The Effect of Teachers’ Metalanguage on Learners’ Noticing of Iranian EFL Learners across Proficiency Levels

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ABSTRACT
Metalanguage that focused on linguistic competence and accuracy, has a crucial role in language teaching. However, by the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT), which greatly focused on fluency and communicative competence, metalanguage did not receive much attention. This study examined the effect of teachers’ metalanguage on learners’ noticing of grammatical points. This research was conducted on Iranian EFL learners of two levels of proficiency, elementary and intermediate, in an English language Institute in Iran. Two groups of experimental and control were chosen in each level of elementary and intermediate. In the group of experimental, metalanguage was used by the teachers to teach grammar points. However, in the group of control examples were used by the teachers to teach grammar points. For collecting data a noticing task test was administered to the both groups of experimental and control. The result indicated that the metalanguage had impacted the learners’ noticing of grammatical points.

Keywords: Metalanguage, Teacher Talk, Noticing

Introduction
There are several definitions for the term of metalanguage. Ellis (2012) states that, “metalanguage is the language used to talk about language” (p. 131). Johnson and Johnson (1998) define it “language about language”, and also Borg (1998) calls it as “meta-talk or explicit talk about grammar” (Cited in Wach, 2007). Furthermore, Hu (2010) believes that Metalanguage uses to analyze, verbalize or even describe language. Hu (2002) points out that, “metalanguage can play in facilitating the development of metalinguistic knowledge, namely analyzed, often verbalisable, knowledge about the L2” (cited in Hu, 2010, p. 63).

Metalanguage has an important role in grammar instruction. It helps learners to have a conscious attention to the language, explore and discover it. Metalanguage can play an important role in emergence of noticing and consciousness raising. Some studies show that for acquiring grammar rules, focus on form and attention or noticing input cannot convert to intake (p. 292-293). Moreover, in grammar instruction when the teacher uses metalanguage, in fact the purpose is to attract the students’ attention to grammar points. The teacher tries to raise their metalanguage awareness and noticing in order to facilitate learning.
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Objectives
This research was an attempt to make a connection between metalanguage and learners’ noticing of grammar. In other words, the researcher intended to examine whether teachers’ metalanguage had any impact on the learners’ noticing of the grammar points. It should be born in mind that this research aimed at investigating this impact in two different levels.

Research Question
On the basis of the purpose of this study, the research question of the present study can be stated as follow:
Does metalanguage have any impact on the noticing of Iranian EFL learners of different levels?

Literature review
The way that teachers talk in the class influences on the students’ success or failure. Effective teacher talk is the one which can facilitate acquisition and make a good atmosphere for communication and interaction between the teacher and learners. According to Prusak, Vincent and Pangrazi (2005), teachers need to pay attention to some points about teacher talk that makes it effective. The first is considering the audience when they are speaking to them about using vocabularies, intonation, and the pause between sentences and so on. They mention that “perhaps the most important aspect of communication is to clearly understand the characteristics and capacities of those to whom one is speaking” (p. 22).

In addition, Prusak, Vincent and Pangrazi (2005) recommend teachers to use short instruction that lasts around one minute or less rather than long instruction, that takes at least one or two minutes. They believe that “lengthy instructions reduce the amount of activity time. Learning to give instructions (both short and long) requires teachers to be precise and concise” (p. 22). Teachers can give necessary information at the first of an activity or task to increase the time of it. And, when the students are doing the activity, the teacher may add some details to the class or individuals based on their needs. The authors claim that this kind of teacher talk that is in the middle of activity is more effective.

Furthermore, it is recommended that teachers talk less and try to be a model. They claim that “a picture is truly worth a thousand words. Greater understanding is achieved more quickly when simple, clear instructions are coupled with modeling of the desired behavior” (p. 24). For example before starting an activity the teacher can practice it alone or with one of the students instead of giving a long instruction. Sometimes students can understand the activity better through a picture or a model because it is simple and clear.

The next point about teacher talk is the use of students’ names in the class. When the teacher calls the name of a student during the lesson or an activity it is desirable for the student. The authors recommend the teachers that use their students’ first name at least once in a lesson in order to remind them that the teacher cares about them.

Consciousness Raising (CR)
Consciousness raising (CR) is an approach for teaching grammar that helps learners to improve their explicit knowledge of grammar. Ellis (2002) points out that “this is not the same as metalinguistic knowledge. It is perfectly possible to develop an explicit understanding of how a grammatical structure works without learning much in the way of grammatical terminology. Grammar can be explained, and, therefore, understand in everyday language. It may be, however, that access to some metalanguage will facilitate the development of explicit knowledge” (p. 196). According to Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith
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(1985) CR is “the deliberate attempt to draw the learner’s attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language” (cited in Cullen, 2012, p. 261).

Some researchers believe that CR facilitates learning, however some others claim that language learning is not a conscious process. Seliger (1981) “has claimed that obviously, it is at the unconscious level that language learning takes place” (cited in Schmidt, 1990, p. 129). Although Schmidt (1990) points out that “there are many who believe that conscious understanding of the target language system is necessary if learners are to produce correct forms and use them appropriately. In this view, errors are the result of not knowing the rules of the target language, forgetting them, or not paying attention”. There are three senses of consciousness: consciousness as awareness, consciousness as intention and consciousness as knowledge (Schmidt, 1990, p. 133).

**Noticing**

Schmidt (1990) mentions there levels of awareness such as perception, noticing (focal awareness) and understanding. Oakley (1985) and Baars (1986) believe that “all perception implies mental organization and the ability to create internal representations of external events” (cited in Schmidt, 1990, p. 132). In noticing level of awareness Schmidt (1990) cites Bowes (1984)’s claim that points out “the crucial distinction between information that is perceived and information that is noticed” (p. 132).

Furthermore, he believes that when we are reading something, we generally pay attention or notice the content of the text. Although there are other things such as the style of the text or writer, noises around us and the sound of music, however we can choose which of these we want to notice and pay attention.

Generally in a conscious experience, it is difficult to describe something that we noticed. For example Schmidt (1990) points out that we may find out two wins differences and notice them but we are not able to describe them, Or notice a person with a regional accent but we cannot explain it phonetically. Therefore he believes that “when problems of memory and metalanguage can be avoided, verbal reports can be used to both verify and falsify claims concerning the role of noticing in cognition”. (p. 132)

The last level of awareness is understanding. When we notice something and think about it we can analyze and compare it with something else that we noticed in another occasion. These mental activities are related to consciousness and problem solving is its example. (Schmidt, 1990, p. 132)

According to Schmidt (1994) “noticing refers to the registration [detection] of the occurrence of a stimulus event in conscious awareness and subsequent storage in long term memory” (p. 179, cited in Al-Hejin, 2005, p. 3). Al-Hejin (2005) represents in his study the Schmidt’s definition of noticing “noticing= detection+ awareness”, and because detection is a part of awareness, he simplifies it to “noticing=awareness” (p. 4). Furthermore, Al-Hejin (2005) claims that “reviewing the psychological literature on consciousness has led Schmidt to propose the Noticing Hypothesis” (p. 14).

There are different studies about the crucial role of noticing in language learning. Truscott (1998) argues that Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis is “a claim about how input becomes intake –that part of the input that is used for acquisition. It claims that conscious awareness (noticing) of grammar plays an important role in the process” (p. 103).

Noticing Hypothesis of Schmidt has two versions, strong and weak. In strong version “noticing is a necessary condition for learning”, however in weak version “noticing is helpful but might not be necessary” (Schmidt, 1990; 1993a; 1994; 1995b, cited in Truscott, 1998, p. 103). In addition, Schmidt (1995) distinguishes between noticing and understanding, “which Schmidt defines as “recognition of a general principle, rule or pattern” (p. 29, cited in Al-Hejin, p. 4). Furthermore, Schmidt (2001) points out that “understanding represents a deeper
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level of awareness than noticing which is limited to ‘elements of the surface structure of utterances in the input’ rather than underlying rules” (p. 5, cited in Al-Hejin, p. 4).

Because of the importance of noticing in language learning and acquisition, recently there are lots of studies about it. Schmidt and Frota (1986, cited in Thornbury, 1997) suggest that

Two kinds of noticing are necessary condition for acquisition:
1) Learners must attend to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to, without which input cannot become ‘intake’.
2) Learners must ‘notice the gap’, i.e. make comparisons between the current state of their developing linguistic system, as realized in their output, and the target language system, available as input.

For the purpose of raising the students’ attention to the language form, the teacher needs to use some classroom activities and techniques such as ‘input enhancement’ and ‘input flooding’. Decarrico and Larsen-Freeman (2002) point out that input enhancement is a technique that is used by the teacher to attract the students’ attention to a special feature such as a new grammar point or vocabulary. In this case the students are given a text with bold fonts in some parts or a gap-filling in a listening text. Moreover, in input flooding, the teacher bombards students with a lot of target form examples. (Cited in Cullen, 2012, p. 260)

In addition, Swain (1995, 2000) and Thornbury (1997) claim that noticing the gap (another aspect of noticing) is “where learners notice gaps that exist between their current state of knowledge (their interlanguage) and the target language system” (cited in Cullen, 2012, p. 260).

Methodology

Design
The present research had posttest-only experimental design (Mackey & Gass, 2005). It did not have last more than one session, so no pretest was used in order not for the learners to remember anything from the posttest. As Mackey and Gass believe, the role of such a design is not development rather than performance. In this research, the researcher aimed to know what learners had achieved as a result of metalanguage. She did not intend to know what the learners had learned over some period of time.

Participants
The participants of this study were selected from Tehran Institute of Technology (The West Branch). They were learning English in two levels: Elementary and intermediate. Prior to their registration, they had taken the institute placement test, but the researcher administered the Oxford Placement Test to four intact classes of elementary and the intermediate to guarantee their homogeneity with regard to their proficiency levels. The experimental group and the control group of the elementary level each included twelve learners, that came to 24 participants altogether. On the other hand, the experimental and the control group of the intermediate level was each composed of thirteen participants that came to 26 participants. Due to restrictions posed by the institute, randomization was not possible. Therefore, the participants of this research were selected by the Oxford Placement Test administered to learners in four classes already organized by the institute officials.

Instruments
The following instruments were used in order to collect the required data for this research:

Oxford Quick Placement Test. The current research was conducted on two levels: Elementary and intermediate. Although the learners are required to take the institute
placement test, the Oxford Placement Test was administered to further guarantee that the learners were homogenously selected. It is a placement test constructed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The test include two part. The first part is composed of 40 items which all the students in the two groups, that is the elementary and intermediate groups, were asked to answer. However, only the learners in the intermediate level were required to answer the next twenty questions which were from 41 to 60.

**Voice Recording.** The teacher’s voice was recorded not as a tool to collect data, but to make sure that he used metalanguage.

**Noticing Task.** The noticing task in the current study includes 10 sentences about the grammar point. Eight of the items are incorrect and two of them are correct, and the students were asked to identify the incorrect sentences and correct them. This task was considered a noticing task by Brown (2010) (see appendix).

**Procedure**

As already mentioned, there were two groups, one experimental and one control group in the current research. The first step was to administer the Oxford Quick Placement test in order to guarantee the homogeneity of the learners with regard to their proficiency levels. Two levels of elementary and intermediate were selected for the present research. In each level, there were one control and one experimental group. The teacher in elementary level to taught ‘articles’ (a/an vs the) using only metalanguage in the experimental group and only examples in the control group. All the students in this level had already learned the articles ‘a’ and ‘an’; however, they were going to learn the article ‘the’ and distinguish it from ‘a/an’.

In the intermediate group, the teacher was requested to teach ‘so and such’ using only metalanguage in the experimental group and only examples in the control group.

Next, a task of 10 items was used in each class to tap the students’ noticing of the grammar point. Furthermore, a voice recorder was used in each class to record the teachers’ voice while teaching grammar structure. This was used to make sure whether the teacher did what he was expected to do.

**Findings**

**Results of Oxford Placement Test (OPT)**

Since we used convenient sampling in this study, the OPT was given to the students in both treatment and control groups in both elementary and intermediate levels to make sure that the both groups are homogeneous in term of English language proficiency. The related descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, the performance of the treatment group ($\bar{x} = 3.17, SD = 2.40$) is not very different from the control group ($\bar{x} = 2.75, SD = 2.37$) in elementary level in relation to language proficiency. Equally, in intermediate level, the performance of the treatment group ($\bar{x} = 33.08, SD = 2.49$) and the control group ($\bar{x} = 32.77, SD = 2.08$) are to some extent the same. What is more, as shown in Table 1, Skewness and Kurtosis of the four sets of proficiency scores are not beyond +/- 1.96 and then the normality assumption for using parametric analysis is not violated.
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Treatment and Control Groups' English Proficiency Scores (Elementary & Intermediate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>2.406</td>
<td>.612</td>
<td>-.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.379</td>
<td>.453</td>
<td>-.847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33.08</td>
<td>2.499</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>-1.450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32.77</td>
<td>2.088</td>
<td>.491</td>
<td>-.225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to use parametric tests (independent t-test for this study), four assumptions (i.e., interval data, independence of subjects, normality and homogeneity of variances) should be met before (Field, 2009). The first assumption is met because the present data are measured on an interval scale. Besides "the assumption of independence of subjects is met when the performance of any given individual is independent of the performance of other individual" (Bachman, 2005, p. 236). The third assumption is not also violated since Skewness and Kurtosis of the four sets of English proficiency scores (Table 1) and noticing scores (Table 3) do not exceed +/- 1.96. So the scores are normally distributed. The fourth assumption – homogeneity of variances – will be discussed when reporting the results of the inferential statistics.

Table 2 contains the results of independent samples t-test that was used to compare the treatment and control groups’ OPT scores. As Table 2 indicates, the hypothesis of equal of variances in the elementary and intermediate levels is met (p > .05). Moreover independent samples t-test results (Table 2) displays that there is not any statistically significant difference in the OPT scores for treatment and control groups in elementary level, t (22) = .42, p > .05, and intermediate level, t (2) = .34, p > .05, in which the t-observed is lower than the t-critical (2.02).

Table 2
Independent Samples T-test for Two Groups’ English Proficiency Scores (Elementary & Intermediate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean Diff.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.871</td>
<td>.427</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.674</td>
<td>.417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.936</td>
<td>.343</td>
<td>.341</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.736</td>
<td>.308</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 demonstrates the English proficiency results in elementary level. Figure 1 illustrates that, in elementary level, the students in the treatment and control groups have performed almost similarly on the OPT.
Figure 1. Treatment and control groups' OPT scores in elementary level

Figure 2 below clarifies the OPT results in intermediate level. As it can be seen in Figure 2, in intermediate level, the students in the treatment and control groups have acquired almost the same OPT scores.

Figure 2. Treatment and control groups' OPT scores in intermediate level

Investigating the research question

The research question of this study was aimed at investigating whether metalanguage has any impact on noticing of Iranian EFL learners of different levels. We used independent samples $t$-test in order to answer this research question. The descriptive statistics of the
treatment and control noticing scores are set forth in Table 3 before discussing the results of independent samples t-test. As Table 3 displays, in elementary level, mean of noticing for treatment group ($\bar{x} = 5.92, SD = 2.39$) is not very different from control group ($\bar{x} = 5.08, SD = 2.19$) though mean is a bit larger in value in favor of treatment group. In contrast, Table 3 shows that, in intermediate level, mean of noticing for treatment group ($\bar{x} = 7.08, SD = 2.39$) is evidently greater than control group ($\bar{x} = 5.00, SD = 2.30$).

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Noticing Scores (Elementary & Intermediate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>2.392</td>
<td>-.313</td>
<td>-.164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>2.193</td>
<td>.184</td>
<td>-.541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>2.397</td>
<td>-1.128</td>
<td>1.742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.309</td>
<td>.384</td>
<td>-.941</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 below represents the results of independent samples t-test that was used to compare the treatment and control groups’ noticing scores in elementary and intermediate levels. Based on Table 4, the assumption of equality of variances in not violated (Sig. > .05).

Table 4
Independent Samples T-test for Noticing Scores (Elementary & Intermediate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean Diff.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Equal assumed</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.961</td>
<td>.890</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.383</td>
<td>.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Equal assumed</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.883</td>
<td>2.250</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>2.077</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of independent t-test, as appeared in Table 4, indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in noticing scores for treatment ($\bar{x} = 5.92$) and control ($\bar{x} = 5.08$) groups in elementary level, ($t(22) = .89, p = .38, p > .05$), in which the t-observed is lower than the t-critical (2.02). Thus, declare that metalanguage does not improve noticing of Iranian elementary EFL learners.

On the other hand, independent samples t-test (Table 4) detected a statistically significant difference in noticing scores for treatment ($\bar{x} = 7.08$) and control ($\bar{x} = 5.00$) groups in intermediate level, ($t(24) = 2.25, p < .05$), in which the t-observed is above the t critical (2.02). Accordingly, we can claim that metalanguage enhances noticing of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

We made a Bar Graph to show the results (Figure 3). Figure 3 illustrates that, in elementary level, the students in the treatment and control groups have not acted very far from each other regarding noticing. But in intermediate level, the students in the treatment group have outperformed those in the control group on the subject of noticing.
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Discussion

In this study the focus is on metalanguage that is the use of language to talk about language, in different proficiency levels and its effect on noticing of the students in grammar instruction. Ellis and Hu had some researches about metalanguage, however there is not any study that integrates metalanguage with noticing in different level of proficiency.

Limitations

Doing the present study, the researcher could not control some factors. First of all, although she briefed each teacher on using metalanguage in the class, but the way he used it was not under the researcher’s control. For instance, a teacher may or may not have used examples to explain a grammar point. Another limitation was the teacher’s experience and expertise in teaching English. A teacher might have two or more years’ experience teaching English. In fact, this can affect how a teacher can effectively use metalanguage. Finally, to have adequate number of subjects, the researcher had to include both male and female EFL learners.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find a relationship between teachers’ use of metalanguage and learners’ noticing of grammatical points across proficiency levels. Therefore, the independent samples t-test was used to answer this research question. The result showed that in elementary level, the students in the treatment and control group have not acted very far from each other regarding noticing. But in intermediate level, the students in the treatment group have outperformed those in the control group on the subject of noticing.

References


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### Appendix

**Noticing Task**

**Code:**

**Level: Elementary**

Find mistakes in the sentences below, add or change *(a/an or the)* when necessary. Write *ok* if the sentence is correct.

1) I bought the new car last week.
2) Tom stayed in a hotel in Paris. A hotel was in the center of town.
3) I am the web designer.
4) She is beautiful woman.
5) She wants to buy an umbrella, but I don’t.
6) There is an apple, the glass of juice and a sandwich on the table.
7) I’d love the vacation soon.
8) I don’t have a extra ticket for the game. Sorry!
9) They live in an island.
10) He is best teacher in our school.

**Noticing Task**

**Code:**

**Level: Intermediate**

Read the sentences below. Write *ok* if the sentence is correct and if not; correct the mistakes.

1) She is so a clever girl.
2) It was so hot last night that I couldn't sleep.
3) He was so fast runner; he could run 5 miles in 30 minutes.
4) The train was such fast; it went from Shanghai to Beijing in only 10 hours.
5) The ocean in Los Angeles is usually such a cold.
6) I can't believe that John stole that woman's purse. He was always such good boy.
7) This restaurant has so selection of food that it's hard to decide what to order.
8) How could you say such an awful thing to your mother?
9) She is so gorgeous girl.
10) I'm just such relieved to get home. That rain was terrible!