THE ROLE OF EXPLICIT CONTRASTIVE INSTRUCTION IN LEARNING DIFFICULT L2 GRAMMATICAL FORMS: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO LANGUAGE AWARENESS

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Abstract

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Most of the scholars in the fields of language learning and teaching assert that, when confronted with difficult grammatical forms, learners often conduct an L1 - L2 comparison and since this comparison is implicit, it may result in the formation of wrong rules due to an incomplete L2 knowledge. (Selinker, 1992; Robinson, 1995). Here, the purpose was to evaluate one specific approach pertaining to the findings of contrastive analysis referred to as contrastive instruction. It provides a kind of inter-lingual comparison on the basis of contrastive analysis database. Such an approach may facilitate the learning process especially if the structures are difficult with respect to the learners' L1. Here, an attempt was made to induce contrastive data in the classroom. Testing the null hypotheses (Ho) demanded an experimental research. The sample consisted of some 450 female high school students of Sabzevar. To do first, a validated proficiency test based on University Entrance Examinations (UEE) was given to some 145 pre-university students. Here, two structures; active/ passive voice and conditional sentences provided evidence for our supposed scale of difficulty. The supposed difficult forms were elaborated through the due contrastive instruction approach performed by two groups of high school teachers. Data collection was conducted via two controlled recognition and production tasks administered during two subsequent post-tests. The t-value needed for our selected significance level of 0.05 for the two-tailed t-test was 1.64. The result of this comparison revealed that the application of contrastive linguistic input (CLI) to Iranian EFL high school students would improve their status as to internalizing those mentioned difficult structures (Ho1). As to the mentioned subsidiary hypothesis (Ho2), we also cared for other factors such as 'maturation' or age. The intention was that ' maturation' might have a facilitative impact in the process of learning in this regard. We compared two groups from first and second grade students of high school and did the same task we carried out for the control and experimental groups in order to quest for the effect of the due factor; age. We had two groups in the population; first and second grade students of high school. This aspect was also investigated on both recognition and production tasks. Again, an independent sample t-test was selected for the statistical measurements. The t-test observed for these groups showed the predominance of the second over the first grade students just in recognition tasks. Here it implies that since the contrastive instruction input can strengthen the learners' metalinguistic knowledge and due to their age, second grade students benefited much more than the first grade students

concerning recognition task while this is not the case for production tasks because, in such sorts of tasks the learners need some other skills too.

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Introduction

Teaching grammar to EFL learners has long been considered a major concern in the whole process of language learning pedagogy. It has, in effect, been the object of numerous studies, each of which has its own contribution to the field. Many research projects have been carried out in order to probe into the validity of different methodologies as it relates to effective grammar teaching.

Statement of the Problem

According to current language learning theories, while internalizing a language, learners often make a series of hypotheses about the structure of the language which they test and either abandon or preserve. This issue has puzzled many researchers in the field of language pedagogy. In recent years, most of the research studies have focused on the contribution of "input" to the learners in order to better establish L_2 learning of grammatical forms. The present study investigates the effect which linguistic input enhancement has on the learning of difficult grammatical forms in EFL settings in high school Iranian students. The due enhanced input concerns the contrastive linguistic input (CLI). In the current study, an attempt has been made to shed greater light on some aspects of this problem in view of the fact that it might bring about some critical thought among English teachers and also provide an indication of what is involved in the learners' minds.

Research Questions and Hypothesis:

In the present study, the questions which have received attention are: (1) Does inducing explicit contrastive instruction of the two languages, first with target, facilitate the learning of difficult L_2 forms? (2) How is wrong hypothesis about L_2 established among L_2 learners? (3) Can maturation (age), as a subsidiary factor, affect the facilitation of CLI?

To approve the desired results on the aforementioned research questions, the following null hypotheses were proposed:

Ho1: There is no relationship between implementing explicit CLI in the classroom and learning difficult L_2 forms.

If the results of statistical measures indicate the superiority of the experimental over the control group in subsequent production and recognition tasks, it is hypothesized that explicit CLI facilitates learning difficult L_2 forms.

Ho2: There is no interaction between 'maturation' as a subsidiary factor and better performance while learning difficult L_2 forms via explicit CLI.

If the results of statistical measures prove the superiority of second over the first grade students in subsequent production and recognition tasks, it is hypothesized that

maturation (age) can be considered to be a crucial factor while implementing CLI for learning difficult L_2 forms.

A Review of Related Literature
Language Awareness: Ways of Knowing

All language learners can develop different sorts of linguistic knowledge. They can develop a chomsky-competence and/or universal intuitions about their first language or about a foreign language that they are learning. There is a second sort of linguistic knowledge people can have. They can develop metacognitions of their personal versions of their mother tongue (MT) and the second or foreign language quite separately. Still, there is another sort of knowledge to take into account and that is the knowledge of relationships holding between one's two languages; it can be the same as cross-linguistic awareness in the process of learning another language. All these three kinds of linguistic knowledge could be right or wrong. As we can see positive or negative L_1 transfer within L_2 learners.

Salient Input and L2 Acquisition

Exposure to linguistic input is a necessary condition in any language learning situation. This present study focuses on the role, which input enhancement or saliency has in engaging the L_2 learners' cognitive processes in instructional settings. Input enhancement or 'induced input' on the other hand, concentrates on teacher or textbook induced linguistic input which can be manipulated or modified by instruction (Sherwood Smith, 1993). When the input presented to the student is noticeable, we state the input is *salient*. Noticing is considered a crucial factor as far as the input saliency is concerned. There are still two potential sources of saliency for any target language (TL) form. First, TL form itself may be inherently salient, and so universally noticeable. Secondly, the saliency may be *contrast-dependent* or cross-linguistic.

Contrastive Linguistic Input (CLI)

Contrastive analysis (CA) of the structure of two languages has been for a long time a technique to enable one to predict problems encountered or to explain errors made by L_2 learners. But, the present study does not use CA to predict difficulty or explain errors. It assigns a new role to CA, which is compatible with recent developments in L_2 acquisition theory. In this study, CA is used for the definition of salient input, which, we assume, might assist L_2 learners. Contrastive linguistic features comprise verbal statements summarizing interlingual differences. Here the L_2 learners notice the two interlingual forms and conduct the comparison quite explicitly. So, it seems that such CLI might facilitate the learning of the target grammatical structures. A possible justification for using such input (CLI) is that since learners, confronting with difficult grammatical forms, often conduct an L_1 - L_2 comparison and the fact that this comparison takes place implicitly within the learners' minds, it is advisable to make such inter-lingual comparisons quite explicit on the part of the learners. Because, in this way the teacher has a direct access to the implicit formulations that the students might verbalize by themselves. Since their L_2 knowledge is still incomplete, they may take the risk of non-comparables. They may

make wrong rules or even right rules but for the wrong purposes. The time and the place of enhancing the input are of crucial importance.

Core Conception of C-R Within EFL

C-R is highly student-centred in nature. Here, the teacher, instead of being the sole-source of knowledge, acts as a facilitator, providing appropriate opportunities for the learner to gain insights into the target language through exploration. Such exploration inevitably results in erroneous target language production. One feature of C-R appears to be that its practitioners do not demand immediate mastery or accurate output upon instruction. As the pioneers in this approach report, this is because C-R is not the end product but a means by which L_2 can be acquired. This is not to say that errors are left untreated, only that it is assumed that learners require time to internalize the new language and incorporate it into their inter – language systems. From the available literature, it is clear that a C-R approach has two intended outcomes. Firstly, it develops students' strategies for generating, testing, evaluating and modifying hypotheses or generalizations about the target language by utilizing their explicit and implicit knowledge. In this way, students can perform what Stern (1992: 139) calls "structural analysis of the target language." The second outcome is as the result of the first one. Learners achieve a degree of autonomy. C-R facilitates student's development of strategies for autonomous learning. C-R breaks that cycle of the generation of teachers who inherently instill in the student the sense of depending upon the teacher.

L_1 and L_2 Micro-Systems

How can EEL learners call upon the totality of their verbal skills (including those in L_1) and their metalinguistic faculties to surmount the obstacles that they encounter in their efforts to communicate in L_2? Here, the notion of micro-systems in the sense defined by Gentilhome (1985) comes to the surface. Contact takes place for the learner in the framework of his interlanguage. This implies most often not two systems (in the sense in which Saussure says that language is a system in which everything holds together) taken as two different abstracts, but two *micro-systems* extracted from the learner's competence in L_1 and L_2 respectively. These micro-systems are selected in a grenerally unpredictable and variable manner. They are also structured in a particular way compared with the competence of the ideal native speakers. According to Gentilhome, micro-systems are organized in a flexible, amendable and provisional manner, in the sense that they are susceptible to rapid and limited internal restructuring without much resistance. This natural openness to change constitutes one of the conditions of learning. Since there is no learning without change.

The process of co-presence of the learners' L_1 and L_2 comes about as a function of problems to be solved. As, by juxtaposing segments formed in several languages, the learner makes connections among these languages, and thus establishes the basis for a contrastive conceptualization. In this study, we are going to raise such contrastive conceptualization in order to establish better learning within L_2 learners. Such explicit contrastive comparisons would take the form of grammatical comments and explanations provided by the teacher before intensive drilling or other forms of language practice.

Method

Subjects

A number of 450 subjects participated in this research. The subjects were all Persian speakers of English. They were selected randomly from a group of female high school students studying in Sabzevar. At the very first stage of the research, some 145 female students attending in pre-university level were randomly selected. They participated in the pre-test of the study taking a proficiency test. The intention was to estimate the general knowledge of the subjects prior to the study in order to determine the basic areas of difficulty as to grammar knowledge. The second group of the subjects, the remaining 305, were attending the first and second grade of high school. Some 170 were selected from among the students of the first grade of high school and the rest, about 135, from among the students of the second grade of high school.

Instruments

At the very first stage, it was intended to estimate the general status of the students for determining the possible areas of difficulty as to grammar knowledge. In order to accomplish this task, three different instruments were utilized. First, a validated proficiency test based on University Entrance Examinations 'UEE' was administered to some 145 pre-university students. The test involved 26 items based on what they had learned as to grammar knowledge in the last three years of high school. Each item of the test was scored as one point. No penalty had been determined for wrong answers. Then, a questionnaire was also distributed among the students in order to confirm the results. In this questionnaire, they had been asked to verify in which areas of grammatical structures, they had difficulty learning and internalizing the rules. A third task was also done in order to further confirm the results. A similar questionnaire was distributed among some 17 experienced English teachers. The statistical analysis, with all the tasks paralleled to one another, revealed that more than half of the students had difficulty learning two structures; *active/passive voice (A/P)* and *conditional sentences (CS)*. These two structures are taught in the first and second grade of high school respectively.

Procedure

After determining the difficult grammatical forms, the next task concerned the random selection of the control and experimental groups in order to examine the main intention of the study which was testifying the effect of CLI on the learning of those difficult forms. Thus, some 170 first grade students of high school were randomly divided into two control and experimental groups. It was intended to examine CLI on the learning of active/passive sentences. The same task was also carried out in some 135 students of second grade of high school. The assumption was to examine the effect of maturation too. The structures proven to be difficult for these students were conditional sentences.

Treatment

In the current study, it has been tried to examine and control the nature of input given to EFL learners. The procedures followed a sort of input based on contrastive linguistic features of the two languages in EFL settings. After giving the mentioned input to the learners, two tasks were given to both control and experimental groups. They were two subsequent recognition and production tasks. Recognition tasks concerned a recognition test for the aim of realizing errors by the students. They consisted of 20 test items containing some errors based on the input given to the learners. Total mark for each student was scored 10. The recognition tasks were

used to measure the subjects' ability to recognize relevant forms as separate entities. Such tasks were chosen to ensure maximum control over the measured variables. In production tasks, on the other hand, the learners were asked to produce what they had learned concerning the grammatical forms they were given. The rational behind including production task was that of the frequency of occurrence of the selected structures in written English. Total mark for each student was scored 10. Reliability fir the tasks given to the subjects was rated by the *Pearson Product-Movement Correlation* for between tasks. Since two tasks: recognition and production were given to the learners, it was tried to use the mentioned correlation formula for *between tasks*. The following tables (1&2) show the reliability for the two tasks given to first and second grade students of high school.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation for the first grade students' (between tasks)

Correlations

	VAR00001	VAR00002
Pearson Correlation	1.000	.225*
Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.038
N	85	85
Pearson Correlation	.225*	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	.
N	85	85

*· Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Pearson Correlation for the second grade students' (between tasks)

Correlations

	VAR00003	VAR00004
Pearson Correlation	1.000	.195
Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.105
N	70	70
Pearson Correlation	.195	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	.105	.
N	70	70

Obviously the P-values in *0.05* level is less than the required 0.05 level. Thus the (**Ho)** is rejected that is indicated as to there is no relationship between the two tasks. Thus, confirming the reliability of the two tasks.

Results

Statistical analysis of the variables was conducted to test the hypothesis as to the effect of CLI and learning difficult grammatical forms in both first and second grade of high school students. **T**-test was selected for the statistical measurements in order to test the null hypotheses. The acceptance level has been set at .05.

Table 3. Variability Due to the Effects of CLI *(First grade / recognition tasks)*

T-Critical	Two-tailed Hypothesis	d.f.	T.Observed	
1.64	0.05	168	5.676	P>0.05

Table 4. Variability Due to the Effects of CLI *(First grade / production tasks)*

T-Critical	Two-tailed Hypothesis	d.f.	T.Observed	
1.64	0.05	168	3.817	P>0.05

Table 5. Variability Due to the Effects of CLI *(Second grade / recognition tasks)*

T-Critical	Two-tailed Hypothesis	d.f.	T.Observed	
1.64	0.05	133	6.846	P>0.05

Table 6. Variability Due to the Effects of CLI *(Second grade / production tasks)*

T-Critical	Two-tailed Hypothesis	d.f.	T.Observed	
1.64	0.05	133	5.180	P>0.05

In this survey, an attempt was also made to probe into the effect of 'age' on learning difficult L2 forms via contrastive linguistic input. Since, we had two groups of population; first and second grade students of high school, we wondered if *maturation* could aid the learner to grasp the grammatical forms better while introducing such input (CLI). Here, *second* grade students were compared with the *first* grade students. For the purposes of the study, just the experimental groups in each first and second grade students were considered. Thus, the control groups were excluded from this phase of the study. Since, they had not been confronted with CLI. This aspect was also investigated on both *recognition* and *production* tasks

Table 7. Variability Due to Maturation *(First vs. Second / recognition tasks)*

T-Critical	Two-tailed Hypothesis	d.f.	T.Observed	
1.64	0.05	153	3.642	P>0.05

Table 8. Variability Due to Maturation *(First vs. Second / production tasks)*

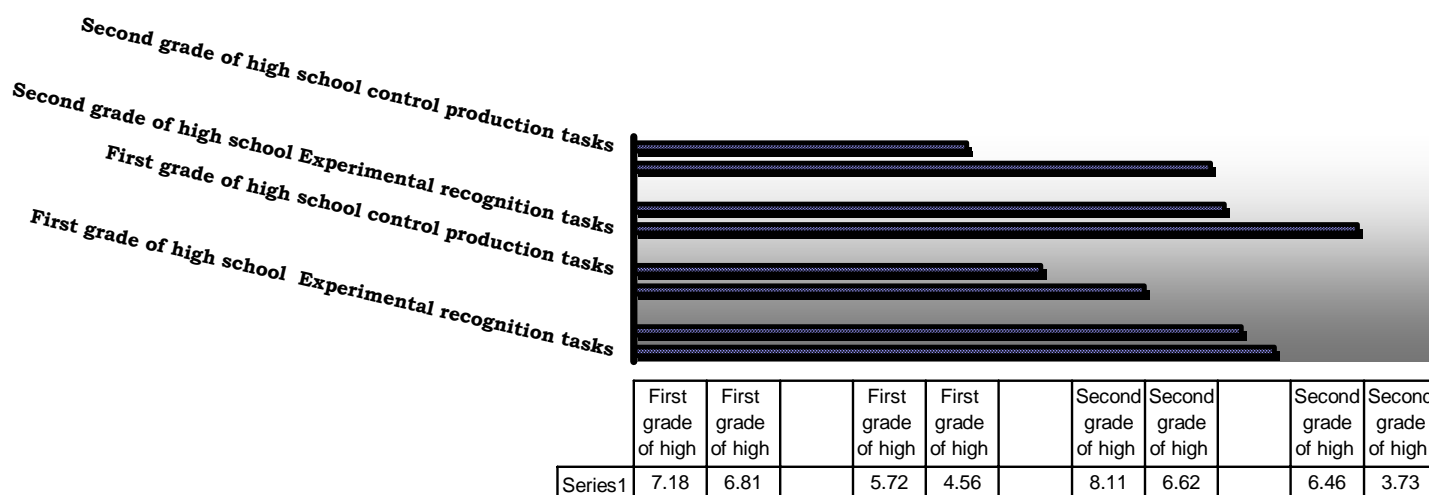| T-Critical	Two-tailed Hypothesis	d.f.	T.Observed	
1.64	0.05	153	.326	P<0.05

Discussion

In conclusion, the final results of the study indicated that following the use of contrastive linguistic input, the scores of the experimental group on recognition and production measurement tasks concerning difficult L_2 forms were significantly higher than the scores gained by the control groups in both first and second grade students. In other words, Persian speakers of English benefited from explicit exposure to CLI and the C-R tasks, which facilitated the subsequent learning of the target grammatical forms. The experimental groups achieved significantly better results on all tasks in comparison with the control groups who learnt the same structures implicitly from comprehensible input only, (Figure1). This study supports Irit Kupferberg' experiment (1996) with the Hebrew speakers of English. He had done the same procedures within some high school students in Tel Aviv, Israel. Kupferberg has reported that the experimental group of his study had achieved significantly better results on all tasks in comparison with the control group. In light of these results, CLI can be viewed as a foreign language learning facilitator of such difficult grammatical forms in FL settings.

The present study had still one subsidiary hypothesis. As stated earlier, it attempted to examine the effect of maturation as a subsidiary factor in inducing CLI for EFL learners. As the final results clearly indicated, the difference between the first and second grade students was significant just on recognition tasks but not on production tasks (Table 8). Such result seems to weaken our claims. It implies that age could not be considered an effective factor while using contrastive-oriented instruction concerning production tasks. In fact, this could be a good indication of what is involved in EFL settings especially in high school situations. This means that the other processes required for a fair L2 production might have not been activated within the learners' mind. All these factors might have caused the second grade students not to score better as far as the production tasks were concerned. Still, one more point is that since CLI has strengthened the second grade students as to the mata-linguistic knowledge on the specified forms (CS) then second grade students have gained better results just in recognition tasks because such tasks call

for some meta-linguistic knowledge. However, first grade students could not have done a good job as compared with the former.

The present study has some **theoretical** and **practical** implications. Theoretically, it contributes to our understanding of the connection between input enhancement and explicit foreign language learning which involves noticing (detecting and interlingual comparing). From practical point of view, contrastive input may facilitate learning grammatical rules as well as other L2 components. If further research proves this fact, it should be incorporated into all teaching programs and language teachers ought to take such contrastive-oriented tasks serious and use them as teaching and reinforcing approaches for presenting new grammatical forms within classroom situations. Material developers should also reckon on such contrastive formats in compiling new textbooks for language learners. Hereby, it is hoped all language adminimstrators and English teachers pay attention to the mentioned pedagogical implications and regard this short survey as a useful guideline in implementing the contrastive features of the two languages concerning high school textbooks and consequently in language classrooms.

Figure 1. A comparative chart exhibiting the overall performance of the groups(first and second grade students) in both recognition and production tasks and in both levels; experimental and control groups.

	First grade of high	First grade of high		First grade of high	First grade of high		Second grade of high	Second grade of high		Second grade of high	Second grade of high
Series1	7.18	6.81		5.72	4.56		8.11	6.62		6.46	3.73

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