

## The Effects of Focus on Form Approach via Dictogloss Technique on Developing Linguistic Competence of Iranian EFL Learners

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IJEAP- 2005-1539

Received: 2020-04-08

Accepted: 2020-06-11

Published: 2020-06-12

### Abstract

The acquisition of passive voice in English was studied in this quasi-experimental research through the use of dictogloss technique as a focus on form approach. The participants, thirty-five male and female students, were English translation majors at BA level at University College of Nabi Akram in Tabriz. They were randomly assigned into two intact classes: the experimental and control groups. Nelson proficiency test indicated that they were at intermediate level of proficiency. The treatments were applied after conducting a proficiency test and a pretest in order to assure the learners' homogeneity in proficiency and their background knowledge in passive voice. The treatment and posttest tests were arranged in two forms, half of which were in multiple-choice format and the other half were supply type ones. The multiple-choice items were selected from *Objective Tests* (Orleans & Sealy, 1928) and the supply types were selected from two books named: *Intermediate Language Practice* by Vince (1998) and *Oxford Living Grammar: Pre-intermediate*. The dictogloss technique was used as a treatment on the experimental group (n=18). Nonetheless, the traditional method of focus on formS was used on the control group (n=17). The results of one-way ANOVA and post hoc test indicated the superiority of focus on form technique over the focus on formS. The findings revealed significant effect of the dictogloss treatment on the performance of the learners. The results showed a significant improvement in the treatment group in posttest over the pretest.

**Keywords:** Dictogloss, Explicit Teaching, Form-Focused Instructions, Implicit Teaching, Grammatical Accuracy

### 1. Introduction

In the acquisition process of a foreign or second language, teachers use different methods and techniques in order to help learners to find mastery and native-like accuracy in L2. Understanding which techniques are more effective in teaching and learning grammar, as an essential component of each language, as well as the integration of form and meaning and combination of explicit and implicit teaching and learning have been investigated for a long time. To this end, different approaches and techniques have been presented. Focus on form is a recent and effective approach which is an important issue in SLA research and has been supported by Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998, as cited in Poole, 2005). In implementing focus on form approach, a lesson starts with completing a communicative task, the content of which can be understood by learners. When a grammatical point is encountered, the teacher tries to draw learners' attention to it. In other words, the teaching syllabus is a reflection of the learners' 'inbuilt syllabus' (Nunan, 1998).

Focus-on-form instructions are of two types: 'planned focus-on-form' and 'incidental focus-on-form'. Planned focus on form tasks are focused tasks designed to use a specific linguistic form in the meaning-centered contexts, in this case the focus on form is already specified (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2001a). Because the focus in these kinds of tasks is on a specific linguistic feature, so in this sense it is similar to focus on forms tasks, but one difference is that the learners do not know that they are learning a specific linguistic feature and they just consider themselves as 'language

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users'. The second difference is that the attention to form occurs through interaction. Unfocused tasks are communicative tasks in which the focus is on 'general language samples' in which learners attend to forms incidentally and 'extensively rather than intensively' (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2001b). In both types of focus on form instructions, communicative tasks are used, but in planned focus on form some predetermined specific linguistic features are included in the tasks which influence the task performance in the classroom.

In 1980, some researchers claimed that communicative trend was ineffective since the "natural language acquisition processes are all powerful" (Doughty & Williams, 1998a, p. 1). There was another group of researchers who did not think like the previous ones and were not validating the 'communicative approach' to language teaching (CLT), furthering the division between research and practice in classroom (Clarke, 1994; as cited in Doughty & Williams, 1998a, p.1).

The time changed. The classroom-oriented research and the role of teacher in the classroom became prominent. Some other issues that were pedagogically important were also addressed. One of the major issues was the disputable question of how to include 'grammar' in L2 instruction. The degree to which the learners and the teacher should attend to the linguistic features has been argued for many years (Doughty & Williams, 1998a, p.1). Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2002) considered focus on form approach for teaching form (syntax) as opposed to the traditional 'focus on forms' in which the focus is on linguistic features. They described some methodologies for teaching form through communication considering two main headings: 'reactive focus-on-form' and 'pre-emptive focus on form'. The present article has three purposes: the first was to provide a definition of focus on form, the second was to describe some of the important procedures for dealing with form using some examples of experienced teachers. The third purpose was to mention some of the problematic issues for discussion and research. Some techniques that have been suggested by different SLA researchers and conductors are listed as below:

Negotiation is an activity in which communication is performed through some questions about how a specific form is taught and learnt (Lightbown, 1998). Consciousness-raising tasks are activities that are similar to those utilized in input enhancement, the only difference being that they deem the role of mind in acquiring and endorse a stimulus event in conscious awareness in order to have it kept in long-term memory (Harley, 1998). Task essential language emphasizes the need to use specific forms in implementation of a task (Doughty & Williams, 1998b). Input flooding is an activity in which natural examples of a particular form are integrated in a passage. Some researchers suppose that very high frequency of occurrence will draw the learners' attention to that specific form (Doughty & Williams, 1998a). Input enhancement is a method that attempts to grab the learners' attention to a specific form by highlighting, coloring, writing in bold face or even writing with capital letters, etc. (Long & Robinson, 1998). Dictogloss is a technique in which a text is read to the students and then they are required to reconstruct it in order to reproduce the specific linguistic forms which are focused in that version. It can be carried out in pairs or groups through interaction because as implied in some studies more learning is attained through interaction rather than undertaking it separately (Doughty & Williams, 1998b).

Output enhancement is an activity in which the learners are encouraged to generate output that coats the specific grammatical forms (Doughty & Williams, 1998a). Interaction enhancement is a technique in which the learners are assisted to notice a discrepancy between their interlanguage and the target language form by offering interactional alterations in their output (Doughty & Williams, 1998b). Input flooding is a method that attempts to focus learners' attention on a form through exposure to very high frequency of the structure. It offers a text, focus of which is on a certain form and includes natural instances of the focused form (Williams & Evans, 1998). Garden path is a method that highlights the errors committed by learners at the time of generality in order to convey to learners about a grammatical regularity conveyed with its exceptions (Doughty & Williams, 1998b). Input processing is an activity in which comprehension is integrated into learner's interlanguage by construing the input (Williams & Evans, 1998).

[Branden \(2007\)](#) believes that naturalistic learning does not necessarily result in higher proficiency. This is because the opportunities of naturalistic learning that the environment offers may vary for the adult SL learners. For example, the opportunity to work in an SL context may not be available for everyone. Reviewing some studies which examine the effectiveness of purely meaning-focused communicative language teaching showed that communicative instruction needed to involve a systemic treatment to draw learners' attention to linguistic forms in order to develop a relatively high communicative competence (Doughty & Williams, 1998b; Long & Robinson, 1998). The present study tried to detect the effectiveness of form focused techniques on linguistic competence of Iranian EFL learners in terms of language learning. To do this, dictogloss technique was chosen. It also aimed to investigate the time of occurrence of different types of noticing in different episodes of focus on form technique. The attitudes of the learners toward the focus on form technique were also investigated.

## 2. Review of literature

Doughty and Williams (1998b, p. 239) define the dictogloss as "a task in which production of the targeted form is highly likely to occur (i.e. nearly essential), because it is the teacher that constructs the task to include learning problems". [Swain \(1998\)](#) claimed that reconstructing a text in target language, which is an additional feature for directing learners to discuss about the language, made them to notice the gap and the holes in their interlanguage which is beyond the simple noticing. In dictogloss technique, the learners are allowed to engage in meaningful communication while their attention is drawn to linguistic form. "More significantly, it holds noticing, the main cognitive construct in Focus on form, as the essential component of instruction" ([Shak, 2006](#), p. 49). She also defined some steps for conducting dictogloss technique and noted that "the noticing process does not only take place in the noticing stage. These stages were used to signal to teachers a change in the focus of instruction" (ibid.). We have used this claim in our study and tried to find in which episode of treatment these noticing happen. Learners are also engaged in syntactic rather than semantic processing through meta-talking during the dictogloss task. This is shown by analyzing the transcriptions of collaborative interaction during the dictogloss task. Here are the aforesaid stages based on Gallego (2010):

The Listening Stage, in which the teacher prepares children for the topic of the dictogloss text via story-telling and whole-class discussion. The Noticing Stage, in which children listen to a short text read to them twice at normal speed. They may choose to take fragmentary notes during the second reading. After that, they reconstruct their version of the original text individually. The Activity Stage, in which children work together in small groups to reconstruct the text. The Checking Stage, in which children analyze and compare their various versions in a whole class setting. Here, the class written output is compared with the original text to find out which differences are acceptable. The Writing Stage, in which children are required to produce a similar text individually. This feature is not part of the original dictogloss procedure. It is added to examine learners' linguistic outcome.

Shak (2006, p. 50) states that although many studies have been done on dictogloss, "the effectiveness of dictogloss has yet to be fully researched". [Kuiken and Vedder \(2002, p.345\)](#) summarized the procedure of conducting dictogloss as: "while the text is being read, learners take notes; they then work together in small groups to reconstruct the initial text from their shared resources. After the reconstruction phase, the final version is compared with the original text, and then analyzed and commented upon by the teacher". Another factor is the different types of noticing that happen in each technique. Shak (2006) introduced a 'noticing stage' for dictogloss technique and elaborated it as the stage in which children listen to a short text which is read to them two times at normal speed. They may take some notes during the second reading and produce their own writing which is a version of original text individually. She also noted that noticing process does not necessarily happen at noticing stage. Kuiken and Vedder (2002) also worked on two kinds of noticing that occurred in dictogloss technique; simple noticing and elaborate noticing. By simple noticing, they refer to "passives which mentioned with more or less emphasis, but are not discussed by the students" and in the elaborate noticing, "passives are put into question, discussed and

alternative structures may be proposed” (Kuiken & Vedder, 2002, p. 350). A similar distinction between the aforementioned noticing is made by some other researchers ([Leow, 1997](#); as cited in Kuiken & Vedder, 2002). They investigated the occurrence of noticing considering the number of cases of simple and elaborate noticing. As put by [Gass \(2002](#); as cited in Kuiken & Vedder, 2002, p. 352) “the process of noticing is affected by factors like genre, difficulty and familiarity with the subject of the text”.

The dictogloss technique was also investigated in terms of interaction between learners of English as a second language. This time, it was not compared with another technique or task. Kuiken and Vedder (2002) tried to investigate the effect of interaction among learners on the acquisition of passive voice in English during a dictogloss task. Thirty four Dutch high school students participated in this quasi-experimental study. Their knowledge of the passive was tested through a pretest. Both the experimental and control group were given the same tasks. The only difference was the interaction among the learners in that the experimental group consisted reconstruction in small groups (+interaction) but in the control group the learners reconstructed the two texts – read by the teacher – individually (–interaction). A qualitative analysis revealed that interaction affected noticing of passive forms (Kuiken & Vedder, 2002).

Reviewing the literature on foreign language learning and psychological review, it is found that consciousness plays a crucial role in foreign language learning. According to [Schmidt \(1995\)](#), not all learning is intended or planned (for example, learning vocabulary through extensive reading is clearly possible and it does not necessarily need any intention to learn new words), but all learning does require attention. ‘Noticing’ that is a low level of awareness seems to exist in all learning but, ‘understanding’ that is a higher level of awareness seems to exist in contrast between explicit and implicit learning. Three types have been proposed for noticing:

The first type is ‘simple noticing’ in which the learners simply notice a form in their target language ([Gass, 1988](#); as cited in Swain, 1998). This may be because of the high frequency of learners’ exposure to that form in their target language. The second is as proposed by Doughty and Williams (1998b) ‘noticing the gap’ in which not only the simple noticing happens but also the learners notice the difference between the form and that of their own interlanguage. This kind of noticing may happen mostly when some more implicit techniques such as input flooding and input enhancement are conducted in class. This is true especially when the rules of the learners’ interlanguage are more general than the rules of their target language. The third type of noticing refers to the time when the learners notice that they cannot say what they want. Doughty and Williams (1998b) called it ‘noticing the hole’. When the learners notice the hole, they attempt to fill it by consulting their implicit or explicit knowledge.

As mentioned before, deciding on what techniques are more effective in teaching and learning a language in different types of contexts is very crucial for teachers, conductors and everyone who deals with language acquisition. Since the contexts differ from each other in some features, different techniques seem to be effective for different contexts. It may be the same for our context in which the participants have different first languages but the dominant language is Persian and English is studied as a foreign language. Focus on form approach can raise both accuracy and fluency of EFL learners simultaneously through insisting on integration of form and meaning. As [Farrokhi and Talabari \(2010\)](#) mentioned in their article, the studies on this approach should also investigate whether focus on form instruction results in more language acquisition or not.

There are various techniques for this approach among which dictogloss was opted for to be explored in terms of its efficiency in raising the learners’ grammatical knowledge. The effectiveness of this technique was explored through performing some focused tasks, the focus of which was on English passive voice and was implemented in an academic EFL context. In this study, the output of the aforementioned technique is compared to that of the traditional approach to see if there is a superiority of one over the other in terms of accuracy and acquisition of EFL grammar. Additionally, the attitudes of the learners participating in this study who were university students studying English as a foreign language were investigated. This study was an attempt to answer the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** Does the outcome of form-focused technique, dictogloss, with respect to specific constructions (the English passive voice) differ from that of traditional method in an Iranian EFL context?

**Research Question 2:** Do all kinds of noticing (simple noticing, noticing the gap and noticing a hole) happen when the dictogloss technique is conducted in an EFL learning class?

**Research Question 3:** In which episode of dictogloss technique does the ‘simple noticing’ happen?

**Research Question 4:** In which episode of dictogloss technique does ‘noticing the gap’ happen?

**Research Question 5:** In which episode of dictogloss technique does ‘noticing a hole’ happen?

**Research Question 6:** What are university students’ attitudes toward the dictogloss and input enhancement technique?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Design of the Study

In this quasi-experimental research, the pretest-treatment-posttest design was applied. The treatment was used after conducting a proficiency test and a pretest. These two tests were administered in advance to the posttest in order to make sure of the students’ homogeneity in proficiency level and also their background passive voice knowledge in English language. The posttest was then conducted after applying the treatment to study the effectiveness of the technique of focus on form approach on the grammatical competence of the experimental group. After that the experimental group (n=18) was compared with the control group (n=17) who received no peculiar treatment. However, the experimental group received the special treatment. All the participants were studying the same course and randomly selected from different classes of the same teacher. The focus on form approach was the treatment that was the independent variable of this study. Therefore, the experimental group was instructed through the dictogloss technique.

#### 3.2. Participants

The participants included two classes comprising thirty-five male and female students, enrolled in intermediate level of proficiency in English at University College of Nabi Akram in Tabriz. Due to two reasons the number of participants was limited. The first reason was the lack of enough classes at this specific proficiency level at that university college. The second one was the lack of students with the same teacher in order to reduce the effect of teachers’ differences on drawing learners’ attention to each type of treatment. Receiving less than 30 (60%), the pass mark for *Nelson’s test*, most of the students were identified to be at low intermediate level. The students were randomly allocated into two intact classes, the experimental and the control group. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 30 and their background languages were Turkish and Persian. They were majoring in translation studies for B.A. So, they had adequate general English knowledge. The results of proficiency test and pretest confirmed the homogeneity of the participants in the experimental and control groups.

#### 3.3. Materials

The first instrument that was used in the present study was the proficiency test. The tests were selected from Nelson English Language Tests. Some three parallel tests – three hundred A, B and C – that covered a wide range of items suitable for intermediate learners were selected. “All items of these tests have been carefully pre-tested” (Flower & Coe, 1976, p.26). After that, a pretest was administered to assess the participants’ background knowledge on the English passive voice. This test was organized in two formats, half of which comprised in multiple-choice format and the other half included supply type tests. *Objective Tests* (Orleans & Sealy, 1928) was used to select the multiple-choice items and the supply types were taken from two books named: *Intermediate Language Practice* (Vince, 1998) published by oxford, Macmillan Education (2010) and *Oxford Living Grammar: Pre-intermediate* (Harrison, 2009) published by Oxford University Press, both of which are used in English learning courses all over the world.

In this study a posttest was also administered that was used as an instrument to assess the effectiveness of the treatment. The organization and sources of the posttest were likewise similar to as the pretest. After running the treatment, an attitude test and a noticing report were administered to the participants. The attitude items were taken from Shak (2006) to study the participants' attitudes concerning the technique. A noticing report paper was designed for the participants to study the time of occurrence of different types of noticing. In this paper, the participants were required to write the episodes in which three types of noticing had occurred for them.

#### *3.4. Target of Instruction*

The passive voice, as a syntactic feature, was chosen as the target of instruction. The drawback with the passive voice may arise from the disparities between both the form and use of it in the participants' native language and in English as a foreign language. The passive structure is considered as one of the problematic areas in learning English as a foreign language by most of EFL learners (Pullum, 2014). After consulting with the teacher and considering the grammatical categories in the syllabus of the selected classes, which was preplanned by the college authorities, the passive voice was among the categories that was chosen as the target of instruction. Focus on form techniques can produce better results for language learning classes but their degree of effectiveness may vary according to some variables such as age, attitude, and proficiency level of the learners (Branden, 2007). Meanwhile, in this study the attitudes of the learners concerning the technique of focus on form were examined.

#### *3.5. Procedures*

A form-focused instruction was implemented for the classroom treatment by the instructor for about ninety minutes over a period of two sessions. A proficiency test and a pretest were conducted to make sure of the participants' homogeneity in proficiency level and their prior knowledge on passive voice. The same instructor taught the control group with the same proficiency level at the same university with the same linguistic feature. Meanwhile, the students' own teacher (not the researchers) set up the activity in order to guard against the researchers' effect on them. Before starting the class, a voice recorder was planted inside the classroom to record the classroom activities. For sharing their ideas and understanding in doing the tasks, the students were divided into groups of two or three. The entire class procedures were audiotaped and a noticing report and an attitude test were administered to both groups at the end of the class.

First, the teacher read the narrative two times at a normal speed. In the first reading, the students were prohibited from taking any notes, while during the second reading, they were allowed to write down what they heard as much as possible. Then, the students were asked to compare their notes in pairs and reconstructed the passage before comparing it with the original one. In the last phase, the instructor carried out some negotiation of form supplemented with some negotiation of meaning while fixing their errors. Some episodes of the dictogloss technique according to which the reporting papers were prepared, are as follows:

First episode: the teacher gave some explanation about the story. Second episode: the text was read by the teacher twice and the students took some notes. Third episode: the students reconstructed the text with their partners in group. Fourth episode: the students compared their reconstructed text with the source text.

It is necessary to mention that in the last episode the teacher helped the students through negotiation of meaning and form. In other words, some explicit rules about passive voice were presented by the teacher. Meanwhile, the passive voice was taught to the control group class by the same teacher but with a traditional method (presentation, practice, and production). By traditional method it is meant that the focus on forms approach in which the emphasis was only on forms and thus the instruction was explicit. The same test, which was administered to the experimental group, was also given to the control group and the correction and scoring processes were rather similar. On the whole, a descriptive analysis on the scores of all tests was performed: the proficiency test, pretest

and posttest. In order to compare the results of tests between the groups, one-way ANOVA, post-hoc tests were carried out.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Results of the Proficiency Test, Pretest and Posttest

First of all, the descriptive analysis results run by the SPSS indicated that the level of proficiency of the two groups was rather similar. The mean scores of the proficiency test taken by the two groups are as follows: the mean score of proficiency test of the control group =19.53, the mean score of proficiency test of the experimental group =19.45 (Table 1 and Table 2). A multiple comparison was also performed between the mean scores of the proficiency test and the difference between them was estimated. However, no significant difference between the proficiency levels of the groups was found (Table 3).

In general, the results of analysis indicated that the mean scores of the pretest taken by the two groups were similar: the mean score of the pretest for the control group is 15.12 and the mean score of the pretest for the experimental group is 15.39 (Table 1 and table 2). Comparing the experimental and control groups according to their pretest scores showed no significant difference between their mean scores. Therefore, it was made sure that the background knowledge of the two groups was rather similar and it indicated the participants' homogeneity in the present study. Consequently, the participants' background knowledge could not significantly have any effect on their performances (Table 3).

Table 1: Mean Scores of Groups 1 (Control) and 2 (Dictogloss) for Pretest and Posttest

	groups				
	1		2		
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	
Mean	15.12	18.65	15.30	23.60	
Std. Deviation	4.526	4.182	6.140	5.452	
Valid N (list wise)	Unweighted	17	17	20	20
	Weighted	17.000	17.000	20.000	20.000

Table 2: Mean Scores of Groups 1 (Control) and 2 (Dictogloss) For Proficiency Test, Pretest and Posttest

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
						Proficiency	1		
	2	20	19.45	8.906	1.991	15.28	23.62	6	33
Posttest	1	17	18.65	4.182	1.014	16.50	20.80	10	27
	2	20	23.60	5.452	1.219	21.05	26.15	9	30
Pretest	1	17	15.12	4.526	1.098	12.79	17.44	7	25
	2	20	15.30	6.140	1.373	12.43	18.17	4	27
	Total	55	15.27	5.553	.749	13.77	16.77	4	27

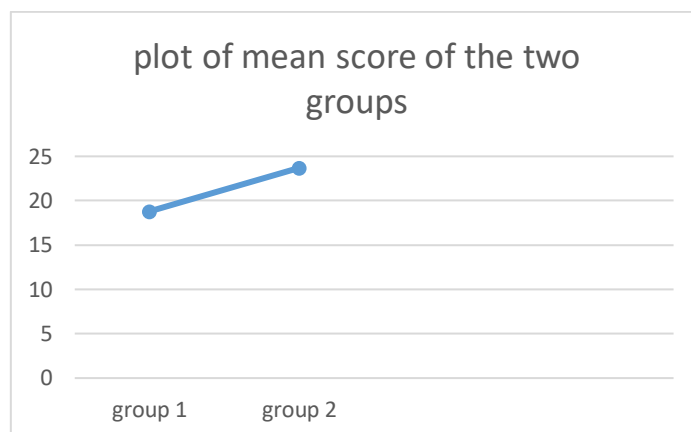


Figure 1: A Comparison of The Mean Scores of Two Groups for The Effect Of Instructions on Their Linguistic Competence

On the main, a significant difference was revealed between the mean scores of the posttests: the mean score of the posttest for the control group is =18.65 and the mean score of the posttest for the experimental group is =23.60 (Table 1 and Table 2). The significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups in the posttest indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group. Therefore, the efficiency of focus on form instruction in teaching English passive voice for Iranian EFL learners were revealed. Comparing the mean scores of the groups, we could see a significant difference. These meaningful differences could again demonstrate the efficiency of the treatments (Table 2 and Figure 1).

Table 3: Summary of Differences and Significance of Mean Scores of Groups 1 (control) and 2 (dictogloss) for Proficiency Test, Pretest and Posttest

Dependent Variable	(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Proficiency	1	2	.079	2.672	.976	-5.28	5.44
	2	1	-.079	2.672	.976	-5.44	5.28
Posttest	1	2	-4.953*	1.489	.002	-7.94	-1.97
	2	1	4.953*	1.489	.002	1.97	7.94
Pretest	1	2	-.182	1.866	.923	-3.93	3.56
	2	1	.182	1.866	.923	-3.56	3.93

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

A multiple comparison was performed between the mean scores of proficiency test, pretest and posttest and the difference between them was calculated through one-way ANOVA and Post-Hoc Test. It illustrated no significant difference between the proficiency level of the groups: the mean difference of groups one and two =  $0.079 \leq 0$ , no significant difference between the mean scores of the groups: the mean difference of groups one and two =  $-0.182 \leq 0$ , but a significant difference between the groups' performance in the posttest can be observed: the mean difference of groups one and two =  $4.953 \geq 0$ . The computed p-value for the difference between the experimental group and the control group was 0.002 and 0.000 respectively which are less than 0.05, and it means that these differences were significant (Table 3).

#### 4.2. Results of the Different Kinds of Noticing Happening in Different Episodes of Dictogloss Technique

##### 4.2.1. Simple Noticing

Looking at the frequency of answers to the first question of the reporting paper given to the dictogloss group, it was clear that most of the learners opted for the second item which referred to the second episode of the dictogloss. As indicated, the frequency of answers to the first question was as follows: 10 percent (2 person) of the students chose the first episode, 75% (15 person) the second



episode and 15% (3 person) chose the first episode. Considering the frequency of answers, it was concluded that simple noticing happened at the second episode of the dictogloss technique in an academic EFL context (Table 4 and Figure 2).

Table 4: Frequency of Simple Noticing Occurring at Different Episodes of Dictogloss Technique

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Third episode	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Second episode	15	75.0	75.0	85.0
	First episode	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

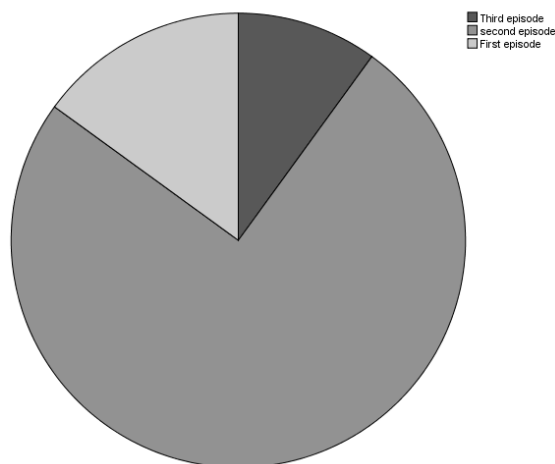


Figure 2: Frequency of Simple Noticing Occurring at Different Episodes of Dictogloss Technique

#### 4.2.2. Noticing the Gap

Some sixty-five percent of replies indicated agreement with the fourth episode of dictogloss technique. As indicated in Table 5, some thirteen out of twenty students went for the fourth episode as the episode in which they noticed the gap between their own interlanguage and the target language. Taking a short look at Figure 3 also confirms that noticing the gap happened at the fourth episode of instruction in the dictogloss technique in which they compared their own reconstructed writing with that of the source text.

Table 5: Frequency of Noticing the Gap Occurring at Different Episodes of Dictogloss Technique

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Forth episode	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
	Third episode	3	15.0	15.0	80.0
	Second episode	2	10.0	10.0	90.0
	First episode	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

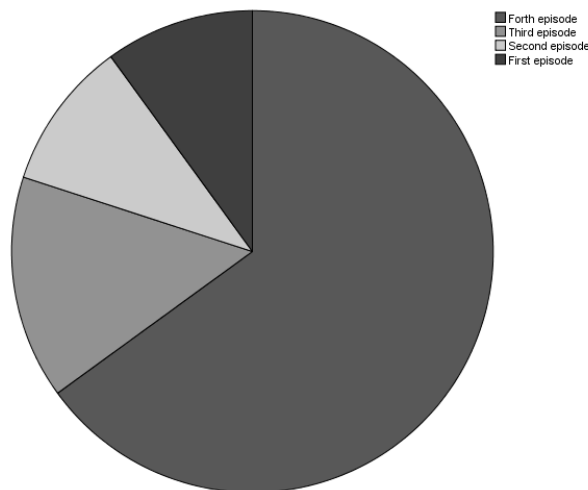


Figure 3: Frequency of Noticing the Gap Occurring at Different Episodes of Dictogloss Technique

4.2.3. Noticing a hole

In some episodes or episodes of focus on form instruction, the learners might have noticed some holes between their interlanguage and the target language, i.e. they found out that they were not able to transfer what was in their mind to the target language. According to the frequency of answers in Table 6, some sixty percent (60%) of learners – twelve out of twenty – experienced this kind of noticing in third episode. The other episodes were mentioned by just a few participants. The least choice was dedicated to the first episode which was just two percent (2%) and three percent (3%) of answers was dedicated to the fourth and second episodes (table 6 and figure 4).

Table 6: Frequency of Noticing A Hole Occurring at Different Episodes of Dictogloss Technique

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Forth episode	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
Valid Third episode	12	60.0	60.0	75.0
Valid Second episode	3	15.0	15.0	90.0
Valid First episode	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

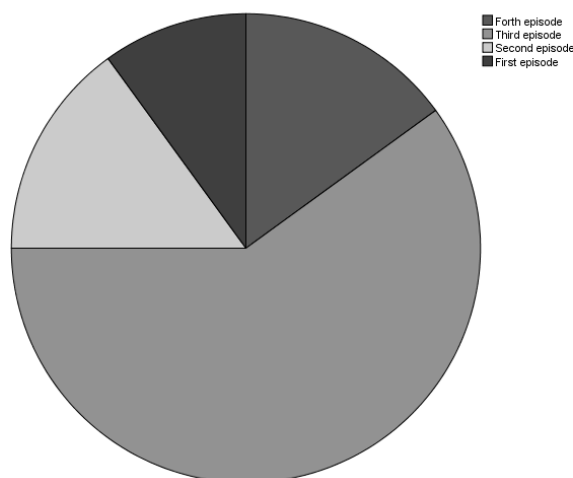


Figure 4: Frequency of Noticing A Hole Occurring at Differen Episodes of Dictogloss Technique

#### 4.3. Answering Research Questions

RQ1: Does the outcome of form-focused technique, dictogloss, with respect to specific constructions (the English passive voice) differ from that of traditional method in an Iranian EFL context? Comparing the mean scores of the posttest gained by the experimental group with that of the control group revealed a significant difference between them: the mean score of the posttest for the control group (group 1) =18.65, the mean score of posttest for the experimental group (group 2) =23.60 (Table 1 and Table 2). The significant difference between the performances of the groups in the posttest is also illustrated by the results of the multiple comparisons (Table 3). It can be observed that the experimental group outperformed the control group and this difference was statistically significant ( $p=.000$ ) at the 0.05 level of significance ( $p<\alpha$ ). This preeminence in the performance of the experimental group is a motive to reject the null hypothesis and take the form-focused instruction using dictogloss as more efficient than the traditional teachings.

RQ2: Do all kinds of noticing (simple noticing, noticing the gap and noticing a hole) happen when the dictogloss technique is conducted in an EFL learning class? Looking at the results of statistical analysis, it is clear that all the kinds of noticing happened in dictogloss technique. They also showed the occurrence of the three kinds of noticing in different episodes of the dictogloss. The significant point was the different episodes of the instruction in which these noticings happened. These results led us to reject the null hypothesis which claimed that some (not all) kinds of noticing occur in dictogloss technique. For a detailed response, we should say that simple noticing in which the participants simply noticed the existence of a special form in target language – which was English passive voice in our study – happened in second episode of the dictogloss technique. In this episode the learners took their notes while the teacher read the source text to them. The second type of noticing in which the learners noticed the gap between their interlanguage and the target language occurred at the last episode of the class when they compared their own reconstructed text with the source text. And noticing a hole occurred at the third episode which was before noticing the gap.

RQ3: In which episode of dictogloss technique does the ‘simple noticing’ happen? As mentioned before, according to the results of statistical analysis done with SPSS, it became clear that the participants experienced this type of noticing in the second episode of the class. In other words, most of the learners (75% which is 15 out of 20 persons) simply noticed the target form when the teacher was reading the source text to them. They noticed that most of the verbs used in the text were in the form of passive. Just two of them (10%) mentioned the third episode and three of them (15%) mentioned the first. These two groups were so smaller than the first mentioned group. Regardless of these two small groups, the majority of learners agreed on the second episode as the episode in which simple noticing had occurred. In this way, the null hypothesis was rejected and the researchers could confirm the hypothesis about simple noticing in dictogloss technique.

RQ4: In which episode of dictogloss technique does ‘noticing the gap’ happen? The results showed that noticing the gap occurred at the fourth episode of the class. As mentioned before, in this episode which is the last one the participants noticed the gap while comparing their own reconstructed texts with the source text. Thirteen out of twenty (65%) students claimed that this type of noticing occurred at the last (fourth) episode. Since the number of choices for the other episodes were not significant, it can be concluded that the probability of occurrence of this noticing at the fourth episode was more than the others. Three students (15%) chose the third episode, two of them (10%) the first and two (10%) others the second one. All these data helped the researchers support the alternative hypothesis and thus reject the null hypothesis.

RQ5: In which episode of dictogloss technique does ‘noticing a hole’ happen? The null hypothesis was rejected by the agreement of the most of the participants on the third episode of dictogloss class. This agreement is also confirmed through comparing the number of students who chose the three other episodes. Three students (15%) agreed on fourth episode, three others (15%) on second and two of them (10%) on the first episode. All these analyses supported the idea that the probability of occurrence of noticing a hole at the third episode was higher than the other episodes. Therefore, our hypothesis about this type of noticing became true and it led us to reject the null hypothesis.

RQ6: What are university students' attitudes towards the dictogloss technique? The attitudes of the participants toward the technique were measured on a three point Likert scale with a choice of *not at all* (1), *so so* (2), and *a lot* (3). According to the frequencies of replies given to all the items of the attitude test by the participants made it clear that they rather did not have strong desire to do the task and had somehow negative stance to it than the control group. Negative attitudes of the university students toward the dictogloss technique is the indicator of the fact that this technique seemed not that much easy for them. It can also be concluded that the task complexity might lead to less interest and thus negative attitudes toward the task.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to find out if implementing focus on form instruction in teaching and learning English as a foreign language could affect Iranian university students' grammatical competence. The effectiveness of focus on form technique has been tested and confirmed in different contexts. Our milieu was an Iranian academic EFL context where the traditional methods of teaching and learning are usually favored and thus practiced. The findings indicated that the dictogloss technique might be efficient and may develop grammatical competence of the learners. Our research's objective was on three types of noticing and the time of their incidence in diverse episodes of the technique.

The experimental group that practiced the focus on form technique topped the control group by making significant gains on the posttest. In spite of the fact that, the students who participated in the control group developed in the posttest rather than the pretest, their improvement was not as much as the experimental group. It has already been established that attention plays a vital role in converting input into intake. The results of the present study also revealed the efficiency of dictogloss in development of grammatical competence, especially in an academic EFL context. Moreover, the occurrence of all types of noticing in different episodes of the technique was investigated and the results revealed that they all might happen in this technique.

Generally, 'simple noticing', which indicates noticing a particular form in a text or context, presented for the participants, happened at the second episode of the dictogloss technique. In this phase, the teacher read the text for the learners at a normal speed and they took their notes. The participants who took part in dictogloss technique noticed the difference between the structure and use of passive voice in Persian and English while they were comparing their own reconstructed writing with the source text. In other words, they noticed the gap between the two languages at the fourth episode of the instruction. 'Noticing a hole', which refers to the time when the learners noticed that they cannot transfer what is in their mind into the target language, occurred at the third episode of dictogloss technique.

Concerning the scores gained on the posttest, some noteworthy disparities appeared. The data analysis showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the posttest. It should be mentioned that the participants who took part in the two groups in terms of both proficiency level and background knowledge on English passive voice were homogenous. It was guaranteed from the scores of proficiency test and pretest that were run before administering the treatment. Our findings are supported by some other researches that have been carried out on the effectiveness of focus on form instruction. For instance, the efficiency of focus on form instruction was proved by [Muranoi \(2000\)](#) in an ESL context. The chief difference between the above-mentioned research and the present study was the context. Contrasting the previous research, our study was carried out in an academic EFL context to understand whether similar results could be attained. Additionally, our findings are in chief contrast with that of [Norris and Ortega \(2000\)](#) who proved a uniform outcome for both focus on form S and focus on form L2 instruction. [Skehan \(2003\)](#) believes that easy tasks can be performed with more control. Therefore, the superiority of focus on form group in the final phase – posttest – might somewhat be because of the relative easiness of the tasks.

According to Shak (2006), simple noticing and noticing the gap occur in dictogloss technique. Kuiken and Vedder (2002) elaborated on the two kinds of noticing that occurred in input

enhancement technique. They made a distinction between simple and elaborated noticing. By 'simple noticing' they referred to "passives which mentioned with more or less emphasis, but are not discussed by the students" (ibid. 350). In the second noticing, "passives are put into question, discussed and alternative structures may be proposed" (ibid. 350). Kuiken and Vedder (2002) concluded that although the learners were not making explicit rules about the use of structures – i.e. English passive voice in this study – they noticed the problems and thus became aware of the passive that occurred. This was drawn from the examples that were analyzed carefully to see if any type of noticing took place. The second kind of aforementioned noticings seems to be the same or at least close to the concept of noticing the gap. Our findings not only supported the findings of Kuiken and Vedder (2002) but also contributed new findings to it. The results of statistical analysis revealed that noticing a hole took place in addition to the two former noticings.

Simple noticing in which the learners simply notice a form in their target language (Gass, 1988, as cited in Swain, 1998) is the first level of noticing. Shak (2006) believes that noticing – regardless of the type – might take place probably in noticing stage. She also noted that it could also occur in some other stages. She introduced the noticing stage as the stage in which children listened to a short text read to them two times at normal speed. This claim is partly supported by our findings that indicated the occurrence of simple noticing in second episode of the class in which the teacher read the texts to the learners and they took their notes. It should be noted that this claim is based on the majority of choices of this episode done by the participants. The other episodes were also mentioned but their frequencies were not as much as the second one.

Most of the learners experienced this type of noticing in the fourth episode of the class in which they noticed the gap while comparing their own reconstructed texts with the source text. As put by Shak (2006, p. 49), "the noticing process does not only take place in the noticing stage". Our findings demonstrated that noticing the gap occurred in 'checking stage' which was known as the fourth episode of the class in our study. This claim does not necessarily reject that of Shak's about the time of occurrence of noticing the gap in dictogloss technique since some differences exist between the contexts and implementation of the technique in both studies. According to Shak (2006, p. 49), "it is at the comparison phase in activity when their attention is directed to notice the disparity between the target language and their own output that the process of noticing the gap is activated". In some other contexts, the same noticing may take place in some episodes or stages other than what we identified in our study. It is notable to say that it may also be different for some contexts which are different from the context of this study.

The majority of learners agreed on the third episode as the time when they noticed a hole between their own interlanguage and the target language. In this episode, the learners reconstructed the text with their partners in their groups. Some of the learners who were interviewed after the class pointed out that they couldn't restate some parts of the story in English while reconstructing the text. This episode is the same as the 'activity stage' mentioned by Shak (2006). As mentioned before, different results may be enhanced in some other contexts that differ from ours in terms of some features. Thus, more studies are needed to see if the features of context affect the time when these noticings take place.

Comparing the mean scores and standard deviations of each question in this technique indicated negative attitudes toward the dictogloss task. One of the factors that led to less positive attitude toward this technique might be its similarity with playing a game or its long duration that made it unsuitable for academic contexts. This claim can be true according to the results of the research done by Shak (2006) in which this activity was so liked by children that found it like playing a game. As contended by Branden (2007), focus on form techniques can be useful for language learning, however, their degree of effectiveness may vary based on some variables such as the learners' level of proficiency, their age or their attitudes. To this end, the present study explored the relation between the learners' attitudes concerning the focus on form technique and their success in strengthening of grammatical competence and performance.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study can be useful for second and foreign language learning and teaching in that it revealed the superiority of dictogloss technique of focus on form approach over the traditional one, i.e. focus on formS, in development of grammatical competence by the learners. The effectiveness of dictogloss, especially while using it with young learners, has yet to be fully investigated (Shak, 2006). As mentioned above, dictogloss technique with more participants over different levels of proficiency and in long durations are in need of further investigation. Some similar studies are needed to be done on the other techniques proposed by focus on form approach rather than the one investigated in this study. The results should be compared with each other to see what techniques are more effective in development of grammatical competence.

The features such as age, background knowledge and even gender of the participants that may affect the results of such studies should be investigated carefully. Conducting the same study in a non-academic context such as private language learning institutes or even schools (elementary, secondary or high schools) may lead to different results. Considering the findings of this study and that of Doughty and Williams (1998b) who believed in appropriateness of focus on form not for all forms for all learners all the time, it is needed to do more investigations on the effects of focus on form on teaching and learning different forms and with different learners. In the case of noticing, a more detailed analysis of each noticing and their occurrences in different episodes of the techniques should be done in different contexts with different participants and also with different texts. Attitudes of different learners toward the different techniques of focus on form can also be investigated to see what techniques motivate what kind of learners more.

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