

Effects of Textual Enhancement on ESL Students' Learning of English Passive Voice

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated to what extent textual enhancement is effective on learning of passive voice in English as a second language among 43 level 3 and level 4 intermediate students in the Program of Intensive English at a university in Arizona. A pretest was given to the participants to make sure their language proficiency is comparable. An experimental reading comprehension task was used as the treatment, with the experimental group reading the enhanced text and the control group reading the unenhanced version. A posttest that included a grammaticality judgment task and a sentence correction task was administered immediately after the treatment to examine the effect of textual enhancement on the learning of passive voice. The results showed no significant difference between the control group and the experimental group, suggesting that no effect of textual enhancement was found on the learning of passive voice in English as a second language.

*Keywords:* ESL, input enhancement, passive voice

## Background

The effect of written input enhancement (also known as visual input enhancement/VIE or textual enhancement/TE) could have an effect on ESL students' learning of English passive voice. VIE's main characteristics is to enhance the saliency for targeted forms in the input by employing enhancement techniques with typographical cues- underlining, **bolding**, *italicization*, CAPITALIZATION, shading, or other strategies such as color coding or using different font sizes or types. According to Schmidt (1994a,b, 1995, 2001), Sharwood Smith (1981, 1991, 1993) and VanPatten (1996), when made more salient, target linguistic features are more likely to be noticed by language learners and as a consequence, become intake. Following Leow (1993), intake is defined as "an intermediate process between the exposure to input and actual language acquisition... that part of input that has been attended to by second language learners while processing the input" (p. 334). In other words, VIE is hypothesized to implicitly draw learners' attention to highlighted forms, and thus facilitating further processing (noticing) of the attended forms.

## Research Question

To what extent is textual enhancement effective on ESL students' learning of English passive voice?

## Methods

### Participants

A total of forty-three subjects from a mixture of Level 3 and Level 4 reading and writing classes in the Program of Intensive English at Northern Arizona University were selected to participate in the study. Subjects were speakers of other languages (Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, Korean and Bengali) who are learning English as a second language for college study in the

United States. There were 33 males and 10 females. Their average age is 21. They have not been taught to the target linguistic feature of this study—passive voice in class by the time this study was conducted. Subjects were assigned at random to two groups: EG with exposure to capitalized texts, and CG with exposure to unenhanced texts.

### **Materials**

In order to address the research question, the following materials were used: (a) a language background questionnaire to obtain information about participants' first language and how long have they been learning English, (b) a pretest and a posttest, both of which include a grammaticality judgment test and a sentence correction test, and an experimental task consisting of two versions of a written text of which one contained TE.

### **Analysis**

In order to answer my research question, an independent t-test was conducted on the data to determine whether TE has an effect on the learning of passive voice. The students' scores on the pretests and posttests of the GJT and SC were compared by an individual t-test to determine the significance of the difference in their performance before and after the treatments. All statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS ver. 10.0, with the level of significance set at 0.05.

## **Results**

### **Grammaticality Judgment Task**

There was no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest for GJT in both EG and CG. However, GJT gains were strongly correlated with the comprehension scores ( $r=0.441$ ). This might indicate that both groups noticed the passive voice that repeatedly appeared in the reading comprehension text, which directed their attention to the same language

feature in GJT posttest. Moreover, more constrained measures usually find larger effects (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Cohan's *D* (1988) CG-EG *d* effect sizes showing the standardized mean difference between enhanced group and unenhanced group performance were also calculated, with  $d = -0.327$ .

### **Sentence Correction Task**

The mean of SC went down for both groups in the posttest. Paired *t*-tests were conducted to determine the statistical significance of the students' score changes from the pretest to the posttest. There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest for SC in both EG and CG. Unlike GJT gains, SC gains were not strongly correlated with the comprehension scores ( $r = 0.145$ ). Again Cohan's *D* CG-EG *d* effect sizes were calculated, with  $d = -0.052$ .

### **Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning**

One factor that needs to be looked into is the relationship between TE and learners' prior knowledge of the target language feature. According to Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993), TE is more an implicit than an explicit attention-focusing device. As such, its underlying purpose may not always be transparent, even to learners with some prior knowledge of the target form. Several participants in the present study reported that they were not certain about the purpose of the enhanced forms, and all the participants have never been taught passive voice in class. For learners with little prior knowledge of the target form, TE could be even more confusing. Therefore, the fact that TE alone may fail to have a noticeable impact on learners' comprehension and intake might be due to the learners having no prior knowledge of the target form. Future investigation should be designed to address the interplay between learners' prior knowledge and the nature of target forms, so as to gain answers to the question of appropriate knowledge prior to IE interventions.

Although the result did not show a significant effect of TE on learning of passive voice, offers valuable information. Teachers, in second language classrooms, commonly use TE to enhance certain aspects of the language they are teaching in order to have their students pay attention to either main ideas or linguistic features. Whether to include TE use in pedagogical materials is usually based on students' language proficiency, target language feature, and even personal preference. However, it appears from the present study that whether to use TE should not be randomly decided, especially when many students reported that they were confused by the enhanced text. Therefore, I hope the present study sheds some light on TE as a way to draw L2 learners' attention to form and that longitudinal studies with larger samples will be conducted in the future before a generalization (with different group and different language) could be made.

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