

On the effect of L1-mediated focus-on-form instruction on English language learners' oral production¹

Amir Valadi²

Fatemeh Hemmati³

Susan Ghahremani Ghajar⁴

Amir Reza Nemat Tabrizi⁵

Received: 2016/06/29

Accepted: 2016/09/05

Extended Abstract

The role that language teachers' instructional behavior can play in any language instruction program has to do with helping language learners move from receiving language input to changing it into language intake, and, finally, to language uptake (Slimani, 1998, as cited in Candlin & Mercer, 2001). As they travel the distance from input to uptake, language learners have to pass through cognitive processes such as inferring, structuring, and restructuring the second language data as well as socio-cultural interactions (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) to acquire the second language (L2).

In English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, like that of Iran, where language learners have the minimum real contact with the target language outside their classrooms, causing them to have almost no social interactions and contacts, the above-mentioned cognitive processes are more at work compared with the socio-cultural factors, in bringing about language learning outcomes (Ellis, 2012).

¹ (DOI): 10.22051/JLR.2018.9628.1117

² Ph.D candidate at Payame Noor University; a_valadi@yahoo.com

³ Associate professor, English language department at Payame Noor University; hematitefl@gmail.com

⁴ Associate professor, English language department at Alzhra Universit; suesanghajar@yahoo.com

⁵ Associate professor, English language department at Payame Noor University; arnemati@pnu.ac.ir

Therefore, it seems that the first mission of every language instructional program in an EFL context is to modify the language input for language learners so that they can benefit from getting involved in the above mentioned processes. As a result, how a language instruction program deals with *input modification* is the first teaching phase to be taken into consideration.

As Kumaravadivelu (2006) explained and discussed, the related literature indicates that there have been three main approaches to input modification in the English language teaching realm: (a) form-oriented, with the emphasis on structural features (b) meaning-oriented, with focusing on meaning rather than grammatical forms and (c) form- and meaning-oriented input modifications, with a focus on both meaning and grammatical forms.

Focus-on-form instruction, as the latest approach towards input modification, continues to have its own share of English language teaching (ELT) research, possibly, because it easily lends itself to new conceptualizations. Based on Ellis's option-based conceptualization of focus-on-form instruction, in English-as-a-foreign-language contexts where both the teacher and learners share the same mother tongue, one pedagogical option at the disposal of foreign language teachers is to combine this type of instruction with the learners' first language use.

Accordingly, this study aimed at finding any possible impact of L1-mediated focus-on-form instruction on oral performance of 120 language learners. The participants of this study from Iran language institute (ILI) in Khoramabad, a city situated in the southwest of Iran, at three different language proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The reason for choosing the mentioned institute was that using Farsi (the L1) is highly discouraged there by both officials and the teachers themselves, making it an ideal place for the purpose of this study. To this end, six groups of learners were chosen as the participants. The study took 24 instructive sessions altogether. The focus-on-form instruction using consciousness-raising technique for three groups, one elementary, one intermediate, and one advanced, was mediated by the participants' first language and for the other

three groups, one elementary, one intermediate, and one advanced, just by English. Afterwards, the participants were asked to participate in two individual oral posttests: one right after the instructions and one two weeks later.

The results revealed that first language-mediated instruction led to significantly higher gains both in fluency and accuracy gains for elementary and intermediate levels, and significantly higher gains in accuracy for the advanced level.

This study argues that the point at issue is not whether to use L1 or not but, rather, it is how to provide the language learners with conditions to take advantages of it. Arguing that L2 learners should be banned from using their L1 is neither realistic nor practical (Cook, 2001; Ellis, 2012, Karathanos, 2009; Levine, 2003).

It goes without saying that too much use of L1 for teaching L2 cannot bring about desired outcomes especially when communicative modes of language are demanded. It seems that both teachers and learners can reap the benefit of a systematic L1 use in their classroom alongside the L2. This, of course, is a reflection of the realities of the classroom situation especially in contexts where teachers and learners share the same mother tongue. Research has shown that forcing learner to abandon their mother tongue use when they know it is already shared by their classmates and teacher is not fruitful at all (Makulloluwa, 2013). The present study, through reconciling L1 use with FonF instruction and providing psycholinguistic justifications for using L1, suggests that a judicious and occasional use of L1 is a better technique to adopt than to completely include or exclude L1 from the teaching/learning activities. It seems that what ELT practitioners need is a re-evaluation of the English-only policy and a re-examination of the L1 role, and that the long-lasting idea that L1 is a hindrance to the learners' L2 learning is to be practically questioned and researched.

There are different groups of stakeholders that might benefit from the findings of this study. First and foremost, language learners who are directly addressed by the results of such studies can take advantage of its findings. This

study showed that learners at different levels of language proficiency benefit from L1-mediated focus on form. Such a finding is worth paying attention to in our language institutes and schools where we are in desperate need of new teaching techniques and experiences. The second stakeholders are EFL teachers who need to be instructed on how to properly use learners' L1 in the classroom. At the moment, there is a long-established idea among language teachers that L1 use is a hindrance to teaching oral communication while the present study, along with many others, proved it wrong. It seems that we need to theorize L1 use and its benefits in EFL contexts more. The third is teacher education system that should familiarize its customers with the practical, not necessarily theoretical, benefits of L1 use and how it should be implemented. Our teachers need to experience that L1 use can be exploited in favor of communicative practice, and that it is not something limited to GTM era of language teaching. And finally, the last stakeholders are material developers and syllabus designers who should leave room for learners' mother tongue when they develop materials and design tasks and exercises for text books.

Keywords: FonF instruction, Consciousness Raising, L1-mediated FonF instruction