# Effects of Class-based Learning of English Articles Through Metalinguistic Explanation and Textual Enhancement

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**Abstract**

This experimental study was an attempt to investigate the effects of class-based learning of English articles (i.e., a, an & the) through metalinguistic explanation and textual enhancement among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In doing so, 80 EFL learners were randomly selected from an English language institute in Isfahan, Iran. The Quick Placement Test (QPT) was administered to select homogeneous participants so that 60 intermediate EFL learners were selected and divided randomly into two groups of Experimental 1(EG1) and Experimental 2 (EG2), each comprising 30. Both groups received a valid and reliable researcher-made pretest in which the items testing on the use of articles were taken from two popular grammar books entitled 'English *Grammar Digest'* and 'English *Grammar in Use'*. Then the English articles were taught to the learners using '*Four Corners'* book (Student's book 3) through metalinguistic explanations to EG1 and via textual enhancement to EG2 in the class. After the treatment, both groups received a posttest. The results revealed that the learners in EG2 outperformed their counterparts in EG1 meaning that textual enhancement proved to be a more effective tool for teaching grammar in the class.

**Keywords:** Class-based Learning, English Articles, Metalinguistic Explanation, Textual Enhancement

## Introduction

Teaching and learning English have been a difficult task for both English teachers and EFL learners in Iran according to some reasons such as lack of resources and little contact with the target language (Sadeghi, ٢٠٠٥). Among different components of English language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, phrasal verbs, and idioms), learning grammar is probably one of the most difficult and important tasks to be accomplished for students especially foreign learners in general and for Iranian EFL Learners in particular. Teaching grammar is really important because grammar is the foundation and the basic of learning language, speaking, writing, reading and listening.

Moreover, metalinguistic explanation refers to as conscious explicit linguistic explanations of rules or patterns in a language (Rosamond Mitchell, Florence Myles and Emma Marsden, ٢٠١٣). In Bialystok's (١٩٨٦a), the process is involved for instance when detecting and correcting grammatical errors in a sentence control of linguistic processing is necessary to direct attention selectively to certain specific features while ignoring other distracting elements. Drawing learners' attention to a particular target structure can be achieved through the manipulation of typography such as different type faces and large font sizes, and by using typographic cues such as underlining, italicizing, capitalizing, highlighting, color coding or bolding (Schmidt, ١٩٩٠; Jourdenais et al., ١٩٩٥; Nunan, ٢٠٠٤ ; Yu, ٢٠١٣).

Input enhancement can be defined as any technique which is designed to draw learners' attention to target features by making these features salient in context (Sharwood Smith, ١٩٩١; Takahashi, ٢٠٠١; Wong, ٢٠٠٣). Textual enhancement is based on comprehension check and confirmation check. This technique involves highlighting (bold-facing) certain target grammatical forms in a reading text or stressing (slowing down or using hand gestures) certain forms. Classroom-based learning means that students and teachers attend in the class and teacher teach them in different methods and by different strategies (Brown, ٢٠١٥).

## Literature Review

Ellis (٢٠٠٦) states that teaching grammar is undoubtedly necessary for achieving accuracy and fluency. However, this statement is controversial and open for challenge (Ellis, ٢٠٠٦). The researcher claimed that textual enhancement can be a suitable way for attracting learners' attention to form as well as to meaning. Since the students in the textual enhancement condition did outperformed the others, the researcher that textual enhancement helps students to concentrate on target forms.

Berent, Kelly, Schmitz and Kenney (٢٠٠٨) attempted to explore the role of visual input enhancement. They explored the efficiency of it for improving English grammatical knowledge in deaf learners' long-term retention. The results indicated that not only the learners improved their grammatical knowledge after ten weeks but also, they ''retained that improvement over the long period (five and half month) with only a modest decrease in assessed grammatical knowledge relative to their ١٠-week assessment during the instructional intervention period'' (p.١٩٨). They also examined the efficiency of visually based focus on form to help deaf students improve their grammatical knowledge of English. the result showed that the students improved their knowledge of grammar over a ten-week period, which sustains the efficiency of theory- based methods in that noticing is an important factor for processing input and, therefore, for acquisition of grammatical knowledge. In another study, Berent and Kelly (٢٠٠٨) investigated the efficiency of teaching visual input enhancement of grammatical forms to deaf ESL learners.

One very useful technique is highlighting (or boldfacing) special grammatical forms in a text or stressing or using hand gestures on certain forms while speaking. (Brown & Lee, ٢٠١٥). Input enhancement promoting students, noticing of a particular language feature, such as putting in boldface type a particular structure in a reading passage. (Diane Larson-Freeman &Marti

Anderson,٢٠١١). Metalinguistic explanation in the classroom, is Linguistic explanations of rules or patterns in a language. Douglas Brown, (٢٠١٤) Clifton, Alison, (٢٠١٤) found that textbooks employ *metalinguistic* terminology in their presentations of *grammar,* but in the majority of cases, they use these *metalinguistic* terminologies. Finally, their findings confirm that while instruction of *metalinguistic* terms significantly affects student performance on task, the improvement made by learner who received this instruction does not differ significantly from the improvement made by learners who do not receive this instruction. According to Bacroft (٢٠٠٣), drawing learners' attention to a pattern in the input is the typical goal of grammar-oriented discourse level enhancement. Therefore, repeated examples of the enhanced grammatical item may be necessary in order to draw learners' attention to the pattern.

Schmidt (٢٠١٠) claimed that people learn those things that they pay attention to and they do not learn much about things that they do not attend to. Attention plays a crucial role in the process of learning second/foreign language (Gass, Svetics, & Lemelin, ٢٠٠٣). Drawing learners' attention could be done by variety of ways including input enhancement; as a way for attracting learners' attention to grammatical points. Nevertheless, Han, Park and Combs (٢٠٠٨) made a distinction between simple and compound enhancement. Simple enhancement involves using an enhancement strategy like textual enhancement via the use of typographical cues (e.g. larger, underlined, or bolded font). Textual enhancement is a type of simple enhancement in which typographical cues are utilized for making the target form of input more salient to the learners. Leow, Nuevo, and Tsai (٢٠٠٣) conducted a research on the role of textual enhancement and type of linguistic item on the second language learners' comprehension and intake.

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In face-to-face classes, students have their classmates, learning centers on campus, professors' office hours, tutors, and teaching assistants to support and help them with their various learning needs. These resources guide them, clarify and reinforce the material, and allow them to succeed in their education. Teachers understand the value of these resources and forms of support (Bejerano, ٢٠٠٨). Ellis (٢٠٠٦) stated that teaching grammar is undoubtedly necessary for achieving accuracy and fluency. However, this statement is controversial and open for challenge (Ellis, ٢٠٠٦). Three basic ways of teaching grammar are presented and summarized by Ellis: first, by the presentation and practice of grammatical items; second, by discovering grammatical rules by learners; and third, by exposing learners to contrived input providing a great number of the examples of one specific grammar rule.

Knowing a language rule metalinguistically does not mean one will be able to use it in communicative interaction. (Brown.٢٠١٤). Kumaravadivelu (٢٠٠٦) stated that metalinguistic function of output relates to the possibility that learners may be consciously thinking about language and its system, about its phonological, grammatical and semantic rules in order to guide them to produce utterances that are linguistically correct and communicatively appropriate.

**Research Question**

The following research question was addressed in the present study:

- Is there any significant difference between class-based learning of English articles through metalinguistic explanation and textual enhancement by Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

In line with this question, the following null hypothesis was made:

- There is no significant difference between class-based learning of English articles through metalinguistic explanations and textual enhancement by Iranian EFL learners.

## Method

Grammar has an important role in learning and teaching any languages. The study tried to investigate the effect of class-based metalinguistic explanations and textual enhancement on learning grammar of English articles. There are two experimental groups.

## Participants

The research was done in one of the institutes in Isfahan. First ۸۰ intermediate students were chosen randomly. They took QOPT proficiency test in order to ensure homogeneity. After that, ۶۰ of them were selected and they were divided randomly into two groups of ۳۰; EG۱ and EG۲.

## Instruments

In this study three types of materials were employed for data collection:

The OQPT (Oxford proficiency test), a pre-test and a post-test were used. The questions for pretest and posttest were taken from the books "*English Grammar in Use"* and *"English Grammar Digest"*. Moreover, "*Four Corners"* (Student's book ۳) was used for the treatment phase.

## Procedure

This study is a kind of quantitative research (Quasi experimental) and there were two experimental groups. The research was done in one of the institutes in Isfahan. First ۸۰ intermediate students were chosen randomly. They took OQPT proficiency Test for the sake of homogeneity. Next ۶۰ intermediate learners were selected and they were divided randomly in two groups of ۳۰; EG۱ and EG۲. Both groups received a researcher-made pre-test in which the items were designed to estimate the students' understanding of article use. Then, for the treatment phase the current researcher taught the English articles from *four corner* book ۲ through metalinguistic explanations to EG۱ in the class. The teacher also presented the English articles over textual enhancement to EG۲. Then, the participants took part in a post-test that was designed by the researcher to assess the English article use by the participants after the treatment.

## Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data and answer the research question, the researcher had to compare the metalinguistic explanation group's (MEG)post-test scores with those of textual enhancement group (TEG) , for which an independent sample t-test could be used .However, to control for any possible differences between these two groups prior to the commencement of the treatment ,one way ANOVA was conducted. This way the teacher could control for any possible difference between the two groups on the pre-test and then compare their post-test scores. The results of the ANOVA test are presented in what follows;

To find out whether this difference in the posttest scores of the class-based MLEG and TEG learners was a significant one or not, the researcher had to look down the *Sig* (۲-tailed) column in front of Groups in Table ۱. To fulfill such a comparison, one-way ANCOVA was conducted, the results of which are in view in the following tables (Tables ۱ and. ۲)

Table ١: Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Post-test Scores of the Class-Based MLEG and TEG Learners

| Groups | Mean | *Std.* Deviation | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| MLEG | ١٧,٣٦ | ٥,٠٨ | ٣٠ |
| TEG | ٢١,٠٦ | ٤,٤٣ | ٣٠ |
| Total | ١٩,٢١ | ٥,٠٨ | ٦٠ |

In Table ١, the descriptive statistics of the post-test for class-based MLEG and TEG learners are shown in the class-based condition, the post-test mean score of the MLEG ($M = ١٧,٣٦$) was less than the post-test mean score of the TEG ($M = ٢١,٠٦$). To find out whether this difference in the post-test scores of the class-based MLEG and TEG learners was a significant one or not, the researcher had to look down the *Sig* (٢-tailed) column in front of Groups in Table ٢.

Table ٢: Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the Class-based MLEG and TEG Learners

| Source | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|
| Corrected Model | ٥,٧٤ | .٠٠٥ |
| Intercept | ٢٦,٤٤ | .٠٠٠ |
| Pretest | ٢,٢٦ | .١٣ |
| Groups | ٧,٤٠ | .٠٠٩ |

In the table above, in front of Groups, under the *Sig.* column, the *p* value was found to be smaller than the alpha level of significance (.٠٠٩ < .٠٥), indicating that the difference between the MLEG and TEG learners in the class-based condition was indeed a statistically significant one. Under the Partial Eta Squared column, the corresponding value was .١١, which shows that the being in one group or another accounted for ١١٪ of the variance in the post-test scores of the MLEG and TEG learner.

Furthermore, the *Sig.* value in front of the covariate (i.e. Pretest) was .١٣, which was larger than the significance level, indicating that the covariate was not significant. In fact, it explained only ٣٪ of the variance in the post-test scores of the learners. Figure ١ also shows the superior performance of the class-based TEG learners over the MLEG learners on the posttest:
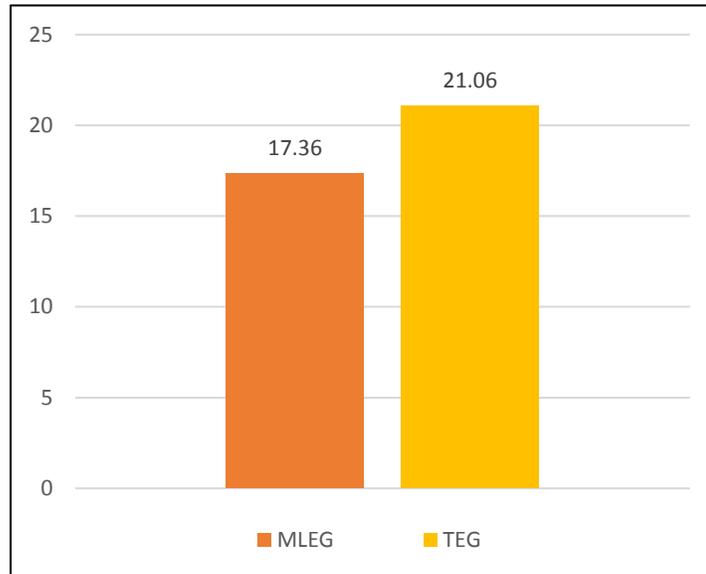
**Figure 1: Post-test Mean Scores of Class-based MLEG and TEG Learners**

The bar chart above clearly illustrates the fact that among the learners who experienced the great value post-test compared to the MLEG learners.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Result of the investigation highlight the great value of applying a Class-based method of metalinguistic explanations and textual enhancement in L2 classrooms. As it was mentioned before, the focus of the study was on intermediate Iranian EFL learners' learning of grammar of English articles by using class-based metalinguistic explanation and textual enhancement. Results of the pre-test and post-test and the answer to the research question in this study may provide some clues to teachers who are certain about the effectiveness of implementing class-based teaching through these different ways for learning English.

The results of data analysis showed that the learners in EG2 outperformed their counterparts in EG1. In fact, textual enhancement proved to be more effective tool for teaching grammar in class. Many of the language related studies (Burgess & Hetherington, 2012) have tried to show whether second language teachers can draw students' attention to linguistic structure.

According to Bacroft (2013), drawing learners' attention to a pattern in the input is the typical goal of grammar-oriented discourse level enhancement. Therefore, it can be claimed that '' repeated examples of the enhanced items may be necessary in order to draw learners' attention to the pattern'' (p.50). Schmidt (2011) claimed that people learn those things that they pay attention to and they do not learn much about things that they attend to. Attention plays a crucial role in the process learning second/ foreign language (Gass, Svetics, & Lemelin,2013). Making learners' pay attention to grammatical points could be done in a variety of the ways including input enhancement.

The result of this study clearly illustrates the fact that among the learners who experienced the class-based condition, the TEG learners had a significantly better performance on the post-test compared to the MLEG learner. Clifton Alison (2014) found that textbooks employ *metalinguistic* terminology in their presentations of *grammar,* but in the majority of cases, they use these

*metalinguistic* terms without defining them. Language learners are generally unfamiliar with metalinguistic terminology. While instruction of *metalinguistic* terms significantly affects student performance on task, the improvement made by learners who receive this instruction.

According to owan,۲۰۰۸, when providing an explicit presentation inductively, the teacher tries to elicit information from the students by presenting example sentences, sometimes by using input enhancement techniques such as consciousness raising (highlighting or bolding the target forms) that works a lot.

Current views of L۲ classroom methodology are almost universally agreed on the importance of some form-focused instruction within the communicative framework, ranging from explicit treat of rules, to noticing and input enhancement (Polio, ۲۰۰۷; Nassaji & Fotos, ۲۰۱۱; Ellis, ۲۰۱۲), to implicit techniques for structuring input to learners. By inductive explicit explanation the teachers try to elicit information from the students by presenting example sentences, sometimes by using input enhancement techniques such as consciousness- raising (e.g., highlighting or bolding the target forms).

Similar to Berent et al. (۲۰۰۸), Lee and Huang (۲۰۰۸) aimed to investigate the overall effect of visual input enhancement on grammar learning. The results showed that the learners who were exposed to target forms in the embedded text barely outperformed those who were exposed to unenhanced text in the same target forms. In another study, Berent and Kelly (۲۰۰۸) investigated the efficiency of visual input enhancement in teaching of grammatical forms to deaf ESL learners.

One very useful technique is highlighting (or boldfacing) special grammatical forms in a text or stressing or using hand gestures on certain forms while speaking. (Brown & Lee, ۲۰۱۵). Input enhancement promoting students' noticing of a particular language feature, such as putting in boldface type a particular structure in a reading passage (Diane Larson- Freeman & Marti Anderson, ۲۰۱۱; Ellies, ۲۰۱۲; Malden, ۲۰۱۱). The result of data analysis in this study in comparison with other studies from other researchers showed that, textual enhancement was found to be more effective than metalinguistic explanations when it comes for teaching/learning a grammar point like English articles.

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