A Comparative Study of Output Task Types on EFL Learners' Comprehension of Target Forms

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Abstract—This study aims at investigating the role of output and the relative efficacy of two different kinds of output tasks (reconstruction task and picture-cued writing task) in comprehending of two English target forms namely called past counterfactual conditional and English passive form. One hundred Iranian EFL learners participated in the experiment. In terms of target forms comprehension, the results showed that the participants who received output opportunities during the treatment performed significantly on the immediate post test and delayed post test. In terms of the individual effect of each type of output task type, the results also revealed that both groups improved significantly after the instructional treatment in the comprehension of the target grammatical features and the effects lasted one month.

Index Terms—output, text reconstruction, picture cued writing task, English past counterfactual conditional

I. INTRODUCTION

Swain (1995) proposed the output hypothesis from the observation that learners in Canadian immersion classroom failed to achieve native like proficiency despite of being exposed to considerable comprehensible input. As Swain argued one plausible reason for this failure was the fact that the comprehensible input which is provided to immersion students might not be enough to make sure that we will have native like productions. Besides other things, she believed that learners could not reach at grammatically native like competence due to lack of opportunities to use the target language.

Swain (1995) later argued that a significant part of output hypothesis is called pushed output. She more specifically stated that productions in the forms of speaking or writing alone may not be adequate to ease some parts of second language learning because second language learners may successfully express meaning despite the use of grammatically or pragmatically incorrect structures. Swain proposed that learners should be pushed to use their available resources. They should practice their output. Learners may be pushed to imply their linguistic capacities in various situations, such as collaborative language tasks (Storch, 2001; Swain, 1998) that include planning time (ss and Skehan, 1996) or post task activities (Skehan and Foster, 1997). Moreover, Swain and Lapkin (1995) held the opinion that the act of target language production is a mean that makes learners able to realize the lack of knowledge in their existing IL resources. This noticing causes them to knowingly modify their production in order to have modified output.

"In general terms, the importance of output in learning may be constructed in terms of learners' active deployment of their cognitive resources" (Izumi, 2003, p. 170). Within this process, output is hypothesized to encourage language acquisition by making learners aware of their ill-formed in their IL and helping learners to compensate for those problems through finding out relevant sources of input or testing and modifying their hypothesis through feedback, etc (Izumi and Bigelow, 2000).

Regarding the relationship between input and output, Richard and Rodgers (2003) claim that language learning not only includes students' attention to comprehensible input but also in tasks which provide them with opportunities to participate in real context of communication and negotiation of meaning. Shehadeh (2002) also declared that Swain did not reject the comprehensible input, but she claimed that comprehensible output will also be essential and it will help learners in various ways. Izumi and Bigelow (2000) also suggested that output hypothesis does not ignore the importance of input and they added that the goal beyond output and input activities involves the complementary and supportive ones, to strength language acquisition by pushing learners beyond what is simply necessary for understanding of meaning. Ellis (2008) states that if learners are not exposed with input in SLA, they can't acquire language. He also adds that in order to have effective communicators in second language, many researchers believed that the role of input is important too. Ellis (2008) states that many of the second language learners try to experience language outside of the classroom. If students are only provided with limited classroom input, they can't expect to achieve high language proficiency. Toth (2006) in his study which examined the impact of output in the process of the acquisition of second language morphosyntax through making a comparison between output-free PI to the instruction where input and output happen in meaningful, teacher-led classroom based reciprocal action, states that when sufficient knowledge is obtained from input analysis, production of target forms might rearrange learners organization knowledge

by pushing a more complicated examination of its different divisions. He also adds that if fruitful results appears, then a treatment which includes a mixture of both input and output opportunities within communicative context may not "put the cart before the horse but provide benefits to learners' linguistic knowledge"(Toth , 2006, p.328). Finally, Kaplan (2002) states that output forces learners to give their attention to the syntax of an utterance and to form a hypothesis based on it. But this is different from receiving input which only is related to comprehension.

Given that output can help students in second language acquisition, the design and effect of different appropriate task types on noticing and acquisition are really interesting and significant for lots of SLA researchers and classroom teachers. Storch (1998) showed that editing and text reconstruction tasks were successful in increasing learners' awareness of some target forms and the learners had the resource to different sources of knowledge when trying to make grammatical judgments in groups while accomplishing those tasks. In order to see whether a number of collaborative writing activities will more efficient than others, Storch (2001) conducted a study on this topic. He chose three kinds of tasks, which were called editing tasks, text reconstruction, and short composition. Within these tasks students discussed with each other about their grammar choices in a meaningful context or meaningful tasks. The results clarified that all three output tasks drew learners' attention successfully, but the text reconstruction was the most successful in achieving the goal as it motivated the students to use their knowledge within their choices of grammatical items. Storch went on to say that, editing task and text reconstruction resulted in attending to form better than others, and this greater attention to grammar in editing and TR can be due to nature of them which are more grammar focused.

Izumi and Bigelow (2000) tried to find out the impacts of various output task types, (Izumi et al., 1999) and (Izumi and Bigelow, 2000) did not consider the impact of the reconstruction and essay-writing tasks independently through having different experimental groups, and thus, it is difficult to determine the comparative effectiveness of two tasks, and also to discuss about the fact that which of these two activities promote better language acquisition and noticing.

Although Izumi and Bigelow (2000) did not report any significant role for output, extended opportunities for output activity and also receiving relevant input were considered as important factors for increasing students' ability in using of target forms accurately. In an attempt to explore the effect of the reconstruction task and the picture cued writing task as an independent variable through employment of two different experimental groups, Song and Suh (2008) conducted the same study on this topic and declared that in terms of acquisition, the results showed that the participants who had the opportunity to be exposed with output activities treatments, outperformed those in none output condition on the production of post test, but concerning the relative efficacy, no significant differences was found. Regarding the noticing function of output, the output groups were successful, but no relative efficacy of two tasks was found again. Based on these results and students scores on recognition and production test, they suggested these results may indicate that the significant effect of output activities on second language learning development is to assist ways to achieve productions which follow the target language patterns.

Statement of the problem

Although Izumi and Bigelow (2000) tried to probe the effects of different output tasks, but Izumi et al. (1999) and Izumi and Bigelow (2000) did not consider the impact of the reconstruction task and the essay-writing task as an independent variable through having different experimental groups, and thus, it is difficult to judge that the comparative effectiveness of one output task type over the other one. Due to this limitation, Song and Suh (2008) investigated the unique effect of each different output task by designing two different experimental groups. However, they only took into consideration a specific type of target form called past hypothetical conditional, limited number of treatment sessions, and inadequate tests instruments which could limit the generalizability of results. Having administrated 3 parallel forms of comprehension tests we sought to investigate the effects of text reconstruction and picture-cued writing tasks in helping intermediate EFL- learners acquire English target forms in terms of comprehending them. It should be mentioned that in fact very little is known about the effectiveness of these kinds of output task types , and the effect of output task types such as editing task, text reconstruction task, picture cued writing task, and dictogloss task, has not been clearly explored.

Three research questions are raised as follows:

1. What are the effects of output task types in helping intermediate-EFL learners comprehend English target features?

2. If there are any advantages of one type of output task type over the other in helping learners comprehend English target features, does the advantage hold over time?

3. What is the individual effect of each type of output task type on the participants' comprehension of English target features?

II. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the present study were two classes of the first- grade intermediate EFL learners (n= 100), ages 18 to 29. This study was conducted in a language institute in Iranshahar, Sistan and Baluchistan province, Iran. All participants were male and shared Baluchi as their first language. The participants were seldom exposed to English and had very little opportunity to use English outside classrooms.

Target grammatical forms

The English conditional sentences, passive voice are chosen as the target grammatical forms for this study. First of all, we include English conditional sentences since many of students will face problems while using of this structure. Song and Sue (2008) in their study represented the following reasons for its selection. The first reason refers to the syntactic complexity which includes two clauses, subordinate and main clause, and the second one is related to semantic difficulty regarding meaning distinction between different kinds of conditional sentences. We also select English passive voices due to VanPatten's input processing model (1996, 2004), the first noun principle. It was claimed that it is difficult for EFL learners to process the English passive voice effectively when they face noun or pronoun which must be inferred as the patient not the agent.

Testing materials

Three parallel tests, Test A, B, C were used, with Test A served as the pretest, Test B as the posttest, and Test C as the delayed posttest. These tests were constructed to assess the participants' ability to comprehend English hypothetical /counterfactual conditional sentence and English passive voice (simple present and past tense). The comprehension tests were adopted from Izumi and Bigelow (2000) and Song and Suh (2008) studies and also were based on *Understanding and Using English Grammar*, and *Grammar in Use, Intermediate Course Book*. Each version consisted of 30 items, of which 24 served for target items and 6 used as detractors. Of the 24 sentences which included the target structure, 7 of them were correct and 17 incorrect.

The comprehension test asked students to do several actions while doing the test. The participants were required to read each of the test items and (a) to determine whether it is correct or incorrect and, if incorrect, (b) to underline the incorrect part and (c) produce the correct form.

The reliability for all tests was calculated through KR-21 formula. The correlation coefficients for comprehension pre, post and delayed post tests turned to be 0.75, 0.78 and 0. 71. Regarding the validity, it was also estimated for all tests. We calculated the amount of correlation coefficient between our newly- developed tests and the subtest (looking at grammar part) of a valid test. This showed that the correlation coefficient for comprehension pre, post and delayed post tests were 0 .70, 0 .74 and 0.71. Furthermore, we also calculated the amount of correlation coefficient of the newly-developed tests and the other subtests part (vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, and writing) of a valid test. As expected, the result showed that since each two subtests were indeed testing different traits or skills, the correlation between our newly-developed tests and other subtests was low.

Procedure

This study uses a quasi-experimental comparison group design with pre-, post- and delayed tests. The experimental sequence of the study will be done over a period of approximately 1 month. Two classes will be randomly assigned to two groups which include reconstruction (EG 1) and picture-cued writing (EG 2). One week prior to the first treatment session all the participants took the pre-test, Test A. Then, the two groups went through the different treatments. The experimental treatment consisted of ten sessions. The second treatment session happened a full week after the first treatment session and the tenth treatment session was followed by the post-test, Test B. Two weeks later, the two groups took the delayed post test, Test C.

Treatment procedure

At the outset of each treatment session, all of the students were aware of the task that they were going to do. They were provided with a text and were asked to read the text. When they finished reading the given text, the reconstruction group was informed to reconstruct the input passage which they read as accurately as possible on a sheet of paper. Storch (1998) states that within text reconstruction task:

"Students are presented with the content words and instructed to reconstruct the text by inserting appropriate function words (e.g. articles, prepositions), linking words, inflectional morphemes (e.g. tense and aspect markers, singular/plural markers), and/or changing word order in order to produce an accurate, meaningful, and appropriate text"(Storch,1998, p.292).

Sample reconstruction task treatment

For example: The following sentences are all related to the past hypothetical /counterfactual conditional. Put the verbs into the correct form.
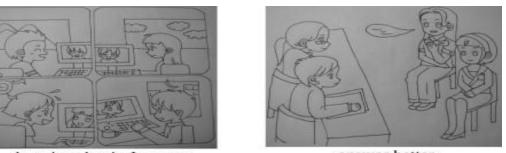
Did you hear about that guy who won 180 million dollars in the lottery last year? Unfortunately, I did not win the California lottery. I quit my job the next day if I win that much money. If I travel around the world, I stay in the most luxurious hotels. If I see a beautiful Mercedenz, I buy it. If I win that much money, I do not keep it all for myself. If anybody needs help, I give them some money to help them out.

The EG 2 participants were provided with pictures and vocabulary prompts intended to elicit the targeted contexts, and do a short guided writing based on them. The participants in all two groups were exposed to the same text for the second time. The EG 1 and the EG 2 received a second reconstruction opportunity and a second picture-cued writing opportunity respectively.

Sample for the picture-cued writing treatment

John applied for a job in a Japanese company, but he failed in the Japanese interview. He regrets the following things:

do voice chat in Japanese

answer better

If John--- .

III. RESULTS

The two groups' scores in the three comprehension tests are presented in Table 1. The two groups' scores in the pretest were subject to an independent- samples t-test. The result showed that there were no significant differences between the two groups, t (100) = 1.19, p >0.05. This means that the two groups were equivalent in terms of their ability to comprehend the target grammatical features before instruction; any differences in the posttest results could only be attributed to the differences in type of instruction. As shown in Table 1, the means of the two groups' performance in the comprehension section of the pretest were: E1= 9.23 and E2=9.31 and the means increased to E1=18.42 and E2 =15.58 respectively on the immediate posttest and to E1=18.39 and E2=14.22 respectively on the delayed posttest.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR COMPREHENSION TEST SCORES

Group	n	Pretest		Posttest		Delayed Posttest	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
E1	50	9.23	1.60	18.42	5.10	18.39	4.99
E2	50	9.31	1.64	15.58	4.15	14.22	3.87

The first research question asked about the relative effectiveness of text reconstruction task and picture cued writing task on the participants' comprehension of the English target features. An independent-samples t-test was conducted on the two groups' scores in the immediate posttest. The result showed that there was a significant difference in the two group's performances, t (100) =4.44, p <0.05. Specifically, the E1 group performed significantly better than the E2 group in comprehension.

The second research question was to investigate whether the possible advantage of one type of instruction over the other in helping comprehension of English passive voice held over time. An independent-samples t-test was conducted on the two groups' scores on the delayed posttest, and a significant difference was found, t (100) =.3.97, p <0. 05. This meant that the superior performance of the E1 group over the E2 group in comprehension remained one month later.

The effect of each type of instruction on the participants' comprehension of English target features is also one of the main concerns of the study, so it is pedagogically useful to examine their individual instructional effect. Two paired-samples t-tests conducted on the two groups' scores in the pretest and the immediate posttest indicated that both groups improved significantly from the pretest to the immediate posttest: t (50) =8.71, p <0.05 for the E1 group, and t (50) = 7.69, p < 0.05 for the E2 group. Another two paired-samples t-tests conducted on the two groups' pretest scores and delayed posttest scores in the comprehension section, and it revealed that both groups' delayed posttest scores were significantly higher than pretest scores, t (50)= 7.16, p < 0.05 for the E1 group, and t (50)= 5.49, p < 0.05 for the E2 group. This indicated that the effect of both types of instruction on learners' comprehension of the target grammatical features was durable over one month.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that there was a significant difference in the two group's performances in the immediate post test and delayed post test. Furthermore, the E1 group performed significantly better than the E2 group in the comprehension section of the immediate posttest and delayed posttest. The results also revealed that both the E1 group and the E2 group improved significantly after the instructional treatments in the comprehension of the target grammatical feature, and the effects lasted one month. In fact the result showed that having output opportunities were effective in developing learner's ability to comprehend the target forms.

In general terms, the findings of this study are consistent with those ideas of Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), Izumi and Bigelow (2000), Campillo (2006) who emphasized on the helpful role of output task types. In fact the result of this study showed that we should probe deeply the advantages of using different types of output task types specially the kind of output tasks which help us to draw learner's attention to form in a meaningful context. For example in terms of text reconstruction task, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) state that "the assumption underlying this task is that in processing a

text for meaning learners store the propositional content but not the linguistic forms used to encode the content" (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005, p.33). On the other hand, Izumi and Bigelow (2000) also suggest that reconstruction tasks which mark a specific kind of target form can stimulate understanding the gap in learners' partial knowledge of target language forms. It can be due to the fact that these tasks increase the resemblance among learners' production and models of target language. Campillo (2006) also states that these kinds of tasks will provide a context for learners to use preselected target forms which will be used during the tasks many times. She also continues that if we provide learners with a context that help them to compare between their current interlangauge and the target language form, acquisition can take place. Concerning picture cued writing task, Song and Suh (2008) state that "although not a purely creative activity, the picture-cued writing task employed in this study could be used in a grammar or writing class as an additional activity which can control the learners' focus of attentional resources without ruling out the meaning. It would, therefore, be useful in a classroom to devise and use this type of task so that learners can notice, take in, acquire and/or produce a syntactic form in a meaningful context, rather than having learners to acquire only receptive knowledge through input flooding" (Song and Suh , 2008, p. 308).

The result of this study contradicts with Song and Suh (2008) findings indicating that the participants who received output opportunities (text reconstruction and picture cued writing task) within the treatment sessions did not perform significantly better than those in the non-output condition on the recognition post-test.

The result of this study is also in line with Qin s' (2008) finding suggesting that through using the dictogloss task as a kind of output task, the DG group participants preformed considerably in their comprehension tasks, although they were not specifically instructed in understanding of the target feature in the DG treatment.

Lee and VanPatten (2003) highlighted the effect of output opportunity only in the mode of assisting students to show some degrees of fluency and accuracy in performance, and they claimed that we cannot expect output to transfer the grammar into the minds of learners. Nevertheless, the result that the E1and E2 group performed considerably in comprehension appears to disagree with their ideas.

Concerning the important role of output, VanPatten (2002) states that "output may play a role as a focusing device that draws learners attention to something in the input as mismatch are noticed"(p.762). Concerning focusing on the form, Sheen (2002) states that focus on form represents the amount of similarity between first and second language acquisition which takes place through leaner's exposure to comprehensible input. He further continues that it is important to know that only exposure cannot be responsible for acquisition of second language grammar, and we should try to focus learner's attention on grammatical features. In other words, we can prepare some activities which catch learner's attention to desired forms.

In terms of output task types, the present study may have implication for the design of output tasks opportunities in educational contexts and it would be important to provide learners with extended opportunities to produce output and to benefit from this type of treatment. It is important for teachers to choose output task types which do not ignore the acquisition and practice of target form in a meaningful context in contrast to traditional focus on forms tasks. For example, text reconstruction can be applied in grammar classroom which can draw learners' attention to the target form without deemphasizing the importance of focus on meaning. Output plus feedback opportunities can also be used in some cases when output treatment alone cannot bring fruitful result regarding attention or acquisition. So it will be fruitful to provide learners with different kinds of output – feedback opportunity in order to change their shaped hypothesis and make the role of output practice more useful.

Some of the issues remaining to be studied include the following. First, long term effects of the output task treatment need to be examined. Second, subsequent studies can examine other target form to investigate the relationship between output task treatment and the specific types of target form. It is also important to consider the cognitive processing vital for learners based on the formal complexity and functional importance related to a given form (Izumi, 2002). It is also interesting to use output combination in order to assess learners noticing and attention related to target forms through think- aloud or stimulated recalls techniques. Because this study only investigated about two kinds of output task types, it is suggested that other studies can be done through the employment of other techniques of focus on form. This study have only examined two English target forms, so comparable studies could consider the accuracy achievements of other English structures.

The findings of this study corroborate a body of research that has recently shown that output task opportunity will help learners improve their accuracy .In other words, this study represented that in order to achieve accuracy in second language learning we should encourage students to produce output in order to test and modify or confirm their hypothesis.

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