
The Effect of Input Enhancement on Academic Vocabulary Learning among Intermediate EFL Learners in Iran

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Abstract

The present study investigated the impact of textual input enhancement on the academic vocabulary learning among intermediate EFL Learners in Iran. The participants of the present study were altogether 56 EFL learners (28 males and 28 females) whose age ranged from 16 to 21. The 56 participants were randomly assigned to control (comparison) and treatment (experimental) groups. The participants, on the whole, were exposed to 14 sessions of instruction over a 14-week period. The participants received instruction under two unenhanced and textually enhanced conditions, covering one academic passage containing the targeted academic words in each session. The results indicated that the experimental group significantly differed from the control group in that they outperformed the control group in terms of both immediate and delayed receptive and productive vocabulary gain. Thus, exposure to input which is textually enhanced through different techniques (e.g. boldfacing, underlining) facilitates the learning of academic vocabulary. Overall, the present study brought about one major finding which indicated that the employed textual input enhancement (TIE) techniques in the present study helped both receptive and productive academic vocabulary knowledge to grow significantly.

Keywords: input enhancement, EFL, Academic Word List

Introduction

As a building block, vocabulary learning plays a crucial role in any effort to learn a second or foreign language, without which, the process of learning and using a target language would be greatly impeded. Generally, one of the basic rea-

sions for which vocabulary learning receives particular attention is the idea that learners encounter numerous unfamiliar and unknown words while they are processing text (and speech), causing numerous difficulties, especially in comprehension. As many researchers (e.g., Stahl, 1990) have posited, a good reservoir of vocabulary knowledge can lead to a complete comprehension of a text.

Vocabulary studies have played a long and important role in the research of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and also English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Hyland & Tse, 2007). More specifically, academic vocabulary is defined as a core of high-frequency words which are found useful across academic disciplines (Coxhead, 2000), (as opposed to, for example, discipline-specific terms such as medical, legal, mathematical, or chemical terms). Apart from the irrefutable role of vocabulary learning, establishing and using appropriate techniques for vocabulary instruction is of utmost importance. Therefore, in pursuit of developing techniques for vocabulary teaching and learning, the concept of input enhancement (IE) has received specialized attention on the part of many researchers in the field of SLA. Input enhancement as a sub-category of form-focused instruction was proposed by Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) and emphasized the role of making features of a language that express the tense, agreement and number of other features (e.g. accent, syllable stress, agreement, idioms) perceptually more salient.

Review of the Literature

Noticing Hypothesis

The field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in recent years highlights the growing attention to the role of noticing in Second Language Learning (SLL). The attention given to form is important or, at least helpful, for learning of the foreign or second language. This attention will be more beneficial if it takes place during meaning-oriented activities (Leow 1997, 1999, 2001; Robinson 1995; Schmidt 1990, 1993, 1994; Tomlin & Villa 1994). In this vein, it can be implied that the “Noticing Hypothesis” a hypothesis that input does not become intake for language learning unless it is noticed, that is, consciously registered” (Schmidt, 2001, pp. 3-4) and the conscious processes converging towards it have been remarkably addressed in different studies. Thus, for Schmidt (1995), successful second language learning depends on conscious attention to linguistic form. In this

respect, a variety of techniques, ranging from more explicit to very implicit ones, have been used to draw learners' attention to formal aspects of the language. Further, Schmidt (1995) upgrades his definition of noticing as being "nearly isomorphic with attention," (p. 1). In this respect, attention is divided into three distinct but connected constituents, namely, "alertness, orientation, and detection for which awareness is not required" (Tomlin & Villa, 1994, p.199).

Input Enhancement

Input enhancement (IE) is defined as "pedagogical techniques designed to direct L2 learners' attention to formal features in the L2 input" Kim (2006, p. 345). The aforementioned definition has been based on Sharwood Smith's (1991) suggestion that learners' processing of linguistic material can be stimulated by changing of the quality of input. "You can't learn a foreign language (or anything else for that matter) through subliminal perception" (Schmidt, 1990, p. 142). As proposed by O'Bryan (2004) there are fundamentally three methods or techniques for enhancement or manipulation of textual input (TI), namely, 1) making specific features of language salient, known as typographical or textual enhancement, 2) providing a clear-cut explanation for the input, and, 3) provision of modified input. In addition, use of recurrence (repetition) of noticeable input, known as typographical input enhancement, can also cause the input to be more salient.

Basically, IE is built on two main premises; the first one draws on an abundance of comprehensible input during L2 learning, while the second considers the attention of the learners as a prerequisite for learning. (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985). As was alluded to beforehand, input enhancement (IE) is a sub-category of form-focused instruction (FFI) that refers to the recruitment of various techniques by which the "perceptual salience of the target items could be increased in the input" (Long & Robinson 1998, p. 24). In this regard, Sharwood Smith (1993) tried to avoid the confusion surrounding his earlier concept of conscious-raising (CR) which was difficult to observe or measure, and came up with the IE as a label. Sharwood Smith (1993) suggested that input salience can be augmented externally by overt examination of targeted forms, metalinguistic explanations, input flooding, negative evidence (error correction), techniques of garden-path, processing instructions, and textual enhancement (as cited in Gascoigne, 2006).

According to Ellis (1993, 1995), IE is a helpful option in English language teaching (ELT) whose significant role in making learners aware of some particularly targeted form(s) in a learning situation is of great importance. Textual or visual input enhancement (TIE) originates from the idea that sheer exposure to particular L2 forms or structures is not always enough for language acquisition or the mastery of the L2 (Smith, 1993). Consequently, there is a possibility for L2 learners to fail to notice particular nonsalient structures in natural input even after a long exposure, resulting in no intake (Lightbown & Spada, 1990). In this regard, Sharwood Smith (1991) maintains that interpositions by teachers are needed to direct learners' attention to the formal properties of L2, thus helping learners increase their awareness of target structures and process the input in order that it becomes intake. In addition, according to Widdowson (1990) left to their own devices, learners "do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities" (p.167). TIE also draws learners' attention to special characteristics of input that may be not noticed under normal conditions through typographical manipulation (Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013).

Textual Input Enhancement (TIE) techniques include (1) avoiding vowel reduction typical of rapid or casual speech, (2) Slowing down the rate of speech, (3) using exaggerated stress and intonation, (4) extensive repetition of words and phrases, (5) less pre-verbal and more post-verbal modification, (6) use of gestures, (7) underlining and other attention-catching textural techniques such as **boldface**, UPPERCASE LETTERS, color-coding, and so forth (Sharwood Smith, 1991). Textual Enhancement (TE) is defined as an "implicit and unobtrusive way of drawing learners' attention to targeted forms" (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011, p. 41). However, learners' internally generated salience may not always match with the salience created externally by teachers. It even seems that learners ignore evidence in the input in favor of their own internal instantiations of the target language. (Sharwood Smith, 1993). In response to this phenomenon, Sharwood proposed two types of enhancement: 1) typographical, realized as written input enhancement and (2) intonational, that is, oral input enhancement.

To date, a great number of empirical studies involving IE have focused on the acquisition of grammatical rules (e.g., Alanen, 1995; Izumi, 2002; Leow, Egi, Nuevo, & Tsai, 2003; Overstreet, 1998; Shook, 1994; Simard, 2009; White, 1998).

However, due to methodological differences and limitations, there is a lack of confident deductions on the efficacy of IE (Han, Park & Combs, 2008).

Input Enhancement and Vocabulary Learning

Regarding L2 vocabulary, studies on input enhancement have been centered on individual words. Kim (2006) explored the provision of meaning—lexical elaboration and textual enhancement—as two basic considerations that influence the incidental acquisition of vocabulary by Korean learners of English. The outcome was significant when the TEI was used together with lexical elaboration, and it resulted in learners' better recognition of targeted words or forms. IE techniques have been shown to be equally effective as explicit instruction as proven by Fahim and Vaezi (2011) among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The results of the study showed that both visually enhanced input and direct teaching had a significant impact on the acquisition of verb-noun lexical collocations. Similarly, the effectiveness of visual input enhancement was studied by Kim (2010) whose study was designed to increase the salience of unknown English words (in the context of reading a book). The results disclosed that visual input enhancement helped the learners' notice the forms; however, it did not develop the rate of unknown vocabulary acquisition within the reading process. Further studies have shown that semantic input enhancement has been far more effective than visual input enhancement. For instance, Rott (2007) discovered that a higher input frequency was helpful for learners and that the semantic enhancement employing glosses boosted the rate of productive vocabulary gain. Williams (1998) points out that visual input enhancement can intrigue learners' attention to the written form of textual input and this technique can be largely used to direct learners' attention to the vocabulary. There are also other studies that scrutinize the theory of input enhancement not only in the area of vocabulary (Izumi, 2002; Kim, 2008; Maftoon & Sharifi Haratmeh, 2012; Rassaei, & Karbor, 2013) but also in other areas such as grammar, reading (e.g., Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013). Thus, the present study aims to find the effect of typological input enhancement on academic vocabulary learning among EFL university students who study academic social sciences.

Academic Literacy

As a rule of thumb, the type of language used in academic literature is different from both fiction and non-fiction texts. Thus, understanding fictional texts does

not necessarily improve comprehension of academic texts. Academic language is “characterized by complex syntax, academic vocabulary, and a complex discourse style” (Krashen & Brown, 2007, p. 1).

Academic Lexis

As Chamot and O’Malley (1994) propose, academic vocabulary refers to the language which is employed by instructors and students for the sake of obtaining new knowledge, describing conceptual ideas, and developing student’s abstract understanding. Elsewhere, Snow (2011) posits that lack of understanding of academic words will greatly impair academic literacy. Therefore, having a great reservoir of academic vocabulary is essential for text comprehension at the academic level; conversely, these words are seldom seen within the context of general, namely, fictional reading texts.

The Academic Word List

Coxhead (2000) has collected a list of 570-word families that involve about 10% of the vocabulary used in academic texts. This group of words only represents 1.4% of vocabulary in fictional texts and approximately 4% in texts from newspapers (Nation, 2008). All the words in the AWL can be spotted among the 10,000 most common words of English (Nation & Beglar, 2007).

Research Questions

Question 1: Does textual input enhancement have any statistically significant effect on EFL learners’ immediate academic vocabulary learning, as measured by a receptive test?

Question 2: Does textual input enhancement have any statistically significant effect on EFL learners’ delayed academic vocabulary learning as measured by a receptive test?

Question 3: Does textual input enhancement have any statistically significant effect on EFL learners’ immediate academic vocabulary learning as measured by a productive test?

Question 4: Does textual input enhancement have any statistically significant effect on EFL learners’ delayed academic vocabulary learning as measured by a productive test?

Method

Participants and Context:

The participants in this study were altogether 56 EFL learners (28 males and 28 females) whose ages ranged from 16 to 21. They were randomly selected from a pool of a population of 200 learners who were enrolled in general English classes in a private language institute in the city of Tehran and were exposed to four hours of classroom instruction per week. The participants had a prior exposure to EFL in primary and secondary schools, 2 to 4 years of which were formed in private language institutes. Only one of them had the experience of staying in a native English-speaking country. A form of consent for participation was administered with an indication of the general purposes to investigate English language learning and procedures of the study.

Materials and Instruments

Placement Test

In order to evaluate the proficiency level of the population, a sample Oxford Placement Test from Solutions Series, 2nd Edition (Edwards, 2009) containing 50 items testing vocabulary and grammar, was administered. Participants were placed at an intermediate level of language proficiency, B1-B2 based on the CEFR.

Treatment passages

Fourteen reading passages on a range of academic topics were selected randomly from among more than 50 academic passages retrieved from an online website that enhanced the academic words textually (www.uefap.com). The learners who were assigned to an experimental group, were exposed to passages whose academic words were bold-faced, italicized, and underlined within instructional sessions, whereas the control groups' academic words within the passages were not enhanced through any IE techniques.

Vocabulary Knowledge Scale Test

Prior to forming the two groups, the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) Test of Paribakht and Wesche (1993), containing 117 academic vocabulary items was administered to the participants to check their prior knowledge of academic words

and to ensure that they were unfamiliar with the target words. The Vocabulary Knowledge Scale requires test takers to look at lexical items and then choose from among the following 5 options: (1) I don't remember having seen this word before, (2) I have seen this word before but I don't know what it means, (3) I have seen this word before and I think it means, (4) I know this word: it means, and (5) I can use this word in a sentence.

Immediate and Delayed Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Posttest

The immediate and delayed vocabulary post-test contained two sections. The first section, receptive tests, was designed to measure partial knowledge of the academic vocabulary and included multiple-choice items (30 questions of 4 options to test the 117 selected academic words). The productive vocabulary test contained a 20-item multiple choice test and 10 questions for which the participants were required to find the words whose letters were randomly highlighted. The vocabulary tests both for control and treatment group were selected based on the exercises in *Focus on Academic Words in English* by Baleghizadeh (2015).

Piloting

In order to ensure the reliability of the productive and receptive tests, similar tests were administrated to a similar population in terms of age language proficiency. Based on the Oxford Placement Test the participants of the pilot group were reported to be at an intermediate level based on the CEFR framework of reference. The participants commented on the mechanics of the test. They mentioned any problems with the test instructions, instances where items were not obvious enough, and formatting and other typographical errors and/or issues were considered following the feedback provided by the pilot testing participants. The revised productive and receptive vocabulary tests based on the received feedback were prepared to be used in the real test situation.

Procedures

Target Words Selection

In order to select target words, the researchers analyzed participants course books which were being used at the time of the study. The word lists provided at the back of each course book, namely, the Top Notch: English for Today's World

3A-3B, Summit 1A-1B, Summit 2A-2B 2nd edition by Saslow and Ascher (2011), and Ready for First (3rd ed) by Norris (2013) were analyzed. Based on Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List of 570 academic headwords, the EFL participants of this study had already covered 453 words within their courses and 117 academic words were unknown to them. To make sure that participants were unfamiliar with all these words the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) Test of Paribakht and Wesche (1993) containing all 117 academic target words was administered to the samples to check their prior knowledge of academic words. VKS results indicated that 71.4 percent of the participants (N=40) chose the first option ("I don't remember having seen this word before."), 26.8 of the participants (N=15) checked the second option which was "I have seen this word before but I don't know what it means," and finally only 1.17 (N=1) of learners selected option 5 ("I can use this word in a sentence.").

Instruction Sessions

For the participants in both control and experimental groups, 14 sessions of instruction were provided within seven weeks. Each session took an average of 35 minutes for completion.

Data Analysis

The collected data with reference to each and every research question in the present study were analyzed using SPSS software version 23. The two group of control (comparison) and experimental (treatment), each of which attended 14 sessions of instruction under two enhanced and unenhanced conditions. As to the research questions which scrutinized the gain of vocabulary knowledge in terms of receptive and productive and reading comprehension achievement the control (comparison) and experimental (treatment) groups who experienced two sets of receptive and productive tests under immediate and delayed conditions were analyzed using t-tests at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Research Questions 1 and 2

In reference to the first and second research questions the study sought to answer, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the two group

means. In this regard, the gain of academic vocabulary, as measured by immediate and delayed receptive vocabulary knowledge tests under two unenhanced (control group) and enhanced (treatment group) conditions, was evaluated. As can be observed in Tables 1 and 2, the results of the immediate receptive test (IRT) in unenhanced group ($M=16.9$, $SD=4.03$) and enhanced group ($M=23.2$, $SD=2.43$) conditions, there was a statistically significant difference between the control and treatment groups ($t=7.063$, $p=0.00$).

Likewise, the results of the delayed receptive test (DRT) show that between unenhanced group ($M=15.4$, $SD=2.92$) and enhanced group ($M=20.79$, $SD=2.54$) conditions, there was a statistically significant difference ($t=7.364$, $p=0.00$) between the control and treatment groups.

Table 1. Group Statistics for Immediate and Delayed Receptive Tests

Type of Test	Group Statistics				
	Conditions	N	Mean (30)	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Immediate Receptive Test	Unenhanced	28	16.8929	4.03080	.76175
	Enhanced	28	23.1786	2.43514	.46020
Delayed Receptive Test	Unenhanced	28	15.3929	2.92295	.55239
	Enhanced	28	20.7857	2.54380	.48073

Table 2. Independent Samples for Immediate (IRT) and Delayed (DRT) Receptive Tests

Types of Tests		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
IRT	Equal variances assumed	8.589	.005	-7.063	54	.000	-6.28571
DR T	Equal variances assumed	.037	.849	-7.364	54	.000	-5.39286

Research Questions 3 and 4

With regard to the third and fourth research questions (productive vocabulary development), an independent-samples t-test was run to compare the mean of the two groups. As can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, the results of the immediate productive test (IPT) in unenhanced group ($M=14.75$, $SD=3.23$) and enhanced group

($M=22.71$, $SD=3.69$) conditions, there was statistically significant difference ($t = 8.583$, $p = 0.00$) between the control and treatment groups. In the same vein, the results of the delayed productive test (DRT) show that between the unenhanced group ($M=11.67$, $SD=3.07$) and enhanced group ($M=20.85$, $SD=2.77$) there was a statistically significant difference between the control and treatment groups ($t = 11.722$, $p = 0.00$). Textual input enhancement techniques had a significant effect on productive vocabulary.

Table 3. Group Statistics for Immediate and Delayed Productive Tests.

Group Statistics					
Type of Test	Conditions	N	Mean (out of 30)	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Immediate Productive Test	Unenhanced	28	14.7500	3.23894	.61210
	Enhanced	28	22.7143	3.69040	.69742
Delayed Productive Test	Unenhanced	28	11.6786	3.07985	.58204
	Enhanced	28	20.8571	2.77174	.52381

Table 4. Independent Samples for Immediate (IPT) and Delayed (DPT) Productive Tests

Independent Samples Test							
Types of Tests		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
IPT	Equal variances assumed	.091	.764	-8.583	54	.000	-7.96429
DPT	Equal variances assumed	1.332	.254	-11.722	54	.000	-9.17857

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the impact of Textual Input Enhancement (TIE) on intermediate EFL learners’ academic vocabulary learning. The results reveal that exposing the learners to the textually enhanced input increased learning, as seen not only by receptive, but also productive vocabulary tests, providing further support for Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis.

In line with the previous studies whose focus was on IE, the present study used several techniques of input enhancement (e.g. such as **boldface**, UPPERCASE

CASE LETTERS, and color-coding. Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) claims that TIE aids the learners with the process through which input turns into the intake as it underscores linguistic forms which typically are overlooked.

The learning of vocabulary takes place incidentally. While the learner is consciously striving to comprehend the context, his or her language processing is being affected by the increased perceptual saliency of specific target forms in the input. With regard to the mentioned claim, Sharwood Smith (1993) emphasizes that the rationale behind IE technique is the probability of increasing the saliency of a form so as to promote the reconstruction of developing interlanguage system of the learners.

With regard to receptive vocabulary gains, the results of this study are in line with Alanen (1995) and Lee and Lee (2012) showing a better performance with enhanced. As for productive vocabulary gains, our results are in line with Rott's (2007) study in which glossing and use of input enhancement techniques together with increasing the frequency of occurrence of the targeted forms resulted in more productive vocabulary gain.

In sum, the results of the present study confirm those of Izumi (2002), Jourdenais et al. (1995), Leow (2001) and Lee and Lee (2012) and discovered that TE could be an influential tool in the process of drawing learners' attention to the target forms. In addition, what Shook (1994) and Jourdenais et al. (1995), whose studies showed a positive effect of textual enhancement, had in common was that their participants had background knowledge of the constructions of the targeted forms. And as to this, we might draw the conclusion that prior knowledge can accelerate students' noticing in the conditions which are textually enhanced. Gass (1997) postulated that what is considered as the frequency of the target form, namely, the number of the times a specific form occurs influences the noticing and therefore highly repetitive exposure can result in noticing more easily.

Conclusion

Without doubt developing strategies together with techniques for expanding vocabulary knowledge and promoting reading comprehension has always been among the concerns of ESL researchers and material developers. In this respect, the present quasi-experimental study scrutinized the impact of textual input enhancement on the academic vocabulary learning among intermediate EFL Learners

in Iran. The study compared two (control and experimental) groups of 28 members in terms of productive and receptive vocabulary gain by the means of immediate and delayed posttests. Overall, the results revealed that use of TIE was statistically significant in the promotion of both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge under enhanced condition.

Considering these results, it can be concluded that not only Focus on Form instruction (e.g., Laufer & Girsai, 2008) but also implicit types of Form-focused instruction that are less presumptuous (Doughty, 2003) should be considered by teachers and language practitioners. We suggest that further research in this area investigate aural IE techniques with the focus not only on individual lexical items, but collocations and idioms, as well. In this respect, use of subtitled videos underscoring idiomatic expressions or movies' catch phrases may prove effective.

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