

The Effect of Degree of Attention on L2 Learners' Oral Task Performance

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Abstract. Since the introduction of Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis in Second Language Acquisition, there has been a plethora of studies with controversial results on the role of the nature of attention to form within communication and its subsequent effect on L2 learners oral and written task performance in terms of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. One of the neglected areas of research regarding form-focused instruction concerns the effects of intensive and extensive focus on form on L2 learners' task production. The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of intensive and extensive F-O-F on EFL learners' oral task performance. For this purpose, 60 participants with intermediate level of proficiency based on their performance on OPT (Oxford Placement Test) were chosen randomly as the participants who were divided into 3 groups of 20. A pictorial narrative task was employed as the means of data collection. The collected data were quantified and measured in terms of recently introduced measures in SLA literature. ANOVA and T-test were employed as the statistical means of analysis. The results of analysis revealed significant differences in three linguistic domains mentioned among the performance of the groups. The study carries significant implications for EFL teachers, LA researchers, as well as task and syllabus designers.

1. Introduction

Second language learners' task performance could be affected by many factors such as task feature, task type, planning time, task complexity, focus on form as well as the nature and degree of attention to form. Essential to the studies of second language acquisition and foreign language learning is the degree of attention and explicitness to draw the learners' attention to the target language features. The main theoretical background of the study lies on Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis. This theory and L2 conscious process have been considered as one of the most important theories of L2 acquisition and has been quoted by many researchers as prominent literature in the research (Ellis, 1993, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Lee, 1997; and many others). Noticing can be regarded as the means whereby L2 learners gain mastery over the input they receive. According to Schmidt (1990, 2001), "subliminal language learning is impossible" (p.149) and only what is consciously noticed can be converted into intake.

To justify the position argued, Gass (1991) states that input can only be accessible for intake into a language learners' existing conceptual system when it is consciously noticed. Since there is a gap in SLA literature on the effectiveness of degree of attention controlled in this study through extensive and intensive oral corrective feedback on L2 learners' task performance. The present study is going to contribute to the current literature on the topic, theories of SLA, and actual practice of provision of difficult type of corrective feedback and degree of attention on foreign language learners' oral task performance in terms of accuracy. Understanding the nature of attention to form and the degree of attention to form will reveal some useful information about the nature of cognitive processes involved in language processing. This study aimed at scrutinizing the effect of the degree and the nature of noticing and attention as one of the rarely explored factors affecting L2 learners' task performance in terms of linguistic domain of the accuracy. The study is also hoped to deepen understanding of the SLA researchers' on the nature of the functioning of each type of focus on form activities intensively and extensively.

2. Literature Review

Oral corrective feedback has been the focus of SLA researchers for a long time. Lyster and Ranta (1997) investigated the oral error correction that students received in immersion classroom and found that recasts were "...less successful at drawing learners' attention to their non-target output- at least in content-based classrooms where recasts risk being perceived by young learners as alternative or identical forms" (p. 207). They also concluded that although recasts were most widely used corrective feedback technique (55%), the uptake of the learners was the lowest of all types. The result of the study carried out by Lyster and Ranta (1997) showed preference for the implicit feedback types such as elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, and repetitions, which do not include giving learners the correct form and provides opportunities for self-correction.

Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) conducted a study to investigate the effects of recasts and metalinguistic clues on learners' interlanguage development of past tense '-ed' with a pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test design. The results of the study showed that both two experimental groups exceeded the control group which received no correction in learning of the target structure. Within the experimental group the learners who received metalinguistic explanations outperformed learners who had received recasts in immediate post-test. The superiority of metalinguistic explanation group over recast group became significant in delayed post-test results; it shows the long-term, gradual benefits of metalinguistic explanations as time passed.

Similarly, Nassaji (2007) conducted a study investigating the usefulness of recasts and elicitation. The results of the study showed that explicit corrective feedback led to better learner repairs in comparison to implicit corrective feedback.

Chu (2011) also found significant difference between teacher's error correction and Chinese L2 learners' of English in terms of oral accuracy. However, what remains missing in the literature of focus on form is the effect of the degree of noticing and attention (intensive/extensive) on EFL learners' oral production (Ellis, 2008).

Fahim and Hashemnejad (2011) also studied the effect of mixed pattern vs. separate pattern of providing corrective feedback on EFL learners' accuracy. They concluded that the coded feedback was much more effective than simple error location.

Khatib and Bagherkazemi (2011) studied the effect of learners' output on enhancing EFL learners' short-term and long-term learning of simple present tense. The results of the study revealed a trend toward significance within three weeks of experimental period. The results showed clear benefit arising from pushing students to produce SL output for the short-term and long-term learning of simple present tense. However, offering more output opportunities over time might be the key factor to the efficiency of learner output in the acquisition of the target language forms. In line with the

findings of this study, one can argue that intensive, repeated and frequent drawing of learners' attention to linguistic forms might lead to more accuracy.

Rahimpour and Maghsoudpour (2011) studied the effect of form-focused instruction and task-based instruction on L2 learners' interaction and language development. The results of the study revealed that FFI group outperformed TBI group in terms of interaction.

Rassaei and Moeinzadeh (2011) studied the effects of three types of corrective feedback on L2 learners' acquisition of English 'Wh' forms by 134 Iranian EFL learners of English. These three forms of feedback types included metalinguistic, recasts, and clarification requests. The participants in each groups participated in meaning-focused tasks. The results of data analysis revealed that metalinguistic and recasts groups outperformed the clarification request group. The group who received metalinguistic corrective feedback outperformed the others in post-test and delayed post-test.

Hejazi (2012) also studied the effect of teachers' error correction on 95 Iranian EFL learners' speech accuracy. The result of the study proved significant differences between the error correction and L2 learners' accuracy in EFL context.

Farahani and Sarkhosh (2012) studied the effect of different types of textual input enhancement on 114 EFL learners' intake of English subjunctive mood. The results of the study proved the effectiveness of intensive underlining textual enhancement format in inducing the intake of target structure, i.e. input enhancement was effective when it was intensive.

Rahimi and Riasati (2012) conducted an experimental study to investigate the effect of explicit, direct, and intensive instruction on 20 Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of acquisition of discourse markers in oral output. The participants received five sessions of explicit instruction on discourse markers, consuming 20 minutes of class time. The results of the analysis revealed that learners receiving explicit instruction outperformed the control group. The results of the study lent support to the effectiveness and usefulness of explicit, intensive instruction.

Rasaei, Moeinzadeh, and Youhanaee (2012) studied the effect of corrective feedback on the acquisition of implicit and explicit knowledge of 86 L2 Iranian EFL learners. Three intact EFL classes were assigned into three groups: two experimental and one control. Learners in one experimental group received recasts whenever they made errors, during task-based interactions with their interlocutors while learners in the second group received metalinguistic corrective feedback for the errors they made while the learners in control group performed the same task without any corrective feedback on their errors. Timed and untimed grammaticality judgment tasks as well as elicited oral imitation task were employed to collect data. The results of analysis indicated that metalinguistic corrective feedback was more effective than recasts in promoting the acquisition both implicit and explicit knowledge.

Since there is a gap in literature on the effectiveness of intensive and extensive focus on form on L2 learner oral and written performances reflected in accuracy, fluency, and complexity, this study is going to contribute to the current literature. Most of the studies done on this issue have just focused on the effectiveness of focus on form on L2 learner performance either on oral or written production without taking into account the role of the degree of explicitness of attention to form either extensive or intensive. According to Ellis (2003) extensive focus on form involves drawing learners' attention on the whole range of linguistic items involving various grammatical, lexical, and phonological non-targets like forms produced by the learner while intensive focus on form involves drawing the learners' attention repeatedly to specific linguistic items, particularly a grammatical one. Furthermore, according to Rezaei, Mozaffari, and Hatef (2011) in Salimi (2012) most of the studies on oral and written corrective feedback examined the efficacy of corrective feedback in a very short period of time ignoring the fact stated by Brock et al (1986) cited in Kim (2009, p. 19) that "a learner may require certain amount of time to make use of negative input, and in the interim will continue to operate with old, as-yet-unmodified hypothesis". This can indicate that the long-term effects of corrective feedback need to be investigated. In line with this argument Schmidt (1990, 1995, 2001)

argues that awareness affects second language learning, understanding is of importance in learning, and that most second language learning is explicit. He argues that much more research needs to be done on the role of consciousness in second language learning. He argues that the role of unconsciousness in second language learning is overestimated, while the role of consciousness in second language learning is undervalued. The main reason is that not enough research is to assess what learners notice and what they think in learning second language. In other words, much more research is needed on the role of consciousness and unconsciousness in second language learning. Considering the instructional context of Iran as an EFL, the teachers and researchers meet more challenges in practice.

On the basis of the above literature review the following research questions and hypotheses are generated:

Research Question 1: What are the effects of intensive and extensive focus on form on L2 learners' oral production reflected in accuracy?

Research Hypothesis₁: Learners receiving intensive focus on form strategies will outperform learners receiving extensive focus on form in terms of the accuracy of oral production.

For measuring the oral task production, the following measure was employed.

Oral Accuracy Measure: For measuring the accuracy of oral production, Skehan and Foster (1999) model was employed. This includes the percentage of error-free clauses in the total number of clauses.

3. Participants

For the purpose of the study 60 female learners of English as a foreign language attending a communicative conversation course with the aim of developing general English affiliated to Iran National Language Institute, Miandoab Branch, were chosen as the participants of the study in summer 2011. The participants were chosen on the basis of their performance on Oxford Proficiency Test (OPT) (2004) administered among 100 EFL learners of English at intermediate level of language proficiency (120-135) rank scale of intermediate level (Senior Level 5). Having administered OPT, based on their scores, the researcher divided the participants into three instructional groups of control who received meaning-centered, message-based instruction, intensive experimental group of focus on form who received repeated feedback on the past tense reference, and extensive experimental group of focus on form who received a wide range of feedback on their grammatical, lexical, and pronunciation problems.

4. Materials and Tasks Used in the Study

The instructional material of the study included units one to five of Interchange Book 2 (Third Edition) written by Richards (2005) which is extensively used as the main instructional material in EFL contexts like Iran to develop the general, communicative ability of learners. The data collection material included a narrative task in a pictorial mode. This task was taken from the Mock or sample examinations of Cambridge University Press (2007) used in international language institutes. The narrative task was about a messy room and the two children with the mother in a room. The children were busy watching TV while their mother came and asked them to tidy up their messy room. The participants of the study were required to look at the picture and narrate the story in the past tense on the basis of the instruction given. This task was utilized to collect oral and written data from the participants in the post-test. Other materials used for data collection included two written production grammar tasks adopted from SchrampherAzar (1998) which is a classical developmental skills text for intermediate learners of English) which were used for collecting data for delayed post-test. The written production delayed post-test focused task included twenty items of verb forms about past tense reference, whereas the unfocused delayed post-test task consisted of twenty items of verb forms

related to tenses in general in which all types of language tenses had been taken into account. The main purpose of the researcher to administer a delayed post-test was to measure the effect of duration and time on treatment in the long term.

5. Procedure

The selected participants were divided randomly into three groups of control, intensive focus on form, and extensive focus on form groups. The participants in the control group received usual meaning-oriented, message-based communicative language instruction in which learners received implicit instruction without explicit instruction of linguistic forms under focus. The control group was chosen to measure the effectiveness of intensive and extensive focus on form strategies on L2 learners' oral task performance. However, the main purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of intensive and extensive focus on form strategies on L2 learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy. The two experimental groups received intensive and extensive focus on form strategies in which the learners' attention was drawn to a specific linguistic feature repeatedly which was past tense. On the fourteenth session, the participants in all three groups were asked to complete the narrative written task and after an interval of two weeks the oral data from the participants of three groups was collected. The oral data collection procedure took place in a quiet room with the researcher and the participants individually. The participants were asked to narrate the story in the task given. Each participant was given 5 minutes of time limit to narrate the task orally. The oral data was recorded, transcribed, and coded. Then, the collected oral were quantified by the researcher and two experts in teaching English as a foreign language with over five years of experience in teaching conversation to have a reliable data in terms of the measures of accuracy, fluency, and complexity as mentioned above.

After an interval of two weeks, the participants in both groups were administered a delayed written production post-test including focused and unfocused tasks. In focused task the participants were required to provide the correct form of the verbs given in the past tense in general while in unfocused task a wide range of tenses were targeted.

6. Data Analysis

1. Comparison of the Means of Accuracy of Control, Intensive, and Extensive Groups in Oral Task

For comparing the means of accuracy of control, intensive focus on form, and extensive focus on form groups One-Way ANOVA was employed. The results of descriptive statistics of three groups are presented in table one.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Comparison of Means of Accuracy of Control, Intensive, and Extensive Groups in Oral Task

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Accuracy Control Oral Task	20	.4150	.15313	.03424	.3433	.4867	.20	.70
Accuracy Extensive Oral Task	20	.4900	.16512	.03692	.4127	.5673	.20	.80
Accuracy Intensive Oral Task	20	.5300	.11743	.02626	.4750	.5850	.40	.80
Total	60	.4783	.15193	.01961	.4391	.5176	.20	.80

According to the table 1, extensive focus on form group produced more accurate language than control group while intensive focus on form group outperformed the other two groups.

Figure 1 shows the means of three groups in terms of accuracy in oral task.

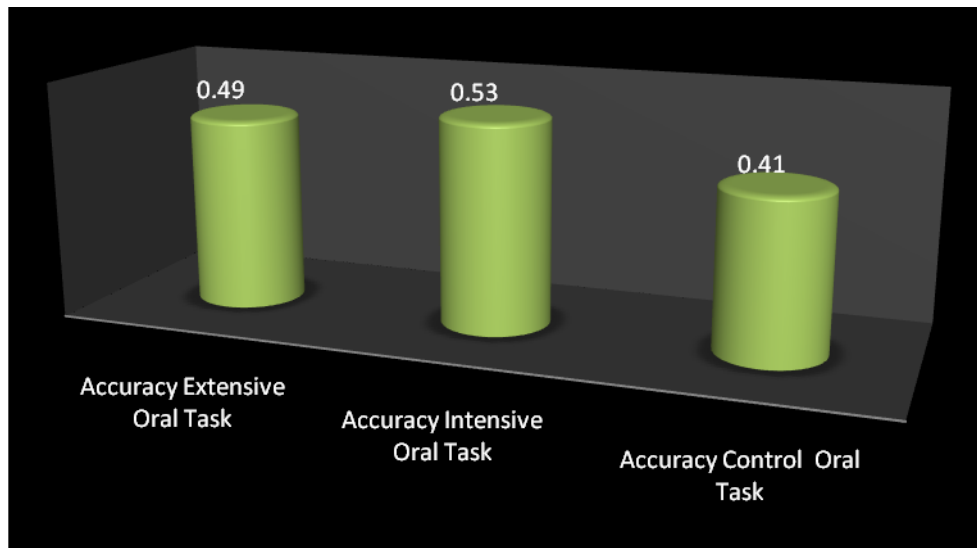


Figure 1. Comparison of the Means of Accuracy of Control, Intensive, and Extensive Groups in Oral Task

The results of inferential statistics of One-Way ANOVA for accuracy of three groups are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Inferential Statistics of ANOVA for Accuracy of Control, Intensive, and Extensive Groups in Oral Task

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.136	2	.068	3.171	.049
Within Groups	1.225	57	.022		
Total	1.362	59			

Table 2 shows that there is a trend toward significance among the mean of accuracy of three groups. To find out the interaction between three groups multiple comparisons of the means of Post Hoc LSD Test was employed which is presented in the following table.

1. Table 3. Multiple Comparisons (Post Hoc LSD Test) for Accuracy of Control, Intensive, and Extensive Groups

	(I) Grouping	(J) Grouping	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
LSD	Accuracy Control Oral Task	Accuracy Extensive Oral Task	-.07500	.04637	.111	-.1679	.0179
		Accuracy Intensive Oral Task	-.11500*	.04637	.016	-.2079	-.0221
	Accuracy Extensive Oral Task	Accuracy Control Oral Task	.07500	.04637	.111	-.0179	.1679
		Accuracy Intensive Oral Task	-.04000	.04637	.392	-.1329	.0529
	Accuracy Intensive Oral Task	Accuracy Control Oral Task	.11500*	.04637	.016	.0221	.2079
		Accuracy Extensive Oral Task	.04000	.04637	.392	-.0529	.1329

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

According to the results of Post Hoc LSD test, there is significant difference between the means of accuracy of control and intensive focus on groups in oral task. However, the difference between the accuracy of intensive focus on form and extensive focus on form is not statistically significant.

The Results of One-Way ANOVA for Accuracy of Intensive and Extensive Groups in post-test in focused and unfocused tasks are presented in the following table.

Table 5. Inferential Statistics of ANOVA for Accuracy of Intensive and Extensive Groups in Delayed Post-test Focused and Unfocused Task

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	48.037	3	16.012	5.226	.002
Within Groups	232.850	76	3.064		
Total	280.887	79			

The results of One-Way ANOVA for the study of extensive and intensive groups in delayed written production post-test in focused and unfocused tasks revealed that there was significant difference between the performances of two groups in terms of accuracy in delayed written production post-test in focused and unfocused tasks.

To find out the interaction between the accuracy of four sets in two groups, multiple comparisons of the means of Post Hoc LSD Test was employed which is presented in the following table.

Table 6. Multiple Comparisons (Post Hoc LSD Test) for Accuracy of Intensive and Extensive Groups in Delayed Post-test Focused and Unfocused Task

	(I) Grouping	(J) Grouping	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
LSD	Accuracy Intensive Focused Task	Accuracy Intensive Unfocused Task	1.95000*	.55352	.001	.8476	3.0524	
		Accuracy Extensive Focused Task	1.80000*	.55352	.002	.6976	2.9024	
		Accuracy Extensive Unfocused Task	1.00000	.55352	.075	-.1024	2.1024	
	Accuracy Intensive Unfocused Task	Accuracy Intensive Focused Task	-1.95000*	.55352	.001	-3.0524	-.8476	
		Accuracy Extensive Focused Task	-.15000	.55352	.787	-1.2524	.9524	
		Accuracy Extensive Unfocused Task	-.95000	.55352	.090	-2.0524	.1524	
	Accuracy Extensive Focused Task	Accuracy Intensive Focused Task	-1.80000*	.55352	.002	-2.9024	-.6976	
		Accuracy Intensive Unfocused Task	.15000	.55352	.787	-.9524	1.2524	
		Accuracy Extensive Unfocused Task	-.80000	.55352	.152	-1.9024	.3024	
	Accuracy Extensive Unfocused Task	Accuracy Intensive Focused Task	-1.00000	.55352	.075	-2.1024	.1024	
		Accuracy Intensive Unfocused Task	.95000	.55352	.090	-.1524	2.0524	
		Accuracy Extensive Focused Task	.80000	.55352	.152	-.3024	1.9024	
	*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.							

According to the results of Post Hoc LSD test, there is significant difference between the means of

accuracy of intensive focus on form and extensive focus on form groups in written production delayed post-test in both focused and unfocused tasks. According to the table, significant differences were found between the accuracy intensive focus on form group in both focused and unfocused tasks. Similarly, there was significant difference between the accuracy of intensive focus on form group and extensive focus on group in focused task. Likewise, there was significant difference between the accuracy of intensive focus on form group in focused and unfocused tasks.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Regarding the hypothesis proposed which states "learners receiving intensive focus on form strategies will outperform learners receiving extensive focus on form in terms of the accuracy of oral production", the results of data analysis (Independent Samples T-test) for oral task production in post-test revealed that there was not any significant difference between the accuracy of intensive and extensive focus on form groups. As a result the hypothesis regarding the results of data analysis for both groups in post-test was rejected. However, in terms of the means of two groups, intensive focus on form group produced more accurate language (0.53) than learners who received extensive focus on form feedback on their erroneous oral utterances (0.49). The results of One-way ANOVA for comparing the means of control, extensive, and intensive focus on form groups on L2 learners' oral task production revealed that there was a trend towards significance among the accuracy of three groups. The results of the further analysis using Post Hoc LSD Test revealed that there was significant difference between the accuracy of the performance of control group and that of the intensive focus on form group in oral narrative task. Furthermore, the results of statistical analysis for delayed post-test in focused and unfocused task, the results of Independent Samples T-test indicated that there was significant difference between the means of accuracy of two groups in delayed post-test in focused written production task. Intensive focus on form group outperformed extensive focus on form group in focused task in terms of accuracy in delayed post-test.

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of Farahani and Sarkhosh (2012), Hejazi (2012), Khatib and Bagherkazemi (2011) who found the effectiveness of form-focused instruction when it was intensive. Similarly, in line with the findings of the study the results of the study conducted by Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) revealed that both experimental groups exceeded the control group in learning target language structures. Within the experimental groups, the group who received more intensive, metacognitive corrective feedback outperformed the other in terms of accuracy.

The results of the study in terms of the effect of extensive and intensive focus on form strategies on L2 learners' oral accuracy, however, ran against the findings of Fahim and Hashemnejad (2011) who studied the effect of with mixed patterns versus separate patterns of providing corrective feedback on EFL learners' accuracy. They concluded that coded feedback was much more effective than simple error correction. Furthermore, the results of the present study are in odds with the findings of Farrokhi and Chehrazad (2012) who studied the effect of planned focus on form on 57 Iranian EFL learners oral accuracy. The results of the study revealed that planned focus on form could be an important tool for development of oral accuracy in EFL situation. This high rate of accuracy in intensive and extensive focus on form groups over the control one could be attributed to the facilitative role of focus on form instruction and negative feedback on L2 learners' performance. It could also be attributed to the effect of the degree of explicitness of instruction, length, repeated and frequent nature of drawing learners' attention to form and the deeper level of processing involved in intensive focus on form strategies. Furthermore it could be attributed to Ortega (2009) who argued that "attention heightens the activation level of input in working memory, allowing it to remain there for longer through rehearsal and thus making it available for future processing and for entering long-term memory (p.93)".

8. Pedagogical implications

The present study has a number of implications for SLA researchers, teachers and practitioners working in EFL context, syllabus as task designers as well as teacher education. To regard the importance of feedback, Hyland and Hyland (2006) argues that although feedback is central for L2 classes, the research literature has not been equally positive about the role it plays on L2 development. He also argues that teachers often feel that they are not making use of its full potential. Schmidt (1990) also argues that understanding the nature of cognitive processes and consciousness may provide an opportunity to unite useful concept of feedback to SLA theories.

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