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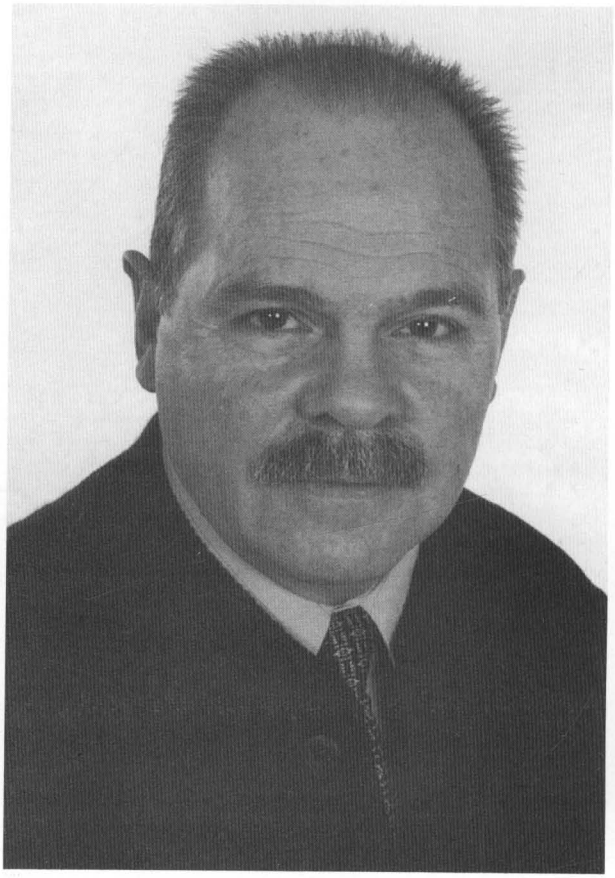

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THE ROLE OF FORMAL INSTRUCTION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

TERESA SIEK-PISKOZUB
Adam Mickiewicz University – Poznań

Introduction

The discovery of a natural order of first language acquisition was a breakthrough for SLA research (Brown 1973, de Villers and de Villers 1973). One of the powerful ideas to emerge from this discovery was that L2 acquisition proceeds in a regular and systematic fashion. A great number of FL teachers and researchers are nowadays intrigued by the question as to whether the learners do learn what they have been taught? The question is motivated by results of studies which indicate that second language learners develop their language in stages (Dulay and Burt 1974) and that they acquire some grammatical structures in sequences (see Milon 1974, Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991).[1]

Many of the studies devoted to developmental patterns were conducted in a naturalistic environment in which students are exposed to the target language almost permanently, like in L1 acquisition. Therefore, a question arises as to whether a similar order of acquisition can be observed when students acquire a target language in the foreign language classroom setting with minor exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Furthermore, another question arises as to whether formal instruction has any influence on the stages of language development and can alter them?

The results of research that has aimed to provide an answer to these questions are equivocal. There is little consensus among researchers. Felix (1981) stated that in general it is not possible to reverse the natural sequence of language development through external impact. Moreover, he also found some evidence to suggest that formal instruction can have a deleterious effect. This opinion is supported by Krashen (1985) who claims that instruction does not help and may even complicate the process of language acquisition. Others are of the opinion that explicit instruction and error correction 'can lead to (...) superficial changes' (Lightbown and Spada 1993:207) in the learners' language system. Still others

[1] For a review of results on developmental patterns see Ellis 1994:73-118.

claim that instruction, particularly in the foreign language classroom, has substantial positive effects on target language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991). VanPatten (1988) found evidence that a focus on form is useful to learning languages. Learners benefit from input enhancement.

Far more research is needed to give a definite answer. The two small-scale studies that are discussed here are an attempt to provide answers to questions as to whether focus on form and corrective feedback can alter the sequence of acquisition and what other possible influence it may have on acquisition. The studies concentrated on the acquisition of a specific grammatical structure, namely interrogatives. The choice was motivated by the fact that earlier research has identified this structure as developmental in nature. The sequence of development of questions in EL2 is very much like the question development in the acquisition of EL1 (Lightbown and Spada 1993). Results of these earlier studies could serve for comparison.

The studies were conducted by two Polish teachers – graduates of Teacher Training Colleges who were continuing their education in a two-year Extramural MA University Programme. The subjects of the two studies were native Polish-speaking students (adolescents and young adults) learning English in a foreign language classroom in Poland. The two studies will be described separately but the final conclusions will be based on both of them.

1.0 Study 1 (S1)

The study was conducted by Iwona Zwierzchlewska, an MA student at the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University (1996:20-43).

1.1 Subjects of S1

Subjects of S1 were 64 students of a Polish secondary school aged 16-17. They were members of three parallel classes: Group A - 19 students, Group B - 22 students and Group C - 23 students. All the students had participated in an EFL programme in the school for a year and a half (approximately 150 hs). They had no instruction prior to the secondary school programme. They had also very little contact with English outside of the classroom. At the onset of the study they were evaluated by their teacher as post-beginners in English.

The EFL programme they were in provided three 45-minute English classes a week for each group. All the three groups had the same English teacher-researcher who was a Polish native speaker. The classroom instruction focused on practising four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The programme provided some communication-based activities and explicit form-focused instruction.

1.2 Research goal

The purpose of this study was to provide answers to two questions;
Do EFL learners acquire question formation in the same order as EL2 learners?
Does form-focused instruction result in increased accuracy?

1.3 Procedures

Groups A&B formed an Experimental Group and Groups C served as a Control Group. All the groups were pre-tested to obtain insight into their current stage of question formation. The test consisted of 12 *wh-* and *yes/no* questions presented in scrambled word order and two types of grammaticality judgement tasks (12 either correct or incorrect questions: without subject auxiliary inversion; 12 pairs of questions to decide if both questions were grammatical, both ungrammatical, or only one was grammatical). The subjects were familiar with the tasks and were give 30 minutes to complete them.

After the pre-test the **Experimental Group** received form-focused instruction and practice on question formation during a three-week period. The experimental design consisted of giving an explicit rule for question formation. Additionally, classroom posters presenting inversion rules for question formation were hung on the classroom walls. The students participated in a series of exercises and activities with focus on question formation. The tasks were varied including: writing and reading out questions about some pictures, a grammaticality judgement task, asking the teacher about a picture she had and identifying which of the 4 pictures they had, it was, and guessing games, asking other students about details of the pictures they had. During the whole 3-week period the teacher provided corrective feedback on students' errors in formulating questions as well as explicit instruction when necessary. Peer correction was also encouraged.

The activities focused on questions with the auxiliaries *be, can, do, did, will, have* and on the question words *what, where, why, how long, how many.* They provided opportunities for teacher-centred, pair-work and group-work. Practice with the experimental instructional materials accounted for about 80-85% of instruction time over the 3-week period.

The **Control Group** had their regular English classes with no special focus on interrogatives. Students errors in question-formation were corrected only sporadically. Classroom activities were aimed at practising four communication skills and introducing new grammatical structures as required by the course-book.

Immediately after the 3-week period the Experimental and the Control Groups were given a post-test to be completed in 30 minutes. The test consisted of the same kind of tasks with the same number of questions as in the pre-test. The questions were, however, slightly altered.

When the experimental instruction was completed, all the groups continued their regular classes. Over the next few weeks the teacher focused on question formation only when it was required by the course-book (e.g. when introducing new tenses). About 5 weeks after the post-test, all the students were given a follow-up test to be completed in 30 minutes. It was an alternation of the pre-test and the post-test.

1.4 Results of S1

The results of the three tests were evaluated according to two types of analyses: developmental stage analysis, and accuracy analysis.

1.4.1 The developmental stage analysis

The developmental stage analysis was based on the sequence for question formation described by Lightbown and Spada (1993) based on Manfred Pienemann's work. The three tests that were given to the students included examples of questions from all stages excepts Stage 6 as students had no prior experience with these kind of questions. All students' questions were analysed individually and assigned to the appropriate stage category. A student was considered to have attained a given stage if she/he produced at least four different utterances from a given stage.

Table 1 and Figure 1, 2 and 3 present the results of the developmental stage analysis. It shows the number of students who produced questions from each stage at each testing session. Almost all students produced questions that fit into at least two different stages. Most students produced questions from three stages at each time. Between the pre-test and post-test, the majority of students in the two **Experimental Groups (A and B)** either advanced one stage or produced more questions at the highest stage they had achieved on the pre-test. The number of students who produced questions of Stage 2 decreased to barely 1 or 2. More students began to produce questions of Stage 5 while the number of questions of Stage 3 dropped significantly.

Between the post-test and the follow-up test, some students showed further progress. The number of questions of Stage 2 and 3 decreased and in the case of Group B there were more Stage 5 questions. Most students remained at the level they achieved on the post-test.

The results of the **Control Group (C)** show that there was no similar tendency as in the experimental groups. Although the number of questions of Stage 2 dropped from 13 on the pre-test to 6 on the post-test, it increased again during the follow-up test. There was no change in the number of questions of Stage 3 and 5. Thus students from the control group did not show any improvement in their performance.

1.4.2 Accuracy analysis

This analysis was a calculation of the percentage of well-formed questions. The total number of questions produced by the subjects at each testing session was the same (36 questions). The maximum score at each test was 36 points. The mean number of correctly formed questions for each group at each test is presented in table 2 and figure 4.

There is an evident improvement in the performance of students from the **Experimental Groups** between the pre-test and post-test. After the three-week period of form-focused instruction, their accuracy in forming questions increased significantly. There was a drop of scores on a follow-up test five weeks later. But the final results were still better than on the pre-test. This indicates that the increase of accuracy in question formation in the experimental groups stabilised on an intermediary level.

The **Control Group** also made some progress between pre-test and post-test but not as high as in the experimental groups. However, the results on the follow-up test were worse than on the pre-test which may have been due to some negative factors other than language competence.

Analysis of ***individual students' results*** shows that some students from the experimental groups remained at the same level or even did worse on the follow-up test than on the pre-test, e.g. in Group A S1 scored 12 on the pre-test, 14 on the post-test and again 12 on the follow-up test; S2 scored 13, 15 and 11 consecutively. At the same time other students made significant improvements after the instruction and remained at the same level throughout the experiment, e.g. in group B S15 scored 15 on the pre-test and 25 both on the post-test and the follow-up test. This may have been due to some individual differences in learning styles.

Students performances seem to be also dependent on the ***type of tasks***. In the *scramble question task* all three groups were showing a tendency to gradually improve their performance, probably due to elimination of the lowest stages of their question development and moving to a higher stage (from Stage 2 to 3, and from Stage 3 to 4). The **Experimental Groups** had however better results (table 3 and figure 5). The *correction task* proved to be more difficult. In the case of the **Experimental Groups** a certain increase in the number of accurate responses between the pre-test and the post-test can be noted. The mean score in the follow-up test is lower than on the post-test but it is still higher than on the pre-test. In the **Control Group** there is slight improvement between the pre-test and the post-test and a drop in the follow-up test below the pre-test scores (table 4, figure 6).

The results of the *preference task* were inconclusive. Whereas the results comparison between the pre- and post-tests in the experimental and control groups shows improvement the follow-up test did not provide any clear pattern. Group A of the experimental groups and the control group both scored lower than on the pre-test (see table 5 and figure 7).

1.5 Discussion

The results of S1 indicate that formal instruction has no significant influence on the sequence of acquisition of interrogatives by foreign language learners. EFL learners proceed through the same stages as EL2 learners. No students were found to jump over the stage of the acquisition of interrogatives as a result of form-focused instruction. The accuracy level changed slightly with some learners. The students' performance improved to a varied extent probably due to individual differences in motivation and willingness to get involved in classroom practice and possibly due to their learning style.

2.0 Study 2

The second study was conducted by Agnieszka Soboń, also an MA student at the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University (1996:25-53).

2.1 Subjects

The subjects of this study were 15 young adult pre-Cambridge First Certificate students enrolled in the EFL programme at the College of Business in Nowy Sącz. The subjects varied in their prior language learning experience. Some had completed high school English programme (3 x 45-minute classes a week for 4 years - approximately 360 hs.). Most of these students, however, had lessons in very large groups (around 30 learners) and a great deal of class time was devoted to focus on form activities. A few of the subjects had private lessons or studied on their own, while others had learnt English through contacts with English abroad (USA, Denmark, Belgium). All the subjects were assigned to the upper-intermediate level based on the placement tests they had taken.

2.2 Research goal

The purpose of this study was to determine whether formal instruction on question formation will influence the learners' production of questions. Two hypotheses were advanced:

- Formal instruction helps to improve learners' accuracy of question production.
- Formal instruction influences positively only the interlanguages of those learners whose competence is close to the stage where the acquisition of a given structure occurs in natural contexts (Pienemann's Teachability Hypothesis).

2.3 Procedures

The subjects participated in a quasi-experiment which consisted of a pre-test, instruction and a post-test. There was no control group. The pre-test was conducted

a week before the instruction started. The instruction lasted one week. The post-test was conducted one and a half weeks after the instruction ended.

2.3.1. Both the pre- and post-tests concerned the formation of questions and included the same types of questions. There were 25 statements to which students were asked to form questions. The statements determined the grammatical tenses and the kind of questions ('yes/no questions', wh-questions, questions with prepositions, embedded questions, question tags).

2.3.2. The instruction consisted of 8 45-minute classes on questions. It included explicit information on the various types of questions, grammar practice based on exercises from the student's book (Headway Upper-Intermediate, Unit 4: Controlled Practice) and two grammar practice books as well as free practice in the form of role-plays, and other communication activities which were not restricted by any language forms but were chosen on the grounds of the potential for rich question use. During the free-practice phase the teacher did not interfere with students' conversations, however a short feedback on errors in the questions was provided after some of the activities.

2.4 Results of S2

Results of S2 were evaluated from the point of view of general accuracy level resulting from instruction and specific accuracy level.

2.4.1. General accuracy level

Each learner's total scores on the pre- and post-tests were compared in order to find out if there was any improvement after the instruction. The learners' errors were analysed and classified into several groups in order to find out which areas of the students' language improved most. The learners were assigned into different levels of question formation based on the difficulty the learners had in production of the questions on the pre-test. Since no learners showed any significant difficulty in formation of 'yes/no' questions, the assignment was based on the learners' production of various types of wh-questions. The deciding feature for the level classification was inversion. It was assumed that students who achieved accuracy of over 80% in inversion on the pre-test were potential candidates to acquire the next stage of question acquisition. Students who achieved lower accuracy were not expected to improve.

Comparison of the total scores on the pre- and post-tests demonstrated that the learners' ability to produce correct questions increased. The improvement for the whole group was 24%. The improvement of certain types of questions, however, varied (table 6).

The most striking finding concerns no improvement on 'yes/no' questions despite the fact that the students achieved the highest accuracy on this type of ques-

tions on both tests (90%). However, some researchers emphasise that 100% accuracy should not be expected even with the native speakers (Ellis 1994). Most errors in this type of questions resulted from the oversuppliance of the morpheme *-s* and *-ed* which may be attributed to transitional stages in acquiring tenses (simple present and simple past).

The analysis of an average score of correctness for various types of wh-questions demonstrates that students achieved the highest accuracy on simple wh-questions and the lowest on the indirect ones. However, the improvement after the instruction was the highest with the indirect questions. This reflects a general pattern, the less acquired before the instruction structure the better the improvement. This supports Van Patten's claim that form-focused instruction may enhance language acquisition.

Comparison of results of individual students shows that some learners improved their accuracy by over 40% while others stayed almost at the same level. There were even two cases of students whose accuracy worsened by 8% and 16% (S4: pre-test 84% accuracy and post-test 68; S9: pre-test 40% accuracy and post-test 32%).

2.4.2 Specific accuracy level

To verify the second hypothesis of the study, accuracy in inversion on the pre-test was compared with the students' achievements on the indirect questions and question-tags (table 7). It was found that most learners who could produce correctly inverted wh-questions were able to improve on the indirect questions and question tags. One of the students (S10) who scored low in accuracy in inversion could not produce correct indirect questions at all and produced only one correct question tag. Another student (S15), however, improved not only the general accuracy in inversion by 20% but also managed to produce correct indirect questions and question tags.

2.5 Discussion

The learners' overall accuracy of question formation increased after instruction although results for individual types varied. It was noticed that the smallest increase was in 'yes/no' questions and simple wh-questions. This may have been due to learners' high accuracy in formation of these types of questions prior to instruction. It seems that only a certain level of correctness is attainable in FLL. The greatest increase concerned indirect questions, special patterns of wh-questions and question-tags. Students were not familiar with certain types of questions (low scores on the pre-test) and instruction raised their awareness of these particular types and their structure. On the pre-test some students used an avoidance strategy to some types of questions. For example to avoid asking *'What*

is he like?'/'What does he look like?', they would write *'Could you tell me something about Alice?'*. Analysis of the manuscripts showed that they had made an attempt to produce the former types of questions but crossed them out. On the post-test all of the students produced the above question, however most of them still did not have correct auxiliaries: **What is she look like?*

It was also found that students improved by 55% on the question in the passive voice. The accuracy of the passive questions reached 80% whereas in the pre-test students opted for the avoidance strategy producing, for example, questions such as *'Who wrote it?'* instead of the expected *'Who was it written by?'*

The analysis of the students' accuracy on the elements of questions implies that instruction helped students to produce meaningful and expected questions. It is also possible that it influenced their confidence in using more complex structures. We may thus assume that Hypothesis 1 is supported by the results of this study. Form focused instruction helps to improve accuracy of question formation.

The data seem also to indicate that there is a positive relation between students' acquisitional stage and the correct production of questions. The learners who achieved a high percentage of correctness in the lower stages (e.g. inversion) were able to profit from instruction on higher stages (e.g. indirect questions) whereas learners who scored low did not show improvement.

There were exceptions to this pattern which may indicate that the change may have been superficial or it may have reflected the learners' general psycho-physiological state on the day of the test. For example, a learner who still had problems with inversion produced correct embedded wh-questions which could indicate the learner's low acquisitional stage (wh-fronting). Two other learners scored high on the pre-test but did not improve in formation of indirect questions and/or question-tags. One of them showed improvement on wh-questions and probably as a result also scored 100% on question tags. It is possible that he was still preoccupied with the inversion in wh-questions which helped him in producing question-tags but did not help to process the rules of embedded questions. The other student not only showed no improvement but even worsened on most types of questions.

Some patterns of the acquisition of more difficult questions emerged from the findings. The variety of structures of questions with prepositions suggest that there may be a pattern of acquisition within this type of questions. The data obtained indicate the following tentative pattern of acquisition of questions with prepositions:

- * To whom the house belongs?
- * To whom belongs the house?
- Who does the house belong to?

The above pattern shows that learners may go back to the previous stage when acquiring questions with prepositions. First they produce questions which contain wh-word with preposition at the beginning of the structure [(prep.+wh-word) S V], then they invert a subject and verb [(pre.+wh-word) V S], and finally learners arrive at the correct question form [wh-word au x. S V prep.].

A similar pattern may be observed in passive questions. The learners produced a variety of questions from simple wh-fronting, e.g.:

- * By who it was written?
- * Who was written it by?
- Who was it written by?

Conclusion

The two studies support the Natural Order Hypothesis. A general pattern of acquisition of certain structures is also evident in the situation of foreign language learning in the educational setting. Form-focus instruction does not alternate this pattern and can at most facilitate the process of acquiring the developmental structures. It can also bring about some superficial changes. Effectiveness of form-focus instruction, understood as pace with which individual learners go through subsequent developmental stages, depends on individual differences (presumably learning styles and motivation) but also on learning tasks and level of L2 development. Learners whose level of proficiency is higher seem to benefit more from form-focus instruction than learners from lower proficiency levels. This could suggest that early teaching should concentrate on activities developing communication skills and strategies (implicit treatment of structures). Explicit form-focused activities could be postponed till the former have been developed.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Developmental stage analysis: number of students who produced questions in each of the stages

Experimental A (n=19)	**Stage 2**	**Stage 3**	**Stage 4**	**Stage 5**
Pre-test	3	16	17	8
Post-test	1	7	19	16
Follow-up test	1	6	19	15
Experimental B(n=22)				
Pre-test	5	16	17	14
Post-test	2	7	19	17
Follow-up test	1	6	19	18
Control C (n=23)				
Pre-test	13	22	16	5
Post-test	6	22	22	7
Follow-up test	9	20	19	5

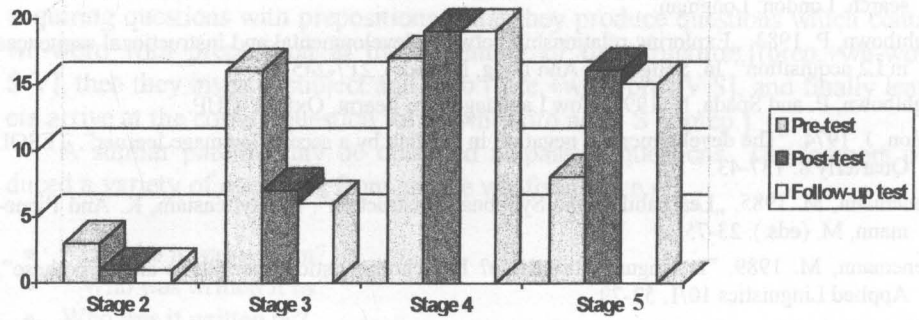

Figure 1. Experimental group A: developmental stage analysis

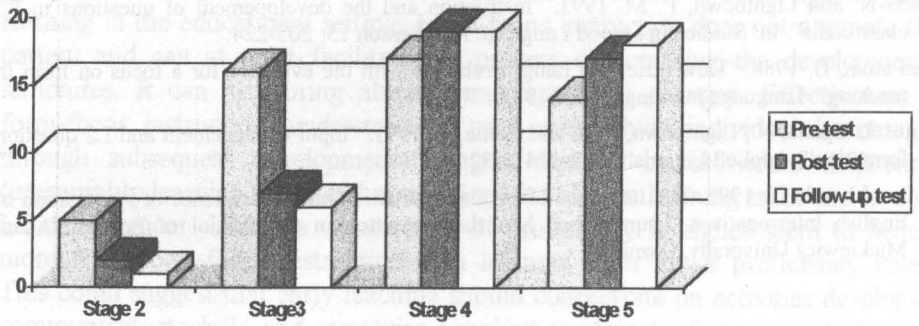

Figure 2. Experimental group B: developmental stage analysis

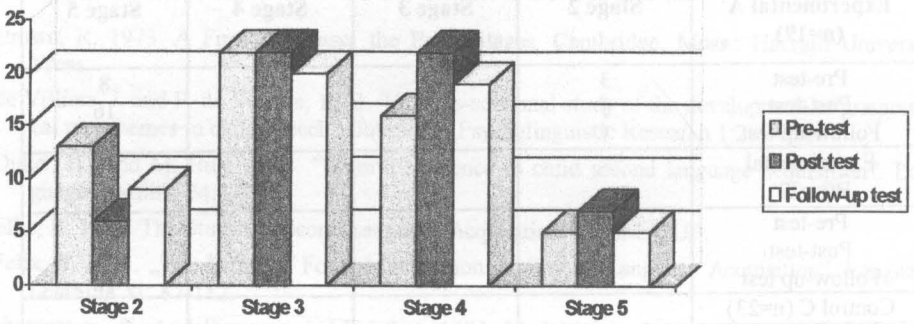

Figure 3. Control group C: developmental stage analysis

Table 2. Mean number of correctly formed questions

Group	Pre-test Mean	SD	Post-test Mean	SD	Follow-up test Mean	SD
Exp. A	20.053	4.49	25.842	573	23.737	6.04
Exp. B	21.5	6.57	27.682	5.37	25.227	6.63
Control C	18.304	3.84	19.261	4.23	17.783	4.43

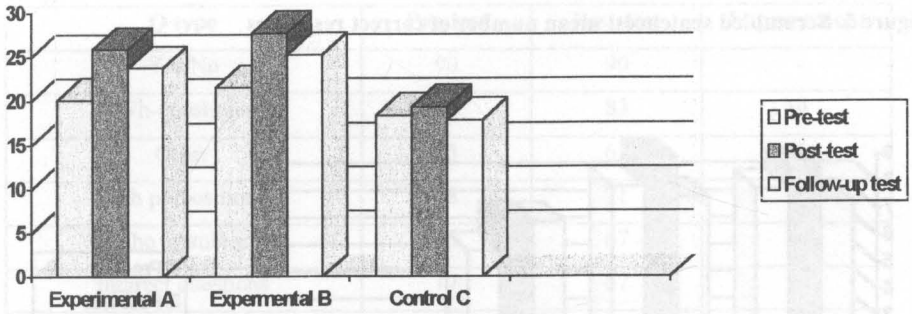

Figure 4. Mean number of correctly formed questions

Table 3. Scrambled sentences: mean number of correct answers

Group	Pre-test Mean	SD	Post-test Mean	SD	Follow-up test Mean	SD
Exp. A	6	7.44	7.842	5.61	9.052	4.05
Exp. B	6.954	5.95	8.454	7.78	9.5	5.69
Control C	4.695	3.4	5.391	5.19	6.521	6.29

Table 4. Correction task: mean number of accuracy scores

Group	Pre-test Mean	SD	Post-test Mean	SD	Follow-up test Mean	SD
Exp. A	7.325	3.67	8.473	3.14	7.736	5.31
Exp. B	7.454	7.12	8.909	2.85	7.863	6.4
Control C	6.565	4.35	6.608	1.7	5.478	4.26

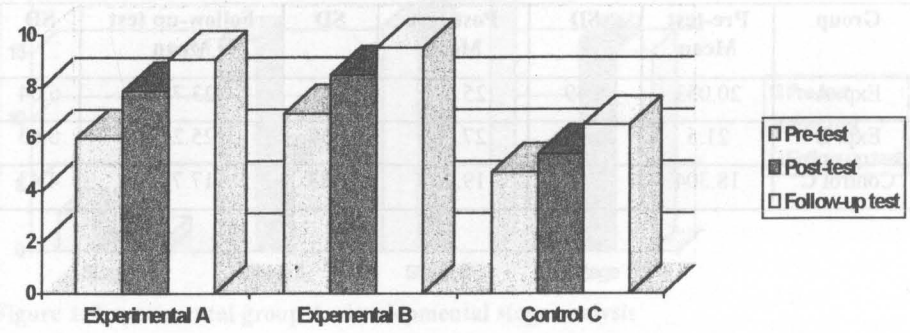

Figure 5. Scrambled sentences: mean number of correct responses

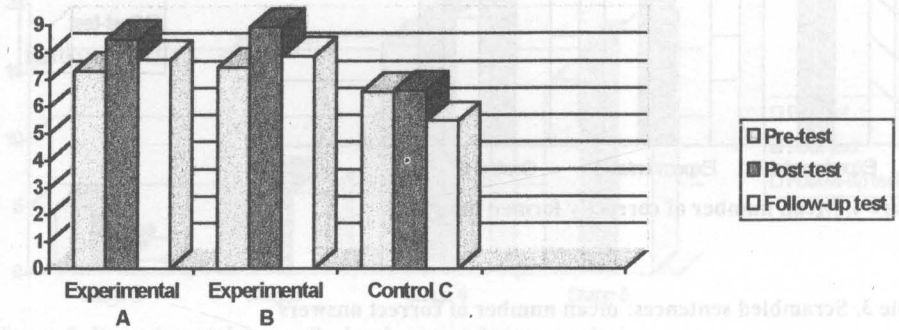

Figure 6. Correction task: mean number of accuracy scores

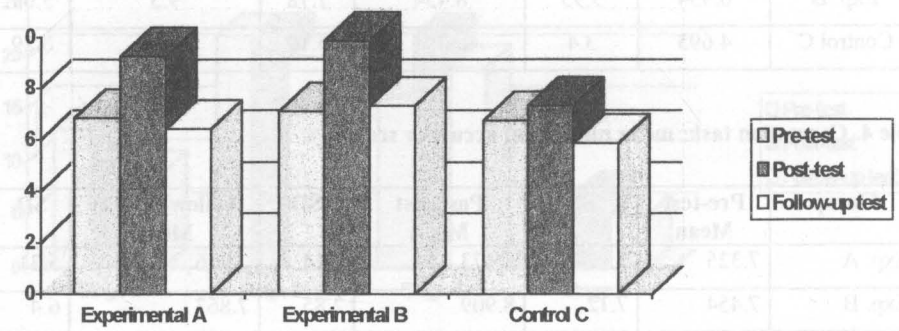

Figure 7. Preference task: mean number of correctly judged sentences

Table 5. Preference task: mean number of correctly judged sentence pairs

Group	Pre-test Mean	SD	Post-test Mean	SD	Follow-up test Mean	SD
Exp. A	6.842	3.03	9.263	5.54	6.421	4.15
Exp. B	7.09	5.08	9.863	4.98	7.863	5.94
Control C	6.739	1.7	7.304	4.04	5.869	1.4

Table 6. Percentage of improvement on various types of questions

Q type	Pre-test	Post-test	Improvement
Yes/No	90	90	-
Wh-questions	69	83	14
Other	23	63	46
with prepositions	58	71	13
Who as subject	49	67	18
indirect questions	17	67	50
Q-tags	38	73	35
TOTAL		73	24

Table 7. The relation between inversion and overall accuracy and percentage of achievement on the post-test

S. no.	Inversion	accuracy	Q-tags pre-/post-test	indirect Q pre-/post-test
1	100	100	67/100	50/100
2	93	84	67/67	0/100
3	100	88	67/67	0/100
4	93	68	67/100	0/0
5	87	80	33/100	0/100
6	87	80	67/100	0/100
7	87	80	67/100	50/50
8	87	56	67/100	0/50
9	87	32	33/0	50/50

Table 7. (continued)

10	73	40	0/33	50/0
11	100	84	0/33	0/50
12	93	84	0/100	0/50
13	93	76	0/100	0/100
14	87	76	0/33	0/50
15	53	64	0/67	50/100