The Effect of Focus on Form in the Written Work of Adult Learners of Arabic

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Abstract

One of the key debates within SLA research circles concerns ‘grammar’ - whether and how to include it in second language (L2) instruction. ‘Non-interventionist’ approaches to language teaching, which centre on focus on meaning (FonM), have been found to be neither economical nor expedient in terms of use of learners’ class time (Long & Robinson, 1998). This paper is a study of the effects of direct grammatical instruction within a communicative context (Focus on Form - FonF) on the accuracy rate of the use of noun-adjective agreement in the written work of adult learners of Arabic. Learning the systems of noun/adjective agreement in Arabic presents problems for beginners since, unlike languages such as English, Arabic needs to be modified for gender, number, definiteness and case. Through teaching material and methods, first-year university English speaking students of Arabic were directly exposed to morpho-syntactic inflections relevant to noun-adjective agreement. In post-tests over an extended period, instructed students showed a higher accuracy rate of some forms than their uninstructed colleagues, suggesting focusing on form is beneficial to the Arabic learner and does not need to interrupt the communicative flow in the classroom (Ellis et al. 2001).

A Review of the Literature

One of the most hotly debated and controversial areas of second language acquisition (SLA) in pedagogical and research circles over the past two decades relates to the nature of second language (L2) classroom instruction. Practitioners and researchers alike have wrestled with the question of whether L2 instruction impacts on learning and if it does, which type of instruction is most effective in classroom settings. Do L2 learners learn better through methodological approaches which focus only on linguistic/grammatical structures (FonFS) or through those that centre on meaning and communication (FonM)? Or is a combined approach, where a learner’s attention is directed to

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grammatical forms but within a communicative context (FonF), a more effective instructional method?

The plethora of recent classroom SLA research has overwhelmingly come down on the side of the benefits of L2 formal instruction in a communicative context, although there is no unanimity in the literature (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Doughty, 2001) and classroom instruction may have little or no effect on the “sequencing or result of acquisition” (Richie & Bhatia, 20). However there is consensus that empirical and theoretical studies of the role of FonF in L2 learning and teaching have broadened research in this area substantially to include the interplay between FonF and a variety of variables. As Catherine Doughty and Jessica Williams (1998a) point out FonF research now centres on four key areas: timing, forms, classroom context and curricular decisions empirically investigating associated SLA issues such as implicit (conscious) v. explicit (unconscious) instruction, practice v. ‘consciousness-raising’, interpretation v. practice and meaning negotiation v. corrective feedback (Ellis, 1994). To this could be added the role of the learner: motivation, attitude, ability and learning strategies, and equally well the role of the teacher.

Institutionalised second language learning has long focussed on the behaviourist theory of learning: the development of language habits through “practice, memorization, and repetition of grammatical structures in isolation from each other and from contexts of meaningful use” (Lightbown & Spada, 1999:171). Historically this has meant methods that emphasised structures (FonFS): Grammar Translation, Direct Method and Audiolingual Method.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the value of communicative teaching methods became recognised in language classroom. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was an instructional method which stressed “communication of meaning over the practice and manipulation of grammatical forms” (FonM) (Lightbown & Spada, 1999:172). The Natural Approach championed by Tracey Terrell and Stephen Krashen went even further (Krashen, 1982, 1985), suggesting L2 learning should reflect the first language learning environment more. Krashen proposed that mastery of the target language (TL) was achievable through ‘comprehensible input’, that is extensive exposure to the TL. He maintained that when listening to their parents after all, children are focusing on the meaning not form of the utterances (Schackne, 2002). The Natural Approach encouraged teachers to speak only the target language (TL) in the classroom, use interesting, relevant materials and focus discussion on personal information to which learners could relate. Students could use either their first or second language, but as a non-interventionist perspective, errors were not to be corrected “unless

1 See M. Rafael-Salaberry & Nuria Lopez-Ortega. 1998, for an empirical study that found FonF led to more accurate use of the TL form, in this case a number of Spanish grammatical features.
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communication is seriously impaired”. The place of grammar and accuracy in instruction was clearly subservient to communicative proficiency in the Natural Approach (Krashen, 1982:137-140).

Renewed and reinvigorated interest in the role of attention to form in second language learning and teaching has been attributed to Michael Long’s seminal 1991 discussion of focus on form as a design feature in language teaching methodology (Doughty & Williams, 1998a:3). Rather than seeing method as the crucial determinant in successful L2 learning, Long argued that emphasis should be shifted to “psycholinguistically relevant design features of learning environments, preferably features which capture important characteristics of a wide range of syllabus types, methods, materials, tasks, and tests” such as focus on form (Long, 1991:40-41).

Long was concerned that the tension between proponents of rule-orientated (FonF) and meaning-orientated (FonM) methodology meant that the combined value of the two types of instruction was being overlooked. Traditionally form focus had really meant a focus on forms based on a prescriptive structural syllabus (FonF), “instruction that seeks to isolate linguistic forms in order to teach and test them one at a time” (Ellis, 1994:639). Long instead advocated a focus on form (FonF); an approach that involves “alternating in some principled way between a focus on meaning and a focus on form” (1991:47). Long believed that FonFS instruction is “counterproductive”; FonF though would produce “a faster rate of learning and (probably) higher level of ultimate SL attainment than instruction with no focus on form” (1991:ibid). Thus “+focus on form” is a desirable design feature of SLA instruction. Long concludes by calling for “true experiments, employing a pretest/post-test control group design” which establish the “validity and scope” of FonF as a design feature in language teaching methodology (1991:48).

Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada’s (1990) research on ESL programs for children in elementary schools near Montreal is crucial to the FonF story. Unlike most previous studies evaluating the benefits of form-based instruction to L2 learners, which were undertaken in contexts whether the instruction was mostly or exclusively form-focused, Lightbown and Spada conducted their research in primarily communicative programs (1990:433). This research, part of a much broader language project, stemmed from a concern that CLT teaching programs that excluded form focused instruction altogether leads to grammatical inaccuracy and fossilisation. In examining the oral English

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2 Given that this paper’s interest reflects empirical studies rather than theoretical aspects of FonF, discussion will not highlight the debate concerning terminology eg grammar instruction, formal instruction, form-focused instruction, code-focused instruction, form-focused (see Doughty & Williams, 1998a, for differences). Here form-focussed and FonF are used interchangeably although some SLA specialists disagree on the combining of these terms (see Long’s views. 1998).
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development of 100 French children (four classes of 10-12 year olds) in a five-month innovative intensive ESL course, the researchers found substantial differences between the classes in their accuracy of English grammatical structures. Although all the classes had received the same amount of English instruction under similar circumstances, there were noticeable differences in the results of a “picture card game”. This was a task in which the learner had to describe a picture until the interviewer could guess which of the four study pictures was being described. Analysis of the learner data showed that one class was much more accurate in their use of the progressive -ing verb, possessive determiners and the correct use of be and have (e.g. “There is a classroom” not “We have a classroom”).

It was this class that was observed to have the teacher who spent the most time focussing on grammatical forms - 29% as opposed to between 10% and 13% for the other three classes – but still within a communicative context (Lightbown & Spada, 1994). It should also be noted that although students were corrected, both explicitly and implicitly, for grammatical errors, this was done in conjunction with a meaning focus. The researchers theorised that the class that received the most form-based instruction, was more accurate and developmentally advanced in its use of some grammatical forms.

Lightbown and Spada (1990, 1994) concluded that there was support for the hypothesis that “form-focussed instruction and corrective feedback might be effective for some linguistic features, particularly if provided within a communicative context (1994:573). Indeed the study had considerable value for future researchers in that it highlighted numerous fertile areas of possible FonF investigation. Lightbown and Spada’s 1990 study first linked FonF with wider SLA research. For example, because teachers in these programs rarely presented a grammar lesson, instead preferring to react to difficulties and errors when they occurred, this was consistent with pedagogical theories concerning “consciousness raising”, developmental sequences in language acquisition and timing of FonF (1990), all areas empirically explored through the 1990s.

Lightbown and Spada continued to investigate the effectiveness of form focussed instruction and corrective feedback in a series of follow-up experimental studies again conducted in French-Canadian ESL intensive classrooms (e.g. 1991, 1994). In their 1994 study Lightbown and Spada examined the long-term effect of FonF and corrective feedback of the adverb placement and question formation grammatical structures, on two groups of classes. The only difference between the subjects was that the experimental class received one hour of instruction and correction of the target forms, always within a communicative context, each day for a two-week period. Materials, activities and tasks were the same or similar. Both groups of learners were tested on oral and written tasks, before instruction, immediately after, 4 or 5 weeks later and six months to a year after that. The researchers found that
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learners who had received instruction on question formation and adverb placement outperformed the control group on immediate post-tests and those administered a month or so later. Over time the experimental group retained and even improved their question formation gains, however the superior adverb placement results did not remain. Yet, Lightbown and Spada (1994) hypothesised that this was because adverbs, unlike questions, occur infrequently in intensive ESL classrooms, meaning these forms were often forgotten. Were learners to receive further exposure and “occasional reminders of the restrictions on adverb placement”, students’ performances may also have indicated long-term retention of this linguistic feature (Lightbown & Spada, 1994:573-575).

Sandra Fotos’ 1993 empirical study of grammar task performance versus formal instruction is important to the FonF debate for a number of reasons. Firstly unlike Lightbown and Spada’s French-Canadian work, the study design suggests wider applicability to the general L2 population, in that her subjects were EFL adults, 160 Japanese first-year non-English major university students, who were not in an intensive language program. Secondly Fotos’ study simultaneously considered two experimental grammar consciousness-raising groups, one given formal teacher-fronted grammar lessons and the other interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks, and a control group which received no grammatical content. This allowed Fotos to apply multivariate statistical analyses, which assessed significant differences between variables across pretests and post-tests. Thirdly, Fotos links FonF more closely with the language processing of the learner than previous empirical studies.³ The nature of the relationship between explicit knowledge of grammatical rules and forms and the implicit knowledge i.e. how to use this information accurately in meaning-focused communication had not been made clear previously (Fotos, 1993:385).

Fotos focussed on three word order structures known to be difficult for Japanese English L2 learners – indirect object placement, adverb placement and relative clause usage. Major findings from Fotos 1993 study were that grammar consciousness-raising activities were effective in promoting “significant levels of noticing the target structures in subsequent communicative input” (1993:400), and that grammar consciousness-raising task performance is nearly as effective as formal instruction in the promotion of noticing linguistic forms. Fotos also suggests “subsequent communicative exposure to the target structures through the noticing exercises serviced to make the effects of the consciousness-raising treatments more durable”(1993:399), a theory first proposed by Ellis (1990) and Schmidt (1990) (see Fotos, 1993).

³See Fotos (1993) for a discussion of a pilot study conducted by Fotos and Rod Ellis on this and related subjects, as well as Fotos’ larger study of which this data forms part.
A recent study by Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) confirms the efficacy of FonF within the classroom. They considered incidental and transitory FonF episodes (FFE) occurring in two communicative ESL classes, each with 12 students, in Auckland, New Zealand. Students were at an intermediate or preintermediate class level. The classes composed two sessions with a short break in between. In the first part the teacher focussed on grammatical forms. In the second, students received communicative instruction through a range of activities including role-plays, jigsaw tasks, class discussions, opinion-gap tasks, reading, comprehension and listening activities.

The researchers collected 12 hours of data and found there was one FFE every 1.6 minutes, the vast majority of which addressed lexical or grammatical problems, i.e. negotiation of form rather than meaning. They (Ellis et al) concluded that their study provides “clear support” for FonF as an instructional option and that it can take place regularly in the classroom without interrupting the flow of communication (2001:314). Even more importantly, this study because of its focus on student-teacher interaction, was able to raise issues questioning the common classroom strategy of the teacher asking questions about forms he/she believed to be problematic. Ellis et al. demonstrate that the effectiveness and frequency of the uptake move suggest a contrary strategy: students should be encouraged to ask their own questions about form (ibid.)

FonF is definitely not a methodological pendulum swing back to the practices of grammar translation practices, with its lengthy grammatical explanations and rules. Nor does it slavishly follow ‘comprehensible input’ theories which suggest that learners only need extensive exposure to the TL for acquisition. Instead FonF seeks to raise learners’ awareness of problematic linguistic forms in the TL through “opportunities that arise naturally from interaction with more proficient speakers, texts and tasks (Mansouri, 2002).

The Study

This study focuses on the form noun-adjective agreement. The structure’s high frequency of occurrence in the spontaneous language of native speakers as well as learners, rather than its place in learners’ natural order of

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4 These were occasions in the class where there was attention to linguistic form (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, spelling, discourse, or pronunciation). Each FFE was coded according to whether it was a response and whether student or teacher initiated. General characteristics of the FFEs were then coded: source, complexity, directness (provide/prompt moves), indirectness (recast, request clarification, repeat, elicit solution) and linguistic focus (see Ellis et al. 2001:294 for detailed description).
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acquisition or (degree of markedness), was the determining factor for its selection. Noun-adjective agreement forms abound in classroom material for the teaching/learning of Arabic, even in beginner and elementary levels. However, in Arabic, this structure is a complex one. In Arabic, adjectives come after the noun they qualify and need to agree with it in gender, number, definiteness as well as case. Table 1 below highlights Arabic inflections, showing how nouns, as well as adjectives, are inflected to show gender, case, definiteness and number (which, in Arabic, has a category for the dual as well as the singular and the plural).

As Table 1 shows, the noun-adjective agreement form in Arabic requires learners, to varying degrees of consciousness, in complex morpho-syntactic processing on top of whatever other linguistic or non-linguistic processes they must perform to produce or comprehend this structure. Another semantic feature which affects noun-adjective agreement and adds another layer of processing complexity is Arabic’s division between human and non-human.

Given the complexities of the Arabic noun-agreement form and that there are no parallels in English, it is expected that university students in Australia will experience difficulties in mastering this structure, if focus is solely on meaning as in the “natural” communicative approach to language learning and teaching, for example. That expectation is corroborated from monitoring learners’ spoken or written output. To raise learners’ awareness of morpho-syntactic inflections relevant to noun-adjective agreement, FonF material and teaching methods were employed thus putting grammatical structures and explanations in the service of language use” (Alosh, 2000: xviii).

Study Design

The study was designed as a longitudinal investigation of the effectiveness of FonF, in particular the noun-adjective agreement form, within the university SLA Arabic classroom. Time constraints and language avoidance issues meant the employment of a cross-sectional study design utilizing elicitation procedures (Nunan, 1996). An experimental pre-post-delay test approach was undertaken involving first-year Arabic students, randomly divided into control and experimental groups. The study was conducted over a 9 month period with pretests at the beginning of semester 2, 2002 and the delayed post-test around March 2003.
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Participants

The participants were a class of 16 first year beginner Arabic students. They were informed of the experimental design employed for the study and all consented to taking part in the study. Half the class was assigned randomly to the Experimental Group (EG) and the remaining students to the control group (CG), forming two groups of 8 subjects each. For this study, only the experimental enhanced language input, and time variables will be considered. Other variables, for example subject’s gender or language background, will not be considered or controlled for.

Materials and Methodology

In FonF research it is important that textbook passages which act as language input are not concocted to serve or reflect a certain grammatical sequencing or to contextualise or elucidate certain grammatical or lexical items. Rather, as in the case of the text used, materials serve to highlight cultural and societal insights and communication strategies and practicalities, while presenting opportunities to focus upon grammatical and lexical items. The textbook uses the device of a foreign university student living and travelling in the Middle East to illustrate communication strategies and cultural information.

Over the course of the 12 week semester instances of noun-adjective structure in textbook passages were underlined and their agreement highlighted by listing their morpho-syntactic features in the left margin for the experimental group. In contrast the control group’s textbook language input did not undergo any “flagging” for the creation of “input salience” (Long & Robinson, 1998). Both the control group and the experimental group engaged in the same classroom activities that focused on communication and meaning with other linguistic structures highlighted for language use when relevant or needed. The form in focus, noun/agreement however, was not treated or discussed as a discrete grammar point in the classroom or as the subject for sentence structure transformation or manipulation exercises.

All participants were exposed to five hours of Arabic teaching per week with the same lecturer, the author of the study. This comprised a 2 hour lecture and a 2 hour tutorial, one hour of which involved self-access computer laboratory language activities. Lectures and tutorials both focused on the prescribed text and classes spent one to two weeks on each lesson. Although
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some grammatical points were discussed in lectures, in tutorials this only occurred if students raised grammatical issues.

During the research period all subjects were exposed to the same testing devices at the same interval. A pretest (twice), post-test and delayed test was administered to both the experimental and control groups. The pretest was conducted twice, once at the end of the 12 week experiment period i.e. the end of second semester, and the second time when participants returned from the three month summer university break to begin first semester. All subjects were given a pretest to assess level of competence before exposure to instruction. The experimental group received enhanced language input on noun-adjective agreement. The post-test at the conclusion of the 12-week semester measured each student’s performance in comparison with pretest results and results for both groups. At the beginning of the students’ second academic year, the delayed post-test was conducted to determine the longevity of language gain in the target structure, in other words to determine the extent the form was maintained in the subject’s interlanguage.

For the data collection in the pre- and post-test, other textbook passages were used with spaces for the adjectives that are given in the left margin in the singular, masculine, indefinite form: the form normally adopted for dictionary entries. Participants filled in the spaces with the correct form of the adjective, which is the form that agrees with the noun it qualifies in number, gender and definiteness. Case agreement was not considered because case for singular, broken plural and sound feminine plural\(^5\) substantives\(^6\) is usually indicated in speaking by short vowel sounds or nunation "تَمَوَّن" and in writing by their orthographical representation by means of diacritics. Both the diacritics and their phonological counterparts are left out in most authentic uses of the language. The dual and the sound masculine plural morphemes, on the other hand, act as indicators of case. For example, a dual or sound masculine plural substantive needs either to be in the nominative or the oblique case, even when used in isolation. Instances of the dual\(^7\) and the sound masculine plural,

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\(^5\) It is argued that it is better referred to as "plural with an augmented form as many old Arab grammarians call it, since its singular may not be feminine, e.g. معاوية or خمام, nor is it always sound, e.g. زوجات but the term sound feminine plural, has caught on and applies to most of its cases.

\(^6\) The *Encyclopaedic World Dictionary* defines a “substantive” as: “a. a noun; b. a noun, pronoun, or other word or phrase having nominal function in sentences or inflected like a noun; and c. (in Latin and other languages [like Arabic] where adjectives are inflected like nouns) a noun or adjective”

\(^7\) The dual is more marked than the plural since the presence of the dual implies the presence of the plural, but the presence of the plural does not necessitate the presence of the dual.
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however, are infrequent in materials for beginners and hence were rarely utilised in the learners’ language texts.

Data Coding and Classification

A simple scoring procedure was adopted in which a test item is awarded one mark if the adjective agreed with the noun it qualified in one of the three attributes of gender, number or definiteness; two marks for agreement in two, and three marks for agreement in all three. That is to say, each item on pre- and post-tests was awarded a maximum of three marks. An item received zero if the adjective did not agree with the noun it qualified in gender, number and definiteness or if no answer was given.

Analysis and Findings

This paper is concerned with examining the effects of direct grammatical instruction within a communicative context (FonF) on the level of accuracy in noun-adjective agreement in the written work of English speaking adult learners of Arabic. To answer this question largely descriptive, rather than complex quantitative statistics, have been used to examine grammatical accuracy, as this is a preliminary study involving small numbers of participants. As there were only eight participants in each group, this paper can report evidence of the effectiveness of FonF in teaching noun-adjective agreement to Arabic beginners, but cautions that a larger study needs to examine and test these findings further. Dispersion of results, visible through standard deviation figures, can be significant in a study of this size. For example in the pretest the EG participants scored an average of 64.02 but this was with a standard deviation of 10.8. Effectively this means that 95% of scores were +/- 10.8 the figure of 64.02. Given that group numbers are small, a common feature of longitudinal studies that are prone to subject attrition, individual students can have a disproportionate effect on results. This is particularly relevant in SLA as research which looks at the successful second language learner points to the importance of factors beyond the classroom, such as an individual’s abilities and motivations (e.g. Chamot & O’Malley, 1994).

Table 1 summarises students’ test results for the three key noun-adjective agreement inflectional categories: gender, definiteness and number. Grammatical accuracy results for the CG and the EG across all time periods are shown. Little discussion will be made here concerning the category of Number though. As this study focussed on beginners, tests were limited in scope somewhat, with the overwhelming majority of questions centring on singular rather than the plural or dual form. From the outset the singular numerical aspect of noun-adjective agreement proved unproblematic for students and results were extremely high, 95% for the CG and 91% for EG participants. Both
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groups showed improvement across time, however there were insufficient inclusions of the plural and dual forms in experimental tests to warrant further comment. This inflectional aspect of noun-adjective agreement may be more suited to research focused on intermediate Arabic learners.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Gender</th>
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<th>Definiteness</th>
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<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>99%</td>
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Table 1: Correct Usage of Gender, Definiteness and Number in Noun-Adjective Agreement (%)

Although the researcher believes that there is an association between highlighting noun-adjective definiteness in the EG’s textbooks and greater improvement in grammatical accuracy of this aspect, experimental results did not conclusively show this. Because the EG showed greater proficiency on the pretest than did the CG, further substantiating testing needs to be undertaken before the link between these variables can be confirmed. In other words grammatical accuracy in this category cannot directly be attributed to the intervention of the treatment as the EG began with a result of 48% and at the delayed post-test averaged 86%. In contrast the CG began with 36% and when tested nine months later had a grammatical accuracy rate of 77%. Of interest though is the gradual, steady improvement of the EG when tested which suggests FonF increases long-term form retention. The CG improved only slightly between the post-test and the delayed post-test (75% to 77%), however the EG continued to improve significantly across time, rising from a similar figure as the CG – 76% - at the post-test to 86% at the final testing.

In contrast though the other key noun-adjective inflectional category of gender is indicative of the effectiveness of focussing on form (FonF) in a communicative context. Experimental Group students who had vocabulary in their reading underlined and highlighted for gender agreement achieved substantially better results than those that did not received this treatment. Table 3 above indicates that the CG began the study with an overall gender accuracy
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rate of 49%. This rose to 55% in the post-test and further increased to 63% at the delayed post-test. However the improvement of the EG was even stronger; from a base of 53% the EG rose to 81% dropping only slightly at the delayed posttest to 79%. In essence by the end of the research period the group that focussed on form were achieving grammatical gender accuracy in around 8 out of every ten noun-adjectives, but unassisted students were more likely to get only six out ten forms correct for gender.

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