

In t he na me of God



University of Isfahan
Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English Language

M.A. Thesis

**The Effects of Implicit vs. Explicit FonF on the Acquisition of
Idioms by Intermediate Persian Learners of English**

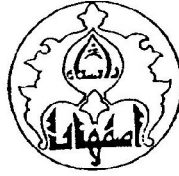
Supervisor:
Dr. Saeed Ketabi

Advisor:
Dr. Mansoor Tavakkoli

By:
Javad A'lipour

September 2009

کلیه حقوق مادی مترتب بر نتایج مطالعات، ابتکارات
و نوآوری های ناشی از تحقیق موضوع این پایان نامه
متعلق به دانشگاه اصفهان است.



دانشگاه اصفهان
دانشکده زبانهای خارجی
گروه زبان انگلیسی

پایان نامه ی کارشناسی ارشد رشته آموزش زبان انگلیسی
آقای جواد عالیپور تجت عنوان

تأثیر روش ضمنی و آشکار FonF در یادگیری اصطلاحات توسط دانشجویان
فارسی زبان آموزنده انگلیسی سطح متوسط

در تاریخ ۸۸/۶/۳۱ توسط هیأت داوران زیر بررسی و با درجه عالی به تصویب نهایی رسید.

- 1- استاد راهنمای پایان نامه دکتر سعید کتابی با مرتبه ی علمی استادیار امضا
- 2- استاد مشاور پایان نامه دکتر منصور توکلی با مرتبه ی علمی استادیار امضا
- 3- استاد داور داخل گروه دکتر منیژه یوحنایی با مرتبه ی علمی استادیار امضا
- 4- استاد داور خارج از گروه دکتر عزیزالله دباغی با مرتبه ی علمی استادیار امضا
- امضای مدیر گروه

Acknowledgements

Writing up this thesis would not have been possible without the contribution of a number of people not all of whom can be mentioned here. First of all, I wish to express my heart-felt thanks to Dr. ketabi, my supervisor, who was such a great help to me in all phases of the study, and who patiently guided me all through the way. My best gratitude is also due to Dr. Tavakoli, my advisor, whose meticulous reading of the work and his subsequent insightful comments helped me rectify some of the problematic parts of the work. Words really fail to appreciate him the way he deserves.

I cannot thank my family enough. For a matter of a few months, they had to put up with the idea of having me locking myself in my room, isolating myself from the rest of the world trying to write up the thesis.

I would also like to thank all those who helped me in one way or another to have this thesis implemented. Without their assistance, the completion of this study would have turned out to be far from possible. Sajad Shafie, Mehdi Latifi, Rahman Azadbakht, Ehsan Rezvani and Jalal A'lipour are to mention just a few.

Dedicated to my Lovely Parents
For Their Continual Support and
Encouragement

Abstract

This study was carried out to measure the efficacy of the different ramifications of FonF instruction on the acquisition of idioms by the Intermediate Persian learners of English. First, 80 students whose language proficiency and idiomatic knowledge were homogenous in terms of language proficiency and idiomatic knowledge were assigned to four groups, three being experimental and one being the control group. One of the experimental groups was exposed to the explicit teaching of idioms contained in five reading passages. The second group was taught the target idiomatic expressions through implicit FonF and the third experimental group (referred to as the combinatorial design group in this study) was taught the idioms through a combination of explicit and implicit techniques. The explicit FonF in the explicitly taught group ran the gamut from meta-linguistic instruction on the part of the teacher to the effort on the part of the students to find Persian equivalents of the idioms they had been presented with. The implicit FonF in the implicitly taught group was realized through modifying the idioms in question by underlining and italicizing the idioms in the readings.

To investigate the hypotheses of the study four paired t-tests along with a one-way ANOVA were utilized. The results of the study showed that the combinatorial design group gained the best results on the post-test followed by the group taught through explicit FonF which was in turn followed by the one taught through implicit FonF.

Keywords: FonF, Explicit FonF, Implicit FonF, Idioms.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

A large number of second language researchers maintain that input is highly critical in acquiring a second or foreign language (Gass & Madden, 1985; Krashen, 1982, 1985; Van Patten, 1995, 1996; Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993). Researchers using cognitive models to second/foreign language learning (McLaughlin, 1987; Ellis, 1997; Tomasello, 1998; Sharwood Smith, 1993, 1994) have also underscored the importance of the input that the learners are exposed to. Gass (1997), for example, has suggested that input provides essential positive evidence containing the language data that allows acquisition to occur (Gass, 1997).

Closely intertwined with the discussion of input is the concept of ‘noticing’ in language learning. Schmidt’s ‘Noticing Hypothesis’ (1990, 1993) is based on the premise that attention to target language forms is necessary for acquisition. In other words, target language forms will not be acquired unless and until they are noticed by the learners.

The hypothesis, thus, runs counter to Krashen’s (1982) claims that SLA is largely a subconscious process in which conscious learning serves merely to monitor or edit the subconsciously acquired knowledge. In fact, from the perspective of Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis, recurrent noticing and continued awareness of target language forms are vital in the acquisition process since they seem to raise the learners’ consciousness of the structures in question and to facilitate restructuring of the learners’ unconscious system of linguistic knowledge. In other words, it has been suggested that language input be followed by an element noticing on the part of the learners (Schmidt, 1990).

The fact is that on the one hand learners are faced with overwhelming amounts of sensory and cognitive information. On the other hand, information processing research has indicated that learners are limited as to the amount of information they are capable of processing (McLaughlin et al., 1983). That is, learners tend to ignore some of the information provided in the input. It is the learners’ attentional system, therefore, that is responsible for reducing and controlling the influx of information. Tomlin and Villa (1994) maintain that attention should be allocated by the learners to sort out and bring order to the input.

Along the same line of research, it has been claimed that instructed SLA makes positive contributions to language learning. The outbreak of the studies investigating the role of instruction could perhaps be attributed to the failure of the communicative approach to keep up to some of the early promises it had made. It, for instance, failed to bring about accuracy in the learners' language. An overreliance on fluency at the expense of accuracy seems to have given rise to a great deal of inaccuracy on the learners' part.

Several studies have indicated that learners who receive formal instruction demonstrate higher levels of L2 proficiency than those who do not (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Long, 1983).

It can be concluded, then, that a basic question in the field of SLA is to what extent and in what ways learners' attention should be directed to certain linguistic forms. Outstanding among the various methods of formal instruction which pay particular attention to the concepts of 'noticing' and 'consciousness-raising' is the focus-on-form (FonF) approach advocated by Long (1991).

In an FonF instructional approach, learners' attention are directed to linguistic data, which are normally ignored in focus-on-meaning language teaching methods, perhaps as a result of an overemphasis on the role of the communication.

A distinction is sometimes made in the field of second language acquisition between focus on form and focus on forms. Focus on forms is a concept reminiscent of the old days of the Audio-lingual method, whereas focus on form

is a recent phenomenon and is found mainly in a communication-based environment to kindle the learners' attention in the accuracy-related points of the target language.

The present study is based on the assumption that L2 learners do need to notice the language input in order for acquisition to occur. Moreover, given the importance of formal instruction in current SLA research, this study seeks to examine the overall effectiveness of the two ramifications of FonF instruction, i.e., explicit vs. implicit FonF, as important triggers that draw learners' attention to certain target forms .

The linguistic realm that this study has focused on is that of idiomatic expressions. Hardly can anyone deny the importance of idioms in learning a second language. Language seems to be replete with a myriad of idiomatic expressions such that some researchers have gone so far as to state that idiomaticity is the ultimate science of sciences (Kavka & Zybert, 2004). Even though they go on to hedge the claim by rephrasing what they claimed along the lines of 'the study of idiomaticity, in a broader sense of the term, is worth the effort', it does not, yet, conceal the idea that idioms are thought to have occupied a central place in the work of a lot of second language researchers.

An idiom is "a term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which are semantically or syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit. From a semantic viewpoint, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a

whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words do not often permit the usual variability they display in other contexts ...” (Crystal, 1980 p.179).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Although ‘noticing’ has been a matter of wide-ranging debate for some years, there is now a general consensus that noticing can certainly contribute to SLA. Schmidt (1994), for instance, contends that noticing target language forms in the input is a pre-requisite for L2 acquisition. However, the unanswered question is concerned with how the learner’s attention can best be drawn to the language forms in question.

In a cognitive perspective on SLA, learners are seen as processors who are limited in capacity. They are, therefore, believed to lack the capability to equally notice all aspects of the incoming information at a given time (McLaughlin et al., 1983). This being so, some of the incoming information becomes the object of focused selective attention, whereas the rest receives only peripheral attention (Tomlin & Villa, 1994).

Considering the learners’ limited capacity in noticing all aspects of L2 input, current theorizing in SLA has underscored the importance of language teaching methods, which are more likely to assist the learners in noticing the information that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The target language forms in question in the present study which were presented to the learners through consciousness-raising techniques are idiomatic expressions. It has been suggested that pre-fabricated language chunks and

routinized formulae play an important role in language acquisition and use (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Carter (1991) defines fixed expressions as a general term for idioms and other types of fixed expressions such as sayings and proverbs. Everyday language contains many thousands of idiomatic, slang and proverbial phrases whose figurative interpretations diverge in various ways from their literal meanings.

Regarding the importance of using second language idioms in communication, Sugano (1981) believes that even the highly proficient foreign language speaker is still likely to be marked out as a non-native if he appears to fall short of idioms in his speech. That is, he will come out as being unnatural though grammatical to the point of being bookish. Likewise, Cowie, Mackin and McCiag (1983) claim that familiarity with a wide range of idiomatic expressions and the ability to use them appropriately in context are among distinguishing marks of a native speaker.

The intrinsic nature of a lot of idiomatic expressions seems to be interesting. Many idiomatic expressions such as *blow one's top*, *hit the ceiling*, *blow a fuse*, *go ape*, and *flip someone's lid*, for instance, denote *anger*. Each of these expressions is motivated by a process of metaphorical mapping whereby people conceptualize their anger experiences partly in terms of acting like an *ape*, flinging the *lid* (which probably represents one's mind), and so on.