

# The Effect of Textual Enhancement Techniques on the Acquisition of Passive Form

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## Abstract

This experimental study evaluated the possible effects of textual input- based enhancement on the acquisition of passive form on Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners. Sixty Iranian EFL learners at the pre-intermediate level of proficiency were randomly assigned into three groups; two experimental group and one comparison group. The first experimental group received passages in which the passive forms were repetitive, the second experimental group received passages in which the passive forms were underlined in different colors. The third group (comparison group) received explicit instruction of passive form with no passage. Repetition group received two texts in each session. The study followed a pre-test /treatment/ post-test design. The result indicated that both textually enhanced input, repetitive and underlined in different colors, have a statistically significant effect on the acquisition of target items than explicit instruction group. Moreover, it can be concluded that repetition can be more beneficial than underlined method of enhancement.

**Keywords:** Focus on forms, Focus on form, Explicit instruction, Input, Input enhancement, Textual enhancement, Noticing hypothesis.

## **Introduction**

Over the past few decades there has been theoretical as well as pedagogical research on the role of pedagogical meditations on grammar learning. Even though, most of the SLA researchers agreed on the benefits of L2 instruction in the field of instructed SLA (Long, 1991) some of the SLA researchers (e.g., Doughty, 1991; Long, 1991) have questioned the comparative effectiveness of various pedagogical interventions. In the same vein, using enhancement techniques (e.g., underlining, bold facing) has utilized the possibility of making input more perceptible. In this way, enhancement embedded texts are used to make a targeted form prominent to facilitate the form. Schmidt's (2001) noticing hypothesis offers rationale for such claims, for input to be processed for acquisition by L2 learners it must first be noticed (Long, 1991). Enhancing input by applying typographical techniques increases the chance that the visually salient input will be noticed and remained in long term memory (Long, 1991). Among studies examining visual input enhancement, some (e.g., Doughty, 1991; Robinson, 1997) have considered input enhancement as one of the techniques for focus on form; others (Ellis, 1994; Long, 1991) have considered it as explicit directions to focus on form.

Long (1991) made a distinction between two types of pedagogical interventions: focus on form and focus on forms. According to Long (1991), focus on form is an instructional way of drawing learner's attention to linguistic form in meaningful context. It needs attention to meaning before attention to successful learning of linguistic forms. Focus on form refers to techniques that draw the learners' attention to form in a meaningful context, while focus on form helps learners develop linguistic accuracy. However, focus on forms draws the learners' attention to independent language forms either with or without concerning meaning.

According to Smith (1981) there are several ways for enhancing L2 learner's grammar. At one polar extreme, the followers of focus on forms advocate explicit instruction; whereas at the opposite polar the proponents of focus on form de-emphasize explicit instruction as a means to learning language (Long, 1991).

Smith (1981) considered input enhancement as an effective way for L2 grammar acquisition. He also suggested two kinds of input enhancement,

namely explicit type involving metalinguistic explanation and implicit type involving typographical enhancement (e.g. underlining, boldfacing, capitalization, or other strategies such as color coding or using different font sizes or types). Explicit instruction refers to clear attention to L2 grammar. Some findings (Norris & Ortega, 2000) show that explicit instruction promotes learner's acquisition.

In the area of textual enhancement in L2 grammar acquisition, researchers have been trying to find out some ways to join textual enhancement with L2 grammar learning and to make use of textual enhancement successfully in grammar teaching. Long (1991) states that focus on form was theoretically followed by interactional hypothesis (Long, 1996) and noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990). Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis focuses on the need to enhance learners' attention of targeted language items in order to turn input into intake and after that internalized input as a part of interlanguage. Benati (2004, as cited in White 1991) introduced noticing as the intake of grammar as a result of learners' attention to the input where intake is a part of the learning process. Schmidt (1993) states that awareness at the level of noticing for turning input to intake is essential. He further made a distinction between two levels of awareness: at the level of noticing and at the level of understanding. Awareness at the level of noticing refers to a surface level phenomenon, which involves conscious registration of language input by the learner, whereas awareness at the level of understanding refers to a deeper level, related to system learning.

Schmidt (1993) argued that the higher level of awareness always is not essential for learning, but without awareness at the level of noticing no learning takes place. According to Tomlin and Villa (1994) attention can be divided into three isolated but dependent elements, namely alertness, orientation, and detection. Alertness is the first stage of attention and refers to the whole readiness of a learner to receive input or stimuli. Orientation represents the learners' directing of his/her attention to absolute incoming stimuli while ignoring other input. Unlike Schmidt's conceptual structure, Tomlin and Villa proposed that conscious attention is not necessary for detection. Ellis (1994) considered two types of awareness. In the first type, learners must be aware of the formal properties of the language in the input. In second one, learners are aware of explicit properties of a targeted form.

Textual enhancement applies visual enhancement styles including color coding, capitalizing, bold facing, underlining, or using different fonts for developing the processing of linguistic items of textual enhancement on L2 grammar acquisition. Alanen (1995) indicated that textual enhancement alone is enough for interlanguage development and proposed that other additional instructional elements should be added.

Fahim and Vaezi (2011) investigated the effect of visually-enhanced input on the acquisition of lexical collocations by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The result revealed that both visually enhanced input and conventional method of teaching have a statistically significant effect on the acquisition of targeted forms.

Alanen (1995) studied the effects of textual enhancement and explicit rule presentation on the acquisition of the semi-artificial locative suffixes and consonant gradation in Finnish. The result demonstrated no significant effect for textual enhancement. Overstreet (1998) examined the impact of textual enhancement and content familiarity by using the preterit and imperfect tenses as linguistic targets. The data analyses indicated that the unenhanced groups outperformed the enhanced groups in comprehension, and the enhancement had no effect on learning of linguistic form.

Lee (2007) studied the effects of textual enhancement and topic familiarity on Korean EFL student's reading comprehension and learning of passive form. He concluded that textual enhancement lead to the acquisition of the targeted forms but negatively affected comprehension. Sascoigne (2006, as cited in Wong, 2003) inquired into the effects of input enhancement on the recall and production of diacritics among beginning college students of French. She found that students who engaged in the transcription of targeted passages by using computers and word processing programs recalled significantly more accents in a subsequent dictation activity than students who initially transcribed the passage by hand in English among grade eight native French speaking students. The results revealed that the textual enhancement formats used in the experimental conditions had different impacts on the intakes produced by the participants.

White (1991) examined the effect of textual enhancement on the use of possessive determiners in English. It has been indicated that the participants who had textual enhancement increased the frequency use of the targeted

forms, it did not have an effect on the subjects' ability to use them correctly. Wong (2003) studied the impact of textual enhancement (bold, underlined, italic, enlarged letters) and input simplification on the acquisition of past participle agreement among English speaking adult learning as a foreign language. The result showed no effect of textual enhancement on the acquisition of the past participle agreement.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The original number of participants for the study was 100 male students studying in Modarres high school in Ardabil, Iran. In order to ensure the homogeneity of the subjects in terms of language proficiency a standardized proficiency test, Oxford Placement Test (OPT), was given to them, but after administering the proficiency test, 40 of them were excluded from the study and 60 students were known as pre-intermediate subjects. The subjects' participation in this study was on a voluntary basis. The average age of the subjects was 18 years, with an age range of 16 to 20. About 90% of the participants had received English instruction for at least 5-6 years in institutes, with an average of three hours of English classes per week. According to the scores students got in OPT, 60 participants were randomly assigned to two experimental and one comparison group. Group A (n=20) was assigned to receive repetitive task; group B (n=20) for underlining in different colors, and group C (n=20) served as comparison group (explicit instruction).

### **Instrumentation**

*The following instruments were used:*

*Proficiency test (OPT):* A standardized proficiency OPT was administered to assess students' knowledge of the key language as well as their receptive and productive skills. This enables teachers to have a great understanding of what level their students are at. The test contain 50 multiple-choice questions which assess students' knowledge of key grammar and vocabulary from elementary to intermediate levels, a reading text with 10 comprehension questions and an optional writing task that assesses students' ability to produce the language. In current study the focus of attention was on pre-

intermediate level students.

*Grammatical judgement test:* I compiled a grammatical judgement test as a pre-test to check the homogeneity of participants in terms of their grammar knowledge of passive form of present continuous. It contained 15 items and lasted 20 minutes. In order to check the validity of the test the researcher consulted with two professional teachers then gave the test to students .

*Receptive and productive test:* to measure grammatical learning of the learners, participants took 10 items of grammatical judgment test and 10 items of fill-in-the-blank test consulted with two professional teachers then given the test to the students.

### **Procedure**

Prior to the pretest, participants were required to take a proficiency test to be placed within homogenous groups. After administering proficiency test, the pretest which included a grammatical judgement test administered to all participants in the three groups involved. Then, the treatment sessions began a week later. Repetition and underline in different colors groups were encountered with some texts in three sessions of 20 minutes (week3, week4, week5). In each session repetition group received 2 texts; underline in different colors group received 1 text but explicit instruction group did not receive any text. At the sixth session, all of the participating groups were taken the immediate post-test including 10 grammatical judgement text and 10 fill in the blank test for measuring students, productive knowledge and were lasted 20 minutes.

### **Results**

The preliminary measure (proficiency measure): With the purpose of testing out the homogeneity of subjects in terms of proficiency level, one-way ANOVA was used and proficiency test scores of three groups were analyzed. Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for proficiency test scores of three participating groups.

*Table 1*  
*Descriptive Statistics for Groups' Performance on the Proficiency Test*

<b>Groups</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>SD</b>	
Group (A)	20	31.00	44.00	36.4500	3.54631
Group (B)	20	31.00	44.00	36.2000	3.73603
Group (C)	20	31.00	41.00	36.000	6.16228
Total	60	31.00	44.00	36.2167	3.43507

Note\*: (A) = control group, (B) = underlined group, and (C) = repetitive group.

The researcher also used One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (K-S) which tries to determine the normality of the scores. The result of the K-S Test (Table 2) indicated that the scores of the proficiency test were normally distributed.

*Table 2*  
*One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test*

<b>N</b>		<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>
		<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>
Mean		36.4500	36.2000	36.000
Normal Parameters (a, b)	Std.Deviation	3.54631	3.73603	3.16228
Most Extreme	Absolute	.100	.121	.100
Differences	Positive	.100	.121	.100
Negative		-.100	-.095	-.100
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.449	.543	.447
A symp. Sig. (2-tailed )		.988	.930	.988

a. Test distribution is Normal

b. Calculated from data

As it is shown in Table 3, the *F* ratio for the means of the proficiency test scores of the three groups proved to be non-significant at the 0.05 level ( $F = 0.083$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). This demonstrated that there was no statistically significance difference between proficiency test scores of the three groups. This ensured that the three groups were about equal with reference to EFL proficiency before the treatment.

*Table 3*  
*Result of One-way ANOVA on Proficiency Test Score*

<b>Sum of Squaredf</b>	<b>Mean square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig. (p)</b>		
Between Groups	2.033	2	1.017	.083	.920
Within Groups	694.150	57	12.178		
Total	696.183	59			

Note\*:  $P < 0.05$

To test students' scores on grammatical judgment test, descriptive statistics

for groups' performance on the pre-test are presented in Table 4. As the table shows the means of the three groups are equal before the treatment.

Table 4  
Descriptive Statistics for Groups' Performance on the Pre-test

Groups	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	SD	Std.Error
Groups (A)	20	20.00	5.00	12.9000	3.05907	.68403
Groups (B)	20	20.00	6.00	12.7000	3.07964	.68863
Groups (C)	20	20.00	4.00	12.8000	3.79196	.84791
Total	60	20.00	4.00	12.8000	3.27189	.42240

The researcher used One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (K-S) to determine the normality of the scores on pre-test. The result of the K-S Test indicated that the scores of the grammatical judgment test were normally distributed. As it is shown in Table 5, the  $F$  ratio for the means of the grammar test scores of the three groups proved to be non-significant at the 0.05 level ( $F = 0.018$ ).

Table 5  
Results of One-way ANOVA for the Groups' Performances on the Pre-test

Source of variances	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	$F$	Sig.
Between Groups	.400	2	.200	.018	.982
Within Groups	631.200	57	11.074		
Total	631.600	59			

Note. \*  $P < 0.05$

Table 6  
Descriptive Statistics for Groups' Performance on the Post-test

Groups	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error
Groups (A)	20	20.00	5.00	13.2500	3.09286	.69158
Groups (B)	20	20.00	7.00	14.1000	3.53777	.79107
Groups (C)	20	20.00	9.00	16.4500	2.89237	.64675
Total	60	20.00	5.00	14.6000	3.41582	.44098

In order to investigate whether or not the observed differences among the participants' means on the post-test were statistically significant, one-way ANOVA was utilized. The  $F$ -value was statistically significant, ( $F = 5.414$ ,  $p = .007$ ). This confirms that the three groups behaved differently on the grammatical judgment test and fill in the blank test as shown in Table 7.



Table 7

*Result of One-way ANOVA for the Groups' Performances on Post-test*

Sum of Squaredf	Mean square	F	Sig. (p)		
Between Groups	109.900	2	54.950	5.414	.007
Within Groups	578.500	57	10.149		
Total	688.400	59			

*Note\*. P < 0.05*

### The post hoc Scheffe test

A post hoc Scheffe test revealed a significant mean difference (MD) between the experimental group (A) receiving instruction through repetitive form and the comparison group (C) instructed according to input enhancement. However, the difference between the achievement means of the experimental group receiving instruction through the underlined passive form and comparison group instructed through the IE technique was not statistically meaningful. The difference between the achievement means of the experimental group (A) receiving instruction through the repetitive form and the experimental group (B) instructed through underlined passive form was not meaningful (Table 8).

Table 8

*Post-hoc Scheffe Test for the Groups' Performances on the Post-test*

Group	Groups	Mean difference	Std.error	Sig.
A	B	-.85000	1.00743	.702
	C	-3.20000*	1.00743	.010
B	A	.85000	1.00743	.702
	C	-2.35000	1.00743	.074
C	A	3.20000*	1.00743	.010
	B	2.35000	1.00743	.074

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

The mean differences between C and A groups (MD = 3.20000) was greater than the mean differences between B and C (MD = .85000) and B and A techniques (MD = 2.35000).

## Discussion

The present study examined the effects of textual enhancement on the acquisition of the passive form. In particular, this research design studied which type of instruction, textual enhancement or explicit instruction would

bring about improved performance on grammatical tasks involving the grammatical judgment test and fill in the blank test. Grammatical judgment test was administered as a pre-test, and grammatical judgment test along with fill-in-the blank test were administered as a post-test in order to test hypothesis. The purpose of proficiency test was leveling of students in pre-intermediate level. The main objective of the pre-test was to measure the learners' performance before instruction. The results of this study indicated that all participants in the three groups acted differently (the results of one-way ANOVA). The significance level of .05 was considered in this study. The students who worked in textual enhancement technique groups performed significantly better than explicit instruction group on grammatical judgment test. The results of the present study also revealed that textual enhancement prepared students better for the tests that are used, and this led to higher overall scores than students in the explicit instruction group. The results of the one-way ANOVA revealed that students on comparison group had no significant impact on their grammar on the whole; it was observed that the learners' grammar knowledge which was almost the same at the beginning of the study was significantly affected by textual enhancement but not by explicit instruction. Therefore, the researcher can reject null hypothesis and express that there are significant differences in grammar ability by EFL learners who are instructed according to explicit instruction and those with whom special types of textual enhancement are used According to Schmidt's noticing hypothesis the necessary condition for developing second language is noticing the L2 form. He argues that consciousness at certain level makes learners notice form in the input and subsequently develop second language learning. Smith (1991) contends that the most obvious way to try to affect subconscious processing beneficially is by making relevant target forms in the input salient. He further argued that making the input salient (input enhancement) has a highly positive effect on the rate and accuracy of L2 acquisition. White (1998) has also stressed the importance of input enhancement. He has suggested that input enhancement can help L2 acquisition in two main ways: by drawing learners' attention to certain properties of L2, and by helping them 'unlearn' their incorrect analyses of L2. Thus, input enhancement appears to affect learners' knowledge and performance in the second language, and it seems

reasonable to expect language teachers and syllabus designers to make use of input enhancement. Some of the studies (Doughty, 1991; Shook, 1994; Williams, 1999) yielded positive findings for the facilitative effects of input enhancement, whereas some other studies (Alanen, 1995; Robinson, 1997a; White, 1998) showed only limited effects. Finally, the other two studies (Doughty, 1988; Leow, 1993) found no significant effects at all. The group that received textual enhancement activates performed better overall on the tests after treatment than explicit instruction group. The specific kinds of input enhancement are underlining with different colors and repetition by addressing the research attention it was indicated that drawing learners' attention to specific linguistic aspects of language through underlining and repetition in this study make learners notice the specific linguistic features in the input. Results suggested that the students in experimental groups who received repetition outperformed than two other groups. The aim of the study was to check whether there is any difference between textual enhancement groups and explicit instruction in developing student grammar knowledge of simple present continuous of passive form. And on the other hand, to explore whether there is significant difference between learners who receive underlining and those who receive repetition. Repetitive technique played an important role for learners'L2 form development. Producing the target form through underlining and repetitive technique give them another opportunity to learn the target form well than traditional or explicit instruction group. And repetitive technique was more effective than the two other groups.

The present study examined the impacts of textual input enhancement on the acquisition of passive form. It is also aimed at comparing the textual input enhancement with explicit instruction. Essentially the idea behind textual enhancement is to make a particular feature of written input more salient that learners normally may not notice or for which they may not make form-meaning connections. A learner may not notice a particular form because it is not very important to the meaning of the message, or when a form is not perceptually salient, it is easy for the eye to miss. Textual enhancement makes these forms more salient and makes it easier for L2 learners to notice these enhanced forms and then enhance form-meaning connections, which results in fostering L2 grammar learning. Since this

study was narrowed down in terms of its participants, structures in focus, techniques of focus on form, etc., some further research seems necessary. First, considering the fact that this study was limited to only two techniques of focus on form, it is suggested that similar studies be conducted regarding other techniques such as bolding, italicizing, etc. Second, since the present study was focused on only one structure (i.e, passive form) similar studies can be conducted to examine other target language forms. Third, this study could be replicated with learners at higher and lower levels of second or foreign language proficiency. Fourth, the present study investigated the effect of textual enhancement techniques only on grammar knowledge of EFL learners. The other three language skills (reading, speaking, and listening) were not investigated. Further studies are recommended to include the other three skills in examining the efficacy of textual enhancement on EFL learners. Fifth, this study was limited to pre-intermediate EFL learners at school. Another study can be conducted with other levels, specially advanced learners in institute or university. Finally, this study was limited to male learners. Another study can be conducted with female or with both male and female learners.

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