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**The Role of Spontaneous Written Output
in Promoting Noticing**

By

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Abstract

A challenge for English teachers is how to promote noticing among learners. This study, at the first stage, explored the role of written output in fostering noticing among the participants. Then, it compared the effects of two types of feedback tools (native models vs. peer feedback) on filling the participants' existing holes and gaps in proficiency and fostering further noticing. Finally, the study revealed the effects of two feedback tools on their retention and learning.

The participants in this study were 65 Iranian EFL learners at the intermediate level (34 in native model group and 31 in peer feedback group). Firstly, they narrated a story in the first stage. Then, in the second stage, the participants of native model group compared their texts with native models and the participants of peer feedback group collaborated with their peers to provide feedback on each other's linguistic problems. Finally, in the third stage, the participants of both groups renarrated the story after a week interval. While completing the task in the first and second stages, the participants had to jot their linguistic problems down. Their notes were considered the operationalized form of noticing.

In order to analyze the data, the researcher used paired *t*-test, independent *t*-test and inter-rater reliability. The results revealed that written output was influential in promoting noticing among the participants. The participants of both groups noticed approximately the same linguistic problems. Moreover, there were substantial differences between the two feedback tools in filling the holes or gaps. The NM group outperformed PF group in filling the holes and gaps. Both quantity and quality of noticing were higher in NM group. Lastly, the effect of native models on the participants' retention and learning was higher than peer feedback.

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List of abbreviations

CHO: Comprehensible output hypothesis

IL: Interlanguage

L1: First language

L2: Second language

LRE: Language related episode

NM: Native model

NNS: Non-native speaker

NS: Native speaker

PF: Peer feedback

PI: Processing instruction

SLA: Second language acquisition

TL: Target language

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Long before, if asked how a second language (L2) was acquired, many language teachers would have replied it was through comprehensible input, i.e. understanding messages in the L2 that are just a little beyond one's current level of competence. There is no doubt that Krashen's input hypothesis still has great value among language teachers and that most communicative tasks are based on Krashen's model. However, it seems that there are some other factors promoting learning and language acquisition.

Noticing is of crucial importance in life. Unless a person notices, he cannot progress in any aspect of life, especially in science. Until an individual does not notice, he cannot choose or act for himself. Bennett (1976) argues that noticing is a transition from one state of experience to another. Its significance for second language acquisition (SLA) can be found in Ellis's claim (1995, p. 89) that "no noticing, no acquisition". Schmidt and Frota (1986) also mention those who notice most, learn most.

In Schmidt's words (1990), noticing is essential for language learning. All involved in SLA or learning are aware that in order to learn language skills, they have to actively engage in related processes. It is the raised issue by communicative approach that learners should use language in order to acquire it. A clear example in this regard is that most language teachers presently believe that learners should speak in order to learn it fluently and accurately. While speaking, learners try to use their present knowledge and revise it because they may confront repeated failures in an attempt to convey a specific message.

Relating these two issues to language learning, it can be concluded that noticing leads to SLA. Thus, productive language skills, i.e. writing and speaking can be used to foster noticing. This function of productive skills is claimed by Swain (1985).

Swain has been interested in the role of output through her study in the context of Canadian French immersion programs. In these programs, non-French speaking children are placed as early as kindergarten at school classes where French is the sole language of instruction. Learners in these programs are provided with an acquisition-rich environment. It is expected that these learners acquire native-like competency. Swain investigated the accuracy of the predictions based on the input hypothesis claiming that immersion would help learners acquire native-like competency (Woodfield, 1998).

Swain (1996) concluded that the learners of these programs obtained native-like proficiency in the receptive skills; however, they still remained non-native-like learners in their production of certain structures. In fact the input hypothesis expectation did not come true. Later, she found out that learners did not produce language as much as they did in their first language (L1). Moreover, their errors, if responded, were not corrected systematically.

As a result of this investigation, Swain (1995) found out that it is output which has crucial importance and that comprehensible input is not enough for learners to become native-like. Swain claims that output is necessary for acquiring native-like proficiency. According to Swain (1995), output has three functions. One of its functions is 'noticing', since producing a language causes learners to pay attention to gaps in their linguistic knowledge. There is now a general consensus that noticing is a

prerequisite for learning to take place (e.g. Ellis, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1995).

L2 writing studies that employ thinking-aloud research techniques support the claim that output stimulates noticing of problems prompting learners to engage in the analysis of their existing linguistic resources in order to resolve these problems (Cumming, 1990). Many studies have focused on the occurrence of modified output, but there is a need to investigate how producing output leads to acquisition (Shehadeh, 2001). It is claimed that, through output activities such as speaking and writing tasks, L2 learners become aware that they cannot say what they want to say in the target language (TL). Output fosters spontaneous attention to form, which affects subsequent learning. This feature appears to be absent or less frequent in input.

Keeping this factor into consideration, researchers, materials writers, and teachers in SLA have been attempting to develop tasks with focus on productive skills to make learners produce language. Among many tasks developed in SLA, researchers are investigating the value of tasks like dictogloss, reformulation, reconstruction, etc. to reveal which of them leads to better results.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Studies have produced some evidence that noticing L2 forms can result in observable gains in L2. Therefore, teachers try to attend to and use it as a factor to promote learning. Noticing is usually achieved through teachers' negative feedback on learners' errors. Learners expect their teachers to inform them of their mistakes, but teachers are not aware of learners' precise interlanguage (IL) level. The quality of feedback they present to learners may not help them solve their linguistic problems as

they expect. In this case, teachers are the initiators of noticing among learners. Teachers should be highly experienced to know what learners' problems are likely to be to promote noticing with a long lasting effect. Moreover, teachers cannot expect learners to consistently pay attention to linguistic items and that they have to acknowledge noticing is not guaranteed to take place within learners. However, noticing can be learner-generated through learners' own output. Learner-initiated noticing is beneficial to learning since learners are free to work on their own choice of linguistic features which are at a more appropriate level of IL and relevant to their needs. Hence, the results will be more permanent. Furthermore, input, even enhanced, seems inadequate for fostering noticing among learners. If input is offered to learners after noticing has been formed in learners' minds, the influence may differ. It seems that using an appropriate model as a pedagogical intervention to learners' output can promote learners' attention to their linguistic inaccuracies and scaffold their learning as they will find solutions to problems in accordance with their needs and IL level.

It should also be pointed out that most studies in this regard were done on the effect of oral output on promoting noticing; however, written output is more beneficial than oral one. Since learners have more time to process their products, they may notice more gaps in their output and think of different ways to produce the required linguistic items. As there is a time limit while speaking, learners' priority seems to be not form. Thus, they may not focus on form in speaking as they do while writing.

Moreover, it seems that EFL learners mostly notice grammatical inaccuracies in their written output more often than other components of language. This might be due to EFL teachers' focus on structure and their feedback on grammatical errors in learners' produced language. Consequently, learners think of grammar as the most significant

component in language learning. If the nature of feedback is changed, learners' focus may change as well. They pay attention to whatever they find problematic with regard to their IL. In this study, the researcher intended to find out whether these assumptions were right through an investigation of a spontaneous written task. In addition, the researcher took advantage of a picture task as a prompt for writing to explore the potential effects of it on noticing because learners were assumed to have a systematic and to some extent homogenous opinion regarding the content of the story. In fact, the study was going to investigate the effect of a narration writing task in developing noticing. In other modes of writing, every single student may have different ideas. This feature was deemed important because of the special kind of feedback which was going to be given to them.

1.3 Significance of the study

Pursuing ideas behind the input, output, and noticing hypotheses, researchers attempted to inspect the role of these hypotheses in SLA. Undoubtedly, most studies confirmed the impact of the above-mentioned hypotheses on SLA since they were proposed based on scientific experiments and observations. However, the majority of studies investigated learners' noticing of specific linguistic forms in input and output tasks. In fact, researchers designed tasks in which learners had to exploit particular linguistic forms to fulfill the task. Then, they were provided with input enhanced with the target forms. Such studies probably are not based on learners' needs or IL level. Recently, researchers have attempted to explore the effects of various types of feedback tasks such as reformulation and reconstruction tasks on fostering noticing in learners and filling holes and gaps in their linguistic knowledge. However, all these studies explored the impact of a specific feedback task on noticing in isolation. It is

not clear which sort of feedback is more effective. Among various kinds of existing feedback, the present study tries to find out the effect of model texts on learners' noticing. Moreover, it investigates which type of feedback (model text versus peer feedback) is more beneficial for capturing learners' attention and filling holes and gaps in their linguistic knowledge.

1.4 Research questions

In accordance with the above-mentioned problems, the following questions are raised to be investigated through this study.

1. What aspects of language will Iranian L2 learners notice while composing a narration on their own?
2. What will Iranian L2 learners notice while comparing their text with related models?
3. What will Iranian L2 learners notice while collaborating with a peer?
4. Is there any difference between the two kinds of feedback (model text vs. peer feedback) on promoting Iranian L2 learners' noticing of linguistic items and its quality?
5. What will be the effect of comparison on Iranian L2 learners' subsequent output?