Effect of explicit instruction on comprehension of English present perfect by Persian EFL learners

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Abstract

The English present perfect is one of the most difficult grammatical items for the Persian EFL learners to comprehend. The current study examined whether an explicit grammar explanation would work for this grammatical item among sixty university level learners. Experimental group practiced the target structure with explicit grammar explanation and control group practiced the target structure in the same manner without explicit explanation. The statistical analysis revealed that a significant difference between the pre-test and immediate post-test was found in those who had explicit explanation prior to practice. However, the results of delayed post-test suggested that their comprehension is temporary.

Key words: Explicit Instruction; Comprehension; Present Perfect Tense; Persian EFL Learners

1. Introduction

It is not at all a novelty to say that English has become prominent as a Lingua Franca, neither it is to mention that its market demand has increased considerably throughout the years all around the world, as well as in Iran. Nevertheless, it is sensible for language professionals, and students alike, to worry over the implications this augmented demand may have on the quality of its teaching.

2. Theoretical framework

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2.1. Types of knowledge

Among the many unanswered questions on how second or foreign languages are best learned, the roles of implicit and explicit kinds of knowledge and the possibility of interface between them are issues that have received considerable attention in SLA studies in the past 30 years. There are three major positions regarding the possibility of interface between these two forms of knowledge. Krashen (1981) initiated the discussion by stating that learned knowledge does not convert into acquired knowledge, or, as current terminology allows, that explicit knowledge would never transform into entail implicit knowledge of the language. A more modern version of this dichotomy is sponsored by Paradis (2009), who also claims that “explicit knowledge and implicit competence do not share information; they do not exchange data; they do not interact” (p. 64). In complete opposition to such No Interface position is Robert DeKeyser’s Strong Interface claim that L2 knowledge will only become procedural after communicative practice of initially declarative knowledge.

2.2. Noticing

Exposure to input is one of the few conditions widely regarded as vital to both L1 and L2 acquisition processes. However, what is often overlooked is how distinct the role of attention in these two processes normally is. L1 learners go through fairly similar learning situations, i.e. daily family care, while L2 learners, with different demands and levels of interest, may have contact with a second or foreign language in different ways, with different frequency and intensity, at different stages in their lives (Schmidt, 2001).

2.3. Explicit vs. Implicit Learning and Instruction

According to Hulstijn (2005):

Explicit learning is input processing with the conscious intention to find out whether the input information contains regularities and, if so, to work out the concepts and rules with which these regularities can be captured. Implicit learning is input processing without such an intention, taking place unconsciously (p.131).

Put simply, explicit and implicit learning can be understood as learning of explicit and implicit knowledge, respectively (see Dekeyser, 1998, 2003, for more detailed definitions). On the other hand, instruction, then, will be considered explicit if learners are given information on how the input they are exposed to is organized, that is to say, if they receive the rules by which they must try to internalize that input. Implicit instruction, therefore, takes place when learners are exposed to meaningful input, allowing them to extract information about its workings on their own. In this latter type of instruction settings, students are normally guided towards internalizing rules, mainly through elicitation or in task-based lessons, but are not explicitly provided with them.

3. The study

3.1. Objective

The overall objective of this study was to analyze the role of explicit instruction in the development of L2 knowledge of the Present Perfect Tense in a group of Persian learners of English in tasks assessing comprehension.

3.2. Hypotheses

A set of hypotheses were then put forward in the investigation reported here:
Learners who received explicit instruction focusing on Present Perfect Tense would achieve higher scores in comprehension in the immediate and delayed post-tests assessing knowledge of the target structure.

Students who did not receive any instruction focusing on the Present Perfect Tense would not show perceptible performance differences between the pre-test and the immediate and delayed post-test in comprehension.

3.3. Subjects

The subjects for this study were EFL learners enrolled at Payame Noor University, Shalamzar Branch, Iran in the winter semester of 2012. A total of 60 learners took part in this study, of which 30 were included in Group A (Experimental Group) and 30 in Group B (Control Group).

3.4. Tasks and Materials

In order to test how explicit instruction might influence learners’ understanding of the Present Perfect Tense, a pre-test and the immediate and delayed post-tests (assessing comprehension) were devised and applied, respectively. All tests consisted of 30 questions testing the use of Present Simple, Past Simple and Present Perfect tenses. Twelve different verbs (like, need, know, think, play, write, work, study, break, find, lose, start) were used once in each set of questions. All verbs were chosen so as to reflect a balanced variety of verbal aspects, namely Achievement verbs (break, find, lose, start), Action verbs (play, write, work, study) and State verbs (like, need, know, think).

3.5. Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was held during February, 2012, in three 90-minute morning meetings with each group, totalling 6 meetings. No off-schedule or extra meetings were required and none of the activities was done outside the classroom setting. On the first day, subjects were given a short personal information questionnaire along with the consent form. On day 2, the lesson was given to the Experimental Group as planned. The immediate post-test step was the quickest in the series, since participants already knew what to expect. The delayed post-test was also administered after an interval of two weeks. Comparative tables of participants’ pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test results were analyzed in SPSS.

4. Results

The analyses are based on the subjects’ scores on the tests, where learners in Group A (Experimental Group) were taught a lesson and learners in Group B did not receive any instruction regarding the topic at test. As it can be seen in Table 1, Group A’s participants performed better than Group B’s overall, having improved their results by 4.58% in the immediate post-test, whilst the latter had a slight 2.38% decrease in their score.

| Groups          | Pretest    | Immediate Posttest |
|-----------------|------------|--------------------|
| Group A ( n=30) | 45.7 (2.67) | 46.8 (4.98)        |
| Group B ( n=30) | 43.86 (2.19)| 43.43 (2.99)       |
The results of the immediate post-test show that the participants in the Experimental group achieved higher scores than the participants in the Control group after instruction, even though the difference between the scores in the pre- and posttests was not statistically significant for either group. The standard deviation was also higher in the Experimental group. When the answers given by subjects from both groups are analyzed separately for Past Simple and Present Perfect questions, the results are more revealing. The results of the ANOVA indicate an interaction between group and verb structure $F(3, 36) = 17.935, p<0.0001$.

As it can be seen in Table 3, Group A’s participants did not perform better than Group B in their performance on the delayed post-test, suggesting that their comprehension is temporary.

Table 2. Mean (and standard deviation) scores in the Comprehension Task

| Group A ($n=30$) | Pre-test | Immediate posttest | Delayed posttest |
|------------------|----------|--------------------|------------------|
|                  | 45.7 (2.67) | 46.8 (4.98)        | 45.6 (2.63)      |
| Group A ($n=30$) | 43.86 (2.19) | 43.43 (2.99)       | 43.45 (2.43)     |

Taking the results of the comprehension task here presented, it is possible to notice that they lend themselves to strongly supporting the idea that instruction of a target language item, namely the Present Perfect Tense, is beneficial to language development and can lead to prominently better performance in the second of the task of similar complexity taken before and after instruction, therefore validating hypothesis 1 partly, but as it is seen in Table 2, the experimental group did not perform better in the delayed post-test, concluding that their outperformance on the immediate post-test is temporary. So, the hypothesis one is rejected. Furthermore, the virtually stagnant results achieved in the same task by Group B come to highlight how linguistic / pedagogic insertions do help shape students’ perceptions of how languages work, as anticipated in hypothesis 2.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the collected data depicted a favourable average performance increase in comprehension task for subjects who received explicit instruction of the tested structure. These numbers show significant short-term improvement for the group. Additional testing is still required in order for long-term efficiency to be verified. Lastly, we would like to point out that it is ever more important for language teachers to be aware of how they can positively influence their learners’ perception and understanding of an L2.

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