring

learning. The outstanding point with Lee's study is his attempt to bring the participants into multiple exposures to TE which "…enabled the students to become accustomed to the reading conditions of typographical enhancement" (p. 96).

Studies That Report No Effects for TE: Alanen's [18] study is another one which reports negative results of TE on learning. She investigated the effects of italics enhanced text on the acquisition of Finnish structures by 36 native English learners of Finnish. She preferred to employ a serial processing mode in her treatment phase by first requiring the participants to read the text for meaning and only then their attention were focused on the enhanced forms. Data were gathered by think aloud protocols and a sentence completion task. Alanen found that subjects who were exposed to explicit instruction performed much better than those who were exposed to TE. Furthermore, she reports learners' overgeneralization of the target forms, which she attributes to the instruction of her study.

Leow [19] examined the effects of TE-underlined and bold letters-and text length on the intake and comprehension of eighty four English speaking learners of Spanish. They were exposed to one of the four formats of (+TE,-L), (-TE,-L), (+TE, +L), (-TE, +L). Results of a multiple choice recognition task and a short-answer comprehension task indicated that simple enhancement (TE alone) did not display any effects on either intake or comprehension.

Overstreet [20] also, investigated the relationship between TE and content familiarity on the one hand and acquisition and comprehension on the other. To this end he exposed his subjects-50 adult learners with L1 English- to different combinations of content familiarity and TE styles-bold, underlined, capital letters and different font types. The subjects were divided into four groups; 1.enhanced text, familiar content, 2. unenhanced text, familiar content, 3. enhanced text, unfamiliar content and 4. unenhanced text, unfamiliar content. A comprehension task in Spanish was utilized to measure their comprehension, along with a production task (picture-cued essay) and a recognition task (circle-the-verb) to measure acquisition. Data pointed to the negative effects on comprehension of TE, which together with content familiarity did not produce any considerable effects on acquisition. He further observed that over-salient forms may deflect learners' attention to meaning.

Jourdenais's other study in 1998 investigated the intake of Spanish preterit and imperfect tense on 116 English-speaking subjects. Participants were required to read a three-section narration, each of whom received a different version of the text-enhanced preterit, enhanced imperfect, enhanced preterit and imperfect and unenhanced. A writing production task was employed to collect data. Results did not point to considerable effects of TE on neither comprehension nor form processing.

Finally, Leow's [21] study reported no effects for TE on comprehension, acquisition or noticing. He made an attempt to examine the effects of TE on learners' acquisition and comprehension of texts including enhanced formats of Spanish imperatives. His subjects, 38 adult learners with English as their L1, were given a multiple-choice recognition task, a fill-in-the-blank production task and were required to think-aloud. He observed that input enhancement might serve as a kind of distraction to learners while they are attempting to interact with the textual material, since they were not familiar with the purpose behind enhancement of the text. He concluded that "…TE alone (i.e. simple enhancement) may fail to have a noticeable impact on learners' comprehension and intake" [12] pp.609.

Explanation on the Inconsistent Results Obtained in TE Studies: Studies carried out hitherto point to the fact that the effects of TE on intake, acquisition and comprehension vary greatly. This can be explained by the different methodological choices made by the researchers, which have led to these contradictory results. Different designs adopted in individual researches as well as varying data collection tools and procedures such as recognition task, production, think aloud protocols and comprehension tests might be taken to account for the contrasting results obtained. The type and the number of methodological cues used in the tasks, text length, learner familiarity with the purpose of the enhanced material or not, parallel vs. serial processing employed and the time given to finish the task might be other sources of variation. A number of methodological as well as conceptual issues that might have given rise to the differing results in the previous research have been suggested in Han *et al.* [12].

In addition to methodological differences, mention must be made of the different objectives pursued in individual studies. While a number of studies have attempted to examine the effects of enhancement via

employing a control group which is not exposed to enhanced text, other studies, for example Simard [14], made an attempt to compare the effects of different TE formats on intake, acquisition or comprehension. Also, while in some studies researchers have displayed their awareness of the fact that noticing is not tantamount to acquisition/intake [16, 18] others assumed that once learners succeed in producing the target form in the posttest, they have acquired that form; this awareness may also contribute to variation in the results obtained. Last but not the least, a number of researchers required participants to produce the target forms in the posttest phase of their studies [13]; others, in contrast, employed comprehension centered approach to examining the effects of TE in the post-test [19].

Research Question: With regard to the various results obtained in TE studies, the present research paper makes an attempt to contribute to the findings in the same regard by focusing on Iranian learners, on whom no TE research has been carried out yet, to the best of my knowledge. The aim is to investigate whether enhancement of printed input works to the benefit of Iranian students or not. Specifically, I aim to study the effects of enhancement of textual input (bold-faced and italicized letters) on Iranian learners, in the context of Iranian Language institutes, which operate mostly upon what constitutes the tenets of functional-notional approach-the introduction of dialogues through the medium of a function of language, or a context for the use of a grammatical point-and therefore underestimate the teaching of writing. The results may prove helpful for making pedagogical decisions on the organization of language classes and for developing material for teaching writing to learners through more efficient ways. The lack of a similar study on the same group of students and therefore, the strong need felt in this regard, may be a justification for the present study.

With regard to the above account, I attempted to provide the response for the following research question:

- Does textual enhancement (bold-facing and italicizing) have any effects on learning English past tense for Iranian learners?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants of the present study were 53 intermediate male learners of English who were studying in a private institute in the city of Caypara, West Azerbaijan, Iran. Their ages varied between 14 to 18. The reading material was developed by the researcher himself and included occasions of past tense as the targeted structure. The text was no more than 6 lines in length and care was taken to adjust its difficulty level to that of the participants, by consulting their textbooks. The text was in the form of a story and it was chosen to avoid from placing an extra burden on their shoulders of reading a text which is unfamiliar and consequently hard to process. Also developed by the researcher was two multiple choice recognition tests each of which included 10 items. One form was used in the pre-and the other in the post-test phase of the study.

Procedure: The participants were first told the aim of the study, that is to investigate the effects of typographical enhancement on their writings. Later, they were administered a multiple choice grammar test, the pre-test, which measured their overall performance in the targeted syntactic item prior to the study. In the next step, they were given the unenhanced version of the reading material and were required to read for its meaning first. During the comprehension readings the researcher himself also attended the sessions to assist in the participants' understanding and answered their comprehension questions. After three days, three versions of the same reading each were given to one group of the participants, who were divided into three groups, one control and two experimental groups and were required to attend to the past tense forms of verbs embedded in the text. One version was enhanced by bold-facing the targeted structures, another by italicization and the third version was the unenhanced one. Immediately after the second reading the participants were administered a second test, as the post-test, which was intended to produce a measure of the participants' possibly increased grasp of past tense due to TE.

RESULTS

After administering the pre-and post-test, the grades of the participants in each group were determined and average scores were calculated for each group. Table 1 displays the average scores for the groups.

The average scores displayed a variation between the performances of groups from the pre-test to post-test. Figure 1 illustrates these variations.

Table 1: average scores of the participants in the three groups

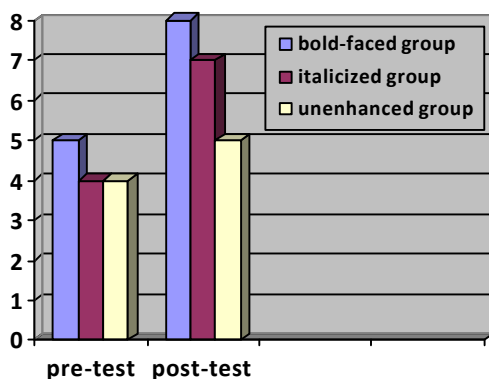| Groups	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean
Bold-faced group (n=18)	5	8
Italicized group (n=18)	4	7
Unenhanced group (n=17)	4	5

Fig. 1: Comparing participants' performance in pre-and post-tests

DISCUSSION

Results showed that textual enhancement has an effect on learner performance regarding distinguishing correct grammar points from incorrect ones. The two experimental groups (bold-faced and italicized groups) rated higher in identifying correct past tense structures as compared to the group of participants who were exposed to the unenhanced but grammatically rich text regarding the targeted item. The bold-faced group's average score in the pre-test was 5 and it was 8 after the post-test, the time exactly before which they had been exposed to enhanced text. Also, the italicized group displayed an improvement in performance, since they increased their group performance from 4 in the pre-test to 7 in the post-test. Therefore, both groups improved their average score by 3 from the pre-test to the post-test. When we compare their scores with that of the control group, which improved their score by just 1 during the same time, we can easily see the superiority of exposing learners to typographically enhanced text in terms of better learning of form. This finding leads to conclude that TE-or at least bold-facing and/or italicizing-helps learners learn better syntactic items. This finding is in line with researchers, e.g. Shook [11], who found that learners who are exposed to TE show a better performance regarding syntactic items, compared to those who are not.

Despite the overall improvement in the performances of all the three groups, there was a measure of variance in the improvements made among the groups. The bold-faced group scored better, in the post-test, than the other two; 1 score better than the italicized and 3 scores better than the control group. The superiority of the bold-faced group over the control group may be attributed to the exposure of its participants to an enhanced text. However, the superiority of bold-faced group over the italicized group may be washed away by taking into consideration the fact that the italicized group made the same improvement, in terms of the amount of the scores, as the bold-faced group, since the italicized group came from one score behind the rival group in the pre-test. On the other hand, we can see an improvement in the performance of the control group, although it is fairly trivial. This improvement may be attributed either to the learning that had taken place naturally during the time span between the two tests, regardless of the research-related intervening factors-or the systematic variation in technical terms [22], or to the variation that takes place between the scores produced by two tests. However, since the time lag between the pre-and post-test was small-10 days-, the effect this time lag may have left on learner performance seems impossible, because of the shortness of this time. So, we can conclude that the variation between the scores of the control group in the pre-and post-test was due to the variation that takes place between the scores of two different tests for the same group of learners. However, since this variation is fairly small, we can consider it to be natural, or not affecting the results substantially.

Although the present study reports a positive effect for TE on learning of form for males, it did not focus on female learners. So, one point which future researchers are advised to take into consideration is how gender mediates learning of form through TE. To the best of my knowledge no study has hitherto taken on to investigate the role of gender in relation to TE. Such investigations can be valuable since they may reveal information regarding male vs. female learning styles and strategies and how they help learners when it comes to textual enhancement.

One limitation of this study is its failure to distinguish between noticing and acquisition that took place as a result of TE. Researchers e.g. Izumi [16] and Leow *et al*. [23] have treated noticing of form and acquisition that follows exposure to a textually enhanced text, distinctly, stating that noticing not necessarily ends in acquisition. In the present paper, however, the effects of TE have been treated as learning and no such a distinction is made. Later studies should accommodate this awareness through methodological organization of their researches.

CONCLUSION

Textual enhancement appears fully effective in a number of studies, while other researchers report partial or zero effects for it. The inconsistency in the results, as Han *et al*. [12] put it, may be due, largely, to the methodological make-up of the related studies; or it may be, for me, because of the varying interpretations different researchers have made of the same events that consequently shape the ensuing results in different directions. Example of such interpretations can be treating performance as either noticing or acquisition, as was discussed above. The present study can be included among those which favor exploiting TE in the language classroom, since it yields positive results. These results show a green light for the inclusion of textual enhancement in the readings of learners, which aim to teach grammar points. However, in contexts in which there is limitations regarding the amount of reliance on TE, i.e. decisions must be made as to which form of TE may be utilized, bold-facing letters may be a better choice than italicizing them, according to the findings of this paper.

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