

The Effects of Explicit vs. Implicit Instruction on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Acquisition of English Definite and Indefinite Articles

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Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the differential effects of two types of instruction (explicit versus implicit) on the learning of English articles by Iranian EFL learners. To achieve this aim, 90 intermediate undergraduate students at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, whose major was English Translation were selected for the experiment. Then, they were divided into three groups namely, explicit group (EG), implicit group (IG), and control group (CG). The EG received instruction on English articles through two popular grammar books-- namely '*Essential Grammar in Use*' by Murphy (1998) and '*Oxford Practice Grammar*' by Eastwood (1999). The second group received instruction on English articles by employing the technique of textual input enhancement. The third group received similar instruction like IG except that English articles were not enhanced for this group. After analyzing the data on pre- and posttests, the results showed that the three groups of EG, IG, and CG improved significantly from pretest to posttests. Moreover, on the posttest, the EG learners significantly outweighed the IG learners, who were in turn found to be significantly better than their counterparts in the CG. The results of this study have several important implications for the classroom practice concerning the controversial issue of teaching English articles.

Keywords: Explicit instruction, implicit instruction, textual input enhancement, definite articles, indefinite articles

Introduction

The effectiveness of teaching based on explicit and implicit instruction has been a controversy for decades. Some educators believe that explicit instruction is more effective for learners, whereas other educators believe that implicit instruction is more beneficial for learners. Explicit instruction is rule explanation and learners are directly asked to attend to particular forms (Dekeyser, 1995). Therefore, the instructions such as rule explanation, error correction, contrastive analysis of L1 and L2, and metalinguistic rules are parts of explicit teaching (Norris & Ortega, 2000). On the other hand, implicit instruction includes no rule presentation or directions to attend to particular forms (Norris & Ortega, 2000). As a result, the instruction approaches such as input flood (i.e., high-frequency input), interaction, and recasts (i.e., "rephrasing an erroneous learner utterance while still referring to its central meaning," Long (1996, p. 434) are considered as instances of implicit instruction.

Explicit learning is an active process where students pay attention to the structure of information that is presented to them. Explicit instruction tries to focus on a specific learning

objective in a very structured environment. The order of presentation of teaching materials is in a logical order and the teacher's role is to present them through demonstration, explanation, and practice. Explicit instruction also involves modeling thinking patterns. This involves a teacher thinking out loud while working through a "problem" to help students understand how they should think about accomplishing a task. Explicit instruction is very teacher-centered because the attention of students is very important. Explicit teaching can be classified as the deductive type of instruction namely, rules are explained and then the examples are seen (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Implicit learning is "learning without conscious attention or awareness" (Brown, 2007, p.291). Besides, implicit learning occurs "without intention to learn and without awareness of what has been learned" (Brown, 2007, p. 292). Implicit learning is a passive process, where students are exposed to information and acquire knowledge of that information simply through that exposure. Implicit teaching involves teaching a certain topic in a suggestive or implied manner. In fact, the objective is not plainly expressed. Implicit teaching is closely related to inductive teaching, which means that rules are inferred from examples presented first. Any kind of topic can be taught implicitly including grammar, vocabulary, culture, etc. Students should be aware of what the learning objective is. In this type of teaching, students are never taught the actual rules; they deduce their own form of rules based on the examples given.

Many studies have been performed to determine which teaching approach is the most effective way of transmitting knowledge to learners. In a study by DeKeyser (1995), he found that explicit learning is better than implicit learning for simple categorical rules and that implicit learning is equally good or even better than explicit learning for prototypes. In addition, some researchers (e.g. Ellis, 1997, Mitchell, 2000, Simard & Wong, 2004) have found that a combination of implicit and explicit learning may lead to the best results. This is because every learner has a different learning style, so it is recommended for teachers to vary their teaching methods to meet students' preferences.

Teaching articles is a challenging task for EFL teachers, especially if the first language of the learners does not have the equivalent concept. As a result, it is very important to choose the most appropriate method for transmitting this linguistic knowledge to learners. Articles are the most common determiners in English that are defined and classified in various ways. According to some linguists, (e.g. McEldowney, 1977; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman; 1983, Quirk et al. 1985; Goodman, 1987) articles in English are *a(n)*, *the*, \emptyset , and *some*; for other linguists (e.g. Master, 1994) English articles are mainly *a(n)*, *the*, and \emptyset . The present study, for the sake of simplicity, has selected Master's classification and investigates which type of teaching method (explicit or implicit) on English articles is more beneficial for Iranian EFL learners.

Since the English article system has proven to be difficult to acquire by some second and foreign language learners, the present study is an attempt to investigate which type of teaching method is more effective for Iranian learners of English. In order to achieve this aim, the two types of teaching were adopted for Iranian EFL learners; namely, metalinguistic explanation and textual enhancement type of teaching. These two types of methods were used for instruction of both definite and indefinite article. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to determine which type of explicit or implicit processing instruction was more beneficial for teaching Iranian learners.

Literature Review

Definite and Indefinite Articles

Bickerton (1981) studied in depth the mechanism of English article. He proposed that English articles have different functions and they can be studied through two binary features;

namely, articles are either associated with NPs that refer to the specific entity (\pm specific referent) or whether articles are associated with noun phrases that are already known to the person who is listening to or reading the sentence (\pm hearer knowledge). According to Bickerton [-SR, +HK] Type 1 or “generics, “is where the indefinite, the definite, or, if the noun is plural, the zero article is used. For example, *a/the tiger is a fierce animal*. Type 2 is [+SR, +HK], where the definite article should be used. It divides into four subcategories: (a) unique referent or conventionally assumed unique referent, such as *the Pope*; (b) referent physically present, as in the example *Pass me the pepper please*; (c) referent previously mentioned in the discourse; and (d) specific referent assumed to be known to the hearer (e.g., a resident in a small village with one church tells another resident, “My wife is at the church”). Type 3 is [+SR, -HK], where the indefinite or, if the noun is plural, zero article is needed. They are divided into two types: (a) first mention in the discourse of a [+SR] NP assumed to be unknown to the hearer, as in *Tom bought a car*; and (b) first mention of a [+SR] NP that follows contains *have* and is supposed to be unknown to the hearer, as in *My computer has a new sound card*. Type 4 is [-SR, -HK], where the indefinite or, if the noun is plural, zero article is needed. This type is divided into four types: (a) sentences that contains subject and complement and both refer to the same person or thing (equative NPs), as in *She is a single parent*; (b) NPs in a negation statement, as in *I don't have a car*; (c) NPs in an interrogative sentence, as in *Do you have a pen?* and (d) NPs in hypothetical statements, as in *If I had had more money, I would have bought a new car*. This classification shows clearly that the four semantic types of NPs each have different discourse and referential constraints and thus demand the selection of a specific article or articles from among *a*, *the*, and zero to mark these constraints. Other studies concerning articles analysis are based on Bickerton's approach to the English article system (e.g. Huebner, 1983; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989)

Explicit versus Implicit Instruction

A considerable number of studies, such as Dekeyser (1998); Galotti et al. (1997); Norris and Ortega (2000); Erlam (2003) and Finestack and Fey (2009), have examined the effects of implicit and explicit teaching approaches. The findings revealed that the participants who received explicit teaching outperformed those who received implicit teaching. These studies demonstrate that explicit teaching is more appropriate and effective in teaching grammar as it aids the speedy mastering of the linguistic elements. For example, the results of the study by Galotti et al. (1997) revealed that the group which received explicit teaching accurately answered questions faster than the group which received implicit teaching. Furthermore, Cross (1991) and Hedge (2000) favored explicit teaching because of the fact that, not only does it lead learners to master grammatical rules, but also because it does not take a lot of time (time-saving) for the instructor to explain in class. Thus, learners have more class time for work and to practice communicative activities. In addition, Cross (1991) claimed that adult learners may prefer learning grammatical rules explicitly as this enables them to understand how language works and, as a result, can apply the rules appropriately. Moreover, a variety of rule aspects such as form can be more simply and clearly explained than when elicited from examples (Chalipa, 2013).

The explicit teaching approach has, however, been criticized by a number of researchers such as Richards (1992) on the basis that it provides fewer opportunities for learners to think and infer a concept for themselves. Shaffer (1989) believed that there may be a gap between teaching and learning. Students could deduce grammatical rules and practice them, but in real time communication may not disclose what they have learned. Another criticism was produced by Sato (1990) who claimed that such instruction might lead to the non-target-like use of target forms. Chalipa (2013) likewise criticized explicit teaching, stating that explicit teaching lacks

learners' immediate involvement and interaction, which could result in the class being teacher-centered and not demanding in terms of creativity. According to Chalipa, in this type of instruction language is divided into small parts and students are taught grammatical features in a linear manner. Such classes are often described: (1) as ignoring student needs; using artificial classroom language and thus, boring; and (2) as being limited in terms of exposure to the target language, meaningful communication, and interaction which are essential for language acquisition (Long, 2000; Lyster, 2004).

Nassaji and Fotos (2004, p.127) pointed out that the inadequacies of explicit teaching approaches have resulted in other approaches with regards to grammar instruction. One of these is textual enhanced input.

Textual enhanced input is an approach that focus on “making learners aware of the new target language features and rules by highlighting them in the input more or less concisely or elaborately, and with greater or lesser explicitness and intensity” (Sharwood-Smith 1994, p.179). It is considered to be one of implicit focus on form teaching techniques. A group of researchers, such as Long and Robinson (1998); Doughty and Williams (1998); Poole (2005) Berent et al. (2007) and Afitska (2012) favored such techniques believe that when the meaning and use are provided to learners, it might draw their attention to the form. Learners develop communicative competence through this type of teaching. When applying implicit focus on form techniques such as textual enhanced input, a teacher is trying to draw learners' attention to a linguistic form implicitly without a direct grammar explanation. Izumi (2012, p. 228) provided some of the techniques that are used to achieve implicit focus on form, which include input flood, input enhancement, task-essential language and recast. Izumi (2012) claimed that in an implicit focus on form class learners communicate naturally and there is no interruption in their speech and the learners are rarely aware of the targeted form.

Implicit instruction has been criticized for a number of reasons. According to VanPatten (1990, 1996) in implicit instruction beginners might face difficulties in paying attention to form and meaning at the same time, besides that they put emphasis on the meaning rather than the form when communicative with each other. Moreover, Poole (2003) pointed out that class size might influence implicit instruction. He claimed that implicit instruction might be suitable for small classrooms which is in accordance with Long and Robinson's studies (1998). Students in small classes can communicate openly and express themselves even when they have problem forms through classroom discussion. Yu (2001) and Butler (2004) pointed out the lack of high proficiency of some English teachers might be an obstacle for implementing implicit instruction.

Poole (2003) pointed out the problem of cod-switching which usually occur when teachers and students try to communicate second languages in the classroom. In this case, both teachers and students' native language may be used for overcoming difficulties in expressing themselves. Therefore, lack of linguistic knowledge of target language may lead to failure in using implicit instruction appropriately in classroom.

Another problem associated with this type of teaching is the individualistic or collectivist view of the community in which the instruction might be used. Learners with individualistic view tend to participate in competitive activities such as ask questions, provide responses and engage in debate, whereas students with collectivist view are less likely wish to engage in question and debate. Learners in collectivist environment try to keep formal and distant relationships with their teachers. Therefore, cultural value is another factor which should be considered in in choosing explicit or implicit instruction.

Generally, implicit instruction is considered to be effective for a variety of reasons. For example, when implicit instruction is used, learners can take time out from a focus on meaning to

noticing targeted linguistic forms in the input. By doing so, learners avoid a complete focus on meaning during which linguistic forms may not be noticed (Loewen, 2003 and Izumi, 2013). Schmidt (1990, 2001) indicated that such noticing reveals the important features in the input and also the targeted forms are made salient in the input, which aid learners to comprehend semantic and syntactic features. A number of studies (Long, 1983; Harley, 1998; Scott, 1989; Master, 1990; Doughty, 1991; Ellis, 1994; Leow, 1997; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993; Cadierno, 1995; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999; Gass et al., 2002; Yu, 2013) show that noticing is more efficient in teaching, because it facilitates the mastering of linguistic elements. What is more, implicit instruction can provide learners with opportunities for '*pushed output*' which improves the competence of learners as they need to use accurate and appropriate language in order to be understood (Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Swain, 2000; Ellis, 2003).

With regards to the controversial issues concerning explicit versus implicit instruction and difficulties in acquiring English articles by second and foreign language learners, the present study is an attempt to investigate which type of teaching method is more effective for Iranian learners of English. In this study, implicit instruction is operationalized via textual enhancement technique and explicit instruction is operationalized through metalinguistic explanation. These two types of methods have been used for instruction of both definite and indefinite types of articles to Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to answer the following research questions.

RQ1. Does explicit instruction have a significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of English definite and indefinite articles?

RQ2. Does implicit instruction have a significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of English definite and indefinite articles?

RQ3. Is there a significant difference between the effects of explicit (metalinguistic explanation) vs implicit instruction (textual enhancement) on improving Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of English definite and indefinite articles?

Methodology

Design and Context of the Study

The present research was quasi-experimental and there was a treatment phase to measure the influence of metalinguistic explanation (explicit) versus textual enhancement (implicit) instruction on Iranian EFL learners. Since true randomization was not feasible for the present study, some English classes at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch were used and the classes were assigned to one control and two experimental groups. The experimental groups then divided into two groups, namely explicit group (EG) and implicit group (IG). The first group (EG) received explicit instruction and the second group (IG) received implicit instruction on the definite and non-definite articles. The control group (CG) received instruction on grammar items and English articles in a conventional fashion. In this study, independent variable was the effect of explicit versus implicit instruction and the dependent variable was acquisition of definite and indefinite article by Iranian Learners. Moreover, it should be noted that a pretest/posttest design were used to compare subjects' performance before and after the treatment.

Participants

The participants of this study were the undergraduate students at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, majoring in English translation. The design of this research needed three different groups: one control group and two experimental groups; this being so, the subjects were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The experiment carried out by a

proficient teacher at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, who had the experience of teaching grammar to EFL learners.

In order to meet the criteria of homogeneity, an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was administered to 200 students whose major was English at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch to measure students' proficiency and knowledge of English. Then, 30 intermediate students were selected for each group, which made a total number of 90 participants. The participants were both male and female and their age ranged from 20 to 35 years old.

APA ethical guidelines were used in order that participants' consent and confidentiality observed. The participants who took part in the study filled in a consent form and the confidentiality of their identity and performance on the tests were maintained throughout the study or even after it.

Materials and Instruments

Instructional Materials

In the experimental groups of the study, English articles were taught through two popular grammar books-- namely '*Essential Grammar in Use*' by Murphy (1998) and '*Oxford Practice Grammar*' by Eastwood (1999). The justification behind choosing these two course books was the fact that these books are conventionally taught in English Department in Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, for Grammar Courses. Moreover, the two books have rich units on teaching English articles to EFL learners.

Pretest

Before the treatment, a pretest was administered on articles. The test was fill-in-the blank question type and it was a researcher-made test. The test included 30 questions in which students had to provide either definite or indefinite articles in the spaces provided. In order to achieve the validity and reliability of the test, a random sample of 30 male and female learners with the same characteristics of the study sample were chosen to sit for the test. The results were recorded and statistically analyzed to determine its validity and reliability. The reliability of the test was determined through statistical technique of Cronbach's Alpha in which Alpha was measured .71. The content validity of the pretest was also approved by two PhD instructors who were experts in field of SLA.

Posttest

After the treatment, a posttest of fill-in-the blank question type on definite and indefinite articles was administered to measure students' achievement in explicit group (EG), implicit group (IG) and control group (CG). The format of the test was the same as pretest (30 questions in the form of fill-in-the blank type) in which students had to provide correct use of articles on the spaces provided. The test was a researcher-made test, the reliability and validity of which had already been proven. The reliability of the test was determined through statistical technique of Cronbach's Alpha in which Alpha was measured .74. The validity of the posttest was also approved by two PhD instructors who were experts in the field of SLA.

Data Collection Procedures

The present study began with the pretest. In the pretest phase, 30 questions were answered by 90 intermediate students who were the undergraduate students at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, majoring in English translation. The questions were in the in the form of fill in the blank type on English articles. The reliability of the pretest was confirmed by Cronbach

Alpha ($\alpha = .71$). The content validity of the pretest was also confirmed by two teachers who were at Ph.D. level. Then the selected students spent eight weeks with the administration of instruction on three separated groups. The first group (EG) received metalinguistic explanation on English articles; in other words, students in the first group were provided with straightforward grammatical explanations and rule application on English article system. In fact, the learners' attention was directly drawn to how the articles can be used in English. However, the second group (IG) received implicit instruction through the technique of textual enhancement on English articles; that is, they received reading passages in which the English articles were made salient via bold typing, but the teacher did not provide any direct comments on the articles that appeared in bold. The third group (CG) received instruction on quantifiers as kind of a placebo. In the posttest phase, 30 questions were designed the students had to answer the fill in the blank type questions on English articles. The reliability of the posttest was confirmed by Cronbach Alpha ($\alpha = .74$). The content validity of the pretest was also confirmed by two teachers who were Ph.D. holders. The quantitative data from pretest (30 questions) and posttest (30 questions) were gathered and analyzed to measure students' achievements after three types of instruction.

Results

First, the results of within-group comparisons of the three groups are presented to see if each group improved from pretest to posttest with respect to their knowledge of English articles.

Pretest vs. Posttest Comparisons of EG, IG, and CG

To find out whether explicit instruction, implicit instruction, and traditional instruction had significant effects on the EFL learners' knowledge of definite and indefinite articles, the pretest and posttest scores of the learners in each group were compared via a paired-samples *t* test; the results of comparisons for the three groups are, however, presented together in the two following tables, for reasons of space.

Table 1

Results of Descriptive Statistics Comparing the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the EG, IG, and CG Learners

Groups	Tests	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
EG	Pretest	30	9.63	2.41	.44
	Posttest	30	19.46	1.71	.31
IG	Pretest	30	9.70	1.89	.34
	Posttest	30	14.50	1.73	.31
CG	Pretest	30	9.36	1.84	.33
	Posttest	30	9.96	1.62	.29

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 display the fact that the EG learners improved from the mean score of 9.63 on the pretest to the mean score of 19.46 on the posttest. Similarly, the IG learners experienced an improvement from the pretest ($M = 9.70$) to the posttest ($M = 14.50$), and so did the CG learners. To find out whether the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the learners in each group was statistically significant or not, the researcher had to examine the paired-samples *t* test table (Table 2) results:

Table 2

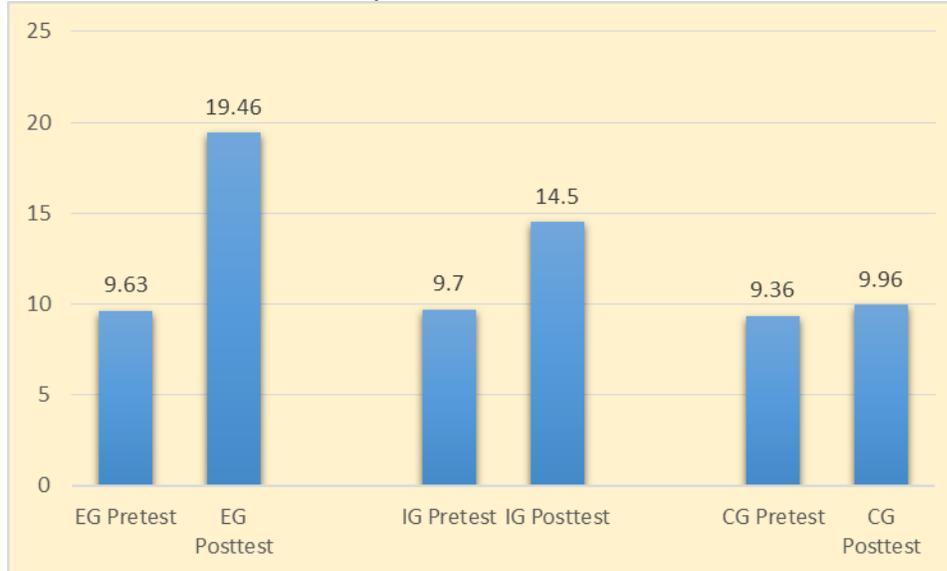
Results of Paired-Samples t Test Comparing the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the EG, IG, and CG Learners

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)
		Mean	<i>Std.</i> Deviation	<i>Std.</i> Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
EG	pretest-posttest	-9.83	1.91	.34	-10.54	-9.11	-28.14	29	.00
IG	pretest-posttest	-4.80	.84	.15	-5.11	-4.48	-31.04	29	.00
CG	pretest-posttest	-.60	.67	.12	-.85	-.34	-4.87	29	.00

Since all the *p* values under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) column in Table 2 were smaller than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), it could be understood that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the learners was statistically significant in all the EG, IG, and CG conditions. This result is graphically represented in the bar graph in Figure 1:

Figure 1

Pretest and Posttest Scores of the EG, IG, and CG Learners



It could be clearly seen in Figure 1 that all the EG, IG, and CG learners had a significant improvement from the pretest to the posttest. This means that experiencing explicit, implicit, and traditional instruction had significant effects on EFL learners' knowledge of English articles. Now the question is whether there were significant differences among the EG, IG, and CG conditions as far as the knowledge of English articles of L2 learners was concerned. The answer to this question is found in the following analyses.

Comparing EG, IG, and CG Posttest Scores

Another objective of the study was to find out whether there were significant differences among the EG, IG, and CG learners with respect to their knowledge of English articles. To fulfil this objective, the researcher had to compare the posttest scores of the EG, IG, and CG learners, for which a one-way ANOVA could be conducted. However, to control for any possible pre-existing differences among these three groups, and compare their posttest scores accordingly, one-way ANCOVA was conducted:

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the EG, IG and CG Learners

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
EG	19.46	1.71	30
IG	14.50	1.73	30
CG	9.96	1.62	30
Total	14.64	4.24	90

In Table 3, it could be found that the posttest mean score of the EG learners ($M = 19.46$) was largest mean score out there, while the posttest mean score of the IG learners was 14.50 and that of the CG learners equaled 9.96. To find out whether these differences among the three mean scores were statistically significant or not, the researcher had to look down the *Sig.* column and in front of the Groups row in Table 4:

Table 4

Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the EG, IG, and CG Learners

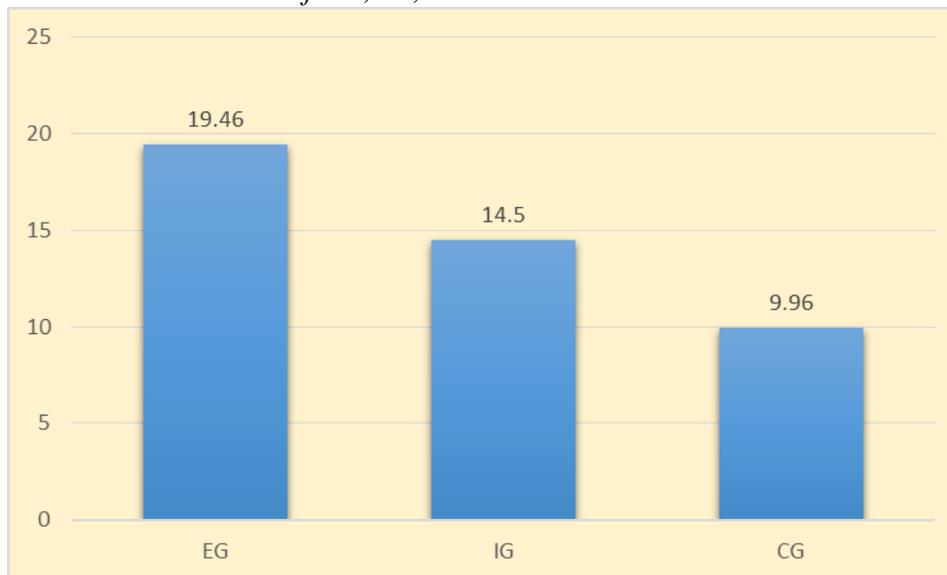
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Squared	Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1510.72	3	503.57	461.21	.00	.94	
Intercept	277.88	1	277.88	254.51	.00	.74	
Pretest	156.03	1	156.03	142.90	.00	.62	
Groups	1303.93	2	651.96	597.12	.00	.93	
Error	93.89	86	1.09				
Total	20906.00	90					
Corrected Total	1604.62	89					

In Table 4, if you find the row labeled Groups in the leftmost column, and read across this row, under the *Sig.* column, you can find the p value, which should be compared with the alpha level of significance (i.e., .05). The p value here was smaller than the alpha level of significance ($.00 < .05$), which indicates that the differences among the three groups of EG, IG, and CG on the posttest of English articles were statistically significant. To pinpoint the exact locations of the differences, the post hoc test table should be consulted:

Table 5*Results of Post Hoc Test for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the EG, IG, and CG Learners*

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
EG	IG	5.01*	.27	.00	4.35	5.66
	CG	9.32*	.27	.00	8.66	9.98
IG	EG	-5.01*	.27	.00	-5.66	-4.35
	CG	4.31*	.27	.00	3.65	4.97
CG	EG	-9.32*	.27	.00	-9.98	-8.66
	IG	-4.31*	.27	.00	-4.97	-3.65

Casting a look at the p values in front of the pair-wise comparisons in Table 5 reveals that the difference between EG and IG learners, the difference between the EG and CG learners, and the difference between the IG and CG learners were all of statistical significance ($p < .05$). This is also graphically represented in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2*Posttest Mean Scores of EG, IG, and CG Learners*

It could be clearly seen in Figure 2 that the learners exposed to explicit instruction received the highest mean score, and that there was a considerable difference between the EG and IG learners, who received implicit instruction. The IG learners, in turn, could significantly outperform their counterparts in the CG condition. In sum, the experimental groups both significantly exceeded the control groups and between the two experimental groups, it was the EG which had a better performance on the posttest.

Discussion

English article system is a difficult area that EFL learners have difficulties in acquiring this concept and they make errors in using it appropriately in various contexts. Teaching this system and choosing an appropriate method for this difficult concept are among controversial

issues for researchers and language teachers. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate the differential effects of explicit versus implicit instruction on English articles for Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. The implicit instruction was presented through textual enhancement technique and explicit instruction was presented through metalinguistic explanation.

To answer the first research question, namely “Does explicit instruction have a significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners’ acquisition of English definite and indefinite articles?”. Data analysis on Table 1 indicated the improvement of the EG learners from the mean score of 9.63 in the pretest to the mean score of 19.46 in the posttest. It clearly showed that the EG learners have benefited from explicit instruction on both the definite and indefinite articles. The results of present study are in line with researchers such as Schmidt (1995) and Hunt and Beglar (2005) who believed that more direct, goal-oriented, and explicit instruction is more effective and beneficial than implicit learning. Ellis (2002) supports the findings of this study in maintaining that explicit instructions may help the learner to notice features in the input that would otherwise be ignored. Doughty and Williams (1998), Long and Robinson (1998), and Norris and Ortega (2000) are in line with the present study by suggesting that there is a positive role for some kind of attention to form either through explicit teaching or explicit error correction. Moreover, several researchers (Ellis, 1994, 2001; Nassaji & Swain, 2000) supported explicit grammar instruction, for the reason that there are some grammatical forms which are difficult to learn even in context and therefore, are better acquired if they are taught using explicit instruction. Word order and determiners (this, that, these, those, a, an, the) can be instances of such challenging grammatical forms (Lynch, 2009).

Implicit views that advocate a language can be learned by a degree of unconscious exposure are theoretically problematic. Based on studies by Schmidt (1993; 2001), some degrees of conscious attention (noticing) is necessary for language learning. A good number of researchers, namely Bialystok (1994), Dekeyser (1998), Robinson (1995, 2001), Nassaji and Swain (2000), Swain and Lapkin (2001) Zhisheng (2008) and Al-Hejin (2009), are in line with Schmidt’s view regarding explanation of linguistic items which they believe, to some degree has a crucial role in L2 learning.

To answer the second research question, namely “Does implicit instruction have a significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners’ acquisition of English definite and indefinite articles?”. According to data analysis on Table 1, results indicated that the IG learners experienced an improvement from the pretest ($M = 9.70$) to the posttest ($M = 14.50$). The comparison of pre-and posttest of EFL learners represented that the IG learners made an improvement due to indirect instruction, however the improvement is not as significant as the EG. The obtained results are partly in tune with studies carried out by Alanen (1995) and Leow (1997). They demonstrated that input enhancement techniques alone may not lead to the ability to master the target form. Another study by Alanen (1995) supports the results of the present study. In his study, he examined the differential effects of four texts in four groups in. The first group received enhanced input; the second group received explicit rule presentation; the third group received explicit rule presentation and enhanced input (i.e. targeted forms are made salient with italics); and the fourth group considered as the control group. The results revealed that the first group who received input enhancement techniques outperformed the control group and the second group who received explicit rule presentation achieved better results than the others.

Therefore, we can conclude that implicit teaching instruction may help EFL learners, to some extent, in acquiring grammatical structure. However, intermediate EFL learners who are taught through explicit instruction strategies did significantly better on the grammar tests than the

ones who received implicit instruction strategies. It can be inferred that may be the explicit instruction only influenced the EFL explicit knowledge and had no effect on their implicit knowledge. It is possible that the groups which received implicit teaching strategies could not explain what they have learned through a grammar test, however, they might have been able to demonstrate long-term implicit knowledge through other language skills such speaking or listening.

To answer the third research question, namely “Is there a significant difference between the effects of explicit (metalinguistic explanation) vs implicit instruction (textual enhancement) on improving Iranian EFL learners’ acquisition of English definite and indefinite articles?” The results obtained from this study through the technique of one-way ANOVA revealed that the differences among the three groups of EG, IG, and CG. on the Posttest of English articles were statistically significant. The mean score for the EG learners on the post test was 19.46 while the mean scores for IG and CG were 14.50 and 9.96. respectively. The results of the present study are in line with Master’s (1994) metalinguistic explanation of English article system and his hierarchical structure proposed by him. He concluded that students who taught through his scheme outperformed other group who taught through other techniques. Furthermore, Master claimed the presentation of both definite and indefinite articles in a systematic way should be presented with great care in order to facilitate acquiring this system in EFL learners.

Conclusion

With regard to the endless debates on whether to teach grammatical items explicitly or implicitly and concerning English article system which is highly difficult and the most frequently used ones in English, the aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of explicit versus implicit instruction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners whose age ranged from 20 to 35 years old. The obtained results were in favor of explicit instruction. This study is in line with interaction hypothesis (Long, 1985, 2015) and noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990; 2001). However, this study is in contrast with Krashen’ theory in which he argued that younger learners prefer naturalistic and implicit processing to explicit method of presenting the form of the language. According to naturalistic view proposed by Krashen, younger children learn their first language incidentally through everyday experiences, thus, an instructional approach that encourages implicit learning of the second or foreign language might be better suited to younger learners. The age, proficiency levels, gender, number of participants and other variables might influence the results of the present study. Since the focus of the present study was on Iranian intermediate EFL learners, other research with focus on different proficient levels and with different age groups might yield useful results concerning the effectiveness of explicit versus implicit instruction.

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