



## The Effect of Online Learning of English Articles through Metalinguistic Explanation and Textual Enhancement

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### Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the effect of online learning of English articles through Metalinguistic explanation and Textual Enhancement among Iranian intermediate EFL learners in one of the institutes in Esfahan. First, 70 students were chosen randomly. They took Quick Placemat Test (QPT) proficiency for the sake of homogeneity. This being so, sixty of them were selected. Next, they were divided randomly into two groups of thirty: Experimental Group 1 (EG1) and Experimental Group 2 (EG2). Both groups received a researcher-made pre-test in which items testing the use of articles were taken from two popular grammar teaching books. Having created two different Telegram channels for each group, the researcher taught the use of articles through metalinguistic explanations to EG1 and via textual enhancement to EG2 on Telegram. Finally, both groups received a posttest after the treatment. The results of the study showed that learners in EG2 outperformed their counterparts in EG1. In fact, textual enhancement proved to be a more effective tool for teaching grammar online. The study has implications for material developers as well as language teachers.

**Keywords:** CALL, metalinguistic explanation, textual enhancement, articles

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning English have long been a difficult task for both EFL students and teachers in Iran due to some reasons such as lack of resources and little contact with the target language (Sadeghi, 2005). Among different components of language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, phrasal verbs, and idioms), learning grammar is probably one of the most difficult tasks to be accomplished and learning English articles (A, An, The) has always been a big challenge for students, especially foreign language learners.

Moreover, new technologies like computer, satellite and cellphone inspire people to study their favorite subject matters online everywhere and every time they want. Computer has different pedagogical characteristic, and it has been utilized in teaching

language around the world. It affects the way we view teaching and learning. This has led to the prominence of the computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Some methodologists maintain that the utilization of computer in the basic stage is the most beneficial for the students (Almekhlafi, 2006; Harmer, 1995).

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is succinctly defined in a seminal work by Levy (2000, p. 24) as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning". In fact, Figure & Jarvis (2007) define CALL as learners learning language in any context with, through and around computer technologies. CALL involves applying computer hardware and software to a teaching and learning environment. (Koua, 2012, Khasawneh, 2011; Sang et al., 2011; Tezci, 2011; Lin, Wang & Lin, 2012). One of the applications of computer can be the use of social networks such as Telegram that is very popularly used by Iranians in daily life. This study is an attempt to investigate the effects of online teaching of articles through metalinguistic explanations and textual enhancement to Iranian EFL learners.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In a lot of teaching and learning situations, working on computers with a large number of different software and connecting to the Internet is as usual as using blackboard or white board in traditional classes (Ur, 2102). Prensky (2010) claimed that current elementary and secondary school students are regarded as digital learners and even referred to as digital natives because technology is very important and very necessary in their academic world as well as in their daily social lives. These new technologies include computers, cellphones, and Mp3 players.

One of the applications of computer can be the use of social networks such as Telegram on mobile phones and Personal Computers (PCs), which is very popularly used by Iranians in daily life. Smart phones give users far greater flexibility than do PCs because they can connect to the Internet through cellular data networks in addition to local Wi-Fi. The availability of mobile and easy access to Wi-Fi connections double the possibility for language learning (Rosell-Agular, 2103). Mobile devices offer immediate access to the Internet and thus, to applications such as social networks (Rosell Aguilar, 2103). All of these facilities make learning online an interesting issue to EFL researchers.

Metalinguistic explanation is defined as linguistic explanations of rules or patterns in a language (Brown, 2104). However, knowing a language rule metalinguistically does not mean one will be able to use it in communicative interaction (Brown, 2104). Kumaravadivelu (2009) stated that metalinguistic function of output relates to the possibility that learners may be consciously thinking about language and its system, about its phonological, grammatical and semantic rules in order to guide them to produce utterances that are linguistically correct and communicatively appropriate. In the present study, metalinguistic explanation was operationalized as explicit explanation of rules regarding usage of English articles.

Over the past years, a large number of researchers have primarily stressed the role of attention and awareness in SLA learning contexts (Schmidt, 1990, 1995). Following the same line of research, drawing the learners' attention to formal properties of language which might otherwise go unnoticed has gained considerable importance. This method of instruction, which aims at heightening metalinguistic awareness, has come to be known as 'input (salience) enhancement' (Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993). Sharwood Smith, who introduced 'input enhancement' as a way of directing learners' attention to formal properties of language information, has noted that the input can be made salient by manipulating different aspects of it visually. Manipulation of input often takes the form of visual input enhancement in which the target forms are made visually salient via such techniques as highlighting, bolding, underlining, color coding, etc. This study used this method online to teach English articles.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research question was addressed in the present study:

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

In line with this question, the following research hypothesis was investigated:

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

## METHOD

### Participants

The research was done in one of the institutes in Esfahan. First 70 students were chosen randomly. They took OQPT proficiency test in order to ensure homogeneity. After that, sixty of them were selected and they were divided randomly into two groups of thirty; EG1 and EG2.

### Instruments

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

In this study OQPT (Oxford proficiency test), a pre-test and a post-test were used. The questions for pre-test and post-test were taken from *Grammar Usage* and *Grammar Digest* books. Also, Four Corners book 2 was used for the treatment phase.

### Procedures

This study was a kind of quantitative research (quasi experimental) and there were two experimental groups. The research was done in one of the institutes in Esfahan. First, 70 students were chosen randomly. They took OQPT proficiency test in order to guarantee

homogeneity. Next, 60 intermediate learners were selected and they were divided randomly into two groups of thirty; EG1 and EG2. Both groups received a researcher-made pre-test in which the items were designed to assess the learners' knowledge of article use in English. Then, as for the treatment phase, the teacher presented metalinguistic explanations on English articles from Four Corners for EG1 through a channel in telegram. The researcher also taught the English articles through textual enhancement in EG2 through a different channel in telegram. Then, the participants took part in a post-test that was designed by the researcher to assess the English article use by the participants after the treatment.

### Data analysis

The research question of the study was: Is there any significant difference between online learning of English articles through textual enhancement and metalinguistic explanations by intermediate EFL learners? To answer this research question, the researcher had to compare the metalinguistic explanation group's (MLEG) post-test scores with those of textual enhancement group (TEG), for which an independent-samples *t* test could be used. However, to control for any possible differences between these two groups prior to the commencement of the treatment, one-way ANCOVA was conducted. This way the researcher could control for any possible differences between the two groups on the pretest and then compare their post-test scores. The results of the ANCOVA test are presented in what follows:

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Post-test Scores of the MLEG and TEG Learners

Groups	Mean	SD	N
MLEG	20.46	3.48	30
TEG	27.06	2.86	30
Total	23.76	4.58	60

In Table 1, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation are presented for MLEG and TEG learners in the online condition. The post-test mean score of the MLEG ( $M = 20.46$ ) learners was less than the post-test mean score of the TEG ( $M = 27.06$ ) learners. To determine whether this difference was a statistically significant one or not, the researcher had to look down the *Sig* (2-tailed) column in the following ANCOVA table.

**Table 2.** Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Post-test Scores of the MLEG and TEG Learners

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	953.95	2	329.79	30.93	.111	.52
Intercept	0773.99	0	0773.99	072.75	.111	.99
Pretest	.35	0	.35	.13	.85	.110
Groups	559.17	0	559.17	53.70	.111	.48
Error	577.77	59	01.33			
Total	35034.11	91				
Corrected Total	0242.					

If you find Groups in the leftmost column of Table 2, 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 given  $p$  value was smaller than the alpha level of significance ( $.000 < .05$ ), indicating that the difference between the two groups of MLEG ( $M = 20.46$ ) and TEG ( $M = 27.06$ ) after the treatment on the posttest was statistically significant.

Under the Partial Eta Squared column, the corresponding value was .48, which shows that being in different groups (MLEG vs. TEG) accounted for 48% of the variance in the post-test scores of the learners who were taught on telegram. Another noteworthy piece of information in Table 2 concerns the influence of the covariate (i.e. the pretest). If you find the line in the table that corresponds to the covariate (i.e. the pretest), and read across to the *Sig.* level, you can see that the  $p$  value here was .85, which was greater than the significance level, meaning that the covariate was not significant. In fact, it explained less than even 1% of the variance in the post-test scores of the learners.

The obtained results of this part are graphically represented in Figure 1:



**Figure1.** Post-test Mean Scores of CALL-Based MLEG and TEG Learners

One could easily notice in Figure 4.1 that the TEG learners significantly outperformed their MLEG counterparts on the post-test.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Results of this investigation highlight the great value of applying a CALL-based method and mobile applications (such as telegram) in L2 classrooms. As it was previously mentioned, the focus of the study was on investigating intermediate Iranian EFL learners' learning of grammar of English articles by using CALL-based metalinguistic explanation and textual enhancement. Results of the pre-tests and post-tests and the answers to the research questions in this study may provide some clues to teachers who are uncertain about the effectiveness of implementing new technologies in L2

classrooms, also for those students who are not certain about online or CALL-based methods for learning English.

The results of data analysis showed that learners in EG2 outperformed their counterparts in EG1. In fact, textual enhancement proved to be a more effective tool for teaching grammar online. Many of the language related studies (Burgess & Hetherington, 2012) have tried to show whether second language teachers can draw students' attention to linguistic structure. According to Bacroft (2113), drawing learners' attention to a pattern in the input is the typical goal of grammar-oriented discourse level enhancement. Therefore, it can be claimed that "repeated examples of the enhanced grammatical items may be necessary in order to draw learners' attention to the pattern" (p. 50). Schmidt (2101) claimed that people learn those things that they pay attention to and they do not learn much about things that they do not attend to. Attention plays a crucial role in the process of learning second/foreign language (Gass, Svetics, & Lemelin, 2113). Drawing learner's attention could be done in a variety of ways including input enhancement; as a way for attracting learners' attention to grammatical points. This can be a justification for the present findings in this study.

Although today most of the teachers try to use new technologies, especially mobile applications, in their L2 classrooms, it seems that the implementation of such technologies has been overlooked in Iran. Therefore, an was made in this study to investigate one of such mobile applications (i.e., Telegram) on Iranian EFL learners' learning of English grammar; more specifically, accurate use of English articles after receiving textual enhancement was shown to be a more effective way of teaching articles online in comparison with metalinguistic explanations. Materials developers and language teachers are encouraged to benefit more from such techniques as input enhancement even in online teaching.

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