



# An Investigation of the Differential Effects of Visual Input Enhancement on the Vocabulary Learning of Iranian EFL Learners

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effect of visual input enhancement on the vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners. One hundred and thirty-two EFL learners from elementary, intermediate and advanced proficiency levels were assigned to six groups, two groups at each proficiency level with one being an experimental and the other a control group. The study employed pretests, treatment reading texts, and posttests. T-test was used for the analysis of the data. The results revealed positive effects for visual input enhancement in the advanced level based on within group and between groups' comparisons. However this positive effect was not found for the elementary and intermediate levels based on between groups' comparisons. It was concluded that although visual input enhancement may have beneficial effects for elementary and intermediate levels, it is much more effective for the advanced EFL learners. This study may provide useful guiding principles for EFL teachers and syllabus designers.

**Keywords:** Focus on form, Focus on forms, Focus on meaning, EFL learners, Noticing, Visual input enhancement

## 1. Introduction

The question of whether and how to include 'grammar' of a language in L2 teaching is considered to be one of the main issues raised by the researchers in second language acquisition (SLA). The debate on the degree of teacher or learner attention which is needed to be directed to the linguistic features and aspects has a long history (Doughty & Williams, 1998a). Traditionally, parts of language were taught in a step by step way and there was a process of gradual gathering of the parts of language until the complete structure was built up, and at any one time the learners were provided with a limited sample of language (Wilkins, 1976). But teachers and learners in the field of language teaching recognized that something was wrong with this view of language teaching, and there was a general belief that these traditional *synthetic* teaching procedures did not work well (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Gradually, there was the recognition in the field of SLA that people from different age groups learn languages best, in natural or classroom settings, not by studying the language as an object, but as a medium for the purpose of communication (ibid.). Wilkins (1976) termed this approach *analytic* and argued that analytic approach is organized in terms of the purposes which are important for the people in learning language and the kinds of language related acts that are necessary for their intended purposes. Synthetic approach includes only a focus on the formal elements and aspects of a language, while analytic approach excludes the focus on the formal aspects. On the basis of their focuses, synthetic and analytic approaches respectively deal with the *focus on forms* and *focus on meaning* instructions.

But results of some studies (Harley & Swain, 1984) show that when the teaching of a foreign or second language is completely meaning focused, some linguistic aspects of the language do not develop to target-like levels and are fossilized. On the basis of such studies and the deficiencies of both the focus on forms and focus on meaning instructions, there is the belief that some kind of incidental focus on the linguistic elements of the language is necessary to improve the interlanguages of second language learners and push them toward target-like second language ability (Doughty & Williams, 1998a). Because of its advantage of including communication-oriented attention to form and its efficiency in pushing the language learning process of second language learners to native-like levels, this approach which is called *focus on form* instruction, is regarded to be a more promising pedagogical choice than the previous approaches which had only a one-dimensional focus on either form or meaning. Long (1991) made a distinction between focus on forms and focus on form, and argued that the main point is that, focus on form involves a prerequisite focus on the meaning of language and communication before attention to linguistic elements can be expected to be effective and beneficial.

Many experimental studies have investigated the effects of focus on form instruction on the language acquisition of classroom learners (e.g. Alcon, 2007; Cho & Lee, 2007 ; Farrokhi, Ansarin, & Mohammadnia, 2008; Mohammadnia & Gholami, 2008), but there has not been enough research on the effectiveness of focus on form instruction across different proficiency levels in foreign language classrooms. This study by comparing the results of focus on form instruction in elementary ,intermediate, and advanced level classrooms tries to find out the level in which focus on form instruction is more effective, and by doing so highlights the most suitable level for providing focus on form instruction in Iranian EFL classrooms.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

### 2.1 Communicative Language Teaching

Richards and Rogers (2001), argue that, a major shift of paradigm in the field of second/ foreign language teaching started with the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). They further noted that, CLT which is considered to be an approach rather than a method has changed the goal of language teaching from linguistic competence to communicative competence and involves different teaching procedures for the teaching of the four traditional language skills in a way that integrates the formal aspects of language and its communication-based functions. Finally they concluded that, the 'Communicative Approach' in language teaching involves a theory of communication regarding its theory of language. Howatt, (1984) made a distinction between a strong and a weak form of CLT. According to him, the strong form involves using the language in communication in order to learn it, and the weak form involves learning to use the language in communication. Among the approaches that follow the strong form of CLT, the 'Natural Approach' (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) along with one of its important hypotheses which is 'Comprehensible Input Hypothesis' (Krashen, 1985, 1994) has attracted a lot of attention in the field of foreign/second language teaching.

### 2.2 Comprehensible Input Hypothesis

The foundation of 'Comprehensible Input Hypothesis' (Krashen, 1985, 1994) is based on the Krashen's (1981) 'Monitor theory'. Krashen (1981) argued that, learners have an 'acquired system' and a 'learned system' which are completely separate from each other. The acquired system is developed through '*acquisition*' which is considered to be a subconscious process and is enacted by using the language for the purpose of communication. The learned system is developed through '*learning*' which is a process of focusing conscious attention to the language in order to understand and learn it. The 'Comprehensible Input Hypothesis' involves only the acquired system along with its relevant process which is acquisition, and states that second language learners progress according to the 'natural order' of language learning by comprehending input that involves the structures which are a little bit beyond their current interlanguage system ( $i+1$ ).

There have been a number of criticisms about the claims of 'Comprehensible Input Hypothesis'. According to Ellis (2008), the major problem about this hypothesis is that Krashen paid little attention to what comprehension means, and what type of processes in the act of comprehending are essential for acquisition. Færch and Kasper (1986) argued that, the existence of gaps between the provided input and the learners' interlanguage system and, the learners' perception of these gaps as actual gaps in their language knowledge, will lead to acquisition. Thus as Gass (1988) pointed out, instead of comprehensible input *comprehended input* is important for the learners' second language acquisition.

### 2.3 Noticing Hypothesis

Considering the theoretical criticisms of 'Comprehensible Input Hypothesis' (e.g., White, 1987), and the practical deficiencies in its application in second/foreign language classrooms, Schmidt (1990) argued that conscious attention to the formal aspects of language, or what he termed 'noticing,' is essential for language acquisition to take place. He further claimed that, awareness of the form of language at the level of 'noticing' which can be called 'consciousness' is essential for the acquisition of the second/foreign language. This claim is in contradiction with Krashen's (1981) 'Dual System Hypothesis' according to which second language acquisition is based on an unconscious/ subconscious acquired system, and the role of the conscious learned system is very limited and peripheral in this process (Robinson, 1995).

### 2.4 Focus on Forms Instruction

According to Long and Robinson (1998), in focus on forms instruction, the language is broken down into its constituents, which may involve vocabulary items, collocations, morphemes, phonemes and so forth, based on the language analyst's preferences about linguistic aspects of language. They further argued that, the items which are the result of these analyses are then ordered based on some criteria like frequency, difficulty, or valence, as prescriptive models to language learners in a linear, cumulative fashion. This is what Wilkins (1976) called synthetic syllabus. She argued that in a synthetic syllabus the language is taught in a step by step way and there is a process of gradual gathering of the parts of language until the complete structure is built up, and at any one time the learners are provided with a limited sample of language. According to Long and Robinson (1998), the learner's role in synthetic syllabi is to synthesize the individual pieces of language to form a unified whole to be used for the purpose of communication. They conclude that, synthetic syllabi, along with their related materials, methodological procedures, and classroom pedagogical considerations, involve language teaching with a focus on forms.

### 2.5 Focus on Meaning Instruction

Over the years a gradual recognition of the deficiency of the synthetic syllabi and their related methodological procedures, along with the consideration of the findings of the studies about language instruction stimulated many

language teachers and syllabus designers, and SLA theorists, to advocate a meaning-based instruction instead of focus on the formal aspects of the L2 in language classrooms (Long & Robinson, 1998). There has been the claim that, learning an L2 *implicitly* (i.e., without consciousness) or *incidentally* (i.e., without any intention for learning) through the comprehensible language input is sufficient for second or foreign language acquisition for adult language learners, just as it is for the first language acquisition by children (ibid).

According to Long and Robinson (1998), the main aims of focus on meaning instruction are to use language for actual life situations, to bring meaning to the learners' attention instead of form, and to emphasize fluency in communication rather than accuracy in production. They further argued that, focus on meaning is a communication-based approach to second/ foreign language teaching/learning which gives little attention to the learning of individual discrete points of language.

### 2.6 Focus on Form Instruction

The advocates of focus on forms and focus on meaning instructions are inclined to treat the problems and deficiencies of their rival position as supporting evidence for the superiority of their own position, but none of these approaches provides the satisfactory results which are expected by the practitioners in language teaching. Fortunately a third choice, which tries to maintain the strengths of the analytic approach while dealing with its deficiencies, is focus on form (Long, 1991). Long and Robinson (1998, p.23) stated that, "during a meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher and/or one or more of the students, triggered by a perceived problem with comprehension or production". In focus on form instruction the learners' main focus of attention is on the meaning, and the attention to form arises as a result of meaning-based language performance in a communicative task (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002). According to Long (1991) focus on form instruction is a kind of instruction in which the importance of the principles of CLT like authentic communication is maintained, and also the incidental and explicit study of the L2 grammatical forms is valued.

### 2.7 Visual Input Enhancement

Doughty and Williams (1998b) argued that, the target forms that the students are provided with in using visual input enhancement have different textual properties which aim to make these forms more salient for language learners and help them in noticing these forms and making connections between the forms of language and their meanings. They further argued that, visual input enhancement is considered to be an implicit technique which aims to attract learners' attention to the forms included in the learners' written input through the use of different methods of textual manipulation.

### 2.8 Information Processing Theory

VanPatten (1996) introduced Information Processing Theory according to which the capacity of working memory is limited which makes it difficult for learners to attend simultaneously to various stimuli in the input. He further argued that the main issue for the learners during online processing is allocating their attentional resources and the theory examines the reasons for the detection of certain stimuli in the input by the learners rather than others. According to him the two main information processing principles include: a) The input is processed by the learners for meaning before it is processed for form; b) For form to be processed by the learners the meaning of that form should be processed without any computational load.

### 2.9 Threshold Level Hypothesis

The threshold level hypothesis (Cummins, 1976, 1979) is one of the noticeable theories which tries to investigate the effects of bilingual competence in second language learning. According to Cummins (1976) the threshold level may be different based on the cognitive level of the second language learner and his/her school-related needs. Based on these principles, Cummins argued that a certain threshold proficiency level is required in the second language for skilled first language learners to transfer their first language reading strategies into L2.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study the following research questions were proposed:

Question 1: Does visual input enhancement have any significant effect on the vocabulary learning of elementary EFL learners?

Question 2: Does visual input enhancement have any significant effect on the vocabulary learning of intermediate EFL learners?

Question 3: Does visual input enhancement have any significant effect on the vocabulary learning of advanced EFL learners?

### 3.2 Participants

One hundred and thirty-two EFL learners at three different proficiency levels from Urmia branch of Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR) took part in this study. They were all male, ranging in age from 16 to 38. All the participants had one year to four years of English studies at ACECR. They were all from Iran and spoke Turkish as their first language. At the time of the study (summer 2013) the learners were selected for the study and divided on

the basis of the results of a placement test to elementary, intermediate and advanced proficiency levels with forty-four learners in each proficiency level.

### 3.3 Context of the Study

Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR) is a public non-governmental institution in Iran, which was founded in 1980. This institution aims to promote technology and science, education, culture, and entrepreneurship in various parts of the country. The head-quarter of this institution is located in Tehran with teaching centers in 26 provinces, 40 cities and 70 institutes across the country. This institution provides both long-term and short-term learning courses in different fields of science. Foreign language courses are among the short-term courses which are provided by this institution. This institution offers language courses to hundreds of learners across the country in Russian, English, French, German, Spanish, and Arabic. There are 7000 learners in Urmia branch of this institution with 80 instructors who are selected on the basis of both written and oral exams accompanied with a teaching ability demonstration.

### 3.4 Instruments

The following instruments were used in this study:

#### 3.4.1 Homogeneity Test

In order to ensure that the study is valid, it is necessary to guarantee the participants' homogeneity before conducting the research. Because this study included three different proficiency levels it was essential to make sure that participants were placed in appropriate levels on the basis of their language proficiency. For this reason Objective Placement Test, from *New Interchange Passages Placement and Evaluation Package* (Lesley, Hansen, & Zukowski/Faust, 2003) was employed. This homogeneity test was comprised of four parts. The first part (Listening) consisted of twenty recorded items. The second part (Grammar) had a total of thirty items. The third part (Vocabulary) included a total number of thirty items, and the final part (Reading) consisted of twenty items.

#### 3.4.2 Pretests

Three 50-multiple choice item pretests (one for each proficiency level) comprising of the vocabulary questions made by the researcher based on the enhanced vocabulary items in the treatment texts were chosen to investigate the learners' knowledge of the vocabulary items enhanced in the treatment texts for each proficiency level before the treatment. The pretests were administered one week after the homogeneity test and one week before the administration of the treatment texts. The learners in each proficiency level were supposed to answer the pretest questions in 50 minutes during their regular class time.

#### 3.4.3 Reading Texts

The researcher of this study used ten reading texts for each proficiency level. All of the texts were selected from *Steps to Understanding* (Hill, 1980) which is a book that provides reading comprehension texts for different proficiency levels. All the texts were nearly 150 words in length and were modified by enhancing (boldfacing & underlining) five specific vocabulary items in each text for the three experimental groups, one group at each proficiency level. But no special treatment (visual input enhancement) was provided for the three control groups at different levels.

#### 3.4.4 Posttests

In order to investigate the effect of visual enhancement of the vocabulary items in reading texts across different proficiency levels, three posttests, one for each proficiency level, were administered one week after the end of the administration of the treatment reading texts. Each of the posttests included 50 multiple choice vocabulary questions based on the enhanced vocabulary items in treatment texts. Different sets of questions from the pretests were developed for the posttests based on the intended enhanced vocabulary items to eliminate any risk of practice effect. The administration of each posttest took fifty minutes in each level.

### 3.5 Design

Typically, the studies of focus on form instruction include a pretest, exposure to the forms of the second language which are intended to be learned, and a posttest, which aims to see whether learners noticed the L2 forms or not (Leow, 1997). In this study, too, the researcher in order to increase the validity of the study and to fulfill its objectives, tried to employ randomization along with pretests, treatment reading texts and posttests. Therefore the design of the present study was quasi-experimental. The present study also consisted of one independent variable that is, visual input enhancement, and three dependent variables, vocabulary learning in elementary level, vocabulary learning in intermediate level, and vocabulary learning in advanced level.

### 3.6 Procedure

In this study effort was made to select the samples of the study randomly. Because this study included three proficiency levels a placement test was administered to place the learners in appropriate levels and also to guarantee the homogeneity of the learners in each proficiency level. Based on the results of the placement test 132 learners were assigned to elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels with 44 learners in elementary, 44 learners in intermediate and 44 learners in the advanced level. Then care was taken to randomly assign 44 learners in each proficiency levels to two groups, one experimental group with 22 learners and one control group with 22 learners. So the study totally included six groups, two groups in each proficiency level with one of the groups being experimental and the other one

being the control group. And the number of the learners being equally 22 in all the experimental and control groups across all the levels.

Before the administration of the pretests, the treatment texts, and the posttests for the different levels, all of them were piloted with twenty-two EFL learners at each proficiency level to detect any problems. The reliability and validity of all the pretests and posttests were determined and found to be acceptable and some misspellings and wrong punctuations in the texts were found and corrected before the main administration. Then the pretests were administered to provide the researcher with the necessary information about the participants' vocabulary knowledge before the administration of the enhanced vocabulary items in the reading texts at each proficiency level. One week after the administration of the pretests, treatment reading texts were administered to all the groups in different levels during five weeks, two sessions each week, each session one text, with the experimental groups in different levels receiving the treatment texts with the visually enhanced vocabulary items but the control groups receiving the treatment texts without any kind of visually enhanced forms.

#### 4. Data Analysis

Based on the research questions and the design of the study, two types of T-tests (Independent Samples T-test & Paired T-test) were used to analyze the data and also to answer the following research questions:

Question 1: Does visual input enhancement have any significant effect on the vocabulary learning of elementary EFL learners?

Table 4.1 Performance of the Elementary Experimental Group in Pretest and Posttest

Elementary Experimental Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	34.59	22	3.813	.813
Posttest	37.64	22	3.215	.685

Table 4.1 shows the performance of the elementary experimental group in the pretest and the posttest. This group displays a bigger mean score in the posttest ( $M= 37.64$ ) than the pretest ( $M= 34.59$ ). But the key question is that whether this difference reaches statistical significance or not. Therefore a Paired T-test was employed to test this question. Because the probability figure—marked as 'Sig.' for this group was smaller than 0.05, (it was .000), the difference can be regarded as significant. This significant difference is better shown in Figure 4.1.

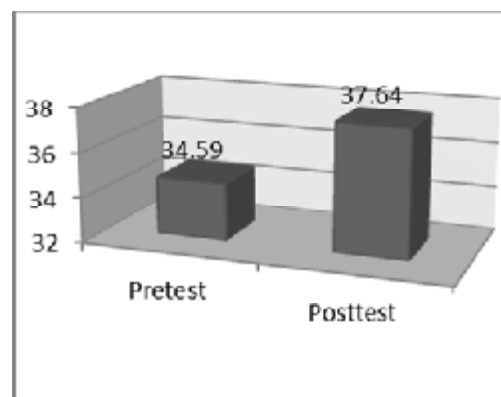


Figure 4.1 Performance of the Elementary Experimental Group in Pretest and Posttest

Comparing the mean score of the elementary experimental and control groups is another strategy that can be used to judge about the effectiveness of the lexical visual enhancement. Table 4.2 shows that the mean score of the experimental group was (37.64) and the mean score for the control group was (36.91) and this means that the learners in the experimental group performed better in their posttest than the learners in the control group.

Table 4.2 Comparison between Vocabulary Performance of the Elementary Experimental and Control Groups

Elementary Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental Group	22	37.64	3.215	.685
Control Group	22	36.91	3.146	.671

An Independent Samples T-test was employed to test whether the difference between the performances of the elementary experimental and control groups was significant or not. Because the probability figure marked as 'Sig.' for these groups was more than 0.05 (it was 0.452) the difference between their performances cannot be considered to be

significant. The lack of significant difference between the performances of these groups is depicted graphically in Figure 4.2.

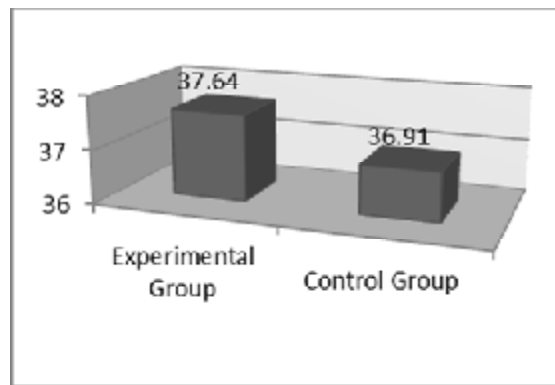


Figure 4.2 Comparison between the Performance of the Elementary Experimental and Control Groups

Therefore it can be argued that, the visual enhancement of vocabulary items was effective on the elementary experimental group's learning, but it wasn't found effective when a comparison was made between the elementary experimental and control groups.

Question 2: Does visual input enhancement have any significant effect on the vocabulary learning of intermediate EFL learners?

Considering the performance of the intermediate experimental group in the pretest ( $M=31.27$ ) and posttest ( $M=34.05$ ), Table 4.3 displays a bigger mean score in the posttest than the pretest for this group.

Table 4.3 Performance of the Intermediate Experimental Group in Pretest and Posttest

Intermediate Experimental Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	31.27	22	2.865	.611
Posttest	34.05	22	2.968	.633

To see if this difference reaches a statistical significance, a Matched T-test was employed. Because the probability figure marked as 'Sig.' for this group was less than 0.05, (it was .000), the difference is regarded to be significant. This significant difference between the performance of the intermediate experimental group in the pretest and posttest is diagrammatically presented Figure 4.3.

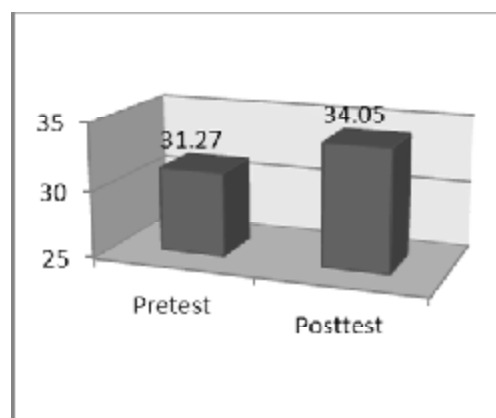


Figure 4.3 Performance of the Intermediate Experimental Group in Pretest and Posttest

In order to further investigate the effectiveness of the visual enhancement of vocabulary items, a comparison was also made between the intermediate experimental and control groups regarding their performance in the posttest. Table 4.4 shows that the mean score for intermediate experimental group was (34.05) and for the intermediate control group was (33.00). This means that the learners in the experimental group performed better in their posttest than the learners in the control group.

Table 4.4 Comparison between the Vocabulary Performance of the Intermediate Experimental and Control Groups

Intermediate Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental Group	22	34.05	2.968	.633
Control Group	22	33.00	3.071	.655

To test whether the difference between the intermediate experimental and control groups is significant or not an Independent Samples T-test was employed. Because the probability figure marked as 'Sig.' was larger than 0.05 (it was 0.257) this difference is not considered to be statistically significant. The lack of significant difference between the performances of the intermediate experimental and control groups is provided diagrammatically in Figure 4.4.

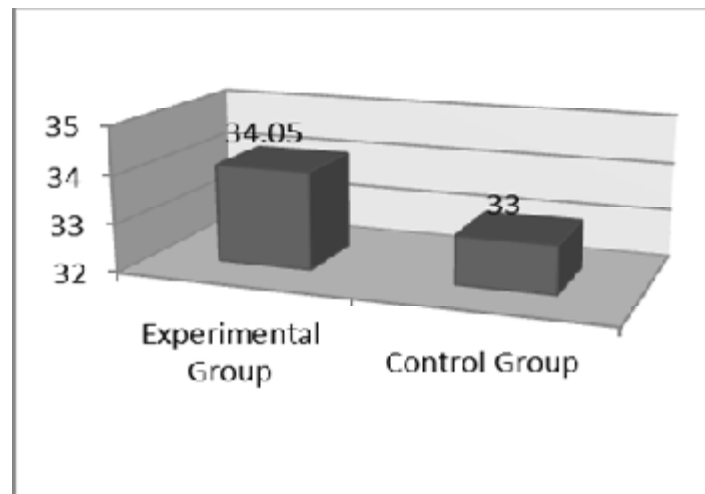


Figure 4.4 Comparison between the Performance of the Intermediate Experimental and Control Groups

Therefore based on these results it can be argued that, visual enhancement of vocabulary items led to better vocabulary learning among the intermediate experimental groups' participants, but this positive effect was not found when a comparison was made between the intermediate experimental and control groups' vocabulary performances.

Question 3: Does visual input enhancement have any significant effect on the vocabulary learning of advanced EFL learners?

Table 4.5 shows that the mean score of vocabulary questions answered correctly by the advanced experimental group in the pretest (M= 33.27) was smaller than the mean score of this group in the posttest (M= 36.73). This means that the advanced experimental group performed better in the posttest than the pretest.

Table 4.5 Performance of the Advanced Experimental Group in Pretest and Posttest

Advanced Experimental Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	33.27	22	2.640	.563
Posttest	36.73	22	3.120	.665

To investigate if this difference reaches a statistical significance, a Paired T-test was employed. Because the probability figure marked as 'Sig.' was less than 0.05, (it was .000), the difference between the performance of the advanced experimental group in the pretest and posttest can be regarded as significant. This significant difference between the performance of the advanced experimental group in the pretest and posttest is depicted diagrammatically in Figure 4.5.

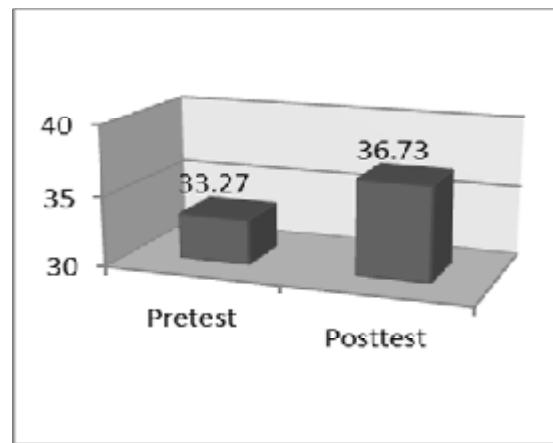


Figure 4.5 Performance of the Advanced Experimental Group in Pretest and Posttest

But in order to further investigate and make sure that the visual input enhancement was effective, the performance of the advanced experimental group was compared with the performance of the advanced control group regarding their posttest scores. Table 4.6 shows that the mean score for the advanced experimental group was (36.73) and the mean score for the control group was (34.14). This means that the learners in the advanced experimental group performed better in their posttest than the learners in the advanced control group.

Table 4.6 Comparison between the Vocabulary Performance of the Advanced Experimental and Control Groups

Advanced Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental Group	22	36.73	3.120	.665
Control Group	22	34.14	3.655	.779

To further test whether the difference between the advanced experimental and control groups is significant or not an Independent Samples T-test was used. Because the probability figure marked as 'Sig.' was smaller than 0.05 (it was 0.015), the difference between the performance of the advanced experimental and control groups can be considered as significant. This significant difference between the vocabulary performance of the advanced experimental and control groups is diagrammatically presented in Figure 4.6.

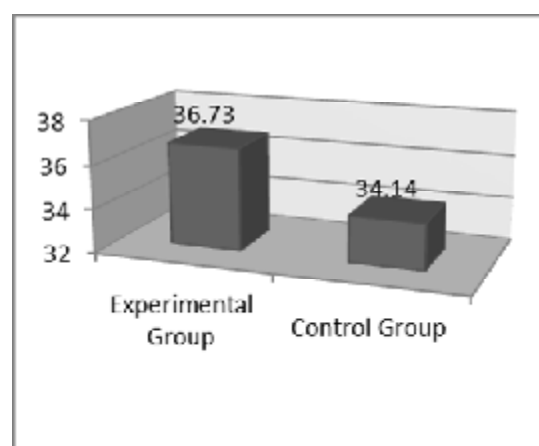


Figure 4.6 Comparison between the Performance of the Advanced Experimental and Control Groups

Therefore based on these results, it can be argued that, visual enhancement of the vocabulary items led to better vocabulary learning among the advanced experimental group's participants and also was found to be effective when a comparison was made between the advanced experimental and control groups' vocabulary performances.

## 5. Discussion

Regarding all of the research questions, the findings of the present study revealed that, visual enhancement of vocabulary items was effective for vocabulary learning for all the experimental groups in different proficiency levels based on the within groups' comparisons. The results show that, the learners' attention in all the experimental groups



was directed to the visually enhanced vocabulary items in reading texts. In other words, visual input enhancement increased the likelihood of noticing the target vocabulary items in the input by the participants in all of the experimental groups, which according to Schmidt (1990) is an essential prerequisite for input to become intake and determines further language learning. The results regarding the third research question also revealed that visual enhancement of vocabulary items was effective for the vocabulary learning of the advanced experimental group on the basis of between the groups' comparison. That is, comparing the vocabulary performance of the advanced experimental and control groups, visual enhancement of the vocabulary items was found to be more effective for the advanced experimental group.

Even though the findings revealed that all participants in the three experimental groups improved in their ability to use the vocabulary items correctly, some factors that may have caused the reduction of between groups' differences in elementary and intermediate levels in this study are discussed:

Cummins (1976, 1979) proposed the 'Threshold Hypothesis' according to which in second language learning, before the use of the language as an academic tool becomes beneficial for the learner, his/her proficiency in that language must reach a certain minimum 'threshold' level. And Van Patten (1996) regarding 'Information Processing Theory', suggested a limited-capacity view of working memory according to which beginner learners, have difficulty in simultaneously attending to meaning and form and as a result give priority to one over the other. He further argued that attending to form becomes possible when understanding the input is easy and when processing meaning is the main aim of the learners.

On the basis of these hypotheses, as Williams (1999) argued, it appears that the learners, which are at the lower proficiency levels do not focus on the formal elements of language frequently because they are not able to do it. The reason is that, these lower-level learners are challenged even in maintaining the processing of meaning and as a result are unable to focus on the formal aspects of language to the same degree like the learners in higher levels of proficiency. She further argued that, as the learners become more proficient, they benefit more from the attention to formal aspects of language because this attention only becomes possible through higher proficiency in language. This could be the reason behind the reduction of differences between the experimental and the control groups in elementary and intermediate proficiency levels. Because of the lower proficiency of the learners in the experimental groups in elementary and intermediate levels, they were not able to attend to the enhanced vocabulary items and as a result the differences between these groups and control groups in these levels was reduced.

White (1998) argued that, despite the general agreement about the role of attention in facilitating the process through which input becomes intake, the role played by conscious awareness and the degree of attention which is needed for second language acquisition are still controversial issues in SLA. Schmidt (1990) argued that 'noticing' which may be defined as conscious attention to the formal aspects of language, is an essential prerequisite for learning the language. Schmidt (2001) argued that, attention is vital in understanding all the aspects of SLA. He further argued that directing the learners' attention to the formal aspects of the language which has the effect of an increased awareness of these forms leads to noticing which is sufficient for successful acquisition of the second language.

However, contrary to the claims made by Schmidt (1990), Tomlin and Villa (1994) argued that, instead of awareness, the central component of attention is detection, and despite the role of awareness in the facilitation of detection, it is not necessary for its occurrence. In this study vocabulary items were made visually more salient in order to increase the likelihood for the learners to notice them which according to Schmidt (1990) has a beneficial role in increasing the chance for their acquisition. Although visual input enhancement of forms might have increased the learners' ability in noticing the forms, it may not have been sufficient for their detection and subsequent acquisition to take place for elementary and intermediate learners. Therefore another reason for the reduction of differences between experimental and control groups in elementary and intermediate levels might be that they were not able to detect and learn vocabulary items in the reading texts.

Doughty and Williams (1998b) argue that one of the efficient implicit techniques in attracting the learners' attention to formal aspects of the written input is visual enhancement of the input, and Doughty and Valera (1998) argue that this technique is considered to be the least intrusive method and the most implicit technique of focus on form instruction. In this study too, for ensuring the implicitness of visual enhancement of the input, the researchers tried to avoid any explicit way of focusing the learners' attention to the target forms, such as discussing the purpose of visual input enhancement with the students or explicitly directing their attention to these forms. The findings of the study, along with the quantitative analysis, show that as Fotos (1993) argued, perhaps a more explicit technique like explicit rule explanation may be more beneficial at the lower levels of proficiency rather than the implicit visual input enhancement.

White (1998) argued that individual differences among the learners can be regarded as factors which affect the learners' responses to focus on form instruction. This fact may also account for the reduced differences among experimental and control groups in elementary and intermediate levels. Some learners in the experimental elementary and intermediate groups may have been more successful with more explicit techniques of instruction and their inability in understanding the purpose of visual input enhancement might have been the reason of their poor performances.

It is argued that visual input enhancement, alone or along with extensive activities of listening or reading may be similar to unenhanced input for the learners (Doughty & Williams, 1998b; White, 1998). In this study because the researchers tried to avoid directing the learners' attention to the target forms by the use of more explicit techniques, there is the possibility that visual enhancement of the vocabulary items was vague for the experimental groups in the elementary

and intermediate levels. Therefore, they did not understand the purpose of enhancement and as a result did not detect the vocabulary items, which according to Tomlin and Villa (1994) is essential for subsequent second language acquisition.

Finally, it is essential to consider the test effects along with the instruments which were employed in the study. It can be argued that the administration of pretests and posttests in elementary and intermediate levels attracted the attention of the learners in control groups to the gaps in their language knowledge and as a result led to the increased salience of enhanced forms in the treatment reading tests and by doing so stimulated these learners to choose the correct item in the posttest just because they were familiar with the same item in the pretest. Therefore practice effect might have enabled the control groups in both elementary and intermediate levels to obtain nearly similar results to the experimental groups in these levels.

Therefore, it appears that a number of factors, including the low proficiency level of the learners, the lack of detection of the enhanced vocabulary items, the low degree of the explicitness of the focus on form technique, individual differences between the learners, and instruments and test effects might have caused the reduction in the differences between the experimental and control groups in elementary and intermediate levels.

## 6. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

This study did not take the learners' age into account, did not include female learners and also did not investigate the effect of visual input enhancement on EFL learners' grammar learning. It is suggested that future research could include larger samples with both male and female learners and also take the learners' age and individual differences into account. In addition, future research could try to answer which techniques of focus on form are more effective in different levels and also could investigate the effect of visual input enhancement on both vocabulary and grammar learning of EFL learners.

## 7. Conclusion

On the basis of the results of the present study as Long and Robinson (1998) pointed out, it can be concluded that, in order to reach a complete mastery and a native-like competence in all the aspects of the second language neither a focus on forms instruction nor a complete meaning-based instruction alone is sufficient, and, focus on form instruction which makes teachers and learners attend to the formal aspects of the language when necessary by maintaining a balance between the meaning and form, within a communication-based environment appears to be a more promising pedagogical approach. Based on the results, it is suggested that second language learners in elementary and intermediate levels may benefit from visual input enhancement and teachers may feel the necessity to provide these types of supplementary materials of their own to balance the lack of beneficial focus on language forms. But because visual input enhancement was more effective in the advanced level compared to elementary and intermediate levels, classroom teachers are strongly recommended to provide the advanced EFL learners with enhanced materials in order to push them toward a more target-like proficiency in the second language. For syllabus designers, it is advisable to develop materials including enhanced lexical forms as a way to increase learners' opportunity of learning these forms, leading to a higher level of proficiency among EFL learners.

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