THE EFFECTS OF INTERACTION ON THE ACQUISITION OF THE PASSIVE ENGLISH STRUCTURE BY IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars have used different ways to approach second language acquisition. Many researchers have developed the line of the research which focuses on the interactional structure of conversation. This study was conducted to examine the effect of interaction on the acquisition of English passive voice on Iranian foreign language learners. The participants were as many as sixty students from two classes who were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. Both groups were given the same tasks (that is editing tasks) in eight sessions. The experimental group edited the text by the help of the peers and the teacher (+interaction). On the other hand, the control group did the tasks individually (-interaction). Before the commencement of the treatment, a grammar pretest was assigned to establish the subjects' knowledge of the passive. After the treatments, all groups sat for post-tests. The findings did not reveal that the interaction among the learners during an editing task in the experimental group helped learners to learn better and retain the structure more than the control group students. However, the researcher states that the treatment helped learners in experimental group notice to the wrong parts of the text. Therefore, treatment proved to have an impact on the acquisition of English passive voice though minimal in production.

Keywords: Editing Task, Negotiation, Passive Voice, Interaction

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, second language researchers considered the role of conversation in the development of second language acquisition. Long's (1996, pp. 451-2; cited in Doughty and Long, 2003) Interaction Hypothesis (IH) states that negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways. Selective attention and the learner's developing L2 processing capacity, mediates environmental contributions to acquisition, and that these resources are brought together most usefully, during negotiation for meaning.

Related to the role of interaction is the assumption that metacognition may have a facilitative effect on L2 acquisition. Ellis (1997) argues that tasks have properties that will predispose or induce learners to engage in certain types of language use and mental processing that are beneficial for acquisition. Particular language tasks may encourage learners to talk about the linguistic problems they encounter. Using communicative tasks is popular in second language classrooms. These tasks make grammar forms salient to the learner but this is achieved through communicative tasks. In this way, we promote learner's attention to the target structure and meanwhile engage learners in meaning focused interaction.

In Iran teaching a second language is limited to teaching grammatical structures and linguistic knowledge while communication is neglected to a large extent. So the present study

mainly aims at promoting the significance of how to study communicatively which will end in grammatically richer intake. In this study we will look at the teaching process as the facilitation of learning. We will use techniques and strategies to face the challenges learners have in the area being investigated. Few researches have been conducted in Iran regarding interaction.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The based assumption underlying input and interaction approach is the fact that communicative pressure stimulates language learning and examines the relationship between communication and acquisition and the mechanisms that mediates between them. Nassaji and Fotos (2004) state that a number of researches have argued that if the goal of SLA is the development of communicative competence, enabling learners to use language for communicative purposes, then grammar and communication must be integrated. However, the challenge is to identify the best ways of doing so in L2 classrooms and to maximize the opportunity for a focus on form without sacrificing the focus on meaning and communication. They suggest that interactional feedback as one of the alternative ways of treating grammar, refers to various negotiation and modification strategies such as repetitions, classification requests, confirmation checks, and the like, which are made by learners or directed to them to facilitate understanding. Such interaction draws the learner's attention implicitly or explicitly to aspects of the target language such as grammatical forms.

Passive structure as one of the grammatical areas of difficulty in SLA can be also dealt with interactively. We as teachers have experienced that teaching the meanings, uses, and functions of the passive voice makes problem for our students. According to Birjandi, Maftoon, Rahemi (2011) this grammatical feature presents lots of problems for Iranian EFL learners and does not occur frequently in teachers talks. Many textbooks include a chapter about passive voice but when it comes to L2 production in speaking or writing, many learners even at advanced levels often do not form passive constructions correctly (Hinkel, 2002). Moreover, most of the time the instruction of passive voice contains derivation of this structure from the active voice. Wang (2010) urges that passive voice is not a derivation of active voice, which is the outcome of people's different meaning expression. Passive voice describes the whole process of certain event from the patient's point of view. It is a marked form of active voice. Previous studies of the SLA on the passive constructions did make great success and pave the way for future research. However, how the passive is acquired is still open to debate.

Interactional feedback refers to various negotiation and modification strategies such as repetitions, clarification requests, confirmation checks, and the like, which are made by learners or directed to them to facilitate understanding. Such interactions draw the learners' attention implicitly or explicitly to aspects of the target language such as grammatical forms (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). This approach is based on the theory that such interactional strategies highlight linguistic or pragmatic problems, pushing learners to intentionally modify their output in order to produce more accurate and comprehensible utterances (see R. Ellis, 1997).

Researchers also found that negotiated feedback was more effective than feedback provided randomly and nonnegotiatively, though the effects of the two were strongly mediated by the explicit nature of the feedback. Thus, the results of studies on interactional strategies suggest the effectiveness of these strategies in promoting SLA. However, no firm conclusions can yet be drawn, particularly about the role of recasts. For example, Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that, although recasts were the most frequently used interactional strategy by teachers in French Immersion classrooms, elicitation was more effective in encouraging learners to

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reformulate their erroneous utterances. However, a study by Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001a) found that recasts were not only the most frequently used type of strategy, but that they also led to a high degree of uptake of the target forms. Such results indicate that more research is needed to examine the effects of interactional strategies not only in response to different types of grammar features but also in different classroom contexts.

Gass and Varonis (1994) concerned with the potential effects of interaction on language development and in their study, learning was operationalized in terms of comprehension and production. Participants were 16 native speakers of English and 16 non-native speakers of English. Each NS-NNS dyad completed two broad-game tasks in which each participant had a board depicting an outdoor scene. They concluded that there was an evidence of interaction having an effect on L2 production but they stated that no specific claims of learning could be made. They supported the idea that the results of interaction are not necessarily immediate. In other words, through interaction learners may notice a gap between what they produce and what is produced by speakers of the L2. However, the awareness of this mismatch may show up later in time.

Mackey (1999) conducted a research to find out whether conversational interaction facilitates second language development or not. The main prediction in this research was that interaction focused on specific morphosyntactic structures would lead to an increase in production of structures (i.e. question formation) at higher developmental levels. Participants were thirty-four adult ESL learners and six NSs. Mackey divided the participants into five groups and the results showed that two groups had greater improvement than the other groups. At the end the researcher concluded that interaction led to development and more active involvement led to greater development.

In 2002, Kuiken and Vedder examined the effect of interaction in acquiring the grammar of a second language during a dictogloss task. They stated that lately, there has been much research in the field of second language acquisition on whether noticing a particular linguistic form may promote the acquisition of that form. Noticing a linguistic form in the input is thought to operate as a necessary, though not a sufficient condition for processing. They based the study on Skehan's Information Processing Model, which is centered on the concept of noticing. The Information Processing Model emphasizes input processing and interaction of input features, via noticing, with the interlanguage system of the learner. A second line of research concentrated on the role of interaction. They also stated that by means of a quantitative analysis it could not be demonstrated that recognition and fluency of use of the passive differ depending on the degree in which learners are encouraged to interact with each other. And a qualitative analysis makes clear that numerous instances of interaction lead to the noticing of passive forms.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The role of conversation in the development of a second language acquisition (SLA) has been considered by many researchers. Long (1980; cited in Doughty and Long, 2003) refined the notion of conversational structure. He showed that there are differences between NS/NNS conversations and NS/NNS conversations. He noted that besides simple native speaker modification, interactional structure must be taken into account, too. By comparing interactional structure of NS/NS conversations and NS/NNS conversations, he showed that NS/NNS conversations had greater amount of interactional modification.

Hence, scholars suggested a link between learning and interaction and some studies have shown that learning appears to occur as a result of negotiation work. Gass and Varonis (1989) as an instance, reported that corrected forms through negotiation work, will appear later in a

learner's production. While some studies supported the above mentioned idea, some others did not. One of the earliest of such researchers was Sato (1990). She reported that in the area she was investigating, past tense marking, interaction did not foster development.

Taking this assumption into account, this paper aims at investigating the effectiveness of interaction on the development of the specific area of grammar that is English passive. Since it is impossible to control all variables, the present study is conducted under the quasi-experimental pretest posttest design. The subjects were exposed to the pretests, then the treatment and finally the posttests.

Three types of instrumentations including the Solutions Placement Test, the grammar tests and the editing task were used in this study. SPT (Solutions Placement Test) was assigned to homogenize the subjects and validate their level of Solutions (i.e. Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, or Intermediate). Each of the grammar tests used in pretest and posttest included 15 multiple choice questions about passive structure. An editing task contained a passage in which students must distinguish the mistakes and write the correct form of it. Working on the grammatical problems in context is one of the advantages of this task. The authentic texts used here, are preferred to decontextualised examples of language, because the latter illustrate forms and structures in context-free sentences and are generally associated with the explicit method of teaching grammar. The main study lasted 12 weeks including the time required for administering the assessment measures as well as the training sessions. At first a grammar test was administered as the pretest in order for the researcher to capture the initial differences between the groups and configure the student's pre-existing knowledge of passive English structure before the treatment commencement. Both groups were asked to perform editing tasks in 8 sessions and each session required 30 minutes. Although our research concentrated on the acquisition of passives in English, the learners were not aware of this fact. Those in the control group were asked to read the passage, underline the incorrect forms and edit it individually, so that there was no possibility for them to interact. The subjects were asked to write the answers on the papers administered to them and the papers were collected after 30 minutes. Then the correct answers were given to the students, with no reference to the target grammar. After 8 sessions the students sat for the posttest in order to investigate the effect of the treatment. Meanwhile, the students in the experimental group were given the same tasks to be edited by the help of the peers and the teacher. First of all, the students were divided into 10 groups and then the passage was administered. The researcher read out each sentence allowing a short pause to attract the learner's attention to the structure of the context. In order not to distract the students, the researcher tried to stand in the same place. During the pause the students negotiated in order to find out the mistakes and correct them. After that the teacher tried to help them to edit the text. As for the feedback, the teacher sought answers from the students, if it came to be right; an immediate feedback was given by saying 'yes' with no further explanation. In contrast, if the answer was not right, receiving 'no' feedback showed the students the answer was not correct so they tried to find the problem. They were then provided with the correct answer as well as a brief explanation for the first handful of sentences. When the process was done for the whole passage, the researcher read the corrected form of the passage again. Once the eight sessions were held and students received the treatment via interaction, they sat for the posttest in order to investigate the effect of the treatment.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences' software program (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. In order to compare experimental and control groups regarding their performance on the pretests and posttests, two *Paired Samples T-Test* were conducted for the analyses and an *Independent-Sample T-Test* was conducted to compare the means of the two posttests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following two SPSS outputs represent the normal distribution of the scores gained on the pretest and posttest for the research groups.

Table1. Descriptive analysis of the pre-test scores of experimental and control group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-Ex	13.5000	30	1.97833	.36119
Pre-Con	13.1000	30	2.05695	.37555

Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis of pre-test scores of experimental group and control group. In the output presented above, there are 30 participants. The mean, standard deviation and SEM of both groups are shown. As the table says, mean of EG is 13.5 and mean of CG is 13.1. Standard deviation of EG is 19.7 and standard deviation of CG is 2.05. SEM of EG is 0.36 and SEM of CG is 0.37.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the post- test scores of experimental and control group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-Con	13.2667	30	2.08332	.38036
	Post-Ex	14.13	30	2.01	.367

Table 2 the descriptive analysis of post- test scores of experimental group and control group. There are 30 participants. The mean, standard deviation and SEM of both groups are shown. As the table says, mean of CG is 13.2 and mean of EG is 14.1. Standard deviation of CG is 2.08 and standard deviation of EG is 2.01. SEM of CG is 0.38 and SEM of EG is 0.36.

Having calculated the descriptive statistics based on the participants' scores on the pretest and posttest, the researcher conducted some other data analysis statistical methods including the Paired Samples T-Te stand the Independent Sample T-Test to answer the research questions. The results of the each method will be presented and described below and discussed in the subsequent part.

Table 3. Paired Samples Correlations between pre- test and post- test scores of experimental group

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pre-Ex & post-Ex	30	.658	.000

As seen in the table above, the correlation is 0.658; that is above 0.50. So there is a high correlation between the scores yielded on the pretest to the posttest in the experimental group. That is to say, the pretest scores are not statistically different from or lower, in value, than the posttest scores. This shows that the treatment has not affected. On the other hand, the significance value (0.000) is below 0.05 (the level of error the researcher set for the present study) and it shows that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores is not by chance.

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Table 4. Paired Samples Correlations between pre-test and post-test scores of control group

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pre-Con & pos-Con	30	.275	.141

The correlation in the table above is 0.275, that is lower than 0.50. So there is a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores. In other words, there is no significant correlation between the pretest and posttest scores. How they performed on the first test was not correlated with as their performance on the posttest. However, the significance value in the table is 0.141 that is above 0.05. This number shows that the correlation between the pretest and posttest scores in CG is by chance.

Table 6. Group Statistics of post-test scores of experimental and control group

	web	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Compliment	+ex	30	14.1333	2.01260	.36745
	2	30	13.1333	2.02967	.37056

Table 8. Independent Samples Test analysis of the post-test scores of experimental and control group of the study

			t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances									
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances not assumed	.001	.974	1.916	57.996	.060	1.00000	.52186	-.04462	2.04462

As seen in the table above, T value is 1.91. There exists 57.99 degrees of freedom. The Sig. value in the t-value for equality of means equals (.06).The observed T is less than the critical T that is 2. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the means of the two groups are not significantly different is supported and it can safely be stated that there isn't a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of their performance on the posttest. Students who took the GO training didn't have significantly higher performance than those who took no treatment.

CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the effects of interaction on the acquisition of English passive structure by Iranian EFL learners. The comparisons of both group scores did not reveal that the students in experimental group could learn and retain the structure more than the control group. The quantitative findings of the study did not support the hypothesis of the research. However, based on the qualitative analysis of the research during the treatment, it can be stated that subjects noticed to the wrong parts of the texts. The researcher may therefore

conclude that in general the subjects in the experimental group gained some kind of knowledge though minimal in production, because of many other factors which complicates the acquisition process.

The findings of this study about the effectiveness of interaction to grammar acquisition, is in line with the claim made by Kuiken and Vedder (2002) in that the quantitative analysis of the data in their research has not shown the opportunity for interaction during the reconstruction phase and did not result in a better score on the detection test of the passive. On the other hand, this is in contradiction with Gass and Varonis (1994) and Mackey's (1999) study that showed interaction has an effect on L2 production and development.

It is noteworthy that different results obtained here should not be considered as evidence for problems with Interaction Hypothesis (IH); rather it might be related to different factors involved which complicate the relationship between interaction and acquisition.

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