The Effect of Different Tasks on L2 Learners' Acquisition of Grammar

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Abstract—In order to address the issue of noticing accompanying different tasks in grammar acquisition, this study investigated the effect of three different tasks in task-based grammar instruction on Iranian adult intermediate EFL learners' intake and acquisition of negative adverbs. Using 3 intact classes totaling 74 students who were at the same level of proficiency, 3groups were formed: dictation group (DG, n=24), individual reconstruction group (IRG, n=22), and collaborative reconstruction group (CRG, n=28). Following a pretest, immediate posttest and delayed post test design; the three groups received explicit instruction accompanying these different tasks related to negative adverb. The analysis of the participants' performance on grammatically judgment test (GJT) demonstrated that the three groups gained grammatical acquisition over time in some immediate post tests, and in nearly all the delayed post tests. DG outperformed the other two groups, and they benefited more from this task. As a result, the efficacy of tasks in establishing new grammatical knowledge was proved. The tasks effectiveness which was asked through an interview from some of the participants, chosen randomly from each group, was in line with the above mentioned results. Further, the type of tasks did affect the degree of the utility of them in developing grammar knowledge and can contribute to the task-based grammar instruction. Hopefully, the findings of this research study could attract EFL and ESL teachers' attention to utilize the same tasks type in the classroom through class activities and could provide EFL and ESL students with an effective way of grammar intake and acquisition.

Index Terms—noticing, acquisition, intake, tasks, explicit instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar according to Rutheford (1987) is "a necessary component of any language teaching program" (p.9), and thus plays an important role in language teaching. With the advent of communicative methodology in the 1970s, the role of grammar instruction in second language was found out to be not only unhelpful but also detrimental. However, the need of formal instruction for learners to master the high level of accuracy has been shown in recent studies. This has led to a shift in grammar teaching. Accordingly, the role of grammar teaching in second language acquisition has been the focus of attention of so many current studies. Task-based approach is an approach which can be used to teach grammar in communicative methodology. Task-based approach to grammar instruction involves the use of tasks making the learners engaged in meaningful interaction and negotiation which result in focusing on integrating a task. Using of tasks can truly contribute the learners to be prepared for real-life communications in order to acquire implicit knowledge. "It is clear to me that if learners are to develop the competence they need to use a language easily and effectively in the kinds of situations they meet *outside* the classroom they need to experience how language is used as a tool for communicating *inside* it" (Ellis, 2003, p. ix).

The focus of this piece of research is on the effects of the different tasks, *instructions* and the extent to which they lead learners to language form. Different instructions can force learners to focus their attention to, or make use of, specified linguistic knowledge.

Such tasks are named as "structure trapping" which means that they help learners to pay attention the gap in their own knowledge by employing them to generate some specific linguistic aspects. Loschky & Bley-Vroman (1993) suggest that "there are varying degrees to which the use of a certain structure is needed for task completion". According to Reinders (2008)

'Task-naturalness' refers to the extent to which a grammatical structure may arise naturally during task completion. "Task-utility" refers to the situation where use of a particular structure facilitates task completion, but where it is not essential. "Task essentialness" refers to the situation where use of a particular structure is needed to complete the task. The authors point out that task essentialness is difficult to achieve. (p.3)

They also asserted that in order to gain the better results, greater amount of learning and the clear feedback is needed for each of these tasks. They pointed out that "there is no guarantee that a task in which a structure naturally occurs will, by itself, trigger the initial acquisition of that structure, even if the structure is modelled, primed, or otherwise 'taught' in the task" (p. 131) and the utility of this type of task is to automatizing the existing knowledge, rather than learning the new ones. According to Reinder (2008), Willis (1996) argues "

The role of the teacher is not to push learners towards using particular structures but to help them notice what language is required to do a particular task. One way to do this is by including in the task specific instructions that draw attention to aspects of the language in the input. Although there has been a range of studies investigating the relative effects of instructions that are more explicit compared with those that are more implicit, this has not been the case for studies into the effects of tasks (which is the subject of the present study).

The study reports on the effects of three types of tasks, on participants' acquisition and intake of English grammatical structure of negative adverbs. However, more research is necessary to see if there is any difference between the different tasks and the explicit instruction accompanying them to draw learners' attention in acquiring grammar structures. Furthermore, the feelings and attitudes that learners have towards the use of tasks and their effectiveness in general and the type of the tasks involved, in particular, have not been the focus of enough number of research studies.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the current study is to find the immediate and delayed effects of reading based task on vocabulary acquisition as follows:

1. Does the use of D, IR and CR tasks have any effect on the intake of negative adverbs from pre-test to immediate post test?

2. Which task has a more facilitative effect on the intake of negative adverbs?

3. Does the use of each task have any effect on the acquisition of grammatical item from the immediate to the delayed post test?

4. Is there any difference among the experimental tasks in delayed post test?

5. What is the participants' attitude towards the use of the target tasks for grammar teaching?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, 100 Iranian undergraduate EFL students (females and males) from Azad University of Najaf Abad were given a version of an OPT, (Edward, 2007). From among these learners, 74 learners, whose scores were within one SD above and below the mean (Mean=27.47, SD=4.24) were chosen as learners of similar language proficiency. These learners were second year English students, who were attending a *grammar course 2* at the time of the study. Hence we had three intact grammar classes. Each class was randomly assigned to one of the tasks used in the study.

B. Instruments

The instruments in this study were a version of OPT (Edwards, 2007), a grammatical judgment test (GJT), as pretest, immediate and a delayed posttest, audio recording short passages, three different tasks (dictation, individual reconstruction and collaborative reconstruction), and an interview.

C. Procedures

The present study was conducted in the spring of 2011 in three grammar classes at Najafabad Azad University. The researcher granted permission from the English department and also the teachers for taking their class and their time. The participants were made aware that results were completely confidential and would not influence their final course scores in any way. The treatment phase of the study continued over 5 weeks of the whole term. 30 minutes of each class time were allocated to the treatment. The general procedure was as follows.

In the first session (week one) the participants received the OPT (Edward 2007), consisting of 50 grammatical multiple choice questions, to screen those who could participate in this study. That is, based on the participants' scores on the OPT test; the decision was made about the homogeneity of the subjects. In other words, only students whose scores on the OPT test were one standard deviation (+1SD) above and one standard deviation (-1SD) below the mean were selected to take part in this study.

In the same session, all participants completed the pretest consisting of a GJT developed by the researcher to determine their existing knowledge of the target structure. The same test was used as the posttest and finally, as the delayed posttest, but items were presented in a different order. From among different grammatical structures, only one grammatical structure, due to the shortage of time, i.e. negative adverb, was chosen. The participants had almost no familiarity with the aimed grammar structure, namely, negative adverbs. During this treatment period the researcher, who was also the instructor of all the three groups, taught the target grammatical structure explicitly through focused tasks (DG, IRG and CRG) as mentioned in section 3.4.4 before in all the three groups.

After the pretest, groups were randomly assigned to one of three treatment types (DG, IRG, or CRG) with explicit instructions. The first treatment took place one week after the pretest and treatments two and three in one-week intervals after that. The final treatment was followed by an immediate posttest and two weeks later by a delayed posttest. The weekly intervals were chosen for practical reasons; two weeks were considered the minimum between test administrations to avoid a practice effect.

The researcher used four short passages during each administration containing three target items each, four per week for a period of three weeks, i.e. a total of 36 target items.

All texts were grammatically correct and thus participants were provided with positive evidence of the target structures only. This applies to all three treatment types. The estimated time for each task was 20 minutes, and the sheets gathered after that time and in all groups participants noticed the target structure by the explicit instruction which was given to them by the researcher in L1 and in L2. The only difference in this study was, about the nature of each task which administered randomly among groups.

Group 1 (DT)

One week later after the pretest, each different task was given to the participants in one of the experimental classes. By having permition from the teacher of the class of *Grammar 2*, task Dictation was given to this group (group 1). Although the instructions of the task were on top of the sheets in English, the participants were instructed by the researcher in L1 and L2. The researcher also drew the participants' attention on the target structure and gave an example of it by giving the explicit instructions.

In the DT participants were asked to listen to a passage of about 60-70 words on a computer, during which they were not allowed to take notes. Next, they heard the passage again but this time part by part. Each part contained no more than 10 words but mostly around seven or eight. Next, they were asked to write in the provided sheet, what they had heard. The treatment thus involved immediate recall.

Group 2 (IRT)

In the IRT participants were asked to listen to the passage, as described before, twice and then to reconstruct it. This task thus involved delayed recall of what was heard. This time participants were allowed to take notes. This time participants received explicit instruction in L1 and L2 from the researcher on the sheets in order to notice to the target structure.

Group 3 (CRT)

This task was similar to the IRT except that two participants were paired and were asked to reconstruct the text together. It also involved delayed recall. These treatments were administered three weeks. After the third week, and after gathering the worksheets, the immediate posttest was administered to the participants in each group. They were instructed in L1 and L2 on how to do the GJT by the researcher. In the posttest participants were shown a total 50 sentences, half in grammatical and the other half in ungrammatical form. Of these 50 sentences, 20 were target sentences and 30 distractors. The test was designed to assess the participants' intake. The students were asked to decide whether each sentence was correct or incorrect, while participants completed the test, the researcher was present to give clarification where needed.

Two weeks later the same GJT test was administered to the participants as delayed posttest. The estimated time four each administration of posttest was 25 minutes and the sheets were collected after that time in each administration of posttests. As mention before, to ensure the validity and reliability of the tests, they were piloted with another group before administering them to the experimental group.

After gathering the delayed posttest, a few participants from each class were selected randomly to have an interview. They were asked to assert their ideas in L1 about the task they had done and how each task helped them learn the meaning of the target words. No specific time was allotted. But it took about 10 minutes for each interviewee to interview and for the researcher to write.

IV. RESULTS

In order to determine whether there were any overall differences among the experimental groups in the pretest, their descriptive statistics were calculated. Table 1 displays the results.

The table shows that the highest and the lowest mean scores of the immediate post test belong to DT and IRT groups respectively. The results of one way ANOVA showed level of significance, regarding the knowledge of target structure, is bigger than .05. $F (3.77) = .945$, $p = .394 > .05$, Therefore, there is no significant difference among the participants' performances in the three groups before the treatment. Groups are equal regarding their knowledge of the grammatical structure in focus.

In order to determine whether there were any overall differences among the experimental groups in the immediate posttest, their descriptive statistics were calculated. Table 2 displays the results.

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF IMMEDIATE POST TEST SCORES

Descriptives

test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
dictation	24	18.0000	4.76400	.97245	15.9883	20.0117	8.00	27.00
individual reconstructed task	22	12.3636	4.31548	.92006	10.4503	14.2770	6.00	24.00
paird reconstructed task	28	15.4286	5.24531	.99127	13.3947	17.4625	8.00	28.00
Total	74	15.3514	5.26147	.61163	14.1324	16.5703	6.00	28.00

The table shows that the highest and the lowest mean scores of the immediate post test belong to DG and IRG groups respectively. The results of one way ANOVA showed a significance difference among groups, $F(3.77) = 7.823$, $p =.001<.05$, and the results of the post hoc test comparisons indicated that the mean score for DG ($M=18.00$, $SD=4.76$) was significantly different from IRG ($M= 12.36$, $SD=4.31$). CRG ($M=15.42$, $SD= 5.24$) did not differ significantly from either group 1 or 2.

Table 3 shows the results of the descriptive statistics of the delayed post test scores.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF DELAYED POST TEST SCORES

Descriptives

delayed test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
dictation	23	19.5652	4.52092	.94268	17.6102	21.5202	10.00	26.00
individual reconstructed task	22	19.5000	3.37709	.72000	18.0027	20.9973	15.00	27.00
paird reconstructed task	25	19.0400	3.75810	.75162	17.4887	20.5913	13.00	28.00
Total	70	19.3571	3.86750	.46225	18.4350	20.2793	10.00	28.00

Table 3 shows that DG group scored the highest in the delayed posttest while CRG scored the lowest. This means that out of the three tasks, DT was the most effective in facilitating acquisition and its effectiveness was considerably superior to tasks IRT and CRT. The results of one-way ANOVA showed that the difference among groups was not significant, $F(3, 77) = .129$, $p =.879$. The results of the post hoc test confirmed that DG significantly showed better acquisition than IRG and CRG ($p =.000<.05$).

In order to compare the performance of participants on the pretest and immediate posttests a series of t-tests were run. The purpose was to see if all tasks helped learners to intake of the target words in their short memory. The results showed a significant difference between the mean scores of pretest and immediate tests in DG, $t(22) = 4.720$. It means that DT led to intake of negative adverbs.

Furthermore In order to compare the performance of participants on the immediate and delayed posttests again a series of t-tests were run. The purpose was to see if all tasks helped learners to acquire of the target structure in their long term memory over two weeks. The results showed a significant difference between the mean scores of immediate and delayed tests in DG, IRG, and CRG tasks, $t(22) = 2.29$, $p =.032$, $t(21) = 6.870$, $p =.000$ and $t(24) = 4.35$, $p =.000$ accordingly. It means that all three tasks led to the acquisition of negative adverbs over two weeks.

All in all the results reveal that DT was more effective than the other tasks for both intake and acquisition. However, all tasks led to significant acquisition from the immediate to the delayed posttests.

Next the interview questions were analyzed qualitatively. The questions asked interviewees to evaluate the task, to express their intention in having the same tasks in their regular classes for grammar learning, and to talk about features of the class in general.

The Results of the Analysis of Interview Questions

The participants who took part in the DT were more comfortable in writing meaningful sentences with the negative adverbs. They noticed the target structure more than the other parts. Some of them also mentioned that the negative adverbs were more salient and noticeable for them. Then, at least they declared that tasks rather than traditional method of their class were more interesting and practical for them. They believed that listening, noticing and writing the passage by their own simultaneously, seemed to be more effective than just doing meaningless exercises out of contexts. Finally they showed their interest in having the same tasks in their class as an activity to enhance their grammar learning by their own teacher. IRG had almost the same opinions about their own tasks.

Learners in IRG stated that although the task seemed difficult at first, it was conductive enough to grammar acquisition and retention. Another positive point mentioned by them was the using listening while doing the task. But processing of the whole task at the same time seemed to be difficult for them since they were not enough familiar to get the whole meaning from the task and reconstruct it. Listening, memorizing noticing the new structure and reconstruct it

were difficult. Learners in IRG agreed to have the same tasks as their own class activity on and off to acquire more grammar in their classes. Finally, they have no problem with the time of administration.

CRG, found their task more interesting than other groups because group work made them motivated for completing the task. They tried to reconstruct the sentences together so they learn more. It was so impressive for them. They believed that the task was time-consuming.

Generally, all the groups had positive attitudes towards using tasks in their regular classes. They found it more beneficial to integrate this method with their current methods. They believed that, these activities teach them to take more responsibility for their own learning. They should act as active participants not as passive recipients, in order for them to carry out the tasks. Here the students are given opportunities to express their own ideas and opinions, and in so doing they have a choice not only about what to say, but also how to say it.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main concern in the first and second research questions was to examine whether noticing accompanying these three different tasks assisted significantly the intake of the targeted grammatical structure. Therefore, analysis was conducted to discover the loci of the differences. As the results are shown, the three groups' mean scores on the post test are higher than those on the pretest. Moreover, the posttests mean score of the DG is higher than those of the two other groups. Hence, it can be concluded that the DG outperformed the other two groups on the post test. As a result, explicit instruction accompanying dictation task was found to be significantly effective in improving learners' grammatical acquisition of the aimed target structure. In other words, this task had a significant effect on the learning of negative adverbs.

The third research question asked whether any of the presented tasks, can lead to better grammar acquisition. This question can be answered by examining the results of the delayed post test. This test was administered to assess acquisition of the target structure. As mentioned before in chapter 4, it was expected that the participants in the IRG perform worst on acquisition, and to be significantly outperformed by the CRG. Surprisingly, the descriptive results showed it to have done considerably better than CR task and this difference reached significance for negative adverbs.

The results of the study regarding the fourth research question indicate that dictation task is significantly better than the other two tasks, and is more conductive in grammar acquisition; however, all the three tasks had beneficial effect on acquisition of the target structure.

The fifth question asked whether learners' beliefs about the task effectiveness are in line with the statistical results of this study. The answer to this question is in the results of an interview done with some of the participants of the study. Although all three tasks indicate their effectiveness in grammar acquisition, the participants' attitudes to the questions shows that DT is more effective than the other two tasks.

To summarize, based on the above discussions, the following findings emerge from the present study:

1. The DT resulted in the greatest intake, the IR task in the smallest from the pretest to immediate test

2. The different tasks employed in this study were in many cases able to affect acquisition of the target structures.

3. In most cases the three task types did differentially affect acquisition. In summary then, tasks that make great attentional demands, require processing that is cognitively demanding, and that are explicit in nature, are the most likely to affect learning.

4. The three tasks differentially affected intake and acquisition. The DT led to high intake and high acquisition than the more demanding IR task that led to low intake but greater acquisition. The CR task was the most consistent for both intake and acquisition of the three.

5. As the result of the interview showed all the participants in three groups found using tasks an efficient way of learning new structure. They all agreed to have the same tasks as an extra activity in their classes to help them better grammar acquisition.

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