ISSN 1799-2591
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 400-407, April 2011

doi:10.4304/tpls.1.4.400-407

The Potential of Learner Output for Enhancing EFL Learners' Short-term and Long-term Learning of the English Simple Present Tense

Mohammad Khatib
Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran
Email: mkhatib27@yahoo.com

Marzieh Bagherkazemi
Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran
Email: kazemi.marzieh62@gmail.com

***Abstract*—Refuting Krashen's Input Hypothesis, some SLA researchers have called attention to the vitality of learner output in the development of their interlanguage systems, which is the essence of Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis. The present study sought to find out the extent to which elementary EFL learners' output promotes their learning of the English simple present tense. To this end, 33 Iranian EFL learners were assigned into a control and an experimental group. Both groups were presented with three texts including rich examples of the structure, over three one-hour sessions. Following the presentation of the text on each session, the experimental group engaged in two output tasks: a reconstruction task, in which they individually reconstructed in written form the text they had been exposed to, and a picture description task, in which they worked in pairs to produce a written description of three pictures, one on each session, while the control group only answered comprehension questions based on the texts. The comparison of the pre-test and the immediate and delayed post-test results indicated a significant gain in the experimental group's performance immediately after the treatment, but only a trend toward significance within three weeks of the experimental period. The results show clear benefits arising from pushing students to produce second language output for the short-term and long-term learning of the English simple present tense. However, offering more output opportunities over time might be the key to the efficiency of learner output in the acquisition of the target language form.**

***Index Terms*—comprehensible output, Input Hypothesis, Output Hypothesis, languaging, pushed output**

I. Introduction

Taking a dim view of Krashen's (1985) "input hypothesis" which posits in essence that comprehensible input is both necessary and *sufficient* for second language acquisition, Swain put forth her "comprehensible output [CO] hypothesis" in 1985. CO capitalizes on the significance opportunities for classroom language use and pushing learners to modify their output and make themselves more comprehensible has for L2 learners' interlanguage development, rather than just as fluency practice (Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Shehadeh, 2002). Based on her study of immersion students in Canada, she stipulated that in the absence of comprehensible or modified output [MO], even with ample comprehensible input provided, learners are unlikely to build adequate knowledge of complex grammatical rules, vocabulary, morphosyntax and sufficient processing control over their expressive performance and pronunciation.

She states that conversational exchanges can aid L2 acquisition to the extent that they are derived from comprehensible output, rather than comprehensible input, since they have the potential to push learners to foster the appropriacy, precision and completeness of their utterances (Swain, 1985) and this is exactly what Krashen opposes to [see Review of the related literature]. Other studies of immersion programs have also accumulated evidence indicating that immersion students generally fail to achieve a high level of L2 proficiency and demonstrate weaknesses in their grammatical accuracy, despite high levels of listening proficiency and communicative fluency (Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara & Fearnow, 1999). It should be mentioned, however, that proponents of learner output are not dismissive of the idea of the necessity of comprehensible input, but argue that in order to develop both accuracy and fluency in the target language, both comprehensible input and comprehensible output are required. In particular, Swain claims that learner output has a unique potential for raising learners' consciousness of the way the target language works, engaging them in hypothesis testing and also reflecting on their own language knowledge and use (Swain, 1995). Lyster and Ranta (1997, p.41) state that "producing comprehensible output entails the provision of useful and consistent feedback from teachers and peers and, second, language features can be made more salient in the input during subject-matter lessons as teachers interact with students".

Since Swain put forth her theory of comprehensible output, a large number of studies have been conducted to substantiate claims as to the significance of learner output for interlanguage development. Having said this, Mitchell

and Myles (2004) and Shehadeh (2002) regret the fact that the majority of these studies have addressed learners' production, comprehension and vocabulary learning, and shown clear benefits inherent in pushing students to produce second language output, but there is still little evidence regarding second language grammar. In an attempt to make a small contribution to this line of research, the present study investigated the extent to which pushing learners to produce output, through passage reconstruction and picture description, has an influence on their acquisition of the English simple present tense. Accordingly, the following research questions were put forth:

1. Does learner output enhance the learning of the English simple present tense?
2. Does learner output have a long-term effect on the learning of the English simple present tense?

II. Review of the Related Literature

Swain (1995) borrows notions from cognitive psychology to posit three prime functions for learners' modified or pushed output, namely the cognitive processes of noticing knowledge gaps (the noticing/triggering function), trialing and testing hypothesis (the hypothesis-testing function) and meta-linguisitic problem solving (the metalinguistic function). Likewise, Swain and Lapkin (1995) conclude in their study that in producing the target language, L2 learners undergo a mental process whereby they notice gaps in their interlanguage through either external or internal feedback, and which may generate new linguistic knowledge for the learner, or consolidate their existing knowledge. More specifically, they claim that "what goes on between the first output and the second is part of the process of second language learning." (p.386). Along the same lines, Swain (1998) speculates that modified or reprocessed output, triggered through feedback, represents the leading edge of learners' interlanguage.

It follows that Swain's CO hypothesis has a lot in common with Schmidt's (1993) "noticing hypothesis" with its emphasis on registering target language forms under attention as necessary for acquisition (Siegel, 2005), though it also allows for learner-internal feedback to perform this function. Advocates of the output hypothesis speculate that verbalization leads learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage and consciously reflect on them drawing on their internal resources either on their own or in collaboration with others (Swain, 1997). CO also shares with Long's (1996) "interaction hypothesis" its emphasis on meaning negotiation, though unlike Long's emphasis on selective attention and negative evidence (Mitchell & Myles, 2004), Swain believes it is the *process* of producing the target language that enhances language learning, by placing a premium on "collaborative dialogue" in such a process. More recently, Swain (2006) has explicitly pronounced the theoretical foundation of her "output hypothesis", allying herself with the sociocultural camp and replacing the word 'output' with 'languaging' on the grounds that:

Output is a word that evokes an image of language as a conveyer of a fixed message (what exists as thought). Output does not allow at all for the image of language as an activity – that when a person is producing language, what he or she is engaging in, is a cognitive activity; an activity of the mind. Individuals use language to mediate cognition (thinking) (p.95)

Insofar as empirical research is concerned, the myriad of studies directed at the output hypothesis have mostly investigated the nature of learners' modified and pushed output in terms of a welter of variables, including task type, signal type, signal source, the context of production, learners' proficiency level, age and gender. However, this research has mostly focused on the frequency/occurrence of modified output and output opportunities, rather than its short-term and long-term effect on interlanguage restructuring, language development and linguistic competence. Shehadeh(2002) cogently has the point when he states that:

Lack of definitive conclusions is not surprising, because research on CO has been mostly cross-sectional in nature, focusing primarily on the production of MO per se rather than on whether and to what degree MO can be a source of linguistic competence (p. 601).

Some researchers have investigated whether learner output can promote their IL development, and in some cases investigated it alongside relevant input opportunities. This line of research has addressed L2 learners' vocabulary learning, production and comprehension abilities, and on a narrower scale certain grammatical structures of the target language (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Izumi and Bigelow (2000) and Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara and Fearnow (1999) tested the noticing/triggering function of learner output focusing on the English past hypothetical conditional. Both studies compared the performance of an input-output group which was provided with output opportunities - engaging in a text reconstruction task followed by a guided essay writing task- and also subsequent exposure to relevant input with that of a second group, namely the input group, receiving the same input merely for comprehension purposes. In both studies, the input-output group showed a significant gain on the target form only after the second output task had been administered. This finding indicates that in order for output to be effective for L2 noticing and learning, output opportunities need to be sustained, and that mere exposure to relevant input does not necessarily induce noticing.

Along the same lines, investigating the noticing and learning of English relative clauses, Izumi (2002) compared the performance of one control and one experimental group to find out how output compares with input enhancement. The four experimental groups differed in terms of whether they received only input enhancement (+IE, -O), only output opportunities (+O, -IE), both input enhancement and output opportunities (+O, +IE), or neither input enhancement nor output opportunities (-O, -IE). The control group, however, only took the pretest and the posttest. The results accrued to the superiority of the (+O, +IE) group in both noticing and learning, but no effect for the (+IE, -O) group on learning. Izumi accounts for this finding by postulating that despite input enhancement which registers the target form under

learners' attention by external means, output serves the same function through providing opportunities for production and the cognitive comparison of the form at issue in one's interlanguage and the target language. Izumi (2002) concludes that pushed output can facilitate L2 development by promoting:

1. detection of the target form;
2. integrative processing of the target form;
3. noticing of the IL-TL mismatches;

In a similar study, Izumi and Izumi (2004) investigated the effect of an oral output task on ESL learners' learning of relative clauses in English. To the researchers' surprise, the comparison of an output group, which received input rich in relative clauses and subsequently engaged in an oral picture description task, a non-output group which received the same input but engaged in a picture sequencing task afterwards, and a comparison group which engaged in a placebo task indicated greater overall gains for the non-output group. The authors discuss the results in terms of the cognitive processes involved in each of the treatments. They deem it possible that the oral output task only required learners to imitate what they had been exposed to, and was not therefore compelling in terms of syntactic processing and genuine oral production, while the picture sequencing task was more demanding in terms of form-meaning mappings.

More recently, Sung and Sue (2008) studied the effect of two types of output tasks, namely a reconstruction and a picture-cued writing task, on the noticing and learning of the English counterfactual conditional. The findings indicated that the two experimental groups, each engaging in one of the output tasks just mentioned, regardless of the output task they carried out, outperformed the comparison group, which merely answered reading comprehension questions, in terms of both noticing and learning. As evident in this brief review of a number of studies investigating the influence of learner output on the noticing and learning of L2 grammatical constructions, the results are not as yet conclusive, though a general trend accruing to the efficacy of pushed output in L2 development is in evidence but still needs to be demonstrated with other grammatical structures and output task types, and also investigated in comparative studies alongside other non-output tasks, given the fact that the output hypothesis is not without its critics. In particular, Krashen (1998) argues in his 'scarcity argument' that instances of modified or pushed output are too rare to have any significant influence on language development. However, Shehadeh (2002) refers to the notion of "critical incidents" to express his doubts over whether frequency is what matters most:

In fact, notions of "critical incidents" would suggest that although MO may be rare in some contexts (which is arguable, but nevertheless claimed by Krashen, 1994, 1998), it can be useful when it does appear (p.622).

Krashen (ibid.) also refers to research findings as to instances of acquisition in the absence of output, and is dubious about whether output has any genuine effect on language acquisition. He also believes that pushing learners to produce and modify their output is an anxiety provoker. He is dismissive of the strong version of interaction hypothesis to which, he deems, Swain's hypothesis is linked, stating that learner output in interaction does not necessarily lead to acquisition: Interaction, to him, is a facilitative source to the extent that it provides comprehensible input. In addition, he refutes the 'need hypothesis', stating that the need for communication will lead to acquisition only if it entails a greater amount of comprehensible input. In the face of all these arguments and counterarguments, and considering Ellis' (2006) comment as to the controversial nature of grammar instruction in SLA research, the present study aims to investigate the immediate and delayed effect of two output tasks on the learning of the English simple present tense, in comparison with a non-output task. The two output tasks included a picture description task and a reconstruction task, while the non-output task merely involved meaning-focused (reading comprehension) questions.

The rationale behind the inclusion of one individual and one two-way output task in the present study is twofold: practicality concerns and the mixed findings of the previous research as to the superiority of one-way tasks such as storytelling and picture description, whether written or oral, over two-way tasks such as an opinion exchange one. As an example, Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) found that the storytelling task employed in their study led to a higher rate of modified output than either native-speaker (NS)- nonnative-speaker (NNS) or NNS-NNS interactions did. Likewise, Iwashita (1999) found that one-way tasks provided learners with greater MO opportunities en route to comprehensibility than two-way tasks. More recently, however, Nassaji and Tian (2010) compared the effectiveness of collaborative and individual output tasks for the learning of English phrasal verbs and came to the conclusion that:

...completing the tasks collaboratively (in pairs) led to a greater accuracy of task completion than completing them individually. However, collaborative tasks did not lead to significantly greater gains of vocabulary knowledge than individual tasks (p. 397).

As for the present study, the individual text reconstruction task was included as an outcome production and modification opportunity based on Swain and Lapkin's (1995) finding, as evidenced in their participants' think-aloud protocols while engaged in a writing task, that the learners tended to "consciously reprocess their IL output without any sort of external feedback when faced with a performance problem" (p. 606). In addition, the two-way picture description task was included in order to take advantage, if any, of the pair and group work-induced negotiation, dialogic support and collaborative scaffolding learners involve in as evidenced in socioculturally founded research.

III. Methodology

A. Participants

In order to answer the research questions, 33 Iranian female elementary-level EFL learners, making up two intact English classes at a private language institute in Iran, took part in the study. They ranged in age from 18 to 25 (average: 22.3) and were mostly non-English major university students. They had all been placed in the third level of a 22-term language program (namely Elementary 1, following Starter 1 and Starter 2), on the basis of the results of a placement test administered by the institute. The test consisted of a 50-item multiple-choice vocabulary and grammar test, and an oral proficiency interview both developed on the basis of the content of the pre-ordained syllabus of the institute (the English series, namely 'True to Life', and other obligatory supplementary materials).

B. Instruments

1. Pretest and posttests: In order to gain a measure of the learners' knowledge of the English simple present tense and ability for use (a) prior to the treatment, (b) three days after the final treatment session and also (c) three weeks after the treatment, three parallel tests on the English simple present tense (i.e. a pretest, an immediate posttest and a delayed posttest) were developed. Each test consisted of two main sections:

A. 12 multiple-choice items on the English simple present tense (statements (3 items), interrogatives (3 items), negatives (4 items) and short answers (2 items)); each item was assigned one mark, which made for a total of 12 marks on this section;

B. A fill-in-the-blanks writing task in which the students were required to complete an 8-turn conversation between two people, comprising simple present statements, interrogatives, negatives and short answers, with no prompts provided. Each conversation contained a total of 8 blanks, each worth a mark, which together with the 12 marks of the first section made for a total score of 20 on all the three tests.

The three tests were first piloted with a sample of 15 elementary students learning English at the same institute. In order to ensure that they were parallel, the mean scores on the three tests were compared using an ANOVA (see Bachman, 1990). The results of the ANOVA (see Table 1 for the descriptive statistics and Table 2 for the ANOVA results) indicated that there was no significant difference between the means of the three tests in question, and they were therefore parallel (F=0.038, α=.962). Moreover, the internal consistency of the three tests was ensured using Cronbach's α, which was 0.8 for the pretest, 0.78 for the immediate posttest and 0.83 for the delayed posttest.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Pretest	15	12.00	20.00	16.4667
Posttest 1	15	12.00	20.00	16.1333
Posttest 2	15	13.00	20.00	16.6667
Valid N				

TABLE 2
ANOVA

Scores	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.311	2	.156	.038	.962
Within Groups	170.000	42	4.048		
Total	170.311	44			

2. Three simple present tense-rich texts and three action-based pictures: For the purposes of the present study, three Elementary-level English passages rich in the use of the simple present tense, ranging in length from 150 to 180 words (one on how an English boy spends his weekend, one on how a computer software works, and one a fable comprising a conversation between a crow and a cat) and also three pictures, each displaying a series of actions/steps taken by a person ((1) a person engaged in his/her daily chores at different times of the day, or (2) a person going through the different steps of operating a washing machine and (3) how a family spends their weekend) were utilized.

C. Procedure

To expedite the experiment, the participants were first pretested on the English simple present tense to make sure they were homogeneous regarding their knowledge of the structure in question. Of the 33 participants (15 as the control group and 18 as the experimental group), 28 were included in further data analysis, with the other 5, 2 in the control group and 3 in the experimental group, scoring outside one standard deviation from the mean and therefore excluded from the study. Both groups had received inductive instruction on simple present earlier at level S2 (Starter 2), but they would normally revisit the structure at this level (E1) in what is called a spiral syllabus, receiving mainly implicit instruction on it. The pretest was given just after this implicit instruction, i.e. on the 7th session of a 21-session term, and the three-hour experimental treatment, which extended over one hour of each of the three subsequent sessions, i.e. sessions 8, 9 and 10, was launched afterwards. The remaining of each of the three sessions was devoted to the fixed syllabus of the program.

On each of the treatment sessions, both groups were presented with three texts rich in the use of the English simple present tense (see section II.2), with the teacher going through the following steps:

1. The Warm-up phase, whereby the students' schemata regarding the passage's topic, were activated through questions, pictures, etc.

2. The Vocabulary Pre-teaching phase, whereby both groups engaged in the same vocabulary-learning activities, including word-definition matching, word-picture matching and fill-in-the-blank exercises;

3. The Silent Reading phase, whereby both groups individually read the passage silently, given a time limit of 5 to 7 minutes, depending on the length of the passage (The time was limited to preclude the participants from memorizing the passage and consequently from reconstructing the text just out of memory);

4. The Post-reading phase, whereby the control group was presented with 10 meaning-focused comprehension questions in written form, but the experimental group was asked to reconstruct the passage in their own words individually within 20 minutes (the longer time allotted to allow them to take their time to test their hypotheses and apply their internal feedback). Both groups were presented with written feedback (meaning-focused for the control group and grammar-focused for the experimental group) on the subsequent session.

Additionally, the experimental group engaged in a paired output task, namely a picture description task. Following the reconstruction of the passage on each of the treatment sessions, the experimental group was presented with a picture (see Instruments), and asked to work in pairs and describe the picture in written form following the teacher's modeling on the first session, using the simple present tense. That this task, too, was a writing task was because of the focus of the present study on 'accuracy', rather than fluency, and also because of granting the participants more time for hypothesis testing and scaffolding, given that they were elementary learners. Grammar-focused feedback was provided on the students' written description on the subsequent session.

Following the treatment, both groups were given the immediate posttest on the 12th session, i.e. one week after the treatment, and the delayed posttest on the 19th session, i.e. three weeks after the treatment.

IV. Data Analysis

Employing a pretest-posttest control group design, the present study was carried out to test the following two null hypotheses:

$H_0$1: Learner output does not enhance the learning of the English simple present tense.

$H_0$2: Learner output does not have a long-term effect on the learning of the English simple present tense.

From a statistical perspective, the assumption behind the null hypotheses is that the experimental group's scores on the immediate and delayed posttests do not significantly improve as compared with those of the control group, with the pretest scores as the basis of comparison. In order to compare the control and the experimental group's scores on the pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest separately, 6 *paired samples t tests* were run, using the 16th version of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), setting the level of significance at 0.05. Tables 3 and 4 contain the results of these 6 t tests. Moreover, the scores of the two groups on the immediate and the delayed posttests were compared through 2 *independent samples t tests* (see Table 5).

Table 3 contains the output of the 3 paired samples t tests run to compare the control group's performance on the pretest, the immediate posttest (Posttest 1) and the delayed posttest (Posttest 2). As shown by the results, the control group's mean score on none of the three tests differs significantly from the other two since the level of significance in all three cases far exceeds 0.05 which is the p level set for the present study. This indicates that these participants' performance neither improved nor declined as the result of the control treatment, which was the presentation of three texts, rich in the use of the simple present tense, followed by meaning-focused comprehension questions.

TABLE 3
PAIRED SAMPLES T TESTS FOR THE CONTROL GROUP

Control Group	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pretest-Posttest 1	0.16667	0.71774	.20719	-.27936	.62270	0.804	12	0.438
Pretest-posttest 2	0.38462	1.12090	0.31088	-.29274	1.06197	1.237	12	0.240
Posttest 1-Posttest 2	.23077	1.09193	0.30285	-.42908	.89061	0.762	12	0.461

However, the experimental group showed significant gains in its performance on the structure in question as indicated in Table 4. The difference between the pretest and the immediate posttest means, in this case, is significant at 0.04 level and this finding may be attributed to the experimental treatment, i.e. the two output tasks the experimental group engaged in. However, the comparison of the pretest and the delayed posttest shows only a trend toward significance (p=0.063), indicating a degree of deterioration in their performance three weeks subsequent to the treatment, though the comparison of the experimental group's mean on the immediate posttest and the delayed posttest (p=0.1) shows that this decline is not statistically significant.

TABLE 4
PAIRED SAMPLES T TESTS FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Experimental Group	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pretest-Posttest 1	-1.84615	1.46322	0.40583	-2.73037	-.96194	-4.549	14	0.04
Pretest-posttest 2	-0.69231	1.25064	0.34687	-1.44806	.06345	-1.996	14	0.063
Posttest 1-Posttest 2	-.92308	1.44115	0.39970	-1.79396	-0.05220	-2.309	14	0.1

Having compared the mean scores of the two groups on the three tests separately, 2 independent samples t tests were run to compare the performance of the two groups on the immediate and delayed posttests. Table 5 contains the outputs of these two analyses, with equal variances assumed for the two groups on each test. The observed t value is statistically significant for 26 degrees of freedom at 0.005 level for the immediate posttest and 0.016 level for the delayed posttest. In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group on both the immediate and the delayed posttest.

TABLE 5
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T TESTS FOR THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

Control and Experimental Groups	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Immediate Posttest	-3.048	26	0.005	-1.85128	0.60743	-3.09987	-0.60269
Delayed Posttest	-2.577	26	0.016	-1.51795	0.59188	-2.73732	-0.29858

These findings lead us to reject both null hypotheses: Learner output DOES enhance the learning of the English simple present tense and it DOES have a long-term effect on it.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study are in line with those of similar studies, accruing to the benefits of offering learners output opportunities, not only as a means of practice, but also as a means of restructuring their interlanguage grammars. That the control group did not show any significant gains in the course of the study, neither immediately after the treatment nor three weeks subsequent to it, is not surprising. The control group was only presented with input flooded with the structure at issue, but was not involved in making use of their own productive resources to test their existing hypotheses and reflect on how to improve them. This raises questions as to whether *input enhancement/flooding* (Sharwood Smith, 1993) or the deliberate manipulation of the input learners are exposed to, devoid of production opportunities, has any potential for learning/acquiring the grammar of the target language, and also whether any such thing as *implicit learning* in the absence of intentionality and awareness (see Ellis, 2008) is possible. However, these issues have to be substantiated through empirical research particularly focused on the potential of input enhancement and the possibility of implicit learning.

The gains shown by the experimental group on the immediate and the delayed posttests, on the other hand, can be taken as evidence of the advantages undergirding the experimental treatment, i.e. offering learners output opportunities. As far as the immediate posttest is concerned, the experimental group's performance improved significantly compared with their pretest scores. Moreover, the fact that they also outperformed the control group, despite their initial homogeneity, is additional evidence on the benefits inherent in making learners draw on their own productive resources to tackle the target language structure in question. However, as Mitchell and Myles (2004) have cogently postulated, a downside with some SLA research is the equation of learning with immediate use. In other words, they have their doubts as to whether it is justifiable to conclude that learning has occurred on the basis of immediate gains. This and Shehadeh's (2002) call for more research on the potential of learner output for long-term learning, or acquisition, led the researchers to include the second posttest three weeks subsequent to the experimental treatment. The findings show a degree of decline in the experimental group's performance since the comparison of the pretest and the delayed posttest results indicated only a trend toward statistical significance, though the comparison of the immediate and the delayed posttest results showed that such decline was not statistically significant, and that the decline can be attributed to such extraneous variables as the time factor (three weeks) inducing some degree of fading. Moreover, the fact that the experimental group's performance was still superior to that of the control group on the delayed posttest is further evidence as to the beneficial effects of learner output for the learning/acquisition of the English simple present tense.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study was carried out to determine if learner output has the potential of enhancing the short-term and long-term learning of the English simple present tense. To this end, two output tasks, i.e. an individual text reconstruction task and a paired picture description task, were carried out by members of the experimental group, while the control group only engaged in answering meaning-focused comprehension questions following the presentation of the same passages the experimental group was exposed to, rich in the structure in question. The results indicated that the

experimental treatment led to statistically significant gains on both the immediate posttest and the delayed posttest (though only a trend toward significance was observed in the case of the delayed posttest), but the control treatment did not.

The results serve to accumulate evidence on the efficacy of learner output in learning an aspect of the target language grammar. That the control group did not show any gains in their performance on either the immediate or the delayed posttest indicates that simply exposing learners flooded with a structure of interest might not be a sufficient condition for inducing improvements in their interlanguage grammars. The results of the study suggest that for such improvements to take place, learners need to be led to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing. As for the lack of gain on the immediate posttest, it can be argued that unless learners are led to notice the structure in some way, for example through producing it drawing on their own resources, no gains are due. As far as this consistent lack of gain on the delayed posttest is concerned, merely reading such rich passages for meaning does not seem to push learners to rethink their interlanguage hypotheses or to reflect on them through languaging. This finding can be taken as evidence against Krashen's postulation that *grammar will be in place if learners are exposed to input that is just beyond their current level of functioning (i+1) and understand it*, and this is exactly what the proponents of learner output, or better to say 'languaging', have rallied against.

The improvements evidenced in the present study for the experimental group are illuminating. That the experimental group showed significant gains in their performance on the immediate posttest and approximately significant gains on the delayed posttest, as opposed to the control group, indicates that learner output can serve as an advantage in the short-term and long-term learning of the target language grammar, in this case the simple present tense. Since two output tasks were drawn upon, one individual and one two-way, it is not clear as to whether the gains can be attributed to either one of the tasks or to their cumulative effect. However, what the two tasks shared was pushing learners to produce the target language structure, and this particular feature can be said to have proved beneficial. Moreover, in the absence of the fine-grained analysis of the participants' talk while carrying out the two-way task, or their recalls and think-aloud protocols while carrying out the individual task, it is not possible to determine which function(s) their output served which might have contributed to the observed gains: Did they engage in hypothesis testing? Was it noticing that brought about gains on the immediate posttest? Did they engage in languaging about language? etc.

Whatever the case, their output seems to have served as *auto-input*, i.e. own-produced input (Ellis, 1997), and a source of *internal feedback*, to bring about changes in their interlanguage systems and in this way to aid acquisition. This interlanguage restructuring is evident in the gains learners showed on the delayed posttest, three weeks after the experimental treatment. It can be concluded that learner output has both short-term and long-term benefits regarding the learning of the target language grammar, well beyond mere exposure to comprehensible input, even if such input has been flooded with the structure in question. However, it is not clear whether administering a third posttest later, e.g., *six* weeks subsequent to the treatment, would show statistically significant performance decline. The decline in experimental group's performance on the delayed posttest, though statistically not significant, seems to imply that offering learners more output opportunities over time in a cyclical fashion might better aid acquisition, but this postulation needs to be further evidenced through empirical research.

The superior performance of the experimental group would be expected if one considered the fact that the experimental group was not only offered output opportunities, but also structure-specific feedback on their production. The results would have been more easily attributed to 'learner output' alone if administrative constraints hadn't imposed the inclusion of feedback for the purpose of 'not straying off the institute's general guidelines' as worded by the institute's supervisor. It is also noteworthy that all the participants in the present study were female, due to practicality concerns. The replication of the study with male EFL learners might produce different results since gender has proved to be a determining factor in the amount and type of comprehensible output produced in different output task types, the general finding being that men tend to create a higher rate of MO opportunities in their interactions in comparison with women (Gass & Varonis, 1986; Shehadeh, 1994). These and the small number of participants in the present study call for replications in other settings and with other aspects of the target language grammar, and preclude sweeping generalizations regarding the absolute benefits of learner output in learning the English simple present tense.

REFERENCES

[1] Ellis, R. (1997). Second language acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[2] Ellis, R. (2006). Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1): 83-107.
[3] Ellis, R. (2008). The study of second language acquisition (2nd Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[4] Gass, S. & Varonis, E. (1986).Sex differences in nonnative speaker–nonnative speaker interactions. In R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to learn* (pp. 327–352). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
[5] Hammerly, H. (1987). The immersion program: Litmus test of second language acquisition through language communication. *The Modern Language Journal*, 71: 395–401.
[6] Harley, B. (1993). Instructional strategies and SLA in early French immersion. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 15, 245–260.
[7] Harley, B., & Swain, M. (1978). An analysis of the verb system by young learners of French. *Interlanguage Studies Bulletin*, 3: 35–79.

[8] Iwashita, N. (1999). Tasks and learners' output in nonnative-nonnative interaction. In K. Kanno (Ed.), *The acquisition of Japanese as a second language* (pp. 31–52). Amsterdam: John Benjamin.
[9] Izumi, S. (2000). Promoting noticing and SLA: An empirical study of the effects of output and input enhancement on ESL relativization. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Georgetown University, Washington, DC.
[10] Izumi, S. (2002). Output, input enhancement, and the noticing hypothesis: An experimental study on ESL relativization. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 24 (4): 541-577.
[11] Izumi, S. Bigelow, M. (2000). Does output promote noticing and second language acquisition? *TESOL Quarterly*, 34: 239-278.
[12] Izumi, S., Bigelow, M., Fujiwara, M. & Fearnow, S. (1999). Testing the output hypothesis: Effects of output on noticing and second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 21: 421-452.
[13] Kowal, M., & Swain, M. (1997). From semantic to syntactic processing: How can we promote it in the immersion classroom? In R. K. Johnson & M. Swain (Eds.), *Immersion education: International perspectives* (pp. 284–309). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
[14] Krashen, S. (1985). The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications. Beverly Hills, CA: Laredo Publishing Company.
[15] Krashen, S. (1998). Comprehensible output? *System,* 26: 175–182.
[16] Mitchell, R. & Myles, F. (2004). Second language learning theories *(2nd Ed.)*. London: Hodder Arnold.
[17] Nassaji & Tian (2010). Collaborative and individual output tasks and their effects on learning English phrasal verbs. *Language Teaching Research*, 14 (4): 397- 419.
[18] Nobuyoshi, J. & Ellis, R. (1993). Focused communication tasks and second language acquisition. *ELT Journal*, 47: 203-210.
[19] Pica, T., Kanagy, R., & Falodun, J. (1993). Choosing and using communication tasks for second language research and instruction. In G. Crookes & S. Gass (Eds.), *Tasks and language learning: Integrating theory and practice* (pp. 9–34). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
[20] Sharwood Smith, M. (1993). Input enhancement in instructed SLA: theoretical bases. *Studies in Second language Acquisition*, 15: 165-179.
[21] Shehadeh, A. (1994). Gender differences and second language acquisition. *Research Journal of Aleppo University* (Syria), 26: 73–98.
[22] Shehadeh, A. (1999). Non-native speakers' production of modified comprehensible output and second language learning. *Language Learning, 49*(4): 627–675.
[23] Shehadeh, A. (2002). Comprehensible output: From occurrence to acquisition. An agenda for acquisitional research. *Language Learning*, 52: 597-647.
[24] Siegel, J. (2005). Social context, In C.J. Doughty & M.H. Long (Eds.), *The handbook of second language acquisition.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
[25] Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235–253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
[26] Swain, M. (1995).Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds), *Principles and practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honour of H.G. Widowson* (pp. 125-144). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[27] Swain, M. (1997). Collaborative dialogue: Its contribution to second language learning. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 34*, 115–132.
[28] Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 16*(3), 371–391.
[29] Swain, M. (2006). Languaging, agency and collaboration in advanced second language proficiency. In H. Byrnes (Ed), *Advanced Language Learning: The contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky* (pp.95-108). London: Continuum

Mohammad Khatib is Assistant Professor of TEFL at Allameh Tabataba'i University. He holds a Ph.D. in TEFL (Allameh Tabataba'i University, 1999), an M.A. and a B.A. in English Literature from Tehran University (1977 and 1972 respectively). He began teaching at Allameh in 1981 and presently offers graduate and post-graduate courses in SLA Theories, Methodology, Literature in EFL Classes and English Literature. His main areas of interest include SLA Theories, language learning strategies, culture and the integration of language and literature. He has published some articles on TEFL in Iranian and international Journals of Applied Linguistics. He has translated a book of short stories from famous writers of the world and published a guidebook on Shakespeare's selected sonnets.

Marzieh Bagherkazemi was born in Iran. She has been a Ph.D. candidate of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran, Iran since September 2009. She graduated B.A. in English literature and M.A. in TEFL both at Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran in 2005 and 2008 respectively. As for her professional background, she has taught English at a number of language schools, and tutored courses in IELTS, TOEFL and FCE since 2003. She has also been a lecturer, running General English, English Grammar, Reading Comprehension, Speaking and Listening and also Language Testing courses at Allameh Tabataba'i and Islamic Azad universities in Tehran, Iran since 2008. Moreover, she has been involved in research on language learning and teaching issues, and published a number of articles in international TEFL journals. Her research interests include personality variables in language learning and teaching, issues in language teacher education, L2 reading, materials evaluation and oral proficiency assessment. Ms. Bagherkazemi is currently a member of the editorial board of the Romanian journal LiBRI, Linguistic and Literary Broad Research and Innovation, and of the Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran (TELLSI).