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Input enhancement and connected discourse: A case of EFL academic context

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This study was an attempt to explore the effect of input enhancement (through interaction and explanation) on EFL (English and Foreign Languages) university language learners' connected discourse. Participants consisted of 54 EFL junior university language learners randomly divided into two experimental and one control group. Two input enhancement instructions, namely, input enhancement through interaction and input enhancement through explanation were administered. Then, two versions of tests (perception and production), regarding the phonology processes, were run. Each version consisted of one pretest and two posttests. Analysis of ANOVA showed that input enhancement had a significant effect on EFL academic language learners' connected discourse. Furthermore, between-test comparisons revealed that input enhancement group through Interaction and significantly outperformed the input enhancement group through explanation.

Keywords: Input enhancement, connected discourse, EFL academic context.

INTRODUCTION

Emergence of communicative competence in the area of foreign and second language teaching has had significant effects on the four language skills. Several research studies have shed light on the possible influence of communicative competence on speaking and connected discourse of language learners (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). One of the vital processes, regarding oral proficiency in EFL and ESL contexts, undoubtedly, is pronunciation. According to Pennington and Richards (1986), pronunciation is essential for interlocutor's' interaction and represent speakers' image whenever they are involved in conversations. Needles to say, the history of language teaching in terms of pronunciation is mingled with teaching super-segmental processes. These processes are appropriate indicators of having a connected discourse like native speakers and, for long, administered to assess oral proficiency of EFL and ESL learners. In a number of research, four main phonological processes occurring in a connected discourse, namely, Rhythm, Elision, Assimilation, … have revealed that connected speech would aid the learners to figure out authentic speech of targeted language (Ito, 2006a; Matsuzawa,2006).

According to Brown and Hilferty (2006), and Dauer and Browne (1992), whenever EFL (English and Foreign Languages) and ESL (English as a Second Language) language learners are aware on how to generate connected discourse, they can produce a more discernable discourse speech. Related literature shows a little information on the ways to estimate connected discourse.

In his research, Ito (2006b) stated that connected discourse produced by native speaker in natural settings is substantially different from what non-native speakers encounter in language classrooms or interaction with their teachers and peers.

Dauer and Browne (1992) displayed that connected discourse would enhance speech rhythm in language learners and can help non-native speakers to have a near-native natural connected discourse. Brown (2001), Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) argued that without connected discourse non-native speakers would not achieve a state of psychological relief, whenever they encounter new natural and communicative contexts.

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Perception and connected discourse

Several research studies have shown sizable influence of connected discourse on perception.

In one study, Henrichsen (1984) found that both advanced and beginner level ESL learners gained significantly lower on a test in which the subjects were expected to write down the citation form of the words in a sentence being presented in reduced forms. Thus, it was concluded that perception (comprehension) of reduced forms is thornier for all level of language learners.

Ito (2006a) did a research and assumed that lexical reduced forms such as “shan’t” show more saliency and would be more comprehensible than phonological forms such as “she’s”. Again, the results were compatible with that of Henrichsens’ (1984).

Furthermore, Brown and Hilferty (1986a, 1986b, 2006) estimated the impact of teaching reduced forms on Chinese EFL students’ listening comprehension. The experimental group who received instruction containing reduced forms as opposed to the control group obtained higher scores.

Administering a pretest-posttest, Matsuzawa (2006) investigated the effects of conned discourse on Japanese business individuals. He used a dictation test and after the instruction, the results displayed the significant effects of conned discourse on individuals’ listening comprehension.

Production and connected discourse

A few studies have investigated the effect of connected discourse on speakers’ ability to produce a natural and discernable speech.

Anderson-Hsieh et al. (1994) found that advanced level students produce more naturally connected discourse than beginner level students which indicated that there is a direct relationship between students’ proficiency level and using a connected discourse in communication.

The researcher did not find more studies on the investigation of effects of connected discourse on production, so, it is needed to do further research in this scope.

Input enhancement is a concept in second language acquisition, coined by Mike Sharwood Smith that is commonly used to signal methods that an instructor uses to make selected processes of a second language more salient for learners in such a way as to facilitate acquisition (Sharwood Smith 1991, 1993). It may be contrasted with similar but not identical to concepts such as motherese or teacher talk where the main aim is to make the language comprehensible and where acquisition is not necessarily intended or is at least not the primary motive. It includes, but is not limited to a number of techniques such as avoiding vowel reduction typical of rapid or casual discourse in some languages, simply slowing down the rate of discourse, using exaggerated stress and intonation, more repetition of words and phrases, less pre-verbal modification and more post-verbal modification, use of gestures, visual enhancement in written text such as boldface and underlining, and the use of video. It also includes explicit, more traditional techniques drawing the learner's attention more overtly to how the language system works by discussing particular elements of grammar and usage. Sharwood Smith distinguishes between external input enhancement, as illustrated earlier, and internal input enhancement where particular elements of the target language become salient at a given stage simply as a result of some natural developmental process outside the learner's control and not because of outside intervention.

Input enhancement was designed to replace the term 'grammatical consciousness-raising' (CR) (Sharwood Smith, 1981; Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1987) since the newer term did not imply that any changes in the mind of the learner would necessarily result from any changes in the external environment that may have been deliberately devised by language teachers or textbook writers (Sharwood Smith, 1993).

Connected discourse, in linguistics, is a continuous sequence of sounds forming utterances or conversations in spoken language. Analysis of connected discourse shows sounds changes affecting linguistic units traditionally described as phrases, words, lexemes, morphemes, syllables, phonemes or phones (Crystal, 2003). The words that are modified by those rules will sound differently in connected discourse than in citation form (canonical form or isolation form).

A number of researchers (Pennington, 1994; Brown and Hilferty, 2006) claimed that in order to get EFL learners’ awareness to phonology elements and achieve phonological competence, language learners should receive systematic institutional methods in their educational setting.

As one of the most important processes in communicative competence, connected discourse was selected and its four main elements, namely, Elision, Assimilation, Linking and Rhythm have been investigated.

Several research studies have displayed the positive effect of enhanced input on second language phonological process. Shook (1994) did a research on 125 first and second year learners of Spanish. The second language forms consisted of Spanish present perfect tense and relative pronouns written in larger font and bold form. The first group received text enhancement only. The second group received text enhancement regarding form and the third group was control group. Total results illustrated that the two text enhancement groups performed significantly better than the control group. Other studies have shown no significant effect of enhanced input on second language such as Leow (2001). He conducted a research on 38 native English speaking university learners of Spanish. The second

language forms were formal imperative and command in Spanish and underlined and bold. The results showed no statistically significant difference between the enhanced and unenhanced groups in regarding participants' comprehension and production. Furthermore, there are some studies in which the negative effect of enhanced written input on second language processes acquisition have been investigated. Overstreet (1998) randomly selected fifty native English speaking university learners of Spanish; the second language form was imperfect tense in Spanish. They were underlined, bold and enlarged. Four groups were selected. The first experimental group received familiar content and textual enhancement, second experimental group received familiar content but no textual enhancement, the third experimental group received unfamiliar content with textual enhancement. The results indicated no positive effect for both content familiarity and textual enhancement on participants' comprehension, and they showed a negative effect for textual enhancement on meaning perception.

Following previous research, this study is another attempt to highlight and investigate possible effects of input enhancement on connected discourse in an EFL context and tries to answer the following:

1. Would input enhancement (through interaction or explanation) have any impact on EFL academic learners' connected discourse?
2. Which type of input enhancement would have a significant impact on EFL academic learners' connected discourse?

METHOD

54 EFL junior university language learners were randomly selected. They ranged between 21 to 25. Gender was not considered as a variable in this research. The participants were divided into three groups: two experimental and on control group. And each group consisted of 18 subjects.

Regarding discourse speech, before conducting the instruction, a pretest was administered to indicate subjects' level of proficiency. The pretest was a multiple choice question exam which its validity and reliability has proven. In this test, the participants were given two reading texts, that is, one containing connected discourse and another without a connected discourse. Input enhancement instruction was conducted by two types of instruction, namely;
-Input enhancement through interaction
-Input enhancement through explanation

Several briefing sessions with three experienced university language instructors were held and the purpose of the study and their duties during instruction were discussed. After pretest, first experimental group (EG1) received input enhancement through interaction and second experimental group (EG2) received input enhancement through interaction, respectively. A listening activity was done to get participants fully involved and be aware of connected discourse in reference to its four processes: Elision, Assimilation, linking and Rhythm.

In input enhancement through interaction, participants were given feedback and interaction on the part of language instructor. Moreover, participants listened to two types of oral reading texts of the same topic that one of them spoke naturally and the other one spoke without connected discourse. Then, language instructors interacted with all participants to share their point of views. It should be mentioned here that all tests (pretests and posttests) were divided into two versions namely production and perception. In production part, language learners' ability to generate connected discourse by using discourse connectors was assessed. And, in perception part, language learners were evaluated according to their perception capability of connected discourse. The instruction lasted nearly seven weeks. The first posttest after four weeks and second posttest was administered three weeks, respectively.

In order to determine any significant differences among the three groups, that is, input enhancement through interaction group (IEIG), input enhancement through explanation group (IEEG), and control group (CG), one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was administered. Both pretest and posttests comprised 30 multiple choice questions which indicated several prosodic elements and connected discourse. Table 1 represents a sample of the sentences in the tests.

Overall analysis showed that there was no significant difference among the participants in three groups ($F(2.73)=3.03$, $p>0.03$, NS). Scores obtained from ANOVA analysis of *production* and *perception* parts revealed that input enhancement had a significant effect. In other words, between-test comparisons showed that input enhancement group through *interaction* and feedback carried out better than input enhancement group through *explanation* and control group, that is $F(2.73)=3.05$, $p<0.01$, $F(2.73)=3.06$, $p<0.001$, respectively. Thus, it could be claimed that input enhancement through interaction and feedback had a strong effect on connected discourse instruction (Table 2).

Resultant pretest scores in the production part, among three groups revealed no significant differences; however, the effect of input enhancement through interaction and feedback on instruction was significant (Table 3).

In perception part, results obtained from repeated measures of ANOVA revealed that, regarding connected discourse, there was a significant difference among the groups. Two input enhancement groups outperformed the control group both in pretest and posttests. In comparison, input enhancement through interaction group performed better than the other groups (Table 4).

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

General results showed that in all of the post-tests, input enhancement group through interaction performed better than input enhancement through explanation and control groups. This can lead to the fact that feedback and interaction among EFL academic language learners and instructors would be more effective in their using connected discourse in natural contexts.

Furthermore, this research investigated the impact posed by instruction on EFL learners' restructuring their inter-language phonology. It means that instructions which utilize input enhancement both through *interaction* and *explanation* would have a significantly positive effect in acquiring second or foreign language phonology.

Compatible with previous research studies, results displayed that when EFL academic language learners are given opportunities to dwell on the second or foreign language forms in communicative activities along with form-focused instruction, they would be able to transfer from input to intake.

Furthermore, the results obtained from second posttest

Table 1. Some instances from the questionnaire.

Phonological processes	Instance
Elision	She has arrived just *n*ow.
Assimilation	I graduated last *y*ear.
Linking	Fred had *a* nice car.
Rhythm	The *hu*man com*pul*sion to *talk* with a *pulse*!

Table 2. Pretest and posttests and their P-value.

Test version	Test	p-value	Comparison
Production	Pre-test	p>0.04 (NS)	IEEG<CG<IEI
	Posttest	p<0.001***	CG<IEEG<IEIG
	Posttest	p<0.001***	CG<IEEG<IEIG
Perception	Pre-test	p>0.04 (NS)	CG<IEIG<IEEG
	Posttest	p<0.01**	CG<IEEG<IEIG
	Posttest	p<0.001***	IEEG<CG<IEIG

IEEG=Input enhancement through explanation group
IEIG=Input enhancement through interaction group
CG=Control group

Table 3. P-value comparison among three groups in production phase.

Phonological processes		Production phase		
		Pretest	Posttest 1	Posttest 2
Elision	p-value comparison	> 0.05 NS IEEG<CG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG<IEEG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG<IEEG< IEIG
Assimilation	p-value comparison	> 0.05 NS IEEG<CG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG<IEEG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG<IEEG< IEIG
Linking	p-value comparison	> 0.05 NS IEEG<CG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG<IEEG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG<IEEG< IEIG
Rhythm	p-value comparison	> 0.05 NS IEEG<CG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG<IEEG< IEIG	<0.001*** CG=IEEG< IEIG

apparently would prove this finding. Improvements of input enhancement group in four elements (*Elision*, *Assimilation*, *linking* and *Rhythm*) of study was significantly higher than the other groups. Therefore, this result would also verify the priority of input enhancement through interaction and feedback, in comparison with Input Enhancement through explanation and control group. This finding might be as the result of noticing and conscious-raising on the part of language instructors to facilitate the process of second or foreign language phonology acquisition process among the EFL learners.

To sum up, Input Enhancement instructions lead to improvement of phonology acquisition in academic EFL learners and thus have a vital dominance over traditional instructions. Using this instruction, EFL language instructors would activate language learners' cognitive strategies and raise the consciousness of phonology processes at the same time. In near future, the dire need to have Input Enhancement instructions and replace prominent traditional instructions with them would be of paramount importance.

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Table 4. P-value comparison among three groups in perception phase.

Phonological processes		Perception phase		
		Pretest	Posttest 1	Posttest 2
Elision	p-value comparison	> 0.05 NS CG<IEEG< IEIG	> 0.05 NS IEEG<CG< IEIG	<0.05* IEEG<CG< IEIG
Assimilation	p-value comparison	> 0.05 NS CG<IEEG< IEIG	<0.01* CG<IEEG< IEIG	<0.001*** IEEG<CG< IEIG
Linking	p-value comparison	> 0.05 NS CG< IEIG<IEEG	< 0.05* IEEG<CG< IEIG	> 0.05 NS IEEG<CG< IEIG
Rhythm	p-value comparison	< 0.05* NS CG< IEIG<IEEG	< 0.05* CG<IEEG< IEIG	<0.001*** IEEG<CG< IEIG

participated in this research.

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