

# The Impact of Focused and Unfocused Tasks on University Students' Grammatical Achievement

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**Abstract**—The educational system in teaching English has always been seeking the best procedure to improve learners grammatical competence. The focus of this study is to find an answer to the following questions: Do focused tasks affect grammatical achievement?; Do unfocused tasks affect grammatical achievement of the students? ; Does traditional method affect grammatical achievement of students?; and is there a significant difference in the grammatical achievement of the students among focused tasks unfocused task, and control group? Subjects in this study were 60 freshman students majoring in English translation, including 41 females and 19 males studying in Lahijan IAU. The subjects were at the age range of 19 to 22. After administrating Nelson B1 test to be sure whether the participants are homogenous, the researchers employed the Opt test; then 60 students out of 146 students studying English translation at Lahijan Islamic Azad university were selected. The result of the study indicated that the performance of the students using focused task outweighed the students using unfocused task and traditional task in terms of grammar. Moreover, the experimental group B (i.e, unfocused task) performed almost identical to the experimental group A (i.e, focused tasks). In a nutshell, the control group performance was statistically different from the other two groups.

**Index Terms**—focused task, grammar, pedagogical tasks, unfocused tasks

## I. INTRODUCTION

“The idea of task-based learning (TBL) was greatly popularized by Prabhu” (cited in Harmer, (2002, p. 89) who, working at a school in Bangalore-southern India, speculated that students could likely learn a language if they were thinking about a non-linguistic problem instead of focusing on particular language forms or a language structure. In other words, students are presented with a task they have to perform or a problem they have to solve.

According to Prabhu (1987) cognitive Processes entailed by tasks. He talks about tasks involving ‘some process of thought’. For Prabhu, tasks should ideally involve learners in ‘reasoning’— making connections between pieces of information, deducing new information, and evaluating information. While such a definition is well-suited to the kinds of tasks that Prabhu himself prefers, for example, working out a schedule of a visit based on railway timetables, it is probably too exclusive. There are many information- and opinion-sharing activities that are commonly seen as ‘tasks’ not involve reasoning, for example, spotting the difference between two pictures, although they may well involve other cognitive skills, for example, perceptual skills (cited in Ellis, 2004, p.3)

One of the major problems of students is the immediate forgetting of the material they were taught. When they are asked the reason why they can not remember any pieces of information about language they have learned before, their answer may be the lack of deep understanding of content they memorized. As Francois Gouin in his *The Art of Learning and Studying Foreign Languages* (1880) described a painful set of experiences that how he failed to make conversation after memorizing grammatical rules and explanations. Since he just memorized a set of rules without being involved in acquiring them. On the other hand, they can remember some of those things they were taught, when their teacher get them involved in doing some special tasks. So, the researchers wants to investigate whether some tasks can help the learners to learn and register the structure of language in their mind permanently. To achieve the purpose of research, the present writers raise the following research question and Hypothesis. Is there any significant difference between unfocused and focused tasks on grammatical achievement of intermediate student?

1. Do focused tasks affect grammatical achievement of the students?
2. Do unfocused tasks affect grammatical achievement of the students?
3. Does traditional method affect grammatical achievement of the students?
4. Is there a significant difference in the grammatical achievement of the students among focused task, unfocused task, and control groups?

Then based on the questions write the null hypotheses:

1. Focused tasks do not affect grammatical achievement of the students.
2. Unfocused tasks do not affect grammatical achievement of the students?

3. Traditional method does not affect grammatical achievement of the students?
4. There is no significant difference in the grammatical achievement of the students among focused task, unfocused task, and control groups?

## II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

### A. *The History of Task-based Teaching*

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerged from the view of Prabhu who was working at a school in Bangalore-southern India, according to him, an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (Richard & Rodgers, 2001, p.223). Another claim for tasks is that specific tasks can be designed to facilitate the use and learning of particular aspects of language. Long and Crookes claimed that: "Tasks provide a vehicle for the presentation to operate target language samples to learners -input which they will inevitably reshape via application of general cognitive processing capacities- and for the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty." (cited in Richard & Rodgers, 2001, p.229). In support of this claim, Skehan (1998) suggests that in selecting or designing tasks "there is a trade-off between cognitive processing and focus on form" (p.97).

### B. *Widdowson's Approach on Tasks*

Widdowson has pointed out that "learners will need to pay attention to both meaning and form in both tasks and exercises" (p.3). For example, learners involved in 'making an airline reservation' will need to find the linguistic form to explain where they want to fly, what kind of ticket they want, etc. Also, learners completing a blank filling exercise designed to practice the use of the past simple and present perfect tenses in English will need to pay attention to the meaning of sentences to determine which tense to use. Widdowson (1998) argues that what distinguishes a task from an exercise is not 'form' as opposed to 'meaning', but rather the kind of meaning involved. Whereas a task is concerned with "pragmatic meaning", that is, the use of language in context, an exercise is concerned with 'semantic meaning', that is, the systemic meaning that specific forms can convey irrespective of context (cited in Ellis, 2004).

### C. *Krashen's Definition of Task*

"Krashen has long insisted that comprehensible input is the one necessary (and sufficient) criterion for successful language acquisition" (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.228). Others have argued, however, that productive output and not merely input is also critical for adequate second language development. For example, in language immersion classrooms in Canada, Swain showed that:

"... even after years of exposure to comprehensible input, the language ability of immersion students still lagged behind native-speaking peers. She claimed that adequate opportunities for productive use of language are critical for full language development. Tasks, it is said, provide full opportunities for both input and output requirements which are believed to be key processes in language learning." (cited in Richard and Rodgers, 2011, p.228)

### D. *The Outcome and the Aim of a Task*

To define the 'outcome' and the 'aim' of a task. 'Outcome' refers to what the learners arrive at when they have completed the task, for instance, a story, a list of differences, etc. 'Aim' refers to the pedagogic purpose of the task, which is to elicit meaning focused language use, receptive and/or productive (Ellis 2004). This distinction is important. "It is possible to achieve a successful outcome without achieving the aim of a task. For example, learners performing a spot-the-difference task based on pictures may successfully identify the differences by simply showing their Pictures to one another, but because they have not used language to identify these differences the aim of the task will not have been met" (Ellis, 2004, p.8).

### E. *Unfocused and Focused Tasks*

Unfocused tasks are those that may predispose learners to choose from a range of forms but they are not designed with the use of a specific form in mind. In contrast, focused tasks, As Ellis (2004) asserts, aim to induce learners to process, receptively, or productively, some particular linguistic feature, for example, a grammatical structure. Of course this processing must occur as a result of performing activities that satisfy the key criteria of a task, that is, that language is used meaningfully to achieve some non-linguistic outcome. Therefore, the targeted feature cannot be specified in the rubric of the task. Focused tasks, then have two aims: one is to stimulate communicative language use (as with unfocused tasks), the other is to target the use of a particular predetermined target feature (Ellis, 2004).

There are two main ways in which a task can achieve a focus. One is to design the task in such a way that it can only be performed if learners use a particular linguistic feature. For example, activity like finding a picture is an instance of such a task. This requires the learner to describe the picture indicated so that his/her partner can identify which picture it is from the same set. To achieve this, the learner has to use prepositions of place. For example, for realizing two pictures the learner will have to use the preposition 'on'. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) refer to focused task as a 'grammatical task'. However, it is not easy to design such tasks. This is because learners can always use communication strategies to get round using the targeted feature. For example, a learner who did not know or could not recall the

preposition 'on' could always say, 'the ball-not in, not by the side of the box'. It is easier to force learners to process a specific feature in a comprehension task (Ellis 2004).

The second way of constructing a focused task is by making language itself the content of a task. In unfocused task the topics are drawn from real life or perhaps from the academic curriculum that students are studying. However, it is also possible to make a language point the topic of a task.

### III. METHOD

#### A. *Participants*

Subjects in this study were 60 freshman students majoring in English translation, including 41 females and 19 males from Lahijan IAU at the age range of 19 to 22. After administering Nelson B test, to be sure whether the participants are homogenous, the researchers employed the Levens test, then 60 students out of 146 students studying English translation at Lahijan Islamic Azad university were selected.

#### B. *Instruments*

Two instruments were used to collect the relevant data for this study. The instrument used in teaching based on focused tasks is Betty Azar (2009). 80 items were chosen. Having piloted it among students, the researchers estimated its reliability. The reliability of 0.82 was obtained. While for unfocused tasks, the researchers applied a three types on tasks subjected by Prabhu (1987). 80 items were chosen. Having piloted it among students, the researchers estimated its reliability. The reliability of unfocused task was reported 0.79.

#### C. *Procedure*

The researchers had three groups in this study. After pretesting, students were divided into three groups. A Nelson grammar test was administered to 146 freshman students. After analyzing the data and the result of the test and ranking the grades of students, 60 students were selected based on one standard deviation below and above the mean. The students then were classified into three groups. That is 20 students were placed in control group. The other 40 students again divided into two groups as experimental groups. In both experimental groups tasks were used as instruction, however, one group was given unfocused task instruction and the other one focused tasks instruction after 10 sessions, at the end of instruction, the three groups took a post-test which was a teacher-made production test.

The first group was given instruction an unfocused tasks which is both pedagogical task proposed by Prabhu (1987). Like reasoning gap tasks, opinion gap tasks, and information gap tasks or real life tasks. In reasoning gap activities which is driving some new information from given information through inference or deduction processes. For examples the researchers may ask students "can you suggest why this might have been so?" or in opening gap activity, in contract, the students were asked to articulate their personal feeling or attitude in response to a given situation. Real life tasks are those that the learner might be called upon to perform in real life such as going to a restaurant or shopping.

The second group was given instruction on focused tasks. In this regard, the researchers introduced tasks that induce students' attention to specific forms of structure. To design focused tasks, there are three types of tasks including: structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, In structured based production tasks, the researchers carried out a study to investigate whether a task designed to elicit the productive use of modal verbs. For instance, the task requires students to read some information about a problem a person was facing. then write down the advice they will give to that person by using the utterance like I think he... and discuss what advice to give in a group. At the end of the task the students will be also asked to write down what they have learned from the task, for example, the researchers will consider how many of learners fail to use at least one modal verb. The principal modal will be should, had better, has to. In consciousness raising tasks, the students are asked to work, for instance, on conditional sentences like what will you do if you have a brother?

The third group, which is the control group, students just receives the traditional kind of instruction. That is, students will be provided with some grammatical explanation based on the grammatical textbook and the researchers will write the rule and formula on the blackboard and also gives some examples based on the rule of grammar. After explanation, the students are asked to do exercises of the same lesson in the text book for next session

After 10 session treatments, the participants in all groups were given a post-test to see if there is any effective change on learners' grammatical achievement through using unfocused and focused tasks.

#### D. *Design*

The design of this study is true experimental. In this research, there are three groups. The researchers is concerned with one dependent variable (i.e grammatical achievement) and three independent variables (i.e unfocused tasks and focused task and traditional grammar).

#### E. *Data Analysis*

Since we are concerned with three means, the researchers use ANOVA. In other words, The researchers is concerned with one dependent variable (i.e., grammatical achievement) and three independent variables (i.e. unfocused tasks and focused task and traditional grammar).

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. *Measure of EFL Proficiency (OPT Test for the Sampling Purpose)*

To select homogenous participants as a sample regarding the general language proficiency, the standardized Oxford Placement test (OPT) was administered to 146 EFL university students. The participants took the structure, vocabulary and reading comprehension sections of the test with a maximum possible score of 60 points. Based on OPT test direction 60 intermediate students whose scores were 31+ in grammar and vocabulary and 8+ in reading section were selected as the main sample for the present study. The results of the OPT test for 146 students are presented in the following table:

TABLE 1:  
STATISTICS FOR THE OPT TEST

OPT		
N	Valid	146
	Missing	0
Mean		36.7260
Median		38.0000
Mode		39.00
Std. Deviation		7.59539
Variance		57.690
Skewness		-.396
Std. Error of Skewness		.201
Range		38.00
Minimum		17.00
Maximum		55.00
Sum		5362.00

Table 1 showed the results of group statistics for the OPT test scores administered for the purpose of selecting homogeneous sample. Measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode) and measures of dispersion (range, variance, standard deviation) along with measures of distribution (Skewness and Kurtosis) were presented for the OPT test. The above descriptive statistics was reported for the 146 university students studying English translation at Lahijan Islamic Azad University. For the present study, the main sample including 60 homogeneous participants were selected, based on Oxford placement test direction in order to select a group of intermediate students and were randomly divided into three groups (one control and two experimental).

B. *NELSON (B1) Grammar Test (Pre-test)*

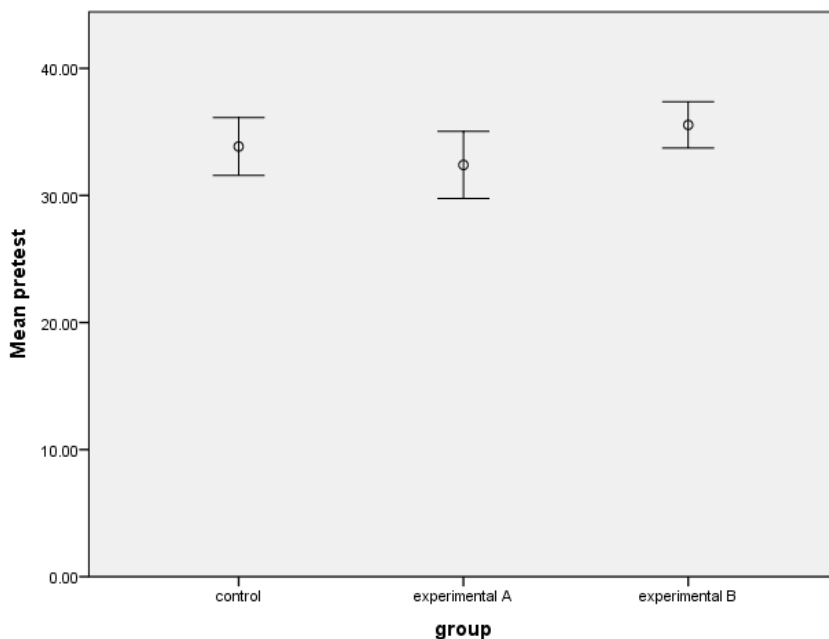
To make certain that the subjects were roughly at the same level in terms of their grammatical knowledge at the beginning of the study, NELSON test (B1) was administered to the three groups. The purpose of administering NELSON test was to establish a baseline from which gains on the post-test could be measured. To test the equality of variance assumption for the NELSON grammar test, One Way ANOVA was run to the results of the pre-test. Results of One Way ANOVA showed that there was no significant difference in learners' performance in terms of their grammatical knowledge on the pre-test across the control and experimental groups ( $p$  grammar test (.155) > 0.05).

Prior to accomplishing the analysis, the main assumption of One Way ANOVA namely, normality of the distributions was examined through running Levene statistics.

TABLE 2:  
TEST OF HOMOGENEITY OF VARIANCES

Pre- test			
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
2.288	2	57	.111

The results of Levene statistic showed that the group variances were equal in grammar pre- test ( $P$  grammar pre- test (.111) > .05). The Levene statistic supported the hypothesis that the group variances were equal.



Error Bars: +/- 2 SE

Figure 1: Error Bars for Examining the Normality Assumption

As it is depicted in the above figure, the average performance was almost identical for the three groups. Besides, variation in performance was similar at the same time. ANOVA assumes equality of variance across groups; that assumption was hold for these data.

TABLE 3:  
DESCRIPTIVES FOR THE PRE-TEST

pretest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Control	20	33.85	5.101	1.140	31.46	36.23	26.00	42.00
experimental A	20	32.40	5.897	1.318	29.63	35.16	26.00	42.00
experimental B	20	35.55	4.071	.9103	33.64	37.45	30.00	42.00
Total	60	33.93	5.158	.6659	32.60	35.26	26.00	42.00

As it is shown in the above table, the standard deviation and standard error statistics confirmed that variation in performance for the three groups was somehow similar. Table 4 shows the results of ANOVA for the pre-test scores of grammar test (pre-test).

TABLE 4:  
ANOVA FOR THE PRE-TEST

pretest	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	99.433	2	49.717	1.927	.155
Within Groups	1470.300	57	25.795		
Total	1569.733	59			

The results of the pre-test showed that the Mean of the (control group) = 33.8500, Mean (experimental A group) = 32.4000, and Mean (Experimental B group=35.5500), did not differ statistically. In other words, the mean difference was not statistically significant for the EFL learners' performance on grammar test before introducing the specific treatments.

TABLE 5:  
MULTIPLE COMPARISONS

Dependent Variable: pretest						
Scheffe						
(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
control	experimental A	1.45000	1.60	.667	-2.5869	5.4869
	experimental B	-1.70000	1.60	.574	-5.7369	2.3369
experimental A	Control	-1.45000	1.60	.667	-5.4869	2.5869
	experimental B	-3.15000	1.60	.155	-7.1869	.8869
experimental B	Control	1.70000	1.60	.574	-2.3369	5.7369
	experimental A	3.15000	1.60	.155	-.8869	7.1869

The significance value of the F test in the ANOVA table was higher than (0.05) for the grammar test. Thus, the average assessment scores of grammar were equal across the three groups at the beginning of the study.

TABLE 6:  
HOMOGENEOUS SUBSETS (PRETEST)

Scheffe <sup>a</sup>		
Groups	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05
I		
experimental A	20	32.4000
Control	20	33.8500
experimental B	20	35.5500
Sig.		.155
Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.		
a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 20.000.		

The above table indicated that the three groups were homogenous in terms of their performance on grammar pre-test and there was not any statistical differences among them ( $P \geq 0.05$ ).

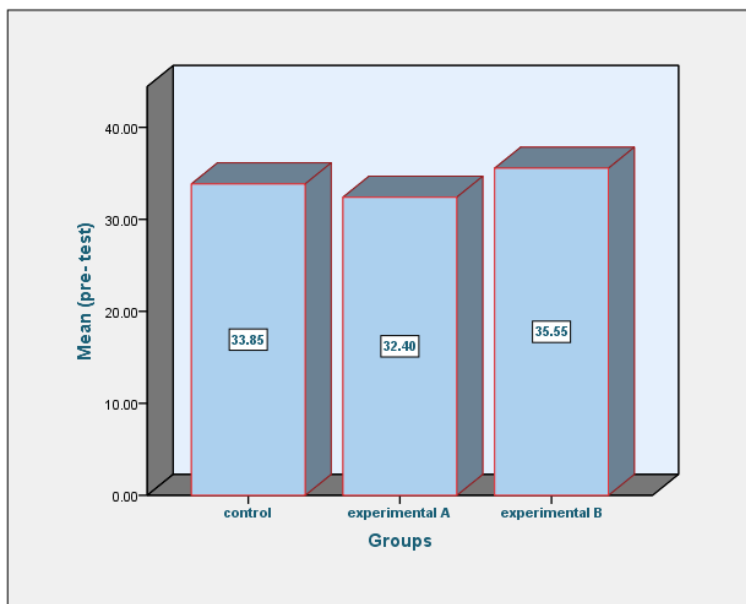


Figure 2: The Three Groups' Performances on Grammar Test (Pre-Test)

C. The Research Hypothesis

H0: There is no significant difference in the grammatical achievement of the students among focused task, unfocused task, and control groups.

The One-Way ANOVA procedure produced a one-way analysis of variance for the quantitative dependent variable namely grammatical achievement by the single factor or independent variable (type of task; focused, unfocused, and traditional). Analysis of variance was used to test the hypothesis that the means of the three groups were equal on grammar test.

It was supposed that each group was an independent random sample from a normal population. Since Analysis of variance is robust to departures from normality, it was examined if the groups came from populations with equal variances. To test this assumption, Levene's homogeneity of variance test was run for the results of the post-test.

TABLE 7:  
TEST OF HOMOGENEITY OF VARIANCES

posttest				
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.	
1.106	2	57	.338	

Thus, the important first step in the analysis of variance established that the variances of the groups were equivalent (sig=.338 ≥ 0.05).

After establishing the normality assumption, ANOVA was run to the results of the post-test. The significance value of the F test in the ANOVA table was less than 0.05. Thus, the hypothesis that average assessment scores of the grammar test (post-test) were equal across the control and experimental groups was rejected.

TABLE 7:  
ANOVA FOR THE RESULTS OF THE GRAMMAR TEST (POST-TEST)

posttest					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	409.300	2	204.650	9.256	.000
Within Groups	1260.300	57	22.111		
Total	1669.600	59			

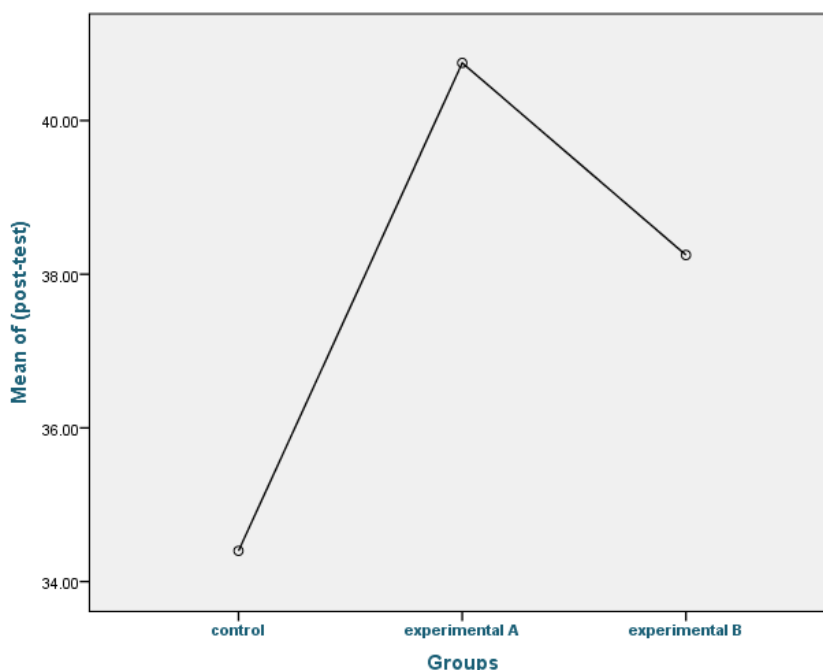


Figure3: Mean Plot for the Results of the Grammar Test (Post-Test)

In general, F statistics established that there was statistically a significant difference between the three groups' means, and means plots showed the location of these differences. Participants of the experimental group A (focused task) outperformed their counterparts namely experimental B (unfocused task) and the control group (traditional treatment).

After confirming that the three groups differed in some way, the detailed structure of the differences was investigated through doing multiple comparisons. Post hoc test (Scheffe) was employed for comparing the means of the three groups.

TABLE 8:  
MULTIPLE COMPARISONS

Dependent Variable: posttest						
Scheffe						
(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	experimental A	-6.350*	1.48	.000	-10.08	-2.61
	experimental B	-3.850*	1.48	.042	-7.58	-.11
experimental A	control	6.350*	1.48	.000	2.61	10.08
	experimental B	2.500	1.48	.252	-1.23	6.23
experimental B	control	3.850*	1.48	.042	.11	7.58
	experimental A	-2.500	1.48	.252	-6.23	1.23

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The group with traditional training of grammar performed significantly lower than experimental A and B groups (p<0.05). However, trainees with unfocused treatment do not statistically differ in their grammar average performance

with Experimental A group who received focused task ( $\text{sig}=.252$ ). Despite this equality, the group that received focused task instruction performed better than the group that worked on unfocused task on post-test of grammar. Although the difference between experimental (B) and the control group was statistically significant ( $\text{sig}= 0.042$ ) it was not very strong.

TABLE 9:  
HOMOGENOUS SUBSET FOR THE GRAMMAR POST-TEST  
Scheffe<sup>a</sup>

group	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
control	20	34.4000	
experimental B	20		38.2500
experimental A	20		40.7500
Sig.		1.000	.252

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.  
a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 20.000.

As it is shown in Table 9, the experimental group (A) outweighed the other two groups in terms of their grammar. Furthermore, the experimental group (B) performed almost identical to the experimental (A). Finally, the control group's performance was statistically different from the other two groups. This rejected the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the grammatical achievement of the students among focused task, unfocused task, and control groups.

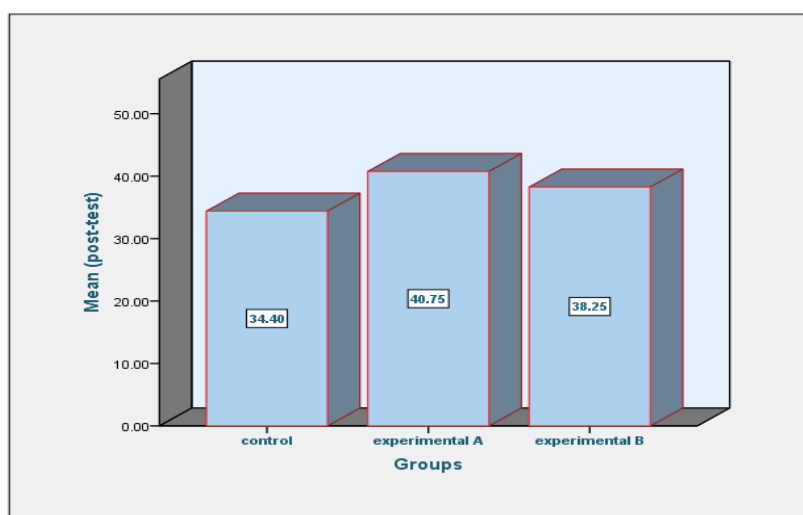


Figure 4: The Three Groups' Performances on Grammar test (Post-Test)

In order to investigate students' progress within groups, three paired t-tests were also run, which showed the subjects' progress in pre-test and post-test that are shown in Tables 10, and 11.

TABLE 10:  
PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Control group pretest	33.8500	20	5.10186	1.14081
	Control group posttest	34.4000	20	4.73953	1.05979
Pair 2	Experimental A pretest	32.4000	20	5.89737	1.31869
	Experimental A posttest	40.7500	20	5.21006	1.16501
Pair 3	Experimental B pretest	35.5500	20	4.07140	.91039
	Experimental B posttest	38.2500	20	4.08946	.91443

The mean scores of the control group has been improved from (33.8500) in pre- test to (34.4000) in post- test for the grammar test; that of the experimental group (A) has changed from (32.4000) in pre- test to (40.7500) in post- test on the grammar test, and finally, the mean of the experimental group (B) has changed from (35.5500) in pre- test to (38.2500) in post- test on the grammar test.



TABLE 11:  
PAIRED SAMPLES TEST

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Control group (pretest) – control group (posttest)	-.55	1.57	.351	-1.285	.18570	-1.56	19	.134
Pair 2	Experimental group (A) pretest – experimental group (A) posttest	-8.35	1.69	.378	-9.143	-7.556	-22.03	19	.000
Pair 3	Experimental group (B) pretest – experimental group (B) posttest	-2.70	.92	.206	-3.132	-2.267	-13.07	19	.000

As depicted in the Tables 10, and 11, both control and experimental groups had progressed in the post-test. Based on the results of paired t-test, this progress is statistically significant just for the experimental groups but not for the control group ( $P$  experimental groups (A & B)  $< 0.05$ ,  $P$  control group  $\geq 0.05$ ).

In other words, both of the experimental groups made a substantially higher progress as compared to the control group in the post- grammar test after practicing focused and unfocused tasks.

These results also rejected the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the grammatical achievement of the students among focused task, unfocused task, and control groups.

#### D. Discussion

This research was conducted to examine the effect of focused and unfocused tasks on students' grammatical achievement and the results of the research showed a major effect of focused and unfocused task on grammatical learning in comparison with control group (i.e, traditional treatment). The result of this study showed that the involvement of the students in learning by means of different tasks can have significant effect on their improvement. In this regard, widson (1998) argues that what makes a task to be different from an exercise it does not mean that form opposed to meaning but rather the kind of meaning involved. Whereas a task is concerned with pragmatic meaning, an exercise is concerned with semantic meaning.

#### V. CONCLUSION

"Krashen has long insisted that comprehensible input is the one necessary criterion for successful language acquisition (cited in Richard and Radgers 2001, p 228). Others have argued however, that productive output and not merely input is also critical for adequate second language development. there is not a unanimity among scholars. According to Anderson (1993, 2000) skill development involves the proceduralisation of declarative knowledge. Declarative knowledge is factual. In this case of language it involves explicit knowledge of grammatical rules, for example, use the indefinite article 'an' before nouns that begin with a vowel sound Laschky and bley-vroman (1993) discuss what they call structure-based communication task. There result of this research also showed that the perforce of the students using focused task outweighed the other two groups experiencing unfocused task and traditional tasks in terms of grammar.

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