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On the Efficiency and Adequacy of L2 Instruction and Input*

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Abstract

The present study was planned to investigate the efficiency of explicit teaching and adequacy of the L2 learners' exposure to L2 input in academic contexts in Iran. The case at hand was the acquisition of referential, quasi and expletive subject pronouns, as three different types of obligatory subjects in English. 96 Iranian EFL learners were selected from two universities in Isfahan. They were categorized into three groups based on the amount of L2 instruction/ input they had received. Analysis of the participants' performance on a grammaticality judgment test and a translation task revealed that their knowledge of English obligatory subjects progressed after instruction and as the years of exposure increased. However, it did not reach an acceptable rate for learning. The problem was more prominent for quasi subjects where they performed least accurately. These results indicate that the kind of instruction on obligatory subjects is not efficient enough to affect the learning process. It is concluded that certain properties of L2 require more elaborate instructional techniques to achieve a higher rate of effectiveness in our teaching EFL setting.

Key words: Explicit instruction, Input exposure, Referential subjects, Quasi subjects, Expletive subjects.

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1. Introduction

Explicit teaching has a long history and has served as a common technique especially for teaching grammar in L2 classrooms (Woods, 1995; Ellis, 1998). It is used to raise L2 awareness in different features of target language. To date, numerous studies have investigated the impact of raising L2 awareness on the acquisition of different L2 linguistic features (e.g. Sharwood Smith, 1981, 1993; Andrews, 1993; Wright, 1994; van Lier, 1995; Sengupta, Forey, & Hamp-Lyons, 1999). These studies have all agreed upon the fact that raising L2 awareness about features of the target language is beneficial to learners, as van Lier (1995) mentions “Many researchers and teachers argue that awareness, attention and noticing particular features of language adds to learning” (p.161). Closely related to raising L2 awareness is the amount of L2 input the L2 learners are exposed to. It has been generally found that the more L2 input exposure second language learners receive, the more success they achieve in L2 development. In teaching L2 grammar, these two issues, awareness raising and input exposure, may gain more importance when the second language learners' L1 and the L2 they are learning adopt different grammatical properties. Among all such cases, the acquisition of "obligatory/null subjects" is one of the most studied topics in the grammar acquisition literature (Liceras, 1989; Tsimpli & Roussou, 1991; Platt, 1993; Boe, 1996; Ayoun, 2000; Gurel, 2006; Khalili Sabet, 2006; Belletti, Bennati & Sorace, 2007). The current study aims to examine the effect of L2 awareness in terms of explicit teaching and the amount of L2 input in a situation where L2 obligatory subjects are totally exclusive in L1. In following we present the assumptions underlying the present study leading to the research questions. Section explains the details of data collection and finally the last section includes the results.

2. Assumptions and research questions

In Towell and Hawkins' (1994) account of "obligatory subjects", languages which have phonetically specified subjects like English and French (non-null-subject languages) in contrast to such null-subject languages as Spanish, Italian, and Persian appear to have three types of obligatory subject pronouns:

1. Referential pronouns, referring to people and things pointed out elsewhere in the discourse (i.e. I, you, he, she, it, they etc.), as in the following English sentence:

1. Why did John go to bed at 9? -Because, *he* was tired.
2. چرا علی ساعت ۹ خوابید؟ - چون خسته بود.

In the above example, the presence of the subject pronoun "he" is obligatory, while in its Persian equivalence it is not.

2. Quasi argument pronouns, occurring with such verbs like "snow" and "rain", as in the following:

3. **It** rained heavily yesterday.
4. دیروز بارون شدیدی اومد.

The existence of the quasi subject "it" is obligatory in English, while there is no such pronoun whatsoever in Persian.

3. Expletive pronouns such as "there" and "it", occurring in subject position of where this position is empty.

5. It seems that nobody has read the book yet.
6. به نظر می رسد (که) تا حالا کسی کتاب رو نخونده.

The supplience of the expletive subject "it" is obligatory in (5) although it is semantically empty and does not refer to anything in the context. In Persian the presence of expletives is not obligatory in such constructions.

Persian learners of English seem to acquire obligatory referential subjects in English at initial stages of exposure to L2 input. However, whether the quasi and expletive subjects appear in their L2 output is a matter of question. Persian speakers majoring in English receive explicit instruction on English obligatory subjects, specifically *it* and *there* in the first year of their BA course (in Grammar and Writing module). For the rest of their course there is no more explicit instruction yet they are frequently exposed to such constructions in the L2 English input they receive. The present study seeks to find (a) whether knowledge of obligatory subjects is acquired over the first year (subject to instruction) and remains constant over the following years; (b) whether instruction is ineffective yet the L2 knowledge is acquired in the course of exposure to more L2 input in the following years. The issues to be investigated are then the adequacy of L2

instruction and sufficiency of L2 exposure as formulated in the following questions and related hypotheses.

I. Is L2 instruction efficient enough for Persian speakers to acquire English obligatory subjects?

H₀1: There is no relationship between instruction and acquisition of English obligatory subjects.

II. Is L2 input adequate enough for Persian speakers to acquire English obligatory subjects?

H₀2: There is no relationship between L2 input and acquisition of English obligatory subjects.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The population addressed in this study were adult Persian speaking undergraduate learners of English as an L2 in academic contexts in Iran. 96 Persian-speaking learners of L2 English studying at University of Isfahan and Sheikhabaee University were recruited in this study. They were both male and female learners aged between 18 and 24. The participants were divided into three groups based on their years of study at university. The first group (N: 26) were freshmen students in their first semester not being exposed to any L2 instruction / input in academic context yet. The second group (N: 44) included sophomores. Being at their third semester, they had already passed Grammar 1 and 2, and been explicitly instructed on different types of obligatory subjects. The third group (N: 26) were seniors who were at their final semester. After having passed Grammar 1, and 2 in their first year of academic life, they were to L2 input for three subsequent years. Regarding the participants' background, the amount of explicit instruction and the L2 input the L2 learners had been exposed to before they attended their universities were limited to six years of English language learning in their pre-university education receiving two hours of English per week. With respect to the materials they had been provided with and the instructions they had received, hardly had they been taught anything on the grammatical properties under investigation in the present study during these six years.

3.2. Materials and Procedures

To assess the participants' sensitivity to these three types of obligatory pronouns a grammaticality judgment test (hence GJT) and a translation task (hence TT) were developed. The GJT included 26 items of which 20 items were the target and the rest were distracters. The target items included grammatical and ungrammatical sentences for which there were three options. Students were required to choose “√” if they thought that the sentence was grammatically correct, choose “*” if they thought the sentence was grammatically incorrect, and choose “?” if they were not sure of the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of the sentence. They were also asked to correct the sentences they judged as ungrammatical. The translation task included 16 sentences in Persian to be translated into English. There were 11 target items in this task and the rest were distracters. Simple vocabulary was used in the sentences in order for the test takers not to have any problem with finding the English equivalents. The sentences represented the three types of subjects which were also assessed in GJT. Sample examples of each type of pronouns are provided below.

7. The young man needs a car for his work, but he is not going to buy any.

8. *Mary is very clever so can learn this lesson easily.

9. When I arrived home, it was still raining.

10. *Hurry up is getting late.

11. The police report there has been an accident in downtowns.

12. *In winter seems to be less entertainment outdoors.

13. He is very shy and it won't be easy to get him to come with us.

14. *Parents are mostly busy and is difficult for them to find some time for entertainment.

15. الآن یادم نیست خونه رو چند فروخت.

16. مدرسه‌ها تعطیل شدند چون برف زیادی باریده بود.

17. رضا خیلی خوشحاله چون امروز تولدشه.

18. بازیهای زیادی برای بچه‌ها در تابستان وجود دارد.

19. لازمه که هر کس کار خودش را انجام بدهد.

Each participant attended two sessions of data collection, one for the GJT and the other for the TT. Since there were three groups of L2 learners, the data were collected in six sessions. The participants were limited in time in both sessions, 20 to 25m for the GJT, and 15 to 20m for the TT). For each test, clear instructions were provided for the participants both in Persian and in English as well as orally and written. The L2 learners took all the tests in groups as they attended their regular and weekly-scheduled classes in their universities. After eliciting the participants' performance, each individual test item was scored by two raters. In the GJT, "One" was considered for each correct judgment and "zero" for each incorrect one. The correctness and incorrectness of the answers were determined on the following bases: a participant's answer to a particular ungrammatical sentence was correct if he had marked "*" and also had supplied the intended subject in the sentence. Otherwise, it was considered as incorrect answer; a participant's answer to a particular grammatical sentence was correct if he had marked "√". Otherwise, it was considered as incorrect answer. Similarly, in the TT, "One" was considered for each correct translation answer and "zero" for each incorrect one. The correctness and incorrectness of the answers in TT were determined on the following basis: a produced English sentence in TT was correct if the intended subject had been properly supplied in the sentence. Otherwise, the sentence was incorrect.

4. Results

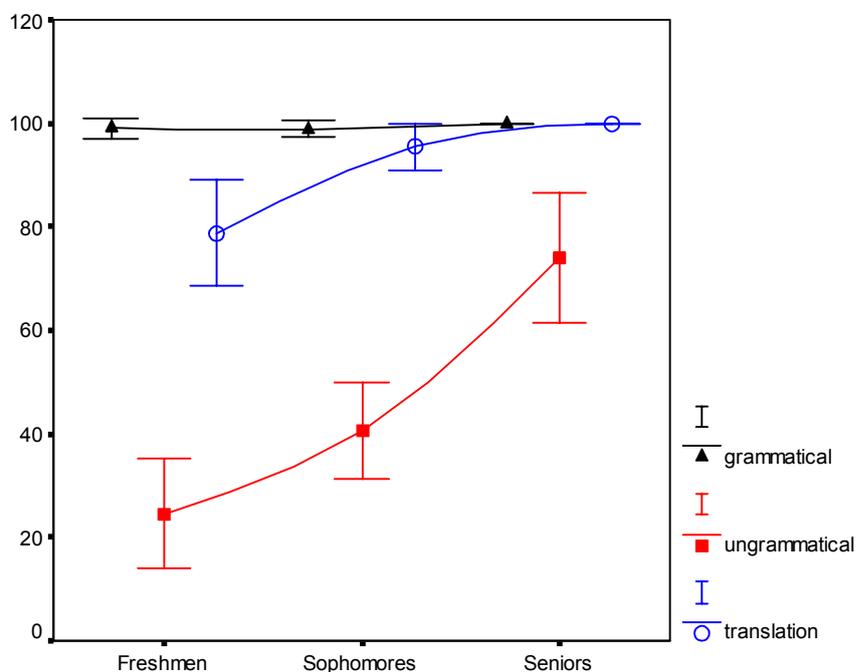
The participants' performance on the GJT and TT items assessing the knowledge of referential subject pronouns is presented Table (1).

Table 1. Mean accuracy scores (%) on obligatory referential pronouns in the GJT and TT

Groups	GJT			TT
	total	grammatical	ungrammatical	
Freshmen	63	99	27	79
Sophomores	72	99	45	95
Seniors	88	100	77	100

As evidenced in the table above, the freshmen learners performed accurately more than 50% of the time on GJT and TT. However, their poor performance on the ungrammatical sentences of the GJT shows that they consider an empty subject pronoun grammatical. In other words, both overt and covert subject pronouns are accepted as grammatical by these learners. The performance of the sophomores shows that instruction has been effective as their scores increased from 63 to 72% on the GJT and from 79% to 95% percent in the TT. Yet, ungrammatical sentences are judged as OK indicating that empty subjects are part of their L2 knowledge. This suggest that after instruction perfect knowledge of obligatory referential subjects is not yet acquired. Considering the third group, their performance has increased to 77% accuracy rate on the ungrammatical sentences. Moreover, the wide range of scores for ungrammatical sentences in Figure (1) indicates that even the senior learners consider them as grammatical.

Figure 1. Mean and range of scores (%) on obligatory referential pronouns in the GJT and TT



A one-way ANOVA run on the judgment scores of obligatory referential subjects showed statistically significant differences between the groups ($F= 22.883, P=.000$). According to *post hoc* Scheffe test results, the differences in performance between each two groups were significant. Another one-way ANOVA performed on the scores on the ungrammatical structures indicated that mean differences were significant. A *Post hoc* Scheffe test indicated that the differences were between all the three groups. As for the TT, a one-way ANOVA run on the participants' scores showed significant differences in performance ($F= 11.380, P= .000$). *Post hoc* Scheffe tests revealed that the difference between the first and the second groups and between the first and the third groups were statistically significant, but the difference between the second and the third group was not significant.

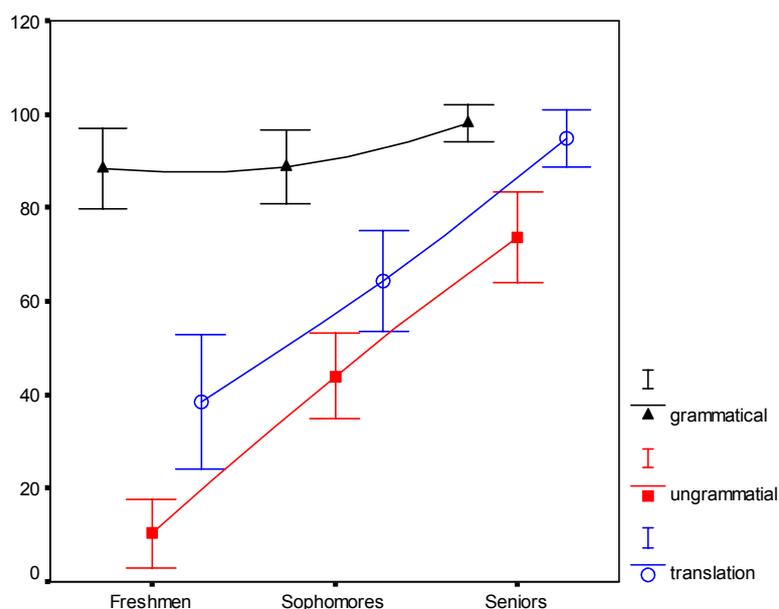
All in all, the participants' performance progressed as their years of L2 exposure increased. More specifically, the explicit instruction the L2 learners had received in the first year proved efficient only in the use of obligatory referential pronouns. The insignificant difference between the scores of the first and second groups on ungrammatical sentences evidenced the inefficiency of the explicit instruction the participants had received during the first year of their academic studies. Further exposure to L2 input also seems insufficient enough. The third group's overall performance on the ungrammatical items indicated the inadequacy of the L2 input they had been exposed to during four years of studying English.

We now turn to participants' performance on the GJT and TT items involving quasi subject pronouns.

Table 2. Mean accuracy scores (%) on obligatory quasi subjects in the GJT and TT

Groups	GJT			TT
	total	grammatical	ungrammatical	
Freshmen	49	88	10	38
Sophomores	66	88	44	64
Seniors	86	98	74	95

Figure 2. Mean and range of scores (%) on obligatory quasi subjects in the GJT and TT



As shown in Table (2) as well as figure (2), the poor performance of the first group is due to their accepting ungrammatical sentences about 90% of the time which has resulted in 10% accuracy rate for these items. More importantly their performance on the TT indicates that they used quasi pronouns only in 38% of time. In other words while this group accepts both overt and covert subjects in these sentences as grammatical, they prefer to use empty pronouns more frequently. The performance of the second groups shows that instruction has not been effective enough for the learners to achieve an accuracy rate above 90%. These learners still consider null pronouns as accurate in the GJT (44% accuracy) and do not use quasi pronouns in their production in 36% of the cases. The scores of the third group indicates that more years of exposure to L2 input has resulted in a steady progress though, null pronouns have not yet been excluded from their L2 knowledge (74% accuracy). Figure (2) supports these findings as it indicates that there is an increase in the mean scores, specifically for ungrammatical sentences, yet, there are senior learners who can reject the ungrammatical sentences only in less than 60% of the time.

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the participants' performance on the GJT showed significant differences between the groups ($F=27.012$, $P=.000$). According to the *post hoc* Scheffe test results, every group performed differently from other groups. Regarding the performance on the ungrammatical structures, the results of performing a second one-way ANOVA demonstrated significant differences between the groups ($F=39.076$, $P=.000$). *Post hoc* Scheffe tests indicated that all the groups performed differently from one another. To see if differences in performance between the groups on the TT obligatory quasi subject items were statistically significant, a third one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results indicated significant differences between the groups ($F=20.904$, $P=.000$). Also, applying *post hoc* Scheffe tests indicated that the significant differences were between every two groups.

The elicited performance on the GJT and TT items assessing the participants' knowledge of expletive pronouns is shown in Table (3) and Figure (3) below.

Table 3. Mean accuracy scores (%) on obligatory expletive subjects in the GJT and TT

Groups	GJT			TT
	total	grammatical	ungrammatical	
Freshmen	49	86	13	73
Sophomores	67	92	41	91
Seniors	89	98	80	100

Figure 3. Mean and range of scores (%) on obligatory expletive subjects in the GJT and TT

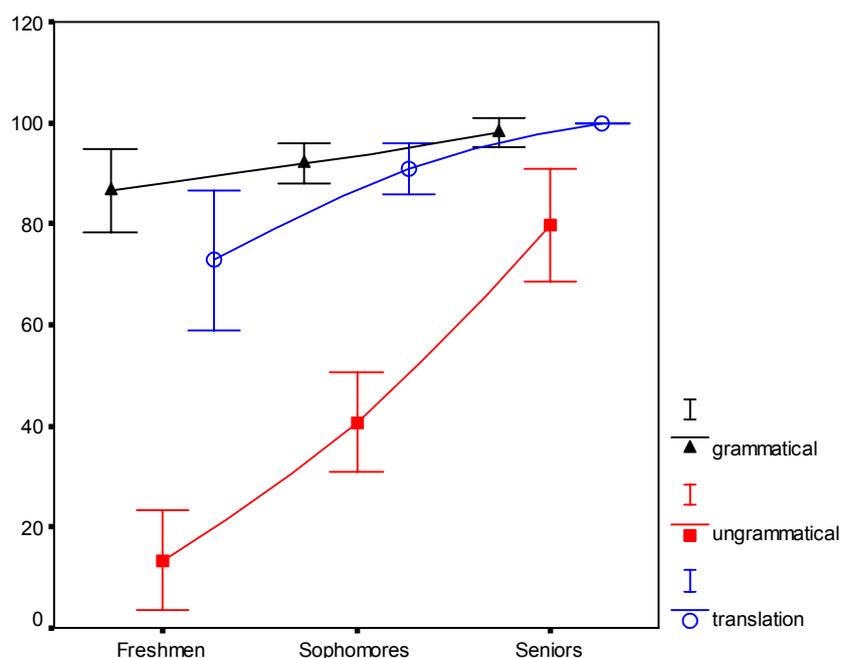


Table (3) shows that before instruction and academic exposure to L2 input the first group performed 49% accurately on the GJT. Persian learners tend to accept both overt and covert pronouns as grammatical (accuracy rates of 86% and 13% on grammatical and ungrammatical items respectively). After instruction and exposure in the second year, as the scores of the second groups indicated, there has been considerable improvement, though it does not yet achieve perfect performance on the ungrammatical items. The performance of the third groups indicates that after two more years of exposure their performance has improved. In fact these results show that expletive subjects are acquired better than the quasi subjects. Once more the wide range of scores on ungrammatical sentences (Figure. 3) indicates that variation in the judgment of the senior learners; though, the minimum score is higher than 60%, indicating that knowledge of expletive pronouns has improved more than that of the quasi pronouns.

Regarding the general performance on the GJT obligatory expletive subject items, the results of a one-way ANOVA conducted on the scores indicated significant differences between the groups ($F=30.642$, $P=.000$). *Post hoc* Scheffe tests revealed that significant differences were between every two groups. Another one-way ANOVA performed on the scores of the ungrammatical structures lacking obligatory expletives showed significant differences between groups ($F=33.025$, $P=.000$). The results of *post hoc* Scheffe tests located significant differences between each two groups. As to the performance on the TT, the differences were statistically significant across the groups ($F=11.919$, $P=.000$). Based on the results of *post hoc* Scheffe tests, the differences between the first and the second groups and also between the first and the third group were statistically significant, while the difference between the second and the third was not significant. Thus, significant progression was observed when the instruction was provided for the L2 learners (the difference between the first and the second group), and also when the years of exposure increased (the difference between the second and the third group), meaning that the L2 instruction / input had been efficient. Yet, the third group performance on the ungrammatical items (80%) may suggest the L2 learners' need further exposure to L2.

5. Conclusion

This study, eliciting the cross-sectional performance Persian learners of English examined the efficiency and the adequacy of the explicit instruction of and the L2 input exposure to English obligatory subject pronouns in academic contexts in Iran. English as an obligatory subject language appears to have three types of obligatory subject pronouns namely referential, expletive, and quasi. Persian, on the other hand, as a null-subject language appears not to have any of these obligatory subjects, but allows the presence of referential and expletive subject pronouns for emphasis. But there is no quasi subject pronoun in Persian whatsoever. In detailed analyses, the statistically significant differences between the groups in almost all the analyses performed on the mean accuracy scores revealed the L2 learners' remarkable progression across different groups. Indeed, the more exposure the learners had to L2 input, higher performance was

observed. This may suggest the important role of L2 input exposure in Second Language Acquisition.

Overall, what we found was that the results obtained using a GJT and a TT with L1 Persian learners of L2 English are compatible with the idea that explicit grammar instructions and L2 input exposure are effective but not efficient and adequate enough for the L2 learners to acquire those grammatical properties which are absent in their native language or at least different from their L1 grammatical properties. These findings may provide second language instructors with a strong suggestion that in L2 grammar teaching more stress should be placed on the points of contrasts between L1 and L2 syntactic properties. The L2 learners awareness needs to be enhanced where a particular L2 grammatical property is absent in L1 or not compatible with that of L2 (Doughty & Williams, 1998; van Lier & Carson, 1997).

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