The Effects of Explicit Focus on Form
on L2 Learning

Hye-Sook Park

(Kunsan National University)

Park, Hye-Sook. (2002). The Effects of Explicit Focus on Form on L2 Learning. *English Language & Literature Teaching, 8*(1), 39-53.

Recently much research has investigated the role of attention in L2 learning, comparing the effects of explicit learning with those of implicit learning. With this background the research aims at examining the effects explicit focus on form has on L2 learning based on the acquisition of the English article system. The participants were 70 Korean college students who enrolled in English Composition classes. The experimental group received explicit focus on form including grammatical explanation, input enhancement, output practice, and negative evidence (corrective feedback) for two weeks, while the control group was exposed to sufficient input and negative evidence. Completion tasks were administered at the beginning and the end of the semester. In addition, errors in the use of English articles were analysed on their compositions both before and after the different treatments. The analyses of the results show that the explicit focus on form group improved significantly more than the control group, particularly for the definite article 'the', and some changes occurred in the distribution of article errors. These findings suggest that explicit teaching plays a more contributory role than implicit teaching in acquiring L2 knowledge in classroom-based L2 learning.

Ⅰ. INTRODUCTION

A number of approaches to language teaching over the past decades have been roughly classified into two options, focus on meaning and focus on form, although the extent of the emphasis may be varied (Long & Robinson, 1998). Focus on form attempts to make students conscious of target language rules and structures by

highlighting them in the input by means of various explicitness and intensity. In contrast, focus on meaning claims that L2 learners acquire L2 implicitly from just exposure to comprehensible input, and teaching cannot intervene in learners' processes of the target language.

Recently a number of studies based on cognitive psychology have investigated the effects of explicit instruction in L2 learning, emphasizing the role of attention in learning. Some researchers have pointed out that attention to the form of the input is a necessary and sufficient condition for learning to take place (Sharwood Smith, 1986; Schmidt, 1990; Alenan, 1995; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993), while other researchers have argued for the superiority of knowledge acquired through unconscious processes as compared to the limitations of explicit learning (Krashen, 1982, 1993). From more practical and pedagogical bases, classroom-oriented studies have reported different findings in terms of short-term and long-term effects of focus on form(White, 1991; Harley, 1989; Lyster, 1994), although much research has suggested that learners may fail to reach high levels of linguistic knowledge and performance when teaching focuses on meaning through extensive exposure to target language input with the exclusion of formal features of language (Harley & Swain, 1984; Lightbown & Spada, 1990).

In reality, it is very important and necessary to identify the role of explicit focus on form in L2 learning for effective teaching of English in Korea. Traditionally, in Korea, formal instruction has played a key role in English education. In recent years, communicative language teaching approaches have been introduced to bring overhauls in the whole system of English education. Meanwhile, the function and status of formal instruction has been questioned and many Korean English teachers are confused about how and the extent to which they should give formal instruction. Furthermore, they doubt they should give up the old-fashioned formal instruction at the expense of communicative activities focused on meaning.

With this background, the research attempts to investigate the effects of explicit focus on form on L2 learning, in particular, on the acquisition of the English article system. The English article system was selected because it is one of the most inherently complex rules for Korean learner of English to learn, and the findings for complex rules remain more conflicting in this area.

II. RELATED RESEARCH

A number of researchers have tried to investigate whether focus on form may mediate the extent to which L2 input actually becomes incorporated into the learner's developing L2 system from experimental studies based on cognitive psychological base to pseudo-experimental studies. Several related studies will be briefly reviewed here.

Ellis (1993) examined English speakers' learning of soft mutation of Welsh morphology under three conditions: an implicit group, a grammar group and a structured group. The implicit group was exposed to randomly ordered examples, and the grammar group was taught the rules of the mutation. The structured group was taught the rules with examples arranged to make consonant changes salient. After the training sessions, the subjects of the implicit group demonstrated poor performance on well-formedness tests. The grammar group did not perform successfully on the tests despite showing explicit knowledge of the rule, while the structured group performed best on the tests and showed explicit knowledge of the rules. Ellis's findings indicate that explicit rule explanation alone didn't contribute to successful performance. However, Ellis's study opens up the possibility that rule explanation and structured exposure to the target form may lead to achieve better performance.

Much research has done to meet the concern with the effects of meaning-focused instruction versus form-focused instruction. Doughty (1991) and Alanen's studies (1992, 1995) are representative studies. Doughty investigated the acquisition of relative clauses by different groups: A control group read texts containing relative clauses, a meaning-oriented group received lexical and semantic paraphrasing of the relative clauses visually enhanced in the texts, and a rule-oriented group read texts with rule statements below an animated version of the target sentences. The results of the study showed that the meaning-oriented group better performed in comprehension tests than the other groups, and for the tests of relativization ability, the meaning-oriented group performed as well as the rule-oriented group, outperforming the control group. From this result, it can be inferred that meaning-oriented instruction has more positive effects on second language acquisition than rule-oriented instruction. However, there is one thing that cannot be missed. The meaning-oriented group of Doughty's studies was provided texts with target forms highlighted, and was encouraged to process sentences for

meaning. Thus, it can be argued that both focus on meaning and input enhancement have a synergistic effect on the meaning-oriented group.

Alanen (1992, 1995) examined the learning in four different conditions: a control group(=C group) which read an original text, an enhanced group(=E group) which was given the text with the target structures enhanced by italicization, a rule group(=R group) with the unenhanced texts and instruction of the rule, and a rule and enhanced group receiving both the rule instruction and the enhanced texts. Analyses of the results showed that R group and RE group outperformed other groups and E group did not outperform the C group in learning suffixes and gradation rules. Rule instruction and rule instruction with input enhancement contributed to greater accuracy, whereas input enhancement alone did not lead to gain significant improvement.

On the other hand, based on early comparisons of naturalistic and instructed interlanguage development, classroom-oriented studies have examined effects of focus on form instruction integrating various focus on form techniques. Generally, studies agree on the short-term effects of focus on form, but regarding the long-term effects findings of studies remain conflicting and undecided. For example, Harly (1989)'s study found that immediate advantageous gains of the instructed group were not kept 3 months later. But, White (1991) investigated the effects of formal instruction by looking at the performance of classes receiving different treatments in question formation of English. The treatment group was given explicit rule presentation and corrective feedback on learners' errors during class activities. After the 2-week treatment, learners in the treatment group showed significantly higher accuracy on a sentence-correction activity than learners who were not instructed. In addition, White examined instructed and uninstructed learners' performance in written tasks and an oral communication task. The instructed group showed more increase in accuracy than the uninstructed group did. The superior improvement of the instructed group to the other group was maintained on the follow-up tests 5 weeks later. This study suggests that formal instruction has longer-term effects as well as short-term effects on classroom-based language learning.

Lyster (1994) presented immediate and delayed advantageous gains of the instructed group in a written production test and a multiple-choice test. In this case, the instructed group received 12-hour treatment over 5 weeks, which consisted of explicit comparison of the target form, structural exercises and intensive reading activities containing the target forms. Compared to other studies, Lyster's

instructed learners were provided with a long period of formal instruction, while delayed posttests were administered just one month later. Considering these aspects, it is difficult to argue for the long-term effects of focus on form.

In sum, these studies highlight a variety of effects of focus on form on L2 learning particularly in classroom-based learning and lead us to reconsider the role of different focus on forms, suggesting that second language learners can acquire the target language by means of various learning strategies.

III. THE L2 ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH ARTICLES

Some research has been done on the acquisition of English articles by L1 and L2 learners centering upon the acquisition order and the error analysis. Zehler and Brewer (1982) measured the use of English articles by L1 learners. They showed that L1 learners used 'a' and 'null' at first, next 'the', and then the overuse of 'the' (cited in Park, 1996, p. 40).

Yamada and Matsuura (1982) examined the article use of Japanese speakers with advanced English proficiency through a kind of cloze test. They found that accuracy in the use of 'the' and 'null' increased significantly from the intermediate level while indefinite 'a' remained the most difficult for advanced learners.

Master (1987) examined the English article acquisition by L2 learners of different L1 backgrounds. They were Chinese, Japanese, Russian, which do not have an article system in L1s [-Art group] and German, and Spanish, which have an article system similar to English [+Art group]. The acquisition order of the English articles was 'null'>'the'>'a' in the [-Art] group and it was 'the' > 'null' > 'a' in the [+Art] group. Particularly, the [-Art] group showed the overuse of 'null', suggesting the problem in spoken interlanguage appears to be a type of underspecification rather than overspecification. By contrast, Chaudron and Parker's study (1988) supports overspecification is the main problem of advanced learners, reporting that Japanese learners of English used the over use of 'the' in place of 'a' and 'null'.

Lee (1996) suggested the linguistic patterns of learners' native language influenced the use of the English articles, showing Korean learners made more omission errors in production of English. Meanwhile, Park (1996) indicated that the acquisition order of English articles was similar regardless of the native languages,

although L2 learners' native language is an important factor of the SLA process.

To sum up, for L2 learners without an article system similar to English, like Korean speakers, it may be forecasted that the 'null' is overused at the beginning, then 'a' is frequently used and after that 'the' is frequently occurred.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With this background the study sought to investigate the following problems.

1. Does focus on form teaching, including explanation, input enhancement and output practice, lead to contribute to the acquisition of the English article system?

2. Does focus on form teaching make a difference in the distribution of errors in use of the English articles?

Ⅴ. METHOD

1. Participants

Seventy Korean college students participated in this study. Their English proficiency was low intermediate level, ranging from 400 to 600 scores of mock TOEIC. Forty of them were given explicit focus on form, and the rest were the control group. They all enrolled in English Composition classes at the time.

2. Instrument

The subjects were given sentence completion tasks and composition tasks, which were administered at the onset and the end of the semester. For the completion task, Master (1994)'s test was used. There was more than two months interval between the pretest and the posttest of the completion task, so the subjects did not recognize the contents of the questions.

In addition, the subjects were asked to write essays, which were analyzed in terms of the use of English articles. The topics were different between the first

essays and the second ones. The topic of the first essay for the focus on form group was "my daily activities" and the second "the memorable trip", while those of the control group were "my hometown" and "my favorite holiday".

3. Procedures

The subjects of the focus on form(=F) group were given explicit explanation, enhanced input, output practice, and negative evidence. The treatment started with the explicit explanation about the English article system based on Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's framework (1999). It focused on the structural, semantic, and pragmatic features of the English article system. After that, they read a short piece from a newspaper with the articles enhanced in italics, through which they were guided to notice the English articles.

Furthermore, the subjects were asked to practice their output in describing the processes of cooking some food. The writings were reviewed and given some feedback on the use of English articles from peers and the teacher. This 2-week treatment was given to the subjects during their composition class.

On the other hand, the control(=C) group wasn't given any explicit teaching about the English article system, except for negative evidence. The control group wrote several essays during the semester as regular work, and the teacher gave them some negative evidences on the English structures including English articles. However, more attention was not paid to the English article system than any other structure.

4 Results and Discussion

A comparison of the pretests and the posttests of the completion task was performed to examine what effects focus on form had on the acquisition of the English article system (Table 1). As shown in table 1, the focus on form group showed greater improvement in accuracy than the control group.

TABLE 1
Accuracy of the pretest and posttest of the completion task

	Control Group				Focus on Form Group			
	Mean	N	St.D.	St.E	Mean	N	St.D	St.E
Pretest	31.75	28	6.60	1.25	34.83	41	4.68	.73
Posttest	33.75	28	6.70	1.27	37.88	41	4.66	.73

Paired samples t-tests were performed between the pretests and posttests of the control group and the focus on form group. The result of the control group showed partially significant improvement in the use of English articles (t=1.856, p=.074), while that of the focus on form group showed a remarkably significant increase in accuracy (t=5.364, p=.000). This suggests that focus on form has a more impact on improving L2 learners' competence than implicit learning at least for the English article system.

For a further analysis, the English article uses were analyzed in more detail. All of the items were classified into 3 categories: indefinite "a" category (A), definite "the" category (The), and null category (N). Learners' responses to the three categories were compared between the pretests and the posttests.

TABLE 2
Accuracy by Three Categories

	Control Group				Focus on Form Group			
	pretest		posttest		pretest		posttest	
	M	St.D	M	St.D	M	St.D	M	St.D
A	.7116	.2077	.7492	.1367	.7716	.1255	.7627	.1284
The	.6658	.1655	.7042	.1576	.6632	.1203	.7411	.1157
N	.3491	.2275	.3664	.2214	.3049	.2485	.3384	.2240

The two groups displayed the same accuracy order before the treatment, that is to say, the highest accuracy was for the indefinite article 'a', then the definite article 'the', and the lowest for the null form. For the indefinite article 'a', the control group obtained 71% accuracy, 67% for the definite article 'the', and 35% for the null article, while the focus on form group answered 77% correct for the indefinite article 'a', 66% for the definite article 'the' and 31% for the null form. For the indefinite article 'a', the focus on form group answered more correctly than the control group, while the control group completed more sentences correctly than

the focus on form group for the null category. However, the two groups showed similar correct responses to the definite article 'the', 67% and 66% respectively. The accuracy for each category indicates that the focus on form group performed better on the A category items than the control group.

After different treatments for the two groups, a noticeable change happened in accuracy. The control group consistently improved accuracy in all three categories to a similar extent. But the focus on form group showed a different picture from the control group. For the 'A' category, the focus on form group performed a little lower in accuracy than that of the pretest, and for the null category it increased from 31% to 34%. In particular, the focus on form group showed a remarkably better performance for the definite article 'the' items, increasing from 66% to 74%. This is the most conspicuous difference between the focus on form group and the control group. From this finding, it can be suggested that the increase in accuracy for the definite article 'the' is due to the explicit focus on form. So, why did article 'a' not show any improvement? It might be suggested that the focus on form group had already reached a stable state with the article 'a'. As a result, 'a' was not substantially affected by additional focus on form. On the other hand, timely focus on form could improve the use of 'the' by the focus on form group because the group was still developing the knowledge of 'the'. This supports Pienneman's (1984) teachability hypothesis, which claims that grammar instruction can be effective when learners are ready to acquire that form.

Next, the subjects' article errors in the compositions were investigated. The article errors were classified into 6 types: the-for-a errors, o-for-a errors, a-for-the errors, o-for-the errors, a-for-o errors, the-for-o errors. Table 3 shows the distribution of article errors by the two groups before the treatment.

TABLE 3
Article Errors of Pre-Compositions (%)

Used	Required	C–Group	F–Group
th	a	3.17	5.26
o	a	38.10	30.52
a	th	1.59	6.32
o	th	33.33	28.42
a	o	7.94	14.74
th	o	15.87	14.74

The greatest proportion of errors consisted of two types: the use of o for a and o for the. These two types of errors accounted for 59% for all errors in the pre-composition of the focus on form group and 71.43 % in the pre-composition of the control group. As other studies found out (e.g., Lee, 1996; Park, 1996), Korean learners of English made more omission errors than any other type. Addition errors for the null category followed the omission error type, amounting to 29.48% and 23.81%, respectively. Finally, the use of ′the′ for ′a′ was 5.26% for the focus on form group and 3.17% for the control group, while the use of ′a′ for ′the′ was 6.32% and 1.59% each group. These results partially confirm the findings of previous studies (e.g., Master, 1987, 1995). The present results and Master′s studies agree in that they find o-for-a the most frequent error type, while a-for-the errors account for a small portion of errors.

The pattern of article errors over the duration of the research period was examined. The percentages of errors of each type were calculated for the pre-composition and post-composition of the focus on form group and the control group, respectively (Table 4). Figure 1 and 2 clearly display the distribution. They show that the patterns of error type by two groups are quite similar across the research period, except for several phenomena. For the the-for-a error type, the focus on form group increased 5.26% to 6.14%, and the control group from 3.17 % to 6.41 %. The focus on form group dropped sharply from 30.52 % to 16.56 %, and the control group 38.10 % to 30.77 % for the o-for-a error type. These results suggest that the focus on form group had less difficulty in using article ′a′ in the

noun phrases than the control group. For the a-for-the error type, there was about 10 % increase from 6.32 to 15.34 % for the focus on form group and from 1.59 to 10.26% for the control group. Some differences appeared in the null category. For the focus on form group, there was little change in a-for-o error type, but there was some increase in the-for-o error type. However, the control group showed more change in the percentage of errors from 7.94 to 16.67% for the a-for-o error type, while making less percentage of errors for the the-for-o error type. The focus on form group experienced more increase in the-for-o errors, compared with the control group, rising from 14.74 to 18.41%, while the control group showed more increase in the a-for-o error type, from 7.94 to 16.67%. These results show that the focus on from group tended to use 'the' when 'null' was required, and the control group used 'a' when 'null' was required.

TABLE 4
Article Error Distribution (%)

Used	Required	C-Group		F-Group	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post
th	a	3.17	6.41	5.26	6.14
o	a	38.10	30.77	30.52	16.56
a	th	1.59	10.26	6.32	15.34
o	th	33.33	23.08	28.42	23.93
a	o	7.94	16.67	14.74	13.50
th	o	15.87	12.82	14.74	18.41

FIGURE 1
Distribution of Article Errors for Control Group
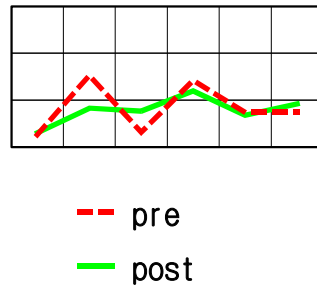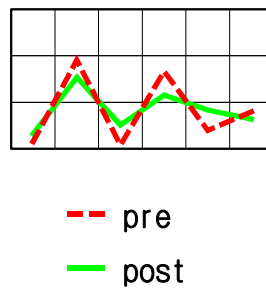
-- pre
— post

FIGURE 2
Distribution of Article Errors for Focus on Form Group

-- pre
— post

The changes in the distribution of errors during the period are in line with the findings of previous studies. As Lee (2000) and Park (2000) reported, Korean learners of English, who belong to the [-Art] group, showed the over use of 'null' at first, and then the control group more used 'a' and the focus on form group more 'the' over the time.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research started with two questions: What effects explicit focus on form has on the acquisition of the English article system, and whether it leads to change in the distribution of errors in the use of the English article system or not. The findings of the research show that the focus on form leads to better performance

on the completion task than the control group, suggesting that focus on form has a positive impact on L2 learning. The focus on form group showed a remarkably significant improvement in accuracy compared with the control group. Specifically, the focus on form group obtained more increased accuracy for article 'the', and there were some differences in the development of the English articles of the two groups. For the control group, there was a general increase in the use of all the articles, while for the focus on form group, there was a noticeable improvement in the use of article 'the'.

These findings can be regarded as a supporting evidence for focus on form in the classroom. Although Krashen strongly argued for the unconscious processes of L2 acquisition, proper attention of the form of the input and output can contribute to efficient L2 learning. In particular, this research suggests at least medium-term effects of focus on form, showing the focus on form group performed superior to the control group after the two-month period. As a result, it can be argued that focus on form including explicit explanation, input enhancement, output practice, and feedback had a synergistic effect on the acquisition of the English article system.

On the other hand, this research suggests that explicit awareness is not a determining factor in L2 learning. Beside the evidence of explicit learning, there was also evidence of implicit L2 learning. The control group showed better performance than before, although they did not receive any grammatical explanation, input enhancement and output practice. However, it cannot be argued that the control group acquired the knowledge in a completely implicit condition because they were exposed to negative evidence from the teacher. As a result, this research does partially support Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, which claims that noticing is a necessary condition for L2 learning. Just under the assumption that the negative evidence of this research does not make learners explicitly pay attention to the form (the English article system), it can be tentatively suggested that L2 learners acquire L2 knowledge in an implicit condition, but L2 knowledge is more effectively improved in an explicit mode.

As for the second question, the present study challenges the positive side of focus on form. As seen above, some differences between the two groups occurred, but they have general pictures in common. Moreover, the differences in proportions for each error type over the time may result partially from the differences in subjects' developmental stages of the English article system, not only from focus on form. These taken into account, it may be suggested that the acquisition of English

articles is promoted by explicit focus on form, but the developmental route of English articles is not seriously affected.

To conclude, this research shows that focus on form can have a positive impact particularly on the classroom-based L2 learning, facilitating the improvement of L2 knowledge. Following this finding, it would be resonable to make an effort to find more effective ways of using explicit focus on form activities for Korean EFL classes where learners are exposed to a limited input with limited hours.

REFERENCES

Alanen, R. (1995). Input enhancement and rule presentation in second language acquisition. In R. Schmidt (Ed.), *Attention and awareness in foreign language learning and teaching* (pp. 259-302). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Doughty, C. (1990). Second language instruction does make a difference: Evidence from an empirical study of ESL relativization. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 13*(4), 431-469.

Ellis, N. (1993). Rules and instances in foreign language learning: Interactions of implicit and explicit knowledge. *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology, 5*(3), 289-319.

Harley, B. (1989). Functional grammar in French immersion; A classroom experiment. *Applied Linguistics, 10*(3), 331-359.

Harly, B. (1994). Appealing to consciousness in the L2 classroom. *AILA Review, 11*, 57-68.

Harley, B. & Swain, M. (1984). The interlanguage of immersion students and its implications for second language teaching, In A. Davies, C. Criper, & A. Howartt (Eds.), *Interlanguage* (pp. 291-311). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Hubner, T. (1983). The acquisition of English. Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma.

Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice of second language acquisition.* Oxford; Pergamon.

Krashen, S. D. (1993). The effect of formal grammar teaching: Still peripheral. *TESOL Quarterly, 27*, 722-725.

Lee, Hwa-yeon (1996). English article usage of native Korean speakers. *English Teaching, 51*(1), 163-179.

Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1990). Focus on form and corrective feedback in communicative language teaching: Effects on second language learning. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 12*(4), 429-448.

Lyster, R. (1994). The effect of functional-analytic teaching on aspects of French immersion students' sociolinguistic competence. *Applied Linguistics, 15*(3), 263-287.

Master, P. (1987). *A cross-linguistic interlanguage analysis of the acquisition of the English article system*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Master, P. (1994). The effect of systematic instruction on learning the English article system. In T. Odlin (Ed.), *Perspectives on pedagogical grammar* (pp. 229-252). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Park, Ki-Hwa (1996). The article acquisition in English as a foreign language, *English Teaching, 51*(3), 37-49.

Pienemann, M. (1984). Psychological constraints on the teachability of language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 6*, 186-214.

Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 11*(2), 17-46.

Sharwood Smith, M. (1986). Comprehension vs. acquisition: Two ways of processing input. *Applied Linguistics, 7*(3), 239-256.

VanPatten, B., & Cadierno, T. (1993). Explicit instruction and input processing. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 15*, 225-41.

White, L. (1991). Adverb placement in second language acquisition: Some positive and negative evidence in the classroom. *Second Language Research, 7*(2), 133-161.

Zehler, A. M., & Brewer, W. F.(1982). Sequence and principles in article system use: an examination of a, the, and null acquisition. *Child Development, 53*, 1268-1274.

Park, Hye-Sook
군산대학교 영어영문학과
573-701 전북 군산시 미룡동 산68
Tel: (063) 469-4332