

Effects of Review Activities on EFL Learning

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The utmost goal of foreign language instruction is aimed at helping the learner master the language. At the same time the learner shall become equipped with linguistic, pragmatic and social-linguistic competence. This study was done to explore if review activities in EFL classes should be mandatory for learners to learn the new knowledge. One hundred and fifty non-English majors participated in this study. They were divided into three groups, two as experimental groups and one as the control group. Group A received written review treatments whereas Group B received oral review treatments once every three weeks. Group C, the control group, did not receive any review activities. All the participants received a pre-test and a post-test. The results showed that the participants in Group A (written review) and Group B (oral review), performed substantially better than those of the control group. A significant difference in gained scores was found between the control group and the experimental groups, indicating that providing review opportunities is both necessary and helpful for enhancing the learning outcomes. No significant difference was found in review types; both oral and written review methods contributed similarly to the retention of new knowledge. Drawing on the findings, some pedagogical suggestions were made.

Key words: review activities, linguistic competence, learning outcome

1 Introduction

Foreign language instruction is directed at helping students gain linguistic competence in terms of phonology, vocabulary, syntax, and functions of the target language, and above all, pragmatic and socio-linguistic competence which is the use of the new knowledge in real-world communication (Hughes, 2003). However, in many foreign language learning settings, the target language is unfortunately not widely used in the community where the learning takes place. Foreign language learners receive instruction and are given opportunities to practice only in the classroom. Usually classroom instruction focuses on the forms and structures of the language within the context of communicative interaction. Indisputably, instruction is a series of

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cooperative activities between teachers and students (Yu, 2002). Teacher-student interaction promotes the acquisition and internalization of new language forms that are characteristic of EFL learning activities. However, language learning is affected by many factors. Among these are the personal characteristics of the learners, the structure of their native and their target languages, the opportunities for interaction with speakers of the target language and access to correction and form-focused instruction. When the class size is large and the instructional time is limited, the chances for students to interact with teachers diminish proportionally. Contradictions between learning outcome and instructional time, class size and cost always exist in many EFL teaching situations. Due to time and cost constraints, it is rather hard to change the present teaching situation. As suggested by Marsh, Waters, & Mann (2002), a win-win problem solving strategy that teachers could adopt in the process of teaching is to develop instructional procedures for improving students' comprehension and memory and at the same time create positive pedagogical environments. In other words, teachers should provide as many alternatives as reasonably possible to help students internalize the language and then use it automatically.

What foreign/second language teachers should do is to use a wide range of teaching resources in an appropriate way and offer as many in-class activities as feasibly possible to help students master the target language. To put it another way, teachers must make professional decisions to ensure that learning takes place effectively and are expected to take control of the teaching processes in their classrooms (Nunan & Lamb, 1996). Learners seem to learn what has been taught. But it is not certain that they learn everything that they are taught. Even though something is taught or made available for them to absorb, it does not mean that the learners will digest it right away. This is especially true for under-motivated non-English majors who study English as a subject instead of a language. They have not had a chance to use English for real-life communication; how can they progress to a level deeper than what has been presented to them? Fortunately, research has also shown that motivated learners can, through their own thinking and learning, progress to a level deeper than what has been presented to them. They are able to use their own internal learning mechanisms to discover many of the complex rules and relationships that underlie the language they wish to learn. Learners, in this sense, may be able to advance much beyond what they have been taught. Obviously and indisputably, learners can gradually adjust their learning methods to become efficient and autonomous learners with clear guidance from the teacher. Therefore, what in-class activities should teachers provide to help students master the target language? Drawing on Output Hypothesis (Swain & Lapkin, 1995), Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), and Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001), the researchers attempt to investigate if it is mandatory to provide in-class review activities, either in written or spoken form, to promote learner's learning

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outcome.

2 Literature Review

Central to learning is the ability to relate the newly acquired information to prior knowledge. The key to learning a foreign or second language in the preliminary stages is for the learner to form his own internal learning mechanisms to accumulate linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the target language. In other words, material processed in specific episodes can, over a period of learning, become conceptual knowledge rather than isolated memory episodes. Conway, Cohen, & Stanhope (1991) suggest that in the early stages of learning, knowledge be more likely to be retained in episodic form which students are able to “remember” specifically. As learning progresses, these memories shift from being episodic to being more conceptual, highly familiar and generalized knowledge which students tend to simply “know”. This shift is called “schematization” and is not a sudden or one-time phenomenon. Schematization, in fact, requires a lot of mental processing activity on the part of the learners.

Gass (1997) proposed a general learning model that captures the overall process of how learners derive their L2 grammatical knowledge. Her model provides a detailed description of each component stage and depicts the interrelated and dynamic processes of language acquisition. The model proposes five stages during the learners’ conversion of input to output. Using Gass’s (1997) own terminology, they are apperceived input, comprehended input, intake, integration, and output. According to Gass (1997), comprehension is different from intake. Learners perceive the ambient input in the light of their past experiences and currently held knowledge. Not all input is automatically used for comprehension. Learners selectively choose chunks of information in order to comprehend the perceived input. Comprehension can be achieved by merely analyzing the semantic components while intake requires the analysis of syntactical structures. The conversion of input into intake depends on the amount of comprehended input at the linguistic level. That is, syntactical analysis contributes more to converting input to intake than the analysis of semantic components does. If input becomes intake, the intake data may be used to form a new inter-language hypothesis which is subject to testing upon further exposure to input. If the input data confirms an existing hypothesis, it will facilitate the integration of the new linguistic knowledge into the new foreign/second language learning system that the learners are progressively developing. If not, learners will reject or modify the hypothesis they have earlier formulated. This creates a feedback loop from the learner’s output to the intake component, where Gass considers that hypothesis formation and testing take place. The output component is also related to the levels of analysis made at

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the stage of comprehended input (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Learners can rely on external cues and their general knowledge for comprehension but they need greater syntactic processing in language production. This language production, the goal of L2 instruction, is seen as an important practice to move the learners from the comprehended input stage to the intake stage. Intake is often used for further processing in learning. Through the process of hypothesis formation, testing, modification, confirmation and rejection, the intake may subsequently be integrated into the learners' developing foreign language learning system and eventually become their internal target language learning mechanism. Finally, learners selectively use their developing system in their output.

Swain & Lapkin (1995) also depicts the interrelated and dynamic processes of language acquisition, converting input into output. They propose that output has the effect of making the learners more alert to the language. The function of output is directly related to Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001), stressing the importance of language awareness and language restructuring. As proposed by several researchers (Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Littlewood, 2004; Long, 1991), classroom instruction, usually form-focused, aims at developing learners' fluency and accuracy. During primarily communicative tasks, before learners learn to connect grammatical form to meaning, they first learn to notice the linguistic features of the input. In the course of interaction, they learn to identify the differences between the input and their own output in terms of language forms. To summarize, without learner's noticing the gap between their interlanguage and the target language, instruction does not guarantee the development of quality language ability for the learners. Long's interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996) proposes that second language learning is facilitated through interactional processes because the role of interaction is to connect 'input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways' (Long, 1996: 451-2). Providing review opportunities guarantee chances for the teacher-student interaction. It can supply corrective feedback and modified output, which has also been claimed by Swain (2005) to be helpful in language learning. Studies have also found a positive relationship between various types of feedback and L2 production and learning (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Mackey, 2006). In other words, through practice learners convert the noticed items into acquired items and restructure them in oral or written tasks they use them productively.

According to Ellis (1997), in the early stages of L2 development, ideas are separate units and the only link between them is their common reference to a given topic. The result of restructuring is often reflected in what is known as U-shaped behavior (Gas & Selinker, 2001). U-shaped behavior refers to three stages of linguistic use. Error frequency follows a low-high-low pattern as development takes place. In the earliest stage, a learner produces some linguistic forms that conform to target-like norms (i.e.,

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is error-free). At Stage 2, a learner appears to lose what was known at Stage 1. The linguistic behavior at Stage 2 deviates from his native language form. Stage 3 looks just like Stage 1 in that there is again correct target language usage (Ellis, 1990; Gass & Selinker, 2001). Such phenomena can be explained by the statement proposed by Clark and Clark (1977) : exact wordings are only stored for very short periods of time and unless actively rehearsed, are lost very quickly. Schematization of knowledge occurs when learners are required to think about the material at a deeper level in terms of how concepts inter-relate (Herbert & Burt, 2003). Ding (2007) interviewed three university English majors who had won prizes in nationwide English speaking competitions and debate tournaments in China. The interviewees regarded text memorization and imitation as the most effective methods of learning English. Seong (2009) found in her study that repetition and imitation are effective strategies to notice the linguistic features of the target language.

As discussed above, the output process is seen as a product of acquisition and represents an active component in the overall acquisition processes. What could teachers do to help learners produce quality target language? In order to answer this question, we need to address how languages are being learnt, internalized, restructured, and produced. It is generally believed that the more the new knowledge is schematized, the better the output results. Therefore, learners need to review the newly absorbed knowledge so as to convert it into generalized conceptual knowledge. Providing review opportunities after oral classroom instruction can be one good way to improve learners' noticing, memory, and production. This study was done to investigate the effects of different review opportunities in EFL classes on the schematization of knowledge. Two kinds of activities were used to review what students had learnt: oral activities and written activities. The following questions were addressed:

- (1) Did the two types of review opportunities promote students' memory and output of the target language?
- (2) Which review activities, written or oral, contribute to the excessive acquisition of new knowledge?
- (3) What were participants' perceptions on the provision of review opportunities after oral teaching?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

There were initially 150 technical college students who participated in this

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study, but 23 of them did not complete the treatment procedures and were regarded as invalid outcomes. Only 127 participants were taken into account. Their average age was 19.2 years. All of them had 8.1 years of learning English as a foreign language at school in Taiwan. None of them had been to English speaking countries. By the time this study was done, they received two-period English instruction per week.

3.2 Instrument

Three contextualized dialogues focusing on listening comprehension and three short stories aiming at reading comprehension were utilized as teaching materials. A criterion-referenced test based on the teaching materials and a post-exercise survey was utilized to gather data for the investigation. In order to investigate participants' previous knowledge prior to the treatment and the gained score after the treatment, the pretest and the posttest are exactly the same. Cheng's study (2004) found that students performed differently in different test formats. They performed substantially better in a multiple-choice test than an open-ended test. However, the advantage of open-ended question, the free response item, is that it is less a test of rote learning. There are no prompts from distractors. The test-takers must understand the content and think up the answer for themselves. It is a test of both comprehension and writing skills. Seong's study (2009) found that translating into English was perceived as an effective way for learners to notice the linguistic features. Drawing on the research results of Cheng (2004) and Seong (2009), to effectively assess participants' learning outcome, the criterion-referenced test included multiple-choice items, open-ended items and sentences to be translated. The test items, derived from the teaching materials, aimed at evaluating participants' reading or listening comprehension (main idea, detail, or inference), vocabulary and syntactical structures (see Appendix A). The test items were pilot-studied by a group of 50 students with similar English proficiency as the participants. Each item was analyzed in terms of item difficulty and item discrimination. Two multiple-choice items and one open-ended item were revised after the pilot run.

3.3 Design

The participants were divided into three groups based on their academic majors (see Table 1). The homogeneity of variance assumption dictates that the language proficiency of groups first has to be homogeneous, otherwise the F-statistic is meaningless (Peers, 1996; Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991). The English score of the Joint Entrance Examination of Junior Colleges was used to investigate the homogeneity of the three groups. The results showed that the three groups in the study were indeed homogeneous in terms of English

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language ability ($df=2$, $F=0.000$, $p>0.05$).

Table 1. Availability of Review Opportunities for Each Group

Group	No. of Participants	Major	Number of Reviews	Review Type
A	43	Electronic Engineering	3 times once every 3 weeks	Written
B	43	Electrical Engineering B	3 times once every 3 weeks	Oral
C	41	Electrical Engineering A	None	None

The three groups received a pre-test at the beginning of the treatment and a post-test after completing the treatment. According to Wu and Lin (2001), the interval between each review cannot be too long or too short. If the interval is too close, the impression is still very clear and students might feel bored. If the interval is too long, the learners might forget most of what they had learned. Ideally, the time between each review ought to be about two or three weeks. In this study the purpose of providing review opportunities is to help students recall what they had learnt and gradually internalize it. Therefore, it was decided that Group A and B be given a review opportunity once every three weeks. However, the control Group C did not receive any review activities between the pre-test and the post-test.

3.4 Procedures

In the first week of the semester, all the subjects received a pre-test on what was about to be taught in the following weeks to see how much prior knowledge the subjects possessed before lecturing. In the second week, the participants were lectured three contextualized dialogues, and in the third week, three short stories. During the 100-minute instructional period, 15 minutes were spent on reviewing or previewing; the rest was spent on lecturing. While doing the review activities, 10 minutes were used to review what participants had learned before and the remaining 5 minutes on previewing the new material to be covered. It was suggested to the participants that they read the assigned reading before attending the class, highlight what they thought was important and new to them, write down unfamiliar words and look them up or take notes in either English or Chinese. During the two-hour class period, the instructor explained the content, the unfamiliar words and the important sentence structures.

Students were not given any indication, before or during the study, of the time and type of review activities they would encounter. Once every three weeks Group A received a written review and Group B received an oral review of what they had learnt. The review activities included multiple-choice questions, open-ended questions, and Chinese-English or English-

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Chinese translation. A total of three reviews were given to each of the two experimental groups. However, the control group did not receive any review activities. In the fourteenth week all the subjects took the post-test without prior notice.

The scores gained from the pre-test and post-test were calculated with SPSS X software package. A one-way ANOVA was used to examine whether review opportunities promoted subjects' memory and output. Furthermore, paired *t*-tests were used to analyze the results of a 'before' and 'after' treatment. That is, the question of whether there was an improvement in English scores which could be attributed to the effect of the treatment was investigated. Each participant's English ability was measured before commencement of the treatment and again measured after the treatment had been completed. Each participant, therefore, had paired English scores, one measured before the treatment and one after. The purpose of a repeated measures analysis using the paired *t*-test was to determine whether the average change in scores was greater than would be expected due to chance fluctuations alone. After the post-test all the subjects completed a post-exercise survey concerning their perceptions of the treatment.

3.5 Scoring

The researchers graded the pre-test and post-test papers independently. Inter-rater reliability on the pre-test was .91 and on the post-test, .93, and the responses on which the raters differed were discussed with a third English teacher and then a single rating was agreed upon by the three raters. Each multiple-choice item was worth two points, each open-ended question and translation question four points. The maximum total score was 100.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Statistical results and discussion

A one-way ANOVA analysis was applied to see whether a significant statistical difference was found in the pre-test and post-test scores among the three groups. The statistical result showed that no significant difference was found in the participants' performance in the pre-test at the critical value where $p=0.05$ ($F=1.316$, $df=2$, $p=0.272$), indicating that the three groups were homogeneous in terms of English ability before the treatment.

However, a significant statistical difference was found in the post-test scores among the three groups ($F=12.933$, $df=2$, $p=0.000$), indicating that the treatment did influence subjects' learning outcome.

Table 2 Scheffe Test on the Post-test Scores

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	Group A (71.23)	Group B (70.69)	Group C (54.29)
Group A (Written Review)	--	--	*
Group B (Oral Review)		--	*
Group C (No Review)			--

* $p < 0.05$

The Scheffe test (see Table 2) revealed that after the treatment there was a significant statistical difference between Group A and Group C as well as between Group B and Group C. These findings indicated that review opportunities, whether oral or written, did facilitate learner's memory and output. No significant difference was found between Group A and B, indicating participants in these two experimental groups performed similarly; however, each of these groups performed better than Group C. This difference could be a result of practice effects for Group A and B as the material taught was repeated once every three weeks for a total of three times before the post-test. On the contrary, Group C did not have any review opportunities.

Table 3 Posttest-pretest Paired *t*-tests for the Three Groups

Group	Mean		Gained Scores		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tail)
	Pretest	Posttest	Mean	SD			
A	48	71.23	23.67	22.71	6.837	42	.000***
B	54	70.69	16.95	18.49	5.869	42	.000***
C	49	54.29	4.83	21.42	1.425	40	.162

***: $p < 0.001$

Results of the paired *t*-tests (see Table 3) showed that the mean of gained scores in Group A is 23.67, the standard deviation of the differences is 22.71, and *t* is 6.837 which has an associated probability of .000. The gained scores between pre-test and post-test were statistically significant, indicating that learners in Group A truly progressed after the treatment. The mean of the gained scores in Group B is 16.95, the standard deviation of the differences is 18.49, and *t* is 5.869 which has an associated probability of .000. The gained mean in learners' scores was also statistically significant, signaling that learners in Group B definitely benefited from the treatment. However, for Group C, no significant difference was found between the learners' pre-test and post-test mean score ($p = .162$), indicating that learners in Group C did not improve their English ability to a significant level after oral teaching. It can be inferred that giving instruction with subsequent review activities is necessary in EFL classes.

To sum up, subjects receiving three review activities did perform better in the post achievement test, and it can be concluded that review

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opportunities did facilitate the subjects' memory and output. A possible explanation is that learners in the experimental group had chances at regular intervals, either in written or spoken form, to recall what had been taught, so new knowledge was less likely to be forgotten. It is likely that knowledge that had been reviewed several times could have been processed at a more profound level and then converted into intake and integrated into the learners' developing foreign/second language learning system. Therefore, learners could successfully retrieve the needed knowledge in their output, leading to a higher performance outcome. No significant difference was found in terms of review types, indicating that either written or oral review served the same purpose of promoting learning outcome. Research Question One and Two can be considered answered.

It was also found that the performance result of Group A showed evidence of U-shaped behavior. The average score of the first review test was 83; the second review test 63; the third test 62 and the post achievement test 71. A backsliding phenomenon, i.e. deviated output, was found in the second and third review tests. But in the post-achievement test, the members of this group tended to produce more target-like responses as they had in the first test.

4.2 Results of the post-exercise survey and discussion

The survey was administered right after the posttest in an attempt to investigate participants' perceptions of providing review activities after oral lecturing. Question 1 was "Do you think providing review activities in class after oral teaching help you remember what had been taught? Why?" All the participants stated that reviewing the learned material regularly would help them remember what had been taught better. Ninety-six percent of the participants admitted that they would not have reviewed the lesson on their own after instruction; therefore, the review opportunities helped them recall the newly acquired knowledge when they were about to forget. They further mentioned that they could remember the content better than the syntactic structures and vocabulary. In other words, they could remember the main idea of what was taught better than the linguistic components. To master the linguistic forms, they needed to practice several times. They agreed that they could learn better under a little pressure and believed that review opportunities if given would have promoted their learning outcome.

Question 2 was "Which review format do you think might help you remember the linguistic knowledge better?" Eighty-nine percent of the participants mentioned that they could perform better if the multiple-choice questions were used to evaluate their performance, because the multiple-choice answers provided some clues to the correct answer. As long as they remembered the content, they still could figure out the most appropriate or

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suitable answer. Guessing played a fairly important part in answering the multiple-choice questions. Ninety-seven percent of the surveyed admitted that open-ended questions and translation could accurately evaluate their linguistic knowledge and restructuring ability, which contributed more to fostering spoken and written skills.

Question 3 was “Why didn’t you perform substantially better in the post-test? If you think you did much better in the posttest, you are allowed to skip this question.” Sixty-two participants answered this question and stated that they could not remember very well what had been taught in class because the interval between instruction and post achievement test had been too long. They had only a vague idea about the content and they could not remember the detailed information, the syntactic structure or vocabulary, because they did not review what was taught immediately after class. Twenty-one out of the 62 responded participants said that their posttest performance would be much worse if the teacher had not provided review in class. Ten of them stated they felt bored and pressurized during the review sessions, because they did not have strong intention to master English. They just wanted to pass the course, because they did not think they would use English for communication in their future career. Even though they failed to perform well in the post test, they consented that review activities did help them.

To sum up, in a foreign language learning situation, where learners do not have a lot of opportunities to interact with the native speakers of the target language, they won’t feel the necessity of mastering the language. Classroom instruction becomes their main source of input. Converting input to output became the main concern of instruction. Providing review activities might be a good alternative to promote internalization of the target language.

5 Conclusion and Suggestion

This study has provided some relative answers to improving learning outcomes. The results revealed that reviewing what had been taught at regular intervals after instruction promoted learners’ performance and no matter what kinds of review, oral or written, contributed to the recall of information taught. No review activities available after the instruction led to poor retention of information taught. It was found that U-shaped learning behavior and practice effects did occur in the process of learning. Generally speaking, participants had positive attitudes toward review activities after oral teaching. The practical goal of this study is to investigate whether providing review opportunities in class is likely to enhance learning outcomes.

It is hoped that the results would provide a basis for teachers to design plausible and effective curriculum. Drawing on the results of this study, some

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pedagogical implications are proposed. First, it is necessary to provide review opportunities after lecturing. Teaching is the mutual cooperation and interaction between teachers and students. The amount of input that teachers provide is not equivalent to the amount of input that their students actually absorb if the students do not work hard to retain what they have been taught. Helping students retain what they have been taught is crucial to success in the learning process, and giving sufficient review opportunities contributes to the construction of generalized and familiar conceptual knowledge. Second, providing review opportunities in different formats avoids boredom and promotes some measure of success and motivation. Third, as U-shaped behavior suggests, reviewing the new information at least once is mandatory.

There was only one group of Chinese technical college students participating in this study. It should be noted that having review opportunities in class is not the only factor that leads to enhanced learning or retention of knowledge. The results presented in this paper cannot be taken as conclusive and definitely do not allow for generalization. This study should be repeated with other groups with different age, language proficiency, or language background to examine whether the conclusions are the same as those in this study.

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Appendix

A. Script of dialogue 1

Man: Oh, I see you've worked for a computer company.
Rebecca: Yes. I worked for Bull Information Systems in Boston.
Man: Could you tell me about your job there?
Rebecca: I supervised a small department. I looked after the day-to-day operations, quality control, that kind of thing.
Man: Mm-hm. We need someone with a background in data entry. You're familiar with all the various computer programs, correct?
Rebecca: Oh, I'm sorry. I don't really type that well. I didn't use the computers. I built them.
Man: I see, Miss Casey. Well, we're interviewing a lot of people...
Rebecca: Excuse me, I could learn very fast.
Man: Well, thank you anyway for coming in.

B. Review items

1. What job did Rebecca use to do?
2. Did Rebecca get the job after the interview? Why or why not?
3. When you look after a small department in a company, that means you s_____ it.
4. How do you say “品管” in English?
5. 你熟悉各種電腦程式嗎？
6. 我不會使用電腦但是我會組裝電腦。

C. Posttest items

1. (main idea) What was Rebecca doing? (A) Looking for a job (B) Arguing with the man (C) Giving the man directions (D) Finding a travel agency
2. (detail) If Rebecca wants to work for the man, what should she be familiar with?
(A) computer programs (B) quality control (C) the boss (D) operations
3. (inference) Did Rebecca get the job? Why or why not?
4. (vocabulary) Rebecca looked after the day-to-day operations; she s_____ them.
5. (structure) Rebecca 不熟悉電腦程式但是會組裝電腦。