Zanjan University

Faculty of literature and Humanities

English Language Department

# The Effect of Manipulating Foreknowledge of Output Tasks on Reading Behavior, Text Comprehension, and Noticing of Language Form

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FUIFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By

Golnaz Babamiri

Thesis Advisor:

Seyed Hessamuddin Aliasin, Ph. D.

Thesis Reader:

Fariba Mobini, Ph.D.

Zanjan, Iran

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*Dedicated to my family for their loving concern, support, and devotion.*

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# Table of Contents

## Chapter one: Introduction

## Chapter two: Review of Related Literature

# List of Tables and Figures

## Abbreviations of Tables

**Chapter Four**

Glob…………………………………………………………Global reading strategies

Prob………………………………………….………..Problem-solving reading strategies

Sup……………………………………………………….Support reading strategies

SD………………………………………………………...……….Standard Deviation

Vis……………………………………………………………..Visualization group

Ret………………………………………………….…………….Retelling group

Mem…………………………………………….……………..Memorization group

# ABSTRACT

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of different demands of output tasks on reading strategies, reading comprehension, and noticing of language form. Sixty high school students, both male and female, were selected to participate in the study. The participants were randomly divided into three groups. Three output tasks including: reading for memorization, reading for retelling, and reading for visualization were used in the experiment. The participants' reading strategies were documented by retrospective questionnaires. The comprehension check test and the verb production test were developed by the researcher to assess the reading comprehension and noticing of language form of the participants relatively. The results show that different demands of output tasks led to differences in reading strategies employed by the participants and noticing of language form, as well. However, no significant difference was found in the reading comprehension among the three groups. Implications of this study are; (1) Memorization tasks are capable of directing learners' attention toward language form, and (2) Different task demands influence the way language is processed.

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

*"Let us work without theorizing,*

*this is the only way to make life*

*endurable." Voltaire*

## 1.1 Introduction

Swain (1995) proposes that learners need to attend to form in order to achieve high levels of linguistic competence. According to Ellis *et al*. (2002) form refers to not only grammar, but also any aspect of linguistic form. In order to develop competence, attention should be placed on meaning as well as other aspects of language such as syntax, semantics, word choice, or discourse structure. Schmidt (2001) states that people learn about the things they attend to. This implies the importance of attention in inter-language development. However, VanPatten (1990) argues that attention is limited, that is, learners can not attend to meaning and form at the same time. Skehan (1998) argues that "…after the critical period, language learning is constrained by similar structures and processes to other learning, and that for learners, meaning takes priority and language form has secondary importance" (p. 2). Therefore, attention should be directed to language form for competence change. Since humans have a limited capacity of information processing, planning before a task probably results in improved task performance. Learners' output is one of the approaches to drive learners' attention to form. In line with the significant role of attention in inter-language development, tasks can affect language learning and language processing. Research findings have indicated that output tasks influence language processing and language learning (Swain, 1985, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 1995; Izumi *et al*., 1999; Izumi, 2002).

Therefore, pre-task planning provides opportunities of pedagogical interventions to direct learners' attention toward language form. Schmidt (2001) argues that "task requirements, task instruction, and input enhancement techniques affect what is attended to and noticed in on-line processing" (p. 10). Thus, pre-task planning affects the way language is processed. It is possible to document planning and meta-cognitive strategies employed by language learners during the planning stage through retrospection.

Swain (1985) argues that learners notice a gap in their inter-language knowledge when they produce the target language. It is believed that learners' sensitivity to the way they encode their intended meaning in the target language is enhanced through the act of producing the target language (Swain 1998). Since pre-task planning influences language production and language processing, it is probable that pre-task planning results in planned output, which is in higher levels of lexical and syntactic complexity. Swain (1998) and Gass (1997) propose two models of language learning which put emphasis on the noticing function of output. They believe that output is not the last stage of language learning, but, it feeds back to previous stages of learning which consequently results in inter-language development. Therefore, the present study focuses on the preparatory stage of performing output tasks. In other words, the study was an attempt to investigate the effect of different cognitive demands of output tasks on planning stage of performing tasks. It is hypothesized that different demands of output tasks lead to differences in the way language learners process input.

**1.2 Statement of the problem**

It has been observed that language learners notice a gap between the target language and their own inter-language while performing output tasks. In other words,

they notice a mismatch between what they are able to produce and what they want to. Therefore, the inter-language needs to be developed in order to fill the gaps. Schmidt (2001) states that "people learn about the things they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to"(p.30).

There has been a growing interest in the role of attention in language learning processes. Several studies (Carr and Curran, 1994; Schmidt 1990, 1993, 1995, 2001; Robinson, 1995) argue that attention plays an essential role in language learning. However, the basic assumption about attention is that it is limited (VanPatten, 1990). Thus, attention needs to be directed to a particular aspect of language because it is difficult to attend to meaning and form at the same time (VanPatten, 1990). That is why adult language learners tend to prioritize meaning over form when producing the target language. The researcher has been teaching English as a foreign language for few years and had such a problem with adult language learners. They do not attend to the language form through which they get the meaning through. Several studies have been conducted based upon the postulate that driving learners' attention to form helps learners to acquire form and meaning in an integrated way (Rutherford and Smith, 1985; Smith, 1993; Doughty, 2001; Long and Robinson, 1998; Izumi and Bigelow, 2000). Researchers proposed some pedagogical approaches and tested them through experimental studies which include explicit method of instructing grammatical rules and exposing learners to input through typographical input enhancement (Alanen,1995; Leow,2001; Leow *et al*.,2003; Wong, 2003). Among various means of getting learners to focus on form, the role of output seems crucial.

Swain and Lapkin (1995) argue that producing the target language is essential to promote learners' inter-language. In contrast to the perspective that considers output as

an end product of learning, it is viewed as an important factor which contributes to develop language learning.

The present study deals with output tasks which are postulated to contribute to draw learners' attention toward language form. The study attempts to investigate the effect of different demands of output tasks on reading comprehension, reading strategies employed by the participants while reading the text as well as language form noticing.

### 1.3 Research questions and hypotheses

The present study was an attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

1) Do different demands of output tasks lead to differences in reading strategies employed by the participants?

2) Do different demands of output tasks lead to differences in text comprehension by the participants?

3) Do different demands of output tasks lead to differences in noticing of language form by the participants?

In line with the questions above, the following null hypotheses were formulated.

$H_{o-1}$: Different demands of output tasks do not lead to differences in reading strategies employed by the participants.

$H_{o-2}$: Different demands of output tasks do not lead to differences in text comprehension by the participants.

$H_{o-3}$: Different demands of output tasks do not lead to differences in noticing of language form by the participants.

### 1.4 Significance of the study

Investigating the effect of different demands of output tasks on reading strategies, reading comprehension, and language form noticing results in a number of findings and implications that contribute to the pedagogy of English as a foreign language instruction. Such knowledge gives teachers a better understanding of to what extent a particular demand of output task makes differences in reading comprehension or language form noticing. Teachers may benefit from the findings of this study in choosing appropriate output tasks to promote the inter-language of EFL learners. The results may be of relevance to task designers and teachers in understanding the contribution of different task demands to both immediate task performance and learning outcomes. Identifying reading strategies, employed by participants of the present study, which resulted in better reading comprehension or language form noticing provides helpful insights into strategy research and strategy awareness instruction. The findings may provide implications for syllabus design and material development. With regard to learners' autonomy, this study may encourage EFL learners to employ certain reading strategies in order to enhance their reading comprehension as well as to shift attention from content to language form.

**1.5 Purpose of the study**

There has been a growing interest in the role of attention in language learning processes. Since attention is limited, it needs to be shifted toward language form (VanPatten, 1990). Swain (1993, 1995,1998) proposed four functions for output and the focus of the present study is based upon the noticing function which argues that while producing the target language, learners may notice a gap between what they are able to produce and what they wish to produce. Noticing the gap in ones' inter-language may encourage the learners to find relevant features in the input to fill the gap. Based on the premise that tasks create opportunities which lead to inter-language restructuring, the

characteristics of the tasks can influence learners' performance (Loschky and Bley-vroman, 1993), the relative effect of different demands of output tasks should be tested.

The present study attempts to find out whether different demands of output tasks lead to differences in noticing of language form by the language learners. Ortega (1999) proposes that learners' processing during tasks performance needs to be documented because task instruction, tasks conditions and individual preferences may influence learners' regulation of attention toward form and meaning during task performance. Moreover, it is believed that particular circumstances under which learners produce output may affect attentional processes and learning (Skehan, 1998; Robinson, 2001; Ellis 2003). Thus, the study attempts to investigate meta-cognitive strategies used by language learners while doing output tasks demanding different meta-cognitive strategies. The study attempts to find out whether or not different demands of output tasks lead to differences in reading comprehension and noticing of language form as well.

## 1.6 Definition of key terms

Key terms and concepts of the present study are:

**Task:** An activity which is designed to help achieve a particular learning goal (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

**Output:** A language which a learner produces. The current view argues that output is not mere product of learning, but it is the means by which learners' inter-language is triggered for further development (Swain, 1985; Gass, 1997).

**Input:** Part of language to which learners are exposed that actually 'goes in' and plays a role in language learning (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

**Intake:** According to 'noticing hypothesis' intake is that part of input that has been attended to and noticed by learners while processing the input (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

**Output task:** Classroom activities which are designed to encourage learners to produce (in both written and oral mode) the target language. The language produced by learners is not the final stage of learning, however, it is considered as a trigger which influences previous stages of language learning for further inter-language development (Gass, 1997).

**Task demands:** The attentional, memory and reasoning demands of tasks that increase the mental workload the learner engages in performing the task (Robinson, 2001).

**Language form:** The term form is used to refer to grammar. However, Ellis (2002) proposes that it refers to any aspect of linguistic form such as phonological, graphological, lexical, and grammatical.

**Noticing:** According to Schmidt (2001) noticing refers to the attending to surface forms in the input. Schmidt (2001, p.30) states that "people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to".

**Noticing hypothesis:** Claims that intake is that part of the input that the learner notices (Schmidt, 1990, 1995, 2001; Schmidt and Frota, 1986). Schmidt argues that noticing requires focal attention and awareness on the part of learner.

**Output hypothesis:** Swain (1985) proposed output hypothesis which claims that" producing the target language may serve as the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning" (p. 249).

**Noticing function of output:** One of the four functions of output proposed by Swain (1993, 1995, 1998) which argues that in producing the target language learners notice a gap between what they are able to produce and what they wish to produce. This may result in inter-language development.

**Inter-language:** The type of language produced by second and foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. It is a grammatical system which differs from both the first and the target language, however, it is a natural system (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

**Reading comprehension:** Is the act of thinking and constructing meaning before, during and after reading by integrating the information presented by the author with the reader's background knowledge (Meissner& Yun, 2008; Sweet& Snow, 2003).

**Reading strategy:** Reading strategy is defined as "a systematic plan consciously adopted and monitored to improve one's performance in learning" (Haris& Hodge, 1995: 277).

**Retrospection:** This involves reflecting on how a task or activity was carried out after it was accomplished. This requires the subjects to infer their own mental processes and strategies from their memory of a particular mental event under observation (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

## 1.7 Limitations of the study

The present study was preliminary and there are several limitations. First, the sample size was not large enough thus the conclusion was speculative. Second, the methods of measurement used in this study were not sophisticated enough to be sensitive. Particularly, 'noticing of language form' should be operationalized more

meticulously in future research. Third, since only two types of output tasks were used in this study, other types of output tasks need to be investigated. Fourth, only short-term effects of different demands of output tasks were investigated; therefore, long-term effects of different demands of output tasks need to be explored in future research.

# CHAPTER TWO

# REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

*"But words are things, and a small*

*drop of ink, falling like dew upon*

*a thought, produces that which*

*makes thousands, perhaps millions*

*think." Lord Byron*

## 2.1 Introduction

The study was an attempt to investigate the effect of different demands of output tasks on the planning stage of task performance. It is assumed that directing learners' attention toward form of language results in inter-language development. Moreover, language learners notice a gap in their inter-language while producing the target language. It is believed that task features such as cognitive demands of tasks influence the way language is processed. Therefore, different demands of output tasks probably lead to differences in the way language learners process the input as well as differences in noticing to form and meaning. The present chapter attempts to review the related literature of the study. In the following the related literature is organized under four major headings including: the importance of focus on form, the importance of attention, the importance of tasks, and the importance of output in language learning.

## 2.2 The importance of focus on form

Learners typically do not achieve high levels of linguistic competence from meaning-centered instruction. Swain (1995) proposes that learners need to do more than to simply engage in communicative language use; they also need to attend to language

form. Ellis *et al.* (2002) proposed as extended discourse and meaning-based view. The term *form* is often used to refer to grammar. However here it refers to any aspect of linguistic form such as phonological, graphological, lexical, and grammatical. It is possible to focus solely on form, for example when the pronunciation of an isolated word is focused. However, it should be noted that attention to form involves consideration of the meaning (function) that a particular form conveys. Long (1991) believes that there are two types of form-focused instruction. The first is focus-on-form, that is, focus on pre-determined specific linguistic forms based on linguistic syllabus and intensive, systematic treatment of those targeted features, for example in PPP instruction a targeted grammatical form is presented, it is practiced in controlled exercises, and free communicative opportunities are provided to produce the targeted grammatical form.

The second is focus-on-form which refers to focus of attention on meaning." The attention to form arises out of meaning-centered activity derived from the performance of a communicative task" (Ellis *et al*., 2002, p.421). For example, learners' attention is directed to certain linguistic forms, which are necessary to accomplish the task, through performing an information-gap task. Focus-on-form instruction is classified to two types: planned focus-on-form and incidental focus-on-form. The former refers to the use of focused tasks, that is, communicative tasks designed to elicit the use of particular linguistic form. The latter refers to the use of unfocused tasks, that is, communicative tasks designed to elicit general samples of the language rather than specific forms (Ellis *et al*., 2002). The teacher and learners can direct incidental attention to various forms while performing the task. In the case of planned focus-on-form, the teacher selects to use a particular task to target a specific linguistic feature and this will lead to differences in how the task is performed. In the