

The Effect of Focus on Form on the Acquisition of English Middle Voice by Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—This study aimed to investigate the effect of focus on form on the acquisition of English middle voice by Iranian EFL learners. Forty participants were assigned to two groups with learners in the experimental group receiving formal instructions on middle voice structure in English. An independent t-test was run to compare the two groups. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups. The results are discussed with respect to the promising effect of focus-on-form instruction.

Index Terms—middle voice, focus on form, passive voice

I. INTRODUCTION

Middle voice is defined as a construction between transitive and intransitive one (Minsky, 1977). Middle voice is actually the equivalent of what is called anti-passive in other languages. The fact that a middle verb sometimes has a corresponding transitive verb seems to support this similarity. Middle construction is semantically different from passive and anti-passive structures (Chung, 1978). This study aims to investigate the learning of English middle voice by Iranian EFL learners. The motivation behind running this research is inadequate attention of both researchers and practitioners to middle voice.

II. MIDDLE VOICE

Middle voice is believed to have existed in Sanskrit, but the history of voice is mainly speculative. Sanskrit has a complete category of middle for all of the grammatical tenses, although this is not used for all the modes, each verb has its own extension, so that is by no means uniform (Robertson, 2006).

Middle voice is a generic statement, and the genericity of the surface subject may be either generic as in (a), or specific as in (b):

- a) Mined food does not freeze well.
- b) Your new hair dryer stares away neatly.

Perlmutter and Paul (1984) argued that the single argument of an intransitive verb may either be generated as an object of the verb (unaccusative verb) or as a subject (unergative). Despite various linguistic views on middle construction, there seem to be arguments concerning its properties. First, it takes the patient as its subject and implies the agent, which is never expressed explicitly. The meaning here is nearly the same as in the passive of the same verb, yet there are certain differences. The middle has the meaning of possibility involved in the construction as seen in the following examples:

- a) This flight-light plugs in easily.

There are other examples for showing the difference between active, middle and passive voices:

- 1) I read this book. (active)
- 2) This book reads easily. (middle)
- 3) This book was read (by me). (passive)

Voice is a feature of verb that shows how the subject of the sentence is related to the state, expressed by the verb. In general voice of the verb indicates that subject is doing the action and is active, receiving the action (passive), or both of them (middle), which means both doing and receiving the action (Wallace, 2000, P.179).

Transitivity refers to the action of a verb to an object, but voice is related to the action of a verb. It is the grammatical categorization of the verb that indicates the direction of the process regarding the subject. In active sentences, the process results from the subject, but in passive ones, the process results from the agent and subject; in the middle construction, the subject works directly or indirectly upon itself (Valeika & Buitkiene, 2003, P.91-97).

III. FOCUS ON FORM

Focus on form has been variously defined by different researchers. Long (1983) defines it as drawing learners' attention to linguistic elements, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose focus is on meaning or communicative (Long, 1983, p.45-6). Long and Robinson (1998) defined focus on form as follows:

Focus on Form often consists of occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher or one or more students triggered by perceived problem with comprehension or production (Long & Robinson, 1998, P. 23).

In traditional language classrooms, learners receive formal instruction in the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the target language, together with tightly controlled opportunities for practicing them systematically. With the advent of more communicative approaches, the PPP approach (*Presentation-Practice-Production*), was introduced; and materials, organized around a grammatical syllabus, allowed for more meaningful practice in communicative situations. But the problem is that often learners complete activities without having a clear understanding of the form-meaning relationship (Crivos & Luchini, 2012).

Batstone (1994, cited in Crivos & Luchini, 2012) claims that there are three approaches to teaching grammar: as *product*; as *process*; and as *skill*. Product teaching is concerned with grammatical forms and with the learners' noticing of them in the input. In order to be noticeable, a grammar item has to be significant to the learner, and teachers should do their best to design activities that aim at making it as salient as possible. *Noticing* the new items of language is just the first phase in learning. After the new item has been noticed, learners are prepared for the second one, during which, they make their own *hypotheses* on how language works and then, they *structure* their knowledge of the language system. These processes are facilitated by consciousness raising, which involves active manipulation of the language under focus and provides conditions for noticing and emphasis on re-noticing (Batstone, 1994; Schmidt, 1990, cited in Crivos & Luchini, 2012). These mental processes of *noticing*, *structuring* and *restructuring* allow learners to organize language flexibly, combining elements from grammar and lexis productively.

Ellis (1993, cited in Crivos & Luchini, 2012) distinguishes two kinds of knowledge: *explicit* and *implicit*. Explicit grammar instruction refers to those instructional strategies used to raise learners' conscious awareness of the form or structure of the target language. Through explicit instruction learners are able to notice features in the input data. Implicit knowledge, on the other hand, is a non-conscious and automatic abstraction of the structural nature of the material arrived at from experience of instances.

Consciousness-raising is a psycholinguistic concept related to the widely debated question of how second languages are learned and is specifically concerned with the cognitive question of how students' minds work. Rutherford (1987, P.151, cited in Jeffrey, 2009) makes the following observation about second language learning:

It is incontestable that one cannot learn a language without direct contact with that language. No one could ever learn English, for example, given a vocabulary list and set of rules for syntax, morphology, phonology, etc., no matter how accurate and comprehensive (Jeffrey, 2009).

Similarly, Skehan (1998) sees consciousness-raising as tasks that draw attention to a particular form, but give no explicit information, and Ellis (1992, 138) defines it as a type of form-focused instruction designed to make learners aware of a specific feature (Jeffrey, 2009).

Consciousness-raising occurs when students are encouraged to notice particular features of the language, to draw conclusions from what they notice and to organize their view of language in the light of the conclusions they have drawn (Jeffrey, 2009).

The essence of consciousness-raising can be found in the interplay between learning and acquisition. Whilst language learning refers to the conscious internalization of rules and formulas, language acquisition tends to be unconscious and spontaneous (Krashen, 1987, 1988, cited in Jeffrey, 2009). Acquisition is similar to the way children learn their mother tongue (however, consciousness-raising refers more specifically to second language students). Krashen believed that no transfer could happen between the learned and the acquired because of their different inputs, but Ellis (1982, P.76) drawing on Stevick (1980) points out that it may be that communicative opportunity is necessary as the *switch* that starts the flow of learnt to acquired knowledge (Jeffrey, 2009).

Consciousness-raising assists in both learning and acquisition in that it relies on some explicit teaching, but uses explicit teaching merely as a foundation to help students understand and use language features by subtly drawing their attention to them. In this way, consciousness-raising makes teaching effective, but by no means should the explicit side of teaching dominate. Doing so would hinder the automatization of acquisition, as Cavour (2002, 27, cited in Jeffrey, 2009) explains:

While it is true that teaching explicitly certain strategies could strengthen learners' weak areas, it may also hinder the automatization of language acquisition and, in turn, slow down communication, the ultimate purpose of foreign language classes (Jeffrey, 2009).

IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to answer the following question:

- Does focus on form have any significant effect on the acquisition of Iranian EFL learners' English middle voice?

V. PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this study were 40 male and female learners of English as a foreign language, aged from 18 to 30 in different private language institutes. Based on an Oxford placement test the participants were observed to be at the upper intermediate level. Participants were placed in two groups and each class had two administrations. The first time

before any treatment the pretest was given and after the instructions the posttest was given to test their improvement in the understanding of middle voice structure in both groups.

VI. MATERIALS

Two tests were devised in order to let the researcher provide an answer to the research question: a pre-test and a post-test. For both the pre-test and the post-test, fill in the blanks and completion items were used for measuring the participants' knowledge of middle voice structures. The purpose of the pretest was to determine the participants' knowledge of English middle voice and the purpose of the posttest was to test the participants' improvement in comprehending middle voice. The test materials were prepared by the researcher and checked for their validity with experts.

VII. PROCEDURE

The participants were first given an exam to determine their knowledge of middle voice. Secondly during the course learners were taught middle voice through focus on form instruction method. Finally the second exam was given to evaluate achievement of learners.

Before the treatment, an independent samples t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest of knowledge of middle voices in order to examine that the two groups had the same level of knowledge of middle voices prior to the main study. As displayed in Table 1 the mean scores for experimental and control groups on pretest of knowledge of middle voices are 2.30 and 2, respectively.

TABLE 1:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS PRETEST OF KNOWLEDGE OF MIDDLE VOICES BY GROUPS

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Strength of association
Experimental	40	2.300	.9661	.1528	0.02
Control	40	2.000	.9337	.1476	0.7

The results of the independent t-test ($t(78) = 1.41$, $P = .16 > .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$ it represents a weak effect size) (Table 2) indicate that there was not any significant difference between experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest of knowledge of middle voices. Thus it can be concluded that the two groups enjoyed the same level of knowledge of middle voices prior to the main study.

TABLE 2:
INDEPENDENT T-TEST FOR THE PRETEST OF KNOWLEDGE OF MIDDLE VOICES BY GROUPS

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.827	.366	1.412	78	.162	.3000	.2124	-.1229	.7229
Equal variances not assumed			1.412	77.909	.162	.3000	.2124	-.1229	.7229

It should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances is met (Levene's $F = .82$, $P = .36 > .05$). That is why the first row of Table 2, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" is reported.

A. Results

An independent t-test was run to compare the students' mean scores on the posttest of knowledge of structures of middle voices in English. On average, as shown in Table 3, the experimental group shows a higher mean score on the posttest ($M = 9.40$, $SD = .67$) compared with the control group ($M = 6$, $SD = 1.43$).

TABLE 3:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	40	9.400	.6718	.1062
Control	40	6.000	1.4322	.2265

The results of the independent t-test ($t(78) = 13.59$, $P = .000 < .05$, $\eta^2 = .7$, summarized in Table 4 indicate that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of knowledge of middle voices in English. Thus the null-hypothesis that middle voice instruction does not have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of structures of middle voices in English **is rejected**. The experimental groups - after receiving treatment on middle voices - outperformed the control group on the posttest.

TABLE 4:
INDEPENDENT T-TEST

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	8.079	.006	13.593	78	.000	3.4000	.2501	2.9020	3.8980
Equal variances not assumed			13.593	55.368	.000	3.4000	.2501	2.8988	3.9012

It should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances is not met (Levene's $F = 8.07$, $P = .006 < .05$). As it was mentioned above, in case the sample sizes are equal, this assumption can be ignored.

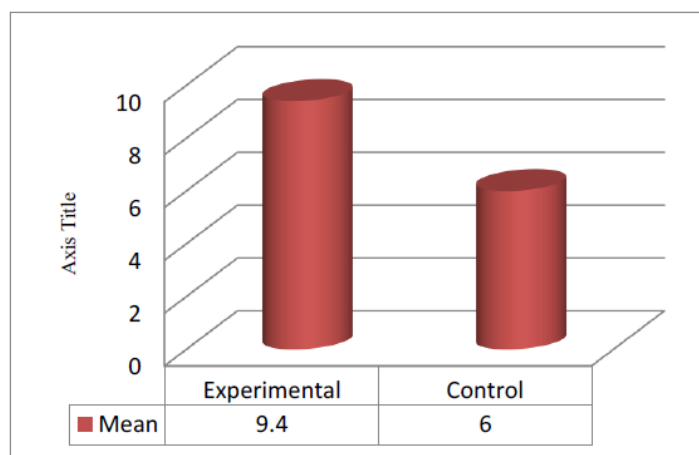


Figure 3: Posttest of Knowledge of Middle Voice by Groups

B. Discussion

The results of the study showed that focus on form instruction had a significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of English middle voice. This finding agrees with the body of research which shows that grammatical instruction and noticing have a positive effect on second language learning.

In line with Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (2001), Skehan (1996) supports the role of focus on form in assisting learners to link declarative to their procedural and communicative use of the structure. He suggests that learners benefit from some type of explicit instruction prior to the activity to help them activate their knowledge of TL structures and facilitate awareness of the forms they will encounter (Skehan, 1996, p.46). Schmidt (2001) also argues that L2 learners must efficiently notice and be aware of the features of input in order for intake and learning to be possible. He also considers attention as a necessary construct for understanding every aspect of SLA (Rahimpour et al., 2012).

The findings of the study corroborate Howkins' (1984) belief that language awareness is needed to develop skills as a prerequisite for efficient foreign language learning, what Donmall (1985) regards as "a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of language" (p. 7).

Recently, a few studies, conducted in the L2 classroom setting (Rosa & O'Neill, 1999), have reported overall positive effects of awareness on learners' subsequent post-exposure performance. Schmidt (1995) views the role of awareness as a necessary and sufficient condition before any L2 data can be taken in. Consciousness raising techniques are used as a means to an end, rather than an end for itself (Smith, 1981). Second language learners cannot begin to acquire a language feature until they have become aware of it in the input.

The findings of this study are in disagreement with the ideas of Krashen (1981, cited in Crivos & Luchini, 2012), who suggests that teaching grammar results in conscious knowledge, which is only available for monitoring utterances that learners produce using their acquired subconscious knowledge and that it is of very limited value. He recommends that teachers abandon grammar teaching, and concentrate instead on providing lots of comprehensible input so that learners can acquire a second language naturally, in the same way they have acquired their mother tongue. Other researchers do not agree with the notion that learners seem to master the grammar of a second language simply by being exposed to plenty of comprehensible input (Ellis, 1984; Schmidt, 1995). Krashen's theoretical claims also seem to be contrary to the personal experiences and beliefs of numerous language teachers who find that this theory does not include those students who perform slowly and consciously in a way that develops into automatic behavior (Smith, 1981, cited in Crivos & Luchini, 2012).

Corder (1967, cited in Crivos & Luchini, 2012) claims that learners possess a built-in syllabus that determine when they are ready to acquire a new grammatical structure independently of how much practice they may have been exposed to. This learnability problem has been the focus of debate for many years and might partly explain why not all learners

are able to learn what they are taught. But the findings of this study support the belief that focus on form can assist all learners in learning English voice structures (Crivos & Luchini, 2012).

Teachers should aim at designing and implementing tasks in the classroom which encourage learners to focus on form and language use and to raise their awareness of processes of language use. Considerable exposure to meaningful samples of language and plenty of opportunities for practicing it freely may not guarantee native-like output.

SLA research suggests that new grammatical features are more likely to be acquired when learners notice and comprehend them through input. However, some attention to form is also necessary (Ellis, 1994). Ellis (1994) argues that formal instruction is central in second language learning only if it is given as part of meaning-based activities.

The findings of this study are in line with those which support the positive role of consciousness raising in second language learning. As Jeffrey (2009) believes, teachers should draw students' attention to prominent characteristics of the target language and let this learning process facilitate acquisition. It is the cognitive capacity of the students that is most important in this respect, rather than mere memorization and regurgitation as in realistic English. Consciousness-raising requires second language acquisition to not be simply the accumulation of one isolated grammatical entity upon another, but rather the acquisition of new language skills upon pre-existing knowledge, through attention to form rather than merely on memorizing details (Jeffrey, 2009).

VIII. CONCLUSION

This research was an attempt to investigate, in particular, the effect of receiving instruction on English middle voice by Iranian EFL learners and to see if focus on form in general affects second language learning or not. The results pointed to the positive effect of instructed language learning in general and receiving instruction on English middle voice in particular. The results corroborate research findings which emphasize the role of attending to form, i.e., grammar, in second language teaching classes.

Based on the results of the study it can be concluded that focus on form is a facilitative strategy in second language learning. This conclusion is in line with previous research which has reported a positive effect for focus on form. For example, Al-Hejin (2012) (undated) is against the idea of unattended language learning and uses the term learning with residual attention. Taking the necessity of attention for language learning, defined as alertness, orientation, and detection, to be obvious by definition, he further asserts that children in unattended language learning contexts "must surely pay attention to the L2 input, but they are unlikely to be preoccupied with noticing the linguistic surface structure of the input, nor are they necessarily aware of the complex grammatical rules underlying their inter-language."

Education should be used to help a person grow and develop in many aspects such as intellectual, emotional, and social aspects. Education should also create awareness (Khatib, Sarem, & Hamidi, 2013). Along similar lines, Radwan (2005) delineates the importance of awareness in language learning and states the association of awareness and learning. He takes noticing as a process leading to awareness and further adds that the degree of success in language learning and the recognition and accurate production depends on the meta-awareness.

In line with the findings of this study, Nassaji (2000) provides support for focus on form through two influential theoretical perspectives: the interactive perspective and the cognitive prospect. Interactive perspective holds language learning to be realized through interaction and negotiation of meaning, using different communicative strategies, and thus make the input comprehensible. Resorting to focus on and use of form can help these strategies acquire higher levels of likelihood to succeed.

The results support claims made by Francis (2002) that research findings from "focus on form" research have led language teachers to employing learning activities that direct students' attention to language patterns and contrasts between target forms and incomplete learner-language forms, which are considered as inter-language forms.

IX. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The result of the present has research the following implications:

1. Teaching middle voice construction is a great way which has to be included in education and language learning syllabuses, for improving speaking and writing.
2. It is evident that without the proper education and instruction of middle, passive and active, students can get confused about the using these constructions. Therefore during training classes, students will be familiar with active, passive and middle voice.
3. The research clearly showed that teaching middle voice is the best way of solving its problematic areas.
4. Teaching middle construction can occur in different levels of English classes as well, that helps students and teachers to be consciously engaged with it.
5. Teaching middle voice is a great way to enhance fluency and accuracy for different skills specially speaking and writing.

X. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this research the focus of attention was on Learning English middle voice constructions by Iranian EFL learners, however, other researchers can investigate the following:

1. Investigating Learning English middle voice constructions by Iranian EFL learners with different proficiency levels and in all other areas.
2. Considering this research for all skills special speaking and writing.
3. Learning English middle voice constructions by Iranian EFL learners of different sex and age groups.
4. Comparing middle construction with other voices.

APPENDIX

A. *First Session Lesson*

Description of Active and Passive voice

- In active voice sentences the subject **does** the action.
Example: Liz played the piano.
- In passive voice sentences the subject **receives** the action.
Example: The piano was played by Liz.

B. *Second Session Lesson*

What is active and passive construction?

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action:

I aced the exam.

Subject/actor verb object/thing acted on

In the passive voice, the object of the action becomes the subject of the sentence, and the actor appears in a prepositional phrase, or is absent from the sentence:

The exam was aced (by me).

C. *Third Session Lesson*

WHAT is the difference?

The active voice tells you what the subject of the sentence does or is.

The children broke the window.

The passive voice tells you what happens to or is done to the subject.

The window was broken (by the children).

In the first sentence, the children are the subject of the sentence. In the second, the window is the subject.

D. *Forth Session Lesson*

Middle voice

Someone broke the window. (active)

The window was broken. (passive)

The window broke. (middle)

All the above sentences are correct. The third sentence, written in the middle voice, contains an ergative verb. This ergative verb can change an object into a subject without needing to use a passive.

An ergative verb is a kind of intransitive verb. It is different from an ordinary intransitive verb (such as cough, die and sneeze) because it can be made passive. For example, we can say:

The window broke. (middle)

Or The window was broken. (passive)

Ordinary intransitive verbs cannot appear in the passive voice.

For example, we can say:

Janet sneezed. (active)

But we cannot say:

Janet was sneezed.

The passive voice allows an agent:

The ball broke the window. (active)

The window was broken *by the ball*. (passive – agent given)

The window was broken. (passive – agent not given)

The middle voice does not allow an agent:

The ball broke the window. (active)

The window broke. (middle)

We cannot say:

The window broke by the ball.

E. *Fifth Session Lesson*

What are middle voice verbs?

It is said English has about 600 ergative verbs. Examples are : alter, balance, beat, begin, bend, bleed, boil, burn, burst, change, circulate, close, commence, dash, decrease, increase, diminish, drop, dry, embark, end, explode, fade, fill, form, freeze, gather, grow, harden, improve, increase, issue, melt, open, pass, roll, separate, shake, shine, shiver, shoot, slip, spread, start, stir, stop, split, spread, start, tear, thaw, thicken, turn, twist, upset, etc..

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