

# The role of proactive focus on form teaching technique on teaching English prepositions

Intesar Othman Elwerfalli\*, Youssif Zagwani Omar and Nora Saad Alarefi  
University of Benghazi, Libya  
et\_1878@yahoo.com

Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in), [www.isca.me](http://www.isca.me)  
Received 9<sup>th</sup> February 2019, revised 8<sup>th</sup> August 2019, accepted 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019

## Abstract

*The effect of explicit and implicit teaching strategies on different areas of grammar have been examined by several studies. There were different findings and opinions about their effect on teaching learners of English as a second language. This study is an attempt to test two teaching strategies, namely, input flood and deductive teaching, to find out which one has the most influence on learning English prepositions. The study was conducted on 40 female third-year high school students in Benghazi. They were divided into two classes: 20 students in each. One class received deductive teaching strategy (Control Group), and the other class received input flood teaching strategy (experimental group). The results showed that although both groups developed from pre-test to post-test 1, the improvement of the experimental group in post-test 2 remained one month after the treatment was conducted.*

**Keywords:** Focus on form teaching, explicit/implicit teaching strategies, input flooding, deductive teaching, English prepositions.

## Introduction

A number of grammar instruction strategies and techniques are presented in the literature in order to improve learners' productive and receptive English skills. Yet, the existing problem of teaching grammar is whether to teach it explicitly or implicitly. That is, to teach grammatical rules as a separate skill or to be indirectly incorporated with other language skills. As teaching grammar at high school in Libya is based on explicit teaching strategy (deductive teaching), this study attempts to test an implicit teaching technique to show its effectiveness both on short and long periods of time.

**Literature review:** Many researchers and studies have emphasized the importance of teaching grammar as an essential element for learning any language. That is because grammar "generates an infinite set of 'structural descriptions,' each structural description being an abstract object of some sort that determines a particular sound, a particular meaning, and whatever formal properties and configurations serve to mediate the relation between sound and meaning"<sup>1</sup>. Grammar is core in any language as it indicates the meaning of a sentence structure in various contextual situations. Grammar is used as a set of forms and structures to give both shape and function of language.

Grammar, according to Crystal is "the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves. The more we understand how it works, the more we can watch the effectiveness of the way we and others use language"<sup>2</sup>. Grammar, moreover, is a branch of linguistic science that is mainly concerned with the description

and analysis of words separately (morphology) and how these words function in formal language structures of sentences (syntax).

**Focus on Form:** To show the importance of grammar to language, Omar emphasizes that "language as a system of symbols includes sounds (phonology) and syntactic structures (grammar) for communication with people, who use the same vocal symbols in forms of speech and syntactic structures in forms of sentences"<sup>3</sup>. This indicates that teaching grammar is essential in foreign language learning. Goodman defines grammar as "the system of language. It includes the limited number of rules necessary to produce an almost infinite number of utterances that will be understood by speakers of a specific language"<sup>4</sup>.

House and Harman believe that "since grammar is a science, it must describe and analyse the basic facts of speech, and explain and interpret the laws governing the behaviour of language"<sup>5</sup>. Chomsky shows the importance of teaching grammar as grammar "is a system of many hundreds of rules of several different types, organized in accordance with certain fixed principles of ordering and applicability and containing a certain fixed substructures which, along with the general principles of organization, is common to all languages"<sup>6</sup>.

However, the ongoing debate is about how to teach grammar. Some scholars prefer explicit teaching strategies while others believe that grammar should be taught implicitly combined with other language skills. In other words, the focus on teaching grammar to be either proactive or reactive. The former entails

the selection in advance of an aspect of language on which to focus; whereas, the latter requires the instructor to note and be ready to solve learning problems as they arise.

Generally speaking, proactive focus on form (or pre-emptive focus on form) requires a teacher or a student to set up explicit attention to a linguistic form in order to avoid an erroneous form to arise. The reactive focus on form takes place when a student has said something erroneous and the instructor or another student reacts to this error and corrects it<sup>7</sup>. Baleghizadeh has distinguished the difference between these two types of focus on form as: "Reactive focus on form addresses errors (i.e. performance problems) which have emerged in the context of meaningful communication. Pre-emptive focus on form, on the contrary, addresses problems which are predicted to occur and thus block communication"<sup>8</sup>.

For the purpose of this study, only proactive (pre-emptive) focus on form is discussed as it is to be adopted for the teaching of third year high-school students in Benghazi. It is one of the implicit focus on form techniques used in teaching. It takes place in instructional tasks that do not offer specific direction on what to learn from the task. This means that an instructor teaches some language skills using indirect teaching techniques. Moreover, teachers provide examples or explanations of language components without a direct and explicit declaration on what is to be learned.

Izumi believes that when applying an implicit focus on form technique in a class, natural communication is not usually broken up, and the targeted forms are less likely to be noticed by learners<sup>9</sup>. In line with Izumi, Ellis emphasizes that implicit teaching is a kind of teaching where teachers do not outline learning goals or make explanations overtly, but rather simply they present the information or problem to learners and allow them to make their own conclusions<sup>10</sup>.

Ling defines implicit instruction as: The teaching methods emphasizing students must be naturally acquired through situational scene when learning grammar. Implicit grammar teaching is also known as suggestive method, mainly adopting the inductive thinking method, and inducing the grammar rules through communicative use of the language. Learners contact with English mainly through scenes. This teaching method makes communicative teaching method as representation, emphasizing the unconsciousness, abstractness, and automaticity of grammar study<sup>11</sup>.

Similarly, Norris and Ortega state that implicit instruction is "neither rule presentation nor directions to attend to particular forms were part of treatment"<sup>12</sup>. The teacher's role in implicit instruction has, then, been shifted to be a facilitator, rather than a guide or an expert in the classroom. In other words, the teacher's role is not to teach, but to provide the rich context to students in classroom, so that they have a large number of activities in the classroom to read, write, listen, and speak in the target language. In this situation, the classroom shifts into a whole language (WL) classroom.

In this regard, Omar emphasizes that "it is crucial that in the WL classroom, teachers have good relationships with learners. The teacher's role in the WL classroom is not to teach, but it is to facilitate the process of learning and help learners acquire new knowledge"<sup>13</sup>.

Furthermore, Izumi has provided certain techniques that are utilised to attain implicit focus on form. Some of these techniques are *input flood*, *input enhancement*, *task-essential language*, and *recast*. In this study, only input flood teaching technique is utilized.

In its wider sense, input flooding is a method whereby input is enhanced to cover a plenty of occurrences of the target form. Wong sees that in input flood, the input learners receive is saturated with the form that we hope learners will notice and possibly acquire. We don't usually highlight the form in any way to draw attention to it nor do we tell learners to pay attention to the form<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, Han, Park, and Combs believe that input flooding strategy makes a target language form salient through artificially planned recurrence<sup>15</sup>. A number of studies supported input flooding strategy. For example, the study of Van Patten, Williams, and Rott which has shown that reiteration is a vital factor in achieving language proficiency<sup>16</sup>.

Another type of instruction is deductive teaching. It is a kind of explicit teaching. It is a policy aims to supply students with structural rules, describe how to form new structures, what their components are. In this strategy, information is presented by the teacher (teacher-centred). That is, a teacher is required to provide grammatical forms followed by instances, and then the students practice these forms. It is based on the idea that optimal learning is achieved through the presentation of linguistic patterns. Teachers present a grammatical rule, describe it and then provide examples, which are followed by exercises on the subject of the linguistic rule. Instructors may provide chances for exercise and feedback in order for a concept to be mastered. This kind of teaching offers a rich clarification of linguistic rules; it is a direct technique and may assist in facilitating learning tasks and make them less intimidating.

A considerable number of studies such as Fey and Finestack<sup>17</sup> and Tezi<sup>18</sup> have examined the effects of deductive teaching and input flood on learning grammar. The results reveal that deductive teaching is more suitable and effective in teaching grammar as it assists mastering language elements speedily. However, the studies of Trahey and White<sup>19</sup> and Bouffard<sup>20</sup> showed that input flood teaching was more effective on teaching grammar.

In general, some studies praised deductive teaching and input flooding teaching strategies whereas others criticised them. In spite of the criticism of these two varieties of teaching, this

study has adopted them in order to figure out which one is more effective in teaching English prepositions.

**English Prepositions:** Various researchers in the literature agree that prepositions are difficult to learn because they have different meanings in other languages. According to Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, a preposition is a word that is used before nouns, noun phrases, or pronouns, to connect it to another word. Prepositions, also, show a connection in space or time or a logical relationship between two or more individuals, places or things.

With respect to form, Ballard states that English prepositions comprise two types: single-word preposition and multi-word preposition<sup>21</sup>. The first type includes only one word such as *on, in, at, for, with,* and others; whereas, the second type consists of two or three words such as *according to, on behalf of, in front of,* and the others. Fang states that prepositions can connect a noun to another noun, a noun to an adjective, or a verb to a noun<sup>22</sup>. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartik<sup>23</sup>, classify prepositions as:

**Table-1:** Classification of English prepositions according to Quirk et.al.

Space Position and direction (specify the direction of an entity relative to a referent) (i) Static position (to, from, at, on, out of) (ii) Movement in a direction (towards - into - away). Relative preposition (opposite, above and below, between). Passage (behind, through, across).
Time Time position (at, in, on). Time duration (from ... to, between, during).
Cause and purpose (because of, on account of, for)
From means to stimulus (by, with, without)
Accompaniment (with, unlike)
Concession It can be expressed with different degree of formality by prepositions (in spite of, for all). Prepositions for exception (except for).

**Methodology**

In this study the researchers conducted Quantitative Research Method, in which they based on getting results statistically, using a quasi-experimental research design, in which the researchers presented pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2 among two different groups (Control Group and Experimental Group) in order to remark the differences and effects of teaching prepositions.

**Problem of the study:** Studies and research reveal that most Libyan students encounter challenges regarding using English prepositions in both oral and written contexts. Based to these research and studies and their own noticing, the researchers see that most Libyan learners of English encounter challenges in

using English preposition system. Most Libyan learners of English confuse using preposition system when they speak or write in English.

**Objectives of the Study:** The key objective of this study was to explore the challenges Libyan learners of English encounter regarding preposition system in English. Thus, the study focuses mostly on carrying out a detailed investigation about some facts related to English preposition system, through literature review and having pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2 on two groups of Libyan students.

**Participants of the Study:** The participants in this study are third year high-school students in Benghazi. There are 40 female participants. The researchers equally divided the participants into two classes, in which each class contained 20 students. The students’ age ranged from 17 to 18 years old. The participants’ English level is acceptable as they studied English in the preparatory and secondary stages. The participants have almost the same background as they speak Arabic as their first language and had been learning English for six years joining two to three sessions per week on average.

**Instrument:** The present study employed a quasi-experimental research design with pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2. The pre-test was presented one day before the procedure. At the end of the week, post-test 1 was held. That is, at the end of the last treatment session, the immediate post-test 1 was administered to the participants in the two groups in order to assess short-term effects of the treatments. Then, after one month, post-test 2 was given to recognise long time effect. The type of task used to collect data is Multiple Choice Questions. It is used to figure out which teaching strategy is more effective in teaching prepositions to Libyan learners of English.

**Procedures and Data Collection:** The participants were divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. Each class contained 20 students. One group (control group) received deductive teaching, and the other group (experimental group) received input flooding teaching. The treatment was conducted for three classes that lasted for 180 minutes. Both procedures were conducted by the researchers.

**The Control Group (CG):** The participants in the deductive teaching group were provided three handouts containing explanations and exercises about prepositions. The lessons were instructed in accordance with the book *Prepositions the Ultimate Book*. Class instruction was given only in English. Arabic was not used. The tasks used in this group were varied. This group had different kinds of exercises such as multiple choice questions and fill in the blanks. The instruction of this group was as follows:

A handout of each lesson regarding prepositions was distributed to every student. Systematic preposition teaching was provided to this group during the one-week treatment. The course concentrated on the uses of English prepositions.

**The Experimental Group (EG):** The participants in the experimental group, however; were instructed using an implicit teaching technique (i.e. focus on form). It was input flooding. With this group, the original texts selected for the study were modified in a way that they contained more examples of the target structures. It was exposed to numerous occurrences of prepositions both oral and written, and made some form focused activities. The instruction of this group was as follows:

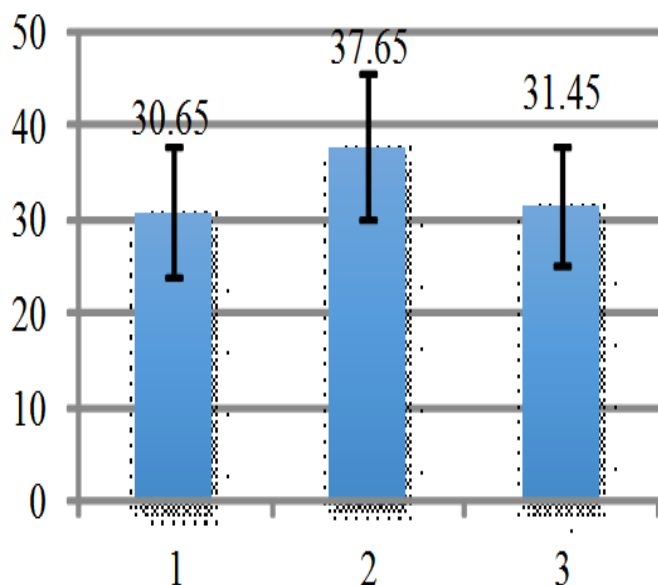
Authentic texts (a set of materials containing different uses of prepositions) were adapted from *English- Online* website. In every class, the participants were given the texts along with reading activities to complete. There were six texts with their exercises for three lessons (two texts in every class). These texts were handed out to the learners during each lesson.

**Results and discussion**

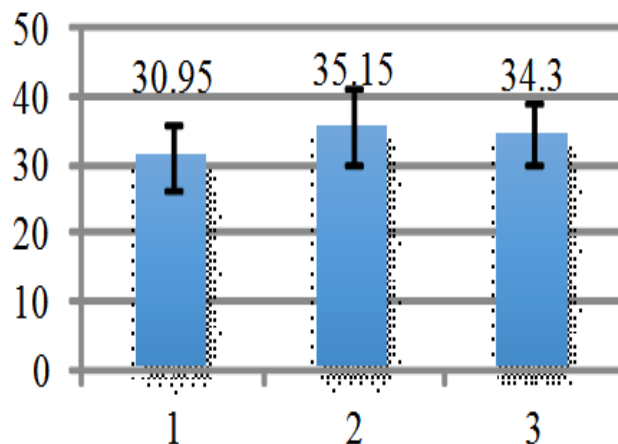
**Descriptive statistics:** The data revealed that the level of students in the pre-test was very close. In post-test 1 the control group outperformed the experimental group. In post-test 2, which was conducted one month after the teaching course, the experimental group showed better results than the control group.

**Table-2:** Descriptive statistics of the results of pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2

Test	Pre-test		Post-test 1		Post-test 2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
CG (n= 15)	30.65	6.861	37.65	7.631	31.45	6.278
EG (n=15)	30.95	4.751	35.15	5.622	34.3	4.589



**Figure-1:** Mean results of the control group.



**Figure-2:** Mean results of the experimental group.

In other words, the results of this study showed that there were no differences before the treatment was conducted. The data revealed that in post-test 1, the results in both groups were better than the results of pre-test. The case with post-test 2 is different as although both groups improved in post-test 2, the improvement of group EG was better.

Before conducting the treatment, a pre-test was done in order to figure out whether there are any differences among the subjects. The ANOVA results revealed that the scores did not differ significantly:  $F(11, 8) = 1.493, p=.291$ . The results of post-test 1 showed that there are no differences between the two groups:  $F(9, 10) = 1.001, p=.495$ .

**Independent Sample T-Test Results:** This test was used to compare the scores of pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2 between the two groups. The results showed that there were not any significant differences in the marks for pre-test:  $t(38) = .161, p=.412$ . However, the findings showed that significant differences were found between the two groups in post-test 1:  $t(38) = -11.180, p<0.001$  and post-test 2:  $t(38) = -11.286, p<0.001$ .

**Paired Sample T-Test Analysis:** In order to compare pre-test with post-test 1 and pre-test with post-test 2 for every group, a paired sample t-test was conducted. The results of group CG showed a significant development in the participants' performance from pre-test to post-test 1:  $t(19) = -8.808, p<.001$ . However, the results did not show any significant difference from pre-test to post-test 2 were found:  $t(19) = 1.414, p=.173$ . This result reveals that the performance of this group continued unchanged after 1 month of instruction.

With respect to group EG, the performance of this group showed significant differences from pre-test to post-test 1:  $t(19) = -4.284, p<.001$  as well as from pre-test to post-test 2:  $t(19) = -13.975, p<.001$ . This result means that the performance of this group developed after the treatment and remained 1 month after teaching.

## Conclusion

Based to the literature review and data statistics, it has been clear that although both teaching strategies have proven effective and improved learners' performances, the input flood teaching strategy has improved learners' language levels and remained one month after the treatment was conducted. Moreover, the group which received input flood teaching strategy gained more vocabulary and improved their reading and speaking skills.

The results of this study are in line with those of Trahey and White; Elwerfally<sup>24</sup>; and Arani and Yazdanimoghaddam<sup>25</sup> which have shown that input flood teaching strategy is effective and can assist students to learn more effectively and result in better learning of structures.

## References

1. Chomsky N. (2006). *Language and mind* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Machin L., Hindmarch D., Murray S. and Richardson T. (2013). *A complete guide to the level 4 certificate in education and training*. England: Critical Publishing Ltd.
3. Omar Y.Z. (2018). Syntactic theory perception on language acquisition. *Journal of Faculty of Arts*, 42, 378-391.
4. Goodman K. (1986). *What's whole in whole language?*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.
5. House C.H. and Harman S.E. (1982). *Descriptive English grammar* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). USA: Prentice-Hall, INC.
6. Chomsky N. (2006). *Language and mind* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Kamiya N. (2012). Proactive and reactive focus on form and gestures in EFL classrooms in Japan. *System*, 40, 386-397.
8. Baleghizadeh S. (2010). Focus on form in an EFL classroom. *Native Royal Journal*, Retrieved on Sep. 15, 2018 from <http://www.novitasroyal.org>.
9. Hanaoka O. and Izumi S. (2012). Noticing and uptake: Addressing pre-articulated covert problems in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21(4), 332-347.
10. Ellis R. (2009). Corrective feedback and teacher development. *L2 Journal*, 1(1)
11. Ling Z. (2015). Explicit Grammar and Implicit Grammar Teaching for English Major Students in University. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 12(8), 556-560.
12. Norris J.M. and Ortega L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50(3), 417-528.
13. Omar Y. (2012). Synthesis of whole language and learning English as a foreign language. *Missouri Bulletin English*. 1.
14. Wong W. (2004). Processing instruction in French: The roles of explicit information and structured input. *Processing instruction: Theory, research, and commentary*, 187-205.
15. Han Z., Park E.S. and Combs C. (2008). Textual enhancement of input: issues and possibilities. *Applied Linguistics*, 29(4), 597-618.
16. Van Patten B., Williams J. and Rott S. (2004). Form-meaning connections in second language acquisition. In B. Van Patten, J. Williams, S. Rott, & M. Overstreet (Eds.), *Form-meaning connections in second language acquisition*, 1-26. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
17. Fey M.E. and Finestack L.H. (2009). Research and development in children's language intervention: A 5-phase model. In R. G. Schwartz (Ed.), *Handbook of child language disorders*, New York: Psychology Press, 513-531.
18. Tezi Y.L. (2014). Using inductive and deductive methods in teaching grammar to adult learners of English. Unpublished MA Thesis. University of Ataturk.
19. Trahey M. and White L. (1993). Positive evidence and pre-emption in the second language Classroom. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 15(2), 181-204.
20. Bouffard P. (2015). The effect of input flooding and explicit instruction on learning adverb placement in L3 French. *The Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 18(2), 1-27.
21. Ballard B. (2013). *The frameworks of English: Introducing language structures*. USA: Palgrave Macmillan.
22. Fang A.C. (2000). A lexicalist approach towards the automatic determination for the syntactic functions of prepositional phrases. *Natural Language Engineering*, 6(2), 183-201.
23. Quirk R., Greenbaum S., Leech G. and Svartik J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.
24. Elwerfally I. (2013). The acquisition of the English article system by Libyan learners of English: A comparison between deductive teaching and textual enhanced input strategies. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Northumbria University, Newcastle.
25. Arani S. and Yazdanimoghaddam M. (2016). The impact of input flooding and textual enhancement on Iranian EFL learners' syntactic development. *Teachers College, Columbia University Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics*, 16(1), 25-37.