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Different Textual Enhancement Formats and the Intake of English Past Simple Tense

Mehdi Sarkhosh (Corresponding author)

Dept. of Humanities, University of Tehran, Iran

Tel: 93-6629-0512 E-mail: mdsarkhosh@gmail.com

Elshan Sarboland

Dept. of Humanities, University of Ahar, Iran

Tel: 93-9024-6552 E-mail: Elashan_Sarboland@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The present study investigated the differential effect of different textual enhancement (TE) formats on the intake of English past simple tense. There were 156 male pre-intermediate learners of English. A reading comprehension text was distributed among four experimental and one control group. The target structure was enhanced differently for four experimental groups but for the control group there was no enhancement. The last experimental format was created by the present researchers to investigate its effect on the noticing of the target form. ANOVA analysis and Scheffe post hoc test were applied to analyze the data. Final results divulged that underline and bold TE formats were more effective in bringing about the noticing and intake of the target structure. However, choice TE format did not prove to be effective. The findings indicated that the different types of TE had differential effect on the noticing and intake of the English past simple tense.

Keywords: Noticing, Textual enhancement, Intake, Past simple

1. Introduction

SLA has been challenged for decades by the controversy over either direct or indirect instruction of language forms. As Ellis, (1997) argued, the question has not been whether to teach grammar or not but *how* to teach it from among a wide range of pedagogical options open to language practitioners. The argument in SLA supports the view that the instruction of form be embedded within communicative activities in the classroom (Pica, 2000; Savignon, 1991). One way to this end has been through the application of input enhancement (Sharwood Smith, 1981). A typical example of input enhancement is TE by which the target language forms are made salient within the text which, in turn, brings about the noticing and subsequent intake of the intended forms.

The issue of noticing has received a considerable amount of attention from applied linguistics researchers in the last two decades (e.g., Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Sharwood Smith, 1981, 1991, 1993). Qi and Lapkin define noticing "as the awareness of stimulus via short-term memory." They refer to stimulus as "anything that rouses one's attention" (Qi & Lapkin, 2001, p. 279). It is believed that attention to form is essential for the acquisition of form (e.g., Doughty, 1991; Fotos, 1994, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Nassaji, 1999). When a structural feature is made salient by enhancing that feature, it brings about the necessary attention on the part of learners. Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) maintains that attention is paid to form when the form is made more salient and this, in turn, brings about the noticing of that form.

TE is making a structure more salient in the text by typographically enhancing that structure, in other words, TE is making a structural feature more conspicuous, compared to the neighboring co-text so that this feature is more easily noticed and recognized by the reader of the text (see Simard, 2009). The enhancement of the structural features within the text makes it more probable for the reader to pay attention to these features (Schmidt, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 2001). A large number of studies in the literature also advocate the view that when due attention is paid to language forms, noticing and intake take place (e.g., Leow, 1997b; Robinson, 1996; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999; Schmidt & Frota, 1986).

There is a great deal of controversy regarding the effectiveness of TE. Some studies such as Alanen (1995) and Leow (1997a, 2001) reject the positive effect of TE on the intake of target forms, however, a set of other studies (e.g., Jourdenaise, Stauffer, Boyson & Doughty, 1995; Shook, 1994) report the positive role of TE on triggering noticing and intake of language forms. In this study, however, there was an attempt to investigate the influence of the type of TE on learners' noticing and intake of English past simple tense. The study also aimed to examine the effect of a new TE format devised by the present authors. This format is called choice TE format and introduces both correct and incorrect forms in the reading text while the incorrect forms are identified by an asterisk and follow the correct ones so that learners are first exposed to the correct forms. The choice TE format is more explicit in nature compared to other TE formats, because both correct and incorrect forms are identified, however, it is not totally explicit since there is no metalinguistic explanation as to how the target structure works. Here is a sample sentence from the experimental reading comprehension task given to subjects:

…The school headmaster (told/ telled) the girl that she (did not like/ do not like*) her bad behavior…*

2. Literature Review

Leow (1997a) investigated the effect of TE and text length on the comprehension of text content and the intake of the target form. There were 84 college Spanish learners who were originally English speakers. The experimental task consisted of four conditions: a) a long unenhanced text, b) a long enhanced text, c) a short unenhanced text, d) a short enhanced text. Leow chose impersonal imperative Spanish form as the target structure of the study. Leow found that input enhancement had no effect on the comprehension of the passage, that is, the group that received input enhancement and the group that did not, were almost similar regarding their comprehension of the text. TE seemed ineffective in improving the intake of the targeted form. Leow also found that text length was effective in the comprehension of the text. The learners who were exposed to shorter texts were more successful than those who were exposed to longer texts. However, his findings did not indicate that text length had any effect on the intake of grammatical forms.

Shook (1994) investigated the effect of TE on 125 first and second year English speaking Spanish learners' intake of present perfect and relative pronouns. He applied two off-line tasks (multiple-choice recognition and fill in the blank production) to measure intake. The experimental groups which were exposed to TE performed better than the control group but the difference between the scores of the two experimental groups was not statistically significant. Leow (2001) in another study on the effect of textual enhancement in L2 reading chose 74 adult Spanish learners. The target form in his study was formal/polite imperative. The text Leow used was a short text which was the modified version of the text he used in Leow (1997a). In order to assess the participants' intake of the target form, a multiple-choice recognition task was prepared. Leow also devised a comprehension task in order to measure the participants' comprehension of the text. Leow concluded that the amounts of reported noticing were similar for both groups. He also found that TE had no effect on the comprehension of the text which was in line with Leow (1997a). What he came up with was related to the issue of TE and the prior knowledge. He found that the level of awareness might have been related to the depth of attention and processing.

Jourdenais et al. (1995) examined the effect of TE (underline, bold, shadow and different font) of preterit and imperfect tense in Spanish on the noticing of 10 English learners of Spanish. Measurement instruments were think aloud protocols and a written task., the final results divulged that subjects exposed to TE significantly performed better than the control group by reporting more episodes containing the target form. Seventy two first year college level learners were exposed to enhanced and unenhanced texts by Leow et al (2003). The target form of their study was Spanish present perfect and present subjunctive. In order to make sure that the participants had little knowledge of the target structure in question, those that scored beyond 40% at pretest were excluded from the study. Also participants who failed to attend all sessions or failed to produce complete think aloud protocols or turned to other students while doing the task were excluded from the study. To assess both intake of the target structures and

comprehension of the text, multiple choice tasks were designed and employed. Leow had four experimental groups. The first group was exposed to +enhanced and +subjunctive, the second group was exposed to +enhanced and +present perfect, the third group was exposed to –enhanced and +subjunctive, and the fourth group to –enhanced and +present perfect. Participants were also required to think aloud while reading the passage. The final findings revealed that both enhanced and unenhanced groups reported the same amount of noticing of the target forms in the input. He also found that enhanced present perfect was more noticed than enhanced present subjunctive. Regarding the effect of TE on comprehension, Leow found that TE had no significant effect. These results are in line with Izumi (2002) and Leow (1997a).

Overstreet (1998) investigated the effect of TE (bold, underline, enlarged letters and different font) and content familiarity on students' acquisition of preterit and imperfect tenses in Spanish and on their comprehension of passage content. Not only did he find no effect of TE on students' intake of target features, but also he found a negative effect of TE on comprehension. Wong (2003) attempted to examine if TE and simplified text could induce noticing of past participle agreement in relative clauses and comprehension of the texts. 82 adult French learners were randomly assigned to three conditions. 1) exposure to TE and simplified input, 2) exposure to simplified input only, 3) exposure to unsimplified input without TE. Wong operationalized TE by typographically altering three texts. Simplified input was operationalized by providing the participants with the simplified version of the reading texts. Acquisition in this study was measured by error correction task and comprehension was measured by free recall task. Wong found that TE had no effect on the acquisition of past participle agreement, simplified input did not have any effect on the acquisition of the target feature either. It was found that TE had no effect on the recall of total idea units but was effective in the recall of enhanced idea units. It was also found that those who read the simplified version recalled more episodes of both total idea units and enhanced idea units.

Combs (2008) studied the effect of TE and topic familiarity on the acquisition of form. The participants were 36 lower intermediate learners of English at a business college at Manhattan. The students had just started the semester and were in the second week. Combs divided the participants into three experimental and one control group. The first experimental group experienced textually enhanced material with training on topic familiarity while the second group did not have topic familiarity training but enjoyed TE. The third group enjoyed topic familiarity training but did not experience TE. The control group however, received neither topic familiarity nor TE. It was revealed that typographical enhancement had no effect on the acquisition of form. Likewise, it was clarified that topic familiarity had no effect on the acquisition of form. White (1998) investigated the effect of TE (enlargement, different combinations of bold, italics and underline) on the use of third person singular possessive determiners. The findings revealed that TE did not lead to the correct use of the target structures but augmented the frequency of the use of these features.

The study reported in this paper attempts to shed some more light on the controversies mentioned above, therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

● Do different TE formats (typographical cues) have differential effects on Persian learners' intake of English past simple tense?

● Does choice TE format have an effect on the Persian learners' intake of English past simple tense?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted on 156 male pre-intermediate learners at Iran Language Institute (one of the oldest and most famous language centers in Iran). The age of the participants ranged between 14 and 32 (mean= 16.33 & SD= 1.7) and their level of education ranged from secondary school to MA. They had studied English for one year in that institute and were almost at the same level of proficiency since they all took the placement test when enrolling and at the end of each term, they had to pass the final exam in order to go to the next level. However, in order to make sure that the participants were all at the same level of proficiency regarding their knowledge of English past simple tense, a pretest was administered. The result of the pretest indicated that there was no significant between group difference at pretest. Therefore, the five groups were similar at the beginning of the study.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Demographical Information

To take the necessary demographical information about the subjects such as, age, educational level, years of studying English, etc, a background questionnaire was distributed among the subjects at the first session

3.2.2 Reading Text

The researchers selected a reading comprehension passage at pre-intermediate level which consisted of 357 words. The text was piloted on a similar pre-intermediate group of learners to ensure that it was of a suitable level of difficulty. Therefore, the text was administered to a class of 23 pre-intermediate learners at the same institute. The learners were asked orally about the difficulty of the passages, and also ten comprehension questions followed the text. The learners' oral reports confirmed that the text was of suitable difficulty level. The learners, furthermore, answered the comprehension questions 81 percent correctly which confirmed the fact that the text was suitable for these learners regarding its difficulty. While piloting the text, the researchers also investigated the reliability of the text by applying KR-21 formula and it turned out to be 0.75. For each of the four experimental groups, the past simple tenses inside the text were enhanced differently, respectively bold, italics, underline, and choice. However, for the control group there was no intervention and the text was neutral.

3.2.3 Multiple-Choice Recognition Tests

The researchers chose multiple-choice recognition tests as the test format to check the students' knowledge and intake of the English past simple tense in both pre and posttests due to two reasons: first, by employing multiple-choice test, the researchers prevent subjects from

applying avoidance strategies and direct their performance toward the intended structures; second, this method is most commonly used to explore the impact of TE on intake (Leow, 1997a; Overstreet, 1998) and has proved to be a suitable method to fulfill this aim. Therefore, two parallel versions of a multiple-choice recognition test were developed (A & B), one for pretest and one for posttest, and each version had eighteen questions, twelve past simple and six fillers. To assess the equivalence of two tests, a pilot study was run in which the twelve past simple questions of pretest and posttest were put together into one test of 24 questions on the English past simple tense. Odd numbers were assigned pretest questions and even numbers posttest questions. The new test was given to an advanced class of EFL learners at the same institute who had already learned past simple according to the institute's syllabus and their teachers' reports to the researchers. The mean of the class was 83 out of 100 demonstrating that the subjects had an ample knowledge of past simple tense. The two parts of the test, i.e., odd numbers (pretest questions) and even numbers (posttest questions) were scored separately and the correlation coefficient between them was computed to examine whether the two versions were parallel and it turned out to be 0.77.

3.3 Target Structure

Ferris (2004) divided linguistic categories into treatable and non treatable. The former category incorporates the structures that are easily rule-bound and it is easier to formulate a rule as to how to apply them, for example, English tenses or conditionals. The latter category, however, refers to those structures that do not easily let the formulation of clear-cut rules as to how to use them, for example, English prepositions or article system. Therefore, the researchers decided to use past simple as the target structure of this study. It was hypothesized that TE might be more effective on treatable error categories because written corrective feedback in the studies on error correction proved to be more effective on treatable error categories (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 1999, 2004).

3.4 Procedure

The study was conducted in February, 2012 in Iran language Institute in Orumieh (a city in north-west of Iran). Prior to carrying out the study, a meeting was arranged and the teachers who were in charge of administering the study in their classes were informed of the exact administration process they were supposed to follow. To ensure that the subjects had no prior knowledge of English past simple, the syllabi they had covered till then were analyzed and teachers were asked whether they had taught past simple tense to their students already or whether their students had any knowledge about the topic. Then, the data were collected in two sessions. The first session, the demographical information questionnaire and the pretest were administered by the teachers. The pretest was one of the two versions of the multiple choice recognition test (A or B) and was administered to ensure that subjects had no prior knowledge of past simple and to confirm whether all groups were equal and comparable at the pretest. A week later, the reading passage and posttest were administered. The text was enhanced differently for different groups. The posttest was the parallel form of the pretest. The questions on neither pre test nor posttest were comprehension questions, but they were all about past simple and were not about the content of the passages. Only the twelve questions on past

simple were corrected at both pretest and post test (Six questions were fillers and twelve were on past simple in each test), to score the tests, three points were given to each correct answer and therefore, the subjects' scores varied from zero to thirty-six in each test. Why three points was chosen to be given to each correct answer was decided because it was the norm practiced in that institute and students and teachers were used to this scoring procedure.

4. Result

The relevant data in this experiment were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18. The level of significance was set at 0.05. The descriptive statistics for the five groups at pretest are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the five groups at pre-test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Underline	18	3.00	18.00	7.34	3.14
Bold	17	0.00	12.00	6.13	2.87
Italic	21	3.00	21.00	7.99	3.65
Choice	17	3.00	12.00	6.23	3.11
Control	21	0.00	21.00	6.54	3.01

In order to ensure the normality of the distribution, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run. The results indicated that there was no normal distribution of the scores at pretest ($p < .05$)(see table.2).

Table 2. The test of normality for the five groups at pre-test

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-test	**Underline**	.211	18	.016
	Bold	.198	17	.000
	Italic	.189	21	.000
	Choice	.297	17	.015
	Control	.199	21	.000

Therefore, the researchers decided to use non-parametric statistics. In order to compare the mean scores of the five groups at the pre-test, a Kruskal-Wallis test was run. As Table 3 displays, the highest ranking was for Choice group at 59.23 and the ranking for the other groups were respectively as follows: there was 55.04 for the Control group, 49.00 for the Bold group, 47.98 for the Underline group, and 44.45 for the Italic group (see Table 3).

Table 3. The ranks for the five groups at pre-test

	Group	**N**	**Mean Rank**
Pre-test	**Underline**	18	47.98
	Bold	17	49.00
	Italic	21	44.45
	Choice	17	59.23
	Control	21	55.04

As table 4 shows, the Chi-square statistic has a probability of p=90 at four degrees of freedom, therefore, there was no statistical difference between the groups at pretest.

Table 4. Test Statistics for the five groups at pre-test

	Pre-test
Chi-square	.698
df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.90

Table 5 illustrates the descriptive statistics for five groups at posttest.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the five groups at post-test

	N	**Minimum**	**Maximum**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Underline	18	6.00	24.00	13.23	3.89
Bold	17	3.00	18.00	14.01	3.11
Italic	21	0.00	24.00	8. 03	4.87
Choice	17	3.00	27.00	8.33	4.90
Control	21	3.00	15.00	7.97	3.32

To investigate the normality of the distribution of the five groups at post-test, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run. The results showed that there was no normal distribution of scores in each group at posttest ($p < .05$) (see Table 6).

Table 6. The test of normality for the six groups at posttest

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov		
		Statistic	**df**	**Sig.**
Post-test	**Underline**	.155	18	.010
	Bold	.198	17	.004
	Italic	.210	21	.000
	Choice	.242	17	.016
	Control	.229	21	.000

Therefore, the researchers used non-parametric statistics in order to compare the mean scores of the five groups at the posttest, a Kruskal-Wallis test was applied. As Table 7 displays, the highest rankings were for the Underline and the Bold groups at 69.89 and 67.68 respectively and the ranking for the other groups were correspondingly as follows: there was 42.41 for the Italic group37.11 for the Choice group, and 33.90 for the Control group.

Table 7. The ranks for the five groups at post-test

	Group	N	Mean Rank
Post-test	**Underline**	18	69.89
	Bold	17	67.68
	Italic	21	42.41
	Choice	17	37.11
	Control	21	33.90

As table 8 shows the chi-square statistic has a probability of p=.000 at 4 degrees of freedom. Therefore, it was concluded that there were statistical differences between the five groups at post-test.

Table 8. Test Statistics for the five groups at post-test

	Post-test
Chi-square	26.398
df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000

In order to save space, the researchers decided to report the rest of results concisely and the relevant tables are not displayed below.

The Kruskal-Wallis test showed that there was a difference among the means, but the exact location of the differences was not clear. To spot the exact place of the differences, the first two groups with the highest rankings – the Underline and the Bold – were chosen and Mann-Whitney U tests were run. These two groups were chosen because they had the highest and almost near mean ranks and the difference between the mean ranks of these two groups and those of other groups was rather large.

The Test Statistics Table for the Underline group demonstrated that there was no significant difference between the Underline and Bold groups (U= 218.3, p> .05), but the differences between the Underline and the other groups were significant which were as follows: the Underline and the Italic (U= 87, p< .05), the Underline and the Choice (U= 97, p< .05), and the Underline and the Control (U= 91, p< .05).

The Test Statistics Table for the Bold group indicated that there was no significant difference between the Bold and Underline groups (U= 218.3, p> .05), but the differences between the Bold and the other groups were significant which were as follows: the Bold and the Italic (U= 98, p< .05), the Bold and the Choice (U= 121, p< .05), and the Bold and the Control (U= 90, p< .05)

5. Discussion

As the results of the study revealed, underline and bold TE formats were more effective than other formats in inducing the noticing and acquisition of the target structure of this study. The findings of the present study corroborate the findings of a number of other studies (e.g., Jourdenaise et al., 1995; Shook, 1994) on TE in that they, likewise, concluded that the type of TE was differentially effective in bringing about the noticing of target structures. The findings also back Simard (2009) ‘s findings since she also found capital letters and three cue TE formats more effective than the other formats.

Similar results were also obtained in some studies in the field of first language acquisition, for example, in Mark's (1966, cited in Simard, 2009) study, as well, the type and combination of the typographical cues used made subjects react differently to the instructions. Foster and Coles (1977) also found that the type of typographical cue can induce different reactions from the subjects to the task they are asked to perform. Shebilske and Rotondo (1981) also found that the use of capital letters helped learners remember the information that was presented to them in their first language.

The underline group showed a better performance at posttest which can be explained by reference to the fact that one common learning strategy among Iranian learners is to underline or highlight the most important parts of the textbooks. To substantiate this assumption, at least, among the subjects of the current study, the researchers asked the participants which one of the five TE formats they generally applied for accentuating the important sections of the textbooks. According to the teachers' oral reports, the majority reported underlining and highlighting. This part was done orally since it was not the focus of this study and was only done as a contingent hint for future research.

Jourdenaise et al. (1995) as well, reported underline as an effective TE format in causing the noticing of the target features. When we underline a structural feature, we make it more salient than when it is bolded or italicized since by underlining something extra is added to the text, in other words, a line is drawn under the target feature. In simpler words, underlining is an *additive* TE format in that the subject sees something extra in addition to the target structure and this is what, we surmise, brings about the noticing of what the researcher means to be noticed. A bolded or italicized feature might not attract as much attention as underlining triggers since the two former approaches to TE do not add anything extra to trigger the subjects' curiosity and induce their noticing of the target structure.

Bold TE format resembles more like highlighting compared to other formats. As was mentioned, one of the strategies the subjects reported to apply for their own learning was highlighting and, in this study, bold TE format like underline was very effective in assisting subjects notice past simple structures in the passages they were given. It seems that the subjects felt a sense of affinity between their learning strategies (underlining and highlighting) and the TE formats in the text (underline and bold). What is contrary to the findings of this study regarding bold TE format is that Leow (1997a) and Overstreet (1998) found no effect of bold TE format on intake.

Choice TE format did not bring about the noticing of the target structure of this study, however, this is really surprising in that this format was expected to bring about more noticing than other ones since it was more explicit compared to other formats. The researchers hypothesize that the reason why choice TE format did not prove effective is that the subjects when confronted with this type of TE were baffled and perplexed as to why one form is asterisk marked as incorrect and the other one is not and is considered correct. This fact, per se, seems to have interfered with the process of reading of the texts and has contributed to malperformance of the learners at posttest. Another fact that caused the ineffectiveness of choice TE format seems to be the fact that, in other formats, learners read

the text and rarely stop at the enhanced points to figure out what is going on and they rarely ask themselves why a particular form is enhanced for example, by underlining. However, regarding the choice TE format, this fact is totally different because when learners are exposed to such an enhancement, they start asking themselves why this form is enhanced and they try to figure out a rule for the correct usage of the form in question. This brings the form to consciousness and makes the learner alert about the form and this is not what TE is trying to achieve since TE aims at making the learners acquire the forms while their attention is focused on meaning and the comprehension of the passage. Choice TE format did not turn out to be effective in stimulating the noticing or intake of English past simple tense and this result backs the finding of Farahani and Sarkhosh (2012)'s study in which they found no impact of choice format on the upper intermediate EFL learners' intake of English subjunctive mood

6. Conclusion

The final findings of the present study can be enumerated as: a) different TE formats were differentially effective in inducing the noticing of the target form, b) underline and bold TE formats were more effective in triggering the noticing of the intended structure and its subsequent intake c) The TE format that the present researchers created did not bring about the noticing and intake of the target form. The findings of this study indicate that enhancing a particular feature in a text is effective in triggering the noticing of that feature and its subsequent intake, several researchers such as Jourdenaise et al., (1995), Shook (1994) and Lee (2007) also came up with similar findings. As Simard (2009) puts it, there is an inherent saliency potential in each TE format and they impact attention differently.

The implication of this research is for researchers to be careful about the learning strategies of learners. Since as was shown, the subjects reported that they usually highlighted salient points in their textbooks by underlining or highlighting, and as findings revealed underline and bold TE formats were more effective than other ones in inducing noticing and intake. What this might imply for researchers is that the type of TE format might not be effective per se and what makes a particular format salient is the interaction of this format with the learner's learning strategies. In simpler words, TE can be more effective when the learners are interacting with the strategy they themselves usually apply for their own learning such as underlining. Future research had better shed more light on the nature of the relationship between learners' learning strategies and different TE formats. This point is not discussed further here because it is not the central focus of this study.

Material developers also can enjoy the findings of this study in that there are many TE formats available for them to enhance structural features in the text, and research results regarding their usefulness are contradictory (Lee, 2007; Lee & Huang, 2008). However, this study revealed that bold and underline formats can be more effective than other ones. Material developers can enhance the target features in the texts by bolding or underlining those features because the findings of the present study showed that these two TE formats were more effective than the other formats in inducing the noticing of the target form of the present study.

This study suggests that teachers ask learners to do TE themselves. That is, emphasizing important points on learners' part mingled with TE on teachers or material developers' part. In simpler words, teachers can teach the target form to the learners and ask the learners to enhance it in the text. The learners will automatically apply their own strategy in enhancing the text.This way each learner applies his/her own TE format, a format which is congruent with his/her learning strategies. The drawback is that learners might grow more conscious of forms, and this is not what TE is trying to achieve. This suggestion needs further research and paves the way for more studies that can delve beneath the relationship between learners' learning strategies and TE formats. However, there is a drawback to this practice and that is the fact that learners, as a result of this practice will grow more conscious of the forms and this is against the purposes of TE and input enhancement in general.

The current study suffers from a number of limitations. One is the type of assessment used. Leow (2001) contended that a more useful kind of assessment is to collect oral protocol by using on-line measurement instruments while this was absent in this study. Therefore, if researchers are trying to figure out what input learners pay attention to and notice, they had better collect oral protocol reports (Jourdenaise, 2001). Another drawback of the current research is the use of an immediate post test design (Han et al., 2008).

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