In His Name

SHEIKHBAHAEE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

COMPUTER - MEDIATED STRUCTURED INPUT ACTIVITIES AND THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH SIMPLE PAST TENSE BY IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS: AN INPUT PROCESSING - BASED APPROACH

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIRMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLSH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

BY

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SUPERVISOR

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SEPTEMBER 2014

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE CONTENT, FORMAT AND QUALITY OF PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY

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ENTITLED:

COMPUTER - MEDIATED STRUCTURED INPUT ACTIVITIES AND THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH SIMPLE PAST TENSE BY IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS: AN INPUT PROCESSING - BASED APPROACH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF M.A. IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IS ACCEPTED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE.

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DEAN OF GRADUATE SCHOOL: DR. S. M. H. FEIZ ……

To my love

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Abstract

Proponents of the Processing Instruction Approach to teaching grammar claim that learners benefit most when presented with both referential and affective structured input tasks while learning grammar. Thus, this study aimed to test the role that these two types of tasks play in the acquisition of English past simple tense via computer-mediated tasks. To this end, 90 elementary students from three intact classes were randomly assigned to three treatment groups: (1) affective tasks only group (AF), (2) referential tasks only group (RE), and (3) mixed tasks group (RA). One week prior to the first treatment session a pre-test consisting of a recognition test and a written production test was given to the learners in order to make sure that they were homogeneous. After the last treatment session, an immediate recognition and a production posttest were given to the participants. In order to examine the long-term effects of the treatment on the learning of English simple past tense a delayed recognition and a production posttest were given to the learners two weeks later. The results of the recognition and production tests indicated that all the experimental groups improved significantly in the recognition and the production of simple past tense. However, the RA group outperformed both the RE and AF groups on immediate and delayed posttests in production test and on delayed posttest in recognition test. No significance difference was found between RE, RA, and AF groups on immediate posttest of the recognition test. However, the findings of the present study indicated that PI can be a successful instructional treatment as it helps learners to make form-meaning connections for acquisition of the target structure.

Abbreviations

AF	Affective task
IP	Input Processing
MOBI	Meaningful Output-Based Instruction
PI	Processing Instruction
RA	Referential and Affective tasks
RE	Referential task
SI	Structured Input activity
TI	Traditional Instruction

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Preliminaries

Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) over the past three decades has been concerned with studies that address the effectiveness of various instructional treatments in L2 classrooms. The aims of these studies have been to investigate what kinds of grammar instruction facilitate SLA. To this end, from 80s to the present there have been considerable shifts of methods in terms of grammar instruction.

Krashen (1981, 1985) proposed Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. According to this theory, language acquisition occurs through providing learners with comprehensible input. Krashen (1985) considered the current level of L2 learners as *i* and their next stage as *i+1*. This means that for language acquisition to take place, learners should receive the input which is a little beyond their present ability. To this end, most of the instructional practitioners in the early decade of 80s held this hypothesis as a basis for language teaching and designed their instructional programs based on input activities. The basic assumption of their programs was that the learning of L2 is similar to the learning of L1. The teacher provided the comprehensible input and the learners were exposed to these comprehensible input through listening and reading. Learners did not have any production because Krashen believed that output is the outcome not the cause of acquisition.

It was in the 1985 that Swain proposed the *output hypothesis* in reaction to Krashen's *input hypothesis*, based on her observations of French immersion programs in

Canada, where she found the students to be much weaker in their oral and written production compared to their reading and listening comprehension abilities. She believed that learners should be engaged in language production (i.e. output) in order to promote their linguistic abilities (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Swain, 1985, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). In other words, she claimed that learners' output has a unique potential for raising learners' consciousness of the way the target language works, engaging them in hypothesis testing and also reflecting on their own language knowledge and use (Swain, 1995).

When Swain (1985) proposed Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, scholars began to discuss the relative merits and demerits of output-oriented practice in language teaching especially in the domain of grammar instruction (e.g. DeKeyser & Sokalski, 1996; VanPatten, 2004). In this relation, VanPatten (2004) asserted that output may play a number of important and facilitative roles in language development, but using a form in one's output is not a direct path to acquisition. He also suggested that acquisition does not appear to be exclusively dependent on output. To date, no study has demonstrated that output is necessary although some studies suggest it may be beneficial (Izumi, 2002).

Most of SLA studies came to the conclusion that learners' exposure to input plays an important role in second language acquisition so that it seems rather impossible to conceive learning a new language without considering the role of input in some form or another. However, what is still disputable is how input can better be transformed into intake (Qin, 2008).

VanPatten's (1996) model of input processing (IP) is mainly concerned with this debated issue. Motivated by the perspectives in cognitive psychology, VanPatten asserted that learners can attend to only a limited amount of incoming input at a given time; this is

why form and meaning may compete for attention resources during input processing. Vanpatten also believed that the communicative goal of learners is to understand the content of messages rather than understanding how that message is encoded; therefore, learners tend to process input for content (meaning) before they process it for the code (form).

VanPatten (1996) identified three sets of acquisitional processes; 'input, intake, and developing system' which are responsible for taking linguistic data in the incoming input, converting it to intake, and making the intake available to the developing system. To VanPatten, what learners do with the input during comprehension determines how intake is derived, and IP is specifically concerned with those psycholinguistic strategies by which learners derive intake from input.

Processing Instruction (PI) is a type of focus on form instruction that is predicated on a model of input processing. The goal of PI is to help L2 learners derive richer intake from input by having them engage in structured input activities that push them away from the strategies they normally use to make form-meaning connections. PI has three steps: (1) giving explicit information about the target structure to learners, (2) giving explicit information about processing strategies to learners, and (3) giving structured input tasks to learners.

Ellis (2003) maintains that processing instruction approach resembles traditional production-based instruction in that it involves a presentation stage followed by a practice stage. However, Vanpatten (2004) emphasizes that PI unlike traditional instruction, provides explicit information about processing strategies that is designed to overcome the default strategies that characterize the way learners naturally process input in accordance with their interlanguage; and also , of course , the practice stage is input- rather than

output-based. Thus, this study aims to test the role of PI in acquiring the simple past tense.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Mastering the grammar of a second language and being able to correctly implement it are challenging tasks to accomplish. That is why most ESL/EFL learners often have problems using language forms accurately in their oral and written performance. Therefore, one of the most interesting and controversial issues in SLA research is the question of how to teach grammar communicatively in formal contexts (Ellis, 2006).

Within the last two decades a significant number of researches have focused on the relative effects of different types of traditional grammar instruction which present learners with paradigmatic instruction with providing input through examples, oral and written output-based tasks ranging from mechanical to meaningful to open-ended communicative tasks.

In reaction to traditional meaningful output-based instruction, Vanpatten (2004) asserts that output plays a facilitative role in acquisition, he does not agree with the claim that 'using a form in one's output is a direct path to and he suggests instead that acquisition does not appear to be dependent on output production (VanPatten, 2004). Therefore, he coined the term 'Processing Instruction' (PI).

Processing Instruction has three basic characteristics: First, learners are given information about how the linguistic form or structure works (explicit information). Second, learners are informed about a particular IP strategy that may lead them to process the input incorrectly. PI has two principles which address two different aspects

of processing. The first principle is the *Primacy of Meaning Principle* which asserts that learners process input for meaning before they process it for form. The second principle is *The First Noun Principle* which asserts that learners tend to process the first noun they encounter in a sentence as the subject/agent. For example, 'John makes Mark clean the room.' When asked, "Who cleans the room?" learners tend to respond that John does, thereby interpreting the sentence as something like "John cleans the room for Mark". The third characteristic of PI is Structured Input (SI) activities. They are termed structured input activities because the input has been manipulated so that learners are pushed away from the less-than-optimal strategies to more optimal strategies.

There are two types of structured input (SI) activities: 1) Referential activities, in these activities learners are required to pay attention to form in order to get the meaning. They can have either a right or a wrong answer, which enables the teacher to check whether the form-meaning connection has been made properly. 2) Affective activities, in these activities there are no right or wrong answers. They refer to the personal experience of the learner who is encouraged to express his/her opinions and beliefs, or react to some views or events.

Both types of these SI activities encourage form–meaning mappings, but they differ in the extent to which they require the learner to attend to form. While referential activities force learners to rely on the target form to complete the task, affective activities are claimed to reinforce the form–meaning connections established during referential activities by helping the learners relate meaning to the target forms in a more personal and meaningful way (Farley, 2005; VanPatten, 2005; Wong, 2004). Proponents of PI claim that learners benefit most when presented with both types of activities,

especially when the pedagogical sequence consists of referential activities followed by affective ones.

While most of the studies provided supportive evidence for the superiority of PI and SI activities over other types of grammar instruction (Benati, 2005; Farley, 2001; Marsden, 2006; Morgan-Short & Wood-Bowden, 2006; VanPatten & Cadierno, 2002), no empirical studies have examined the relative effects of referential and affective activities on grammar acquisition. Thus, it is possible to ascertain whether learners do, in fact, benefit most from the combination of these two types of tasks. If referential activities promote conscious attention to form and affective activities serve as 'implicit reinforcement' (Marsden, 2006, p. 524), it could be hypothesized that providing the learner with both types of SI activities would be more likely to promote language acquisition, as PI advocates maintain. Nonetheless, considering that affective activities do not force learners to make form–meaning connections, it is reasonable to question whether affective SI activities are beneficial or even necessary.

Considering the above mentioned issues, the purpose of the present study is to compare the performance of students who learn past tense through referential tasks only and those who learn it through affective tasks only, and those who learn it through both referential and affective tasks. Instruction and practice were based on the tenets of PI and computer-delivered tasks.

1.3. Significance of the study

English Teachers sometimes feel dissatisfied whenever their students show a dissatisfying uptake of the material they teach them as input. In addition, the strategies that L2 learners use to process input are not always efficient and may sometimes be