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Research Paper

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## **The Impact of Focus on Form and Focus on Forms Instruction on Grammar Acquisition of the Subjunctive by Iranian Advanced EFL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

Grammar instruction is a crucial topic of debate in foreign language development. This study aimed at investigating the impact of focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs) instruction on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners. To this end, 40 Iranian advanced EFL learners were selected within the age range of 16-20 from a language school in Karaj, Iran. Initially, the Preliminary English Test was run to ensure that the students were homogenous with respect to their language proficiency. Before any treatment, a pretest was administered to determine the participants' knowledge of the subjunctive. Afterwards, the researchers taught the subjunctive to one group through FonF instruction and the second group received FonFs instruction. After five weeks of instruction, the researchers administered a posttest to investigate the effectiveness of FonF and FonFs instruction. Then, paired samples statistics, the independent samples t-test, and Mann Whitney U test were run to test the null hypotheses. The findings revealed that although FonF and FonFs instruction have significant positive impacts on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners, the students who were taught through FonFs

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instruction significantly outperformed the ones who received FonF instruction.

**Keywords:** Focus on Form, Focus on Forms, Form-Focused Instruction, Teaching Grammar, The Subjunctive

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## 1. Introduction

A brief review of language teaching history reveals that grammar is a major concern to EFL instructors, students, and scholars, and there are controversial issues about how to teach grammar effectively. Therefore, grammar instruction is a long-lasting topic of debate and plays an essential role in developing EFL learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Thus, stakeholders are required to provide EFL instructors with the facilities they need to teach grammar (Guci, Rochsantiningsih, & Sumardi, 2021). Besides, Lotfipoursaedi (2021) put under the spotlight the significance of the dominant impact of grammar in the history of language education and pointed out that grammar has long been perceived as a crucial component of language by EFL students and educators.

Despite swings in the theoretical and methodological pendulum, the role of instruction in foreign language development has remained a subject of interest in applied linguistics (Kang, Sok, & Han, 2018). The impact of instruction on the rate and ultimate achievement of second language learning was the focus of early research (Kang et al., 2018). However, since the 1990s, the focus has turned to different forms of teaching and their respective consequences (Goo, Granena, Yilmaz, & Novella, 2015). Besides, the question of how to teach grammar in a foreign language class has always been controversial. Thus, as a result of the introduction of form-focused instruction, a transition occurred from incidental and implicit grammar teaching to formal and meaningful grammar instruction (Ebrahimi, Rezvani,

& Kheirzadeh, 2015). Long (1998) introduced two types of form-focused instruction in terms of focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs). FonF is described as an instruction that draws language learners' attention to linguistic features that appear incidentally in lessons whose overarching focus is on communication or meaning. On the contrary, FonFs instruction involves teaching isolated linguistic forms in individual lessons based on a structural syllabus (Long, 1991). Despite the fact that there have been a lot of studies on the impact of various kinds and strategies of FonF instruction in the literature, few researchers have specifically compared the efficacy of FonF and FonFs approaches (Ebrahimi et al, 2015).

Collins and Ruivivar (2021) underscored the importance of a teacher's role in providing EFL students with rich practice opportunities and noted that peer interaction during oral communication drew young EFL learners' attention to grammar. Moreover, they highlighted the significance of using effective approaches for teaching spoken grammar. However, EFL instructors are not always sure about the importance of grammar instruction and often have insufficient opportunities for professional development in grammar instruction (Collet & Greiner, 2020).

Al-khreshah and Orak (2021) pointed out that grammar skills have a major effect on English language acquisition. Thus, effective grammar instruction can foster students' linguistic development. Besides, when EFL teachers emphasize language form and meaning, their students will be able to develop their language skills more effectively. Further, grammar skills are of paramount importance for developing students' language abilities. Therefore, having constant exposure to grammar maximizes language learners' ability to use grammar (Pagcaliwagan, 2016). However, some EFL teachers may perceive English grammar to be a demanding topic to teach (Iqbal, Akbar, & Ahmad, 2017; Yusof, 2018).

For the last forty years, scholars studying second language acquisition and language teachers themselves have been arguing which grammar teaching method is better to use. While some maintain that incidental instruction is the best and easiest way to teach grammar rules, others highlight the importance of FonFs and explicit instruction of grammar (Lopez Diaz, Martinez, Jiménez, Perez, & Mateo, 2019; Rodgers, 2015).

Ellis (2001) distinguished between the two kinds of instruction and pointed out that students who were taught based on FonFs instruction considered themselves as learners of a language and perceived the language as the aim of study. In contrast, students who were taught based on FonF instruction perceived themselves as users of the language and considered language as a tool for communication. FonFs instruction is the traditional way of teaching in which grammar rules are presented in a prearranged manner, mostly based on what textbook writers or instructors consider as difficult or easy. On the contrary, FonF instruction involves a brief attention to linguistic features as they appear naturally during communication (Loewen, 2018).

Grammar instruction is an essential topic of debate that plays an important role in foreign language development. Besides, EFL instructors and researchers are eager to identify how to teach grammar ideally. Thus, there is a major gap between FonF and FonFs grammar instruction in foreign language research. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there have not been any studies in the literature on the impact of FonF and FonFs instruction on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by EFL learners in the world, in general, and in the Iranian EFL context, in particular. Thus, this research topic has remained under-researched and this prompted the researchers to undertake this study. The results of the current study will be significant for English language learning and teaching, in general, and teaching grammar, in

particular. Moreover, the results of the study provide some pedagogical implications that can be of benefit to syllabus designers and material developers, EFL teachers, and learners in Iranian language schools. To this end, the study aimed at identifying the impact of FonF and FonFs instruction on the acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners and investigating whether there is any significant difference between FonF and FonFs in their impacts on Iranian advanced EFL learners' acquisition of the subjunctive.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

### **2.1 Teaching Grammar**

The question of whether or not instruction had any impact on second language development was a source of debate in the early years of instructed second language acquisition (Kang et al., 2018). However, it was gradually discovered that although the second language acquisition route is largely impervious to instruction, instruction speeds up the acquisition rate and leads to a better achievement when compared to uninstructed second language acquisition (Ellis, 2012; Kang et al., 2018). Instructed second language acquisition originated in the early 1980s as a sub-domain of second language acquisition. At its most fundamental level, as a field of research specifically associated with second language learning in the classroom, it seeks to address two questions: (a) is instruction useful for second language learning? and (b) if so, how can the efficacy of instruction be maximized? (Kang et al., 2018; Loewen, 2015).

Grammar instruction entails a variety of approaches or methods that assist students in acquiring a reasonable degree of second language proficiency (Soodmand Afshar & Bagherieh, 2014). Moreover, grammar teaching entails employing educational techniques to assist students in comprehending the application of various grammatical rules. However, different experts,

scholars, and instructors might have different attitudes toward the best method to teach grammar (Soodmand Afshar & Bagherieh, 2014; Due, Riggs, & Mandara, 2015; Sato & Oyanedel, 2019). Due to the outstanding power of teachers' beliefs, undoubtedly, they have a strong impact on grammar teaching and learning. Zheng (2013) highlighted the importance of exploring what teachers themselves believe to be true about teaching grammar. Thus, language teachers' beliefs are reflected in their instruction in the class and their grammar instruction is considerably influenced by their beliefs (Bell, 2016; Li & Walsh, 2011; Zheng, 2013).

Grammar teaching is one of the controversial issues in foreign language acquisition. Second language scholars demonstrated conflicting views regarding grammar instruction. Some of the second language educators highlighted the importance of grammar instruction. However, other researchers maintained that only the proper incorporation of grammar instruction in the syllabus resulted in language development. In contrast, some other scholars believed that grammar instruction was detrimental to EFL students' language development (Fazilatfar & Beedel, 2008). Grammar is regarded as an essential component of any language, and learning a new language without grammar is not possible. However, the best way to teach grammar to students, whether implicitly or explicitly, has been a source of debate in the field of second language learning (Mirzaei & Taheri, 2016). In this regard, Ghorbani and Atai (2013) asserted that implicit and explicit form-focused instruction is considerably useful for teaching simple linguistic features. Further, EFL instructors' attitudes toward grammar instruction affect their classroom practices and they are expected to be more reflective about the effectiveness of their grammar instruction practices. Besides, the efficacy of grammar instruction can be enhanced by identifying language instructors' weaknesses in grammar teaching, raising their awareness, and providing them

with the most effective grammar instruction principles (Kaivanpanah, Alavi, & Hamed Barghi, 2019).

## **2.2 Focus on Form Instruction**

In FonF instruction, the paramount emphasis is on meaning rather than linguistic form. Thus, in FonF instruction, a teacher draws students' attention from meaning to form, with the message remaining the primary subject. This shift will occur while either the instructor or language learners try to solve a production or comprehension problem in communication (Long, 1991; Long & Crookes, 1992). Moreover, Shintani (2013) highlighted the importance of form-function mapping in FonF instruction.

Ellis (2001) clarified the definition of FonF by discriminating between incidental and planned FonF. Incidental FonF takes place unintentionally during communication without anybody deciding which language forms must be targeted. During the process of a meaning-focused assignment, such cases normally include instructors providing corrective feedback, and, as a result, several different linguistic features can be targeted. On the contrary, planned FonF happens when there is a prearranged linguistic target that is still presented within the meaning-focused interaction context. Planned FonF takes place preemptively or reactively. It occurs preemptively when a communicative activity is seeded with examples of a target structure. It occurs reactively, when an instructor provides corrective feedback mostly on the target structures, possibly those which have been recently presented through a FonFs (Ellis, 2001).

Rahimi Domakani (2008) underscored the significance of communication and meaning in FonF instruction and pointed out that this type of instruction draws EFL students' attention to linguistic forms that might otherwise be overlooked and provides them with attentional resources that are required to acquire the target linguistic features. In the same vein, Mohammadnia and

Gholami (2008) demonstrated that the concept of FonF instruction arose from the rational belief that it paved the way for EFL students to pay attention to linguistic features in a meaningful context as they take place within a wider framework of meaning.

### **2.3 Focus on Forms Instruction**

In FonFs instruction, language is broken down into distinct items (e.g., words, grammatical features, notions, and functions) that are taught one by one through an additive linear manner. Thus, in this type of instruction, students' paramount focus is directed at linguistic forms, though meaning is not ignored. The emphasis of FonFs instruction is on the deliberate acquisition of grammatical structures. In contrast, FonF instruction provides students with input involving not only the second language structures but also other linguistic elements and it enables them to acquire these features incidentally (Long, 1996). Explanation of grammar rules or activities in which the main purpose is to practice a particular linguistic feature are examples of FonFs (Loewen, 2011). Moreover, FonF instruction includes incidental learning. However, FonFs instruction involves intentional learning (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002; Sheen, 2002; Shintani, 2013).

### **2.4 Form-Focused Instruction**

FonF and FonFs instruction have recently been merged into the category of form-focused instruction. They are two ends of a spectrum in this taxonomy. However, they vary in the main purpose of instruction. The main goal of FonF instruction is communication, while attention to language features is highlighted in FonFs instruction (Loewen, 2011).

Ellis et al. (2002) maintained that FonF refers to “a particular type of form-focused instruction – the treatment of linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative task” (p. 419). According to Ellis et al. (2002), FonF instruction occurs in meaning-oriented practices where the main

emphasis is on content rather than linguistic elements. Language learners must establish more than just communicative language use in FonF instruction and should not neglect attention to form (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). Ellis et al. (2001) asserted that "focus on form stimulates the kind of attention to form that occurs in natural language acquisition, addresses linguistic problems that individual learners are actually experiencing, and encourages the kind of noticing that has been hypothesized to aid acquisition" (p. 410). Therefore, the main objective of form-focused instruction is to provide language learners with tasks that draw their attention to particular aspects of a second language (Arias de la Cruz, Domínguez Barrera, & Morales Vázquez, 2019). Incidental FonF entails bringing students' attention to linguistic features that occur naturally and unexpectedly through communicative practices. Since the target forms in incidental FonF are not predictable, the possible efficacy of incidental FonF in developing second language acquisition has mostly been assessed through uptake rate or customized posttests in observational classroom studies (Gholami & Gholami, 2018; Nassaji, 2013). Any planned or incidental pedagogical experience in which an emphasis on language features happens in a meaningful way is referred to as form-focused instruction. It differs from the traditional grammar translation method in that it emphasizes transfer-appropriate instruction, which involves learners practicing target language types in a communicative sense before using them in real-world contexts (Ellis, 2001; Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Yang, Zhang, & Cheng, 2019).

Spada and Lightbown (2008) differentiated between isolated and integrated form-focused instruction and noted that integrated form-focused instruction allows students to concentrate on language forms during communicative tasks, while isolated form-focused instruction excludes language forms from communicative tasks. Isolated form-focused instruction,

they say, is particularly helpful in the creation of target features that are not prominent in the feedback. Besides, isolated form-focused instruction is particularly helpful for developing target language features that are used infrequently. However, integrated form-focused instruction could be more useful for learning lexical rather than grammatical forms (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). According to isolated form-focused instruction, explicit grammar instruction should come before or after communicative activities (Zamani, Youhanaee, & Barati, 2019). Dekeyser (2007) noted that explicit instruction should precede fluency-oriented practices since language rules need to be followed communicatively for automaticity. In contrast, Ellis (2008) asserted that explicit instruction should not precede communicative tasks. He noted that if teachers present rules prior to interaction activities, students will start manipulating the rules rather than creating meaning.

Karami and Bowles (2020) reported a summary of the recent studies on isolated and integrated form-focused instruction, examined the theoretical differences between the two types of form-focused instruction, and pointed out that isolated versus integrated form-focused instruction is an essential technique that should be used in EFL classes at the appropriate time. Moreover, Benati (2021) investigated the nature and role of FonF instruction in second language acquisition, put under the spotlight the importance of the facilitative role of instruction in the rate of acquisition, and demonstrated that FonF instruction must be meaning-oriented.

### **2.5 Studies on Focus on Form and Focus on Forms Instruction**

FonF and FonFs instruction have been examined by different researchers and scholars from different aspects. For instance, Othman and Ismail (2008) identified the impact of employing FonF instruction on second language learners' accurate production of the past perfect and past simple tenses. They collected data from two ESL classes in a Malaysian context. The first class

received FonF instruction of grammar. However, in the second class (control group), grammar was taught through standard practices. Moreover, the researchers administered a pretest and posttest to identify the impact of FonF instruction on the students' production of the past perfect and simple past tenses. The findings of the study revealed that participants in the FonF group outperformed the students in the control group.

In another study, Shintani (2015) examined the effects of FonF and FonFs instruction on the incidental acquisition of two grammatical features (plural –*s* and copula *be*) for 30 young beginner Japanese students. The participants of the study were divided into two different groups (FonF and FonFs). The researcher did not teach the grammar rules directly, but provided the language learners with some opportunities to learn the grammatical features in their classroom interactions over five sessions. After administering the tests, it was observed that the participants in the FonF group demonstrated acquisition of plural –*s* but not of copula *be*. However, none of the grammatical features was acquired by the participants in the FonFs group.

More recently, Soodmand Afshar (2021) investigated the effect of task-related FonF (i.e., focus on spoken form and word parts) on vocabulary development of EFL learners. The participants were 130 EFL learners who were randomly divided into three different groups. In the first group, the focus was on meaning and use only. The second group did the same as that in the first group. Moreover, they focused on the pronunciation of the target words modelled by the instructor and followed by the students' repetition. In the third group, other than what was done in group two, the students also focused on word parts as another characteristic of word form. The participants' vocabulary development was tested by a forty-item multiple-choice vocabulary scale. The results of the study revealed significant differences between the groups with the third group outperforming the

second group, who, in turn, outperformed the first group. Moreover, focus on spoken form and word parts were both useful in developing vocabulary knowledge.

In a very recent qualitative study, Sun and Zhang (2021) drew on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and investigated four Chinese EFL instructors' cognitions about form-focused instruction through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and follow-up stimulated recall interviews. The findings of the study revealed that the participating teachers supported FonF instruction. On the contrary, they shifted from FonF to FonFs in their classroom practices. Thus, data demonstrated that the participants identified the challenges regarding FonF instruction and preferred to teach grammar through FonFs approach.

In another recent study, Saeed and Reinders (2021) examined the impact of the timing of form-focused instruction on the acquisition of the past counterfactual conditional and framing expressions for English questions. The participants of the study were 63 EFL students, who received integrated or isolated form-focused instruction on the target structures. The researchers collected data through interviews and cloze tests. Further, mixed-design ANOVA and dependent t-test were run to test the hypotheses. The findings of the study revealed that the students in the two experimental groups improved significantly and the timing of form-focused instruction had a varied impact on the two target structures.

According to Saslow and Ascher (2012), the subjunctive form of a verb is used in noun clauses following verbs or adjectives of urgency, obligation, or advisability. It should be noted that the subjunctive form is always the same as the base form of the verb, no matter what the time frame or the subject of the sentence is. Many of the verbs and adjectives following which the

subjunctive form of a verb is used are provided in the procedure section of this study along with some example sentences.

FonFs instruction draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks regarding how a second language is taught. This study subscribes to Anderson's (1982) skill acquisition theory as its theoretical framework. According to skill acquisition theory, second language acquisition involves a gradual shift from effortful to automated use of the second language, which is achieved by input and practice in practical contexts (Anderson, 1982). For instance, DeKeyser (2007) noted that second language can be acquired by transforming declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge through practice and pointed out that declarative knowledge (i.e., understanding specific linguistic features) is the starting point for foreign language acquisition, which is then converted into procedural knowledge by rigorous practice. Besides, DeKeyser (2007) defined practice as "specific activities in the second language, engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language" (p. 1). Drill-like preparation is insufficient; students must therefore have hands-on experience with the second language in real-world situations (i.e., in the performance of a communicative task). However, since teaching is based on a structured syllabus and requires deliberate preparation, this does not constitute FonF (DeKeyser, 2007). FonF instruction is based on current theories that highlight the importance of cognitive processing and cooperation in learning a second language. The negotiation of context and form are two main interactional constructs. They are used to draw students' attention to form in communication (DeKeyser, 2007).

## **2.6 Research Questions**

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there have not been any studies in the literature on the impact of FonF and FonFs instruction on grammar

acquisition of the subjunctive by advanced EFL learners in Iranian language schools. Thus, this research topic has remained under-researched. The following research questions were formulated to address the objectives of the study:

1. Does FonF instruction have any significant impact on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners?
2. Does FonFs instruction have any significant impact on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners?
3. Is there any significant difference between FonF and FonFs instruction with regard to their impacts on Iranian advanced EFL learners' acquisition of the subjunctive?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants were 40 Iranian EFL learners from among an initial 59 advanced level male language learners with the age range of 16 to 20. The language learners participating in this study were selected from *Hekmat English Language School* in Karaj, Iran, based on their performance on a proficiency test and convenience sampling. Thus, after all the students took the Preliminary English Test, in order to have homogeneous participants, the students whose scores were not in the appropriate range were excluded from this study. It is worth noting that the language learners were randomly assigned into two main groups, namely, FonF (N=20) and FonFs (N=20). Besides, it should be mentioned that the names of the participants are not disclosed in this study to maintain anonymity.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

In order to answer the research questions of this study, the researchers employed three instruments.

##### **3.2.1 Preliminary English Test (PET)**

Initially, the Preliminary English Test was run to ensure that the students were homogenous with respect to their language proficiency. PET is one of

the Cambridge English exams and tests all four skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking in three sections. The first section of the PET exam tests language learners' reading comprehension and writing ability, the second section gauges students' listening comprehension, and the last section measures their speaking ability. Thus, in this study, reading, listening, and writing sections of the PET were administered to the language learners by the researchers and the students whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the target participants of the study. Therefore, 40 language learners were selected, and in order to have homogeneous participants, the students whose scores were not in the appropriate range were excluded from this study. Besides, it must be noted that the reliability of the PET was estimated using Cronbach's Alpha and found to be .79.

### **3.2.2 Pretest of the Subjunctive**

A pretest of the subjunctive was developed and administered by the researchers to determine the participants' knowledge of the subjunctive. It should be mentioned that three university professors of Applied Linguistics confirmed the validity of the pretest. Moreover, the reliability of the pretest was estimated to be 0.86, using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. On the pretest, the students in both groups were expected to answer 20 items including fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, true or false, and open-ended questions. It is worth noting that each item had one point.

### **3.2.3 Posttest of the Subjunctive**

After five weeks of instruction of the subjunctive, another test of the subjunctive was administered to both FonF and FonFs groups as a posttest. It is worth noting that three university professors of Applied Linguistics confirmed the validity of the posttest and the reliability of the pretest was estimated to be 0.86, using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Like the above-

mentioned pretest, on the posttest, the participants were expected to answer 20 fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, true or false, and open-ended items. It must be noted that each item again received one point.

### **3.3 Procedure**

Initially, in order to achieve the desired goals of the study, the Preliminary English Test was run to ensure that the students were homogenous with respect to their language proficiency. Then, 40 advanced EFL students were selected and assigned into two experimental groups, namely, FonF and FonFs by the researchers. Before any treatment, a pretest of the subjunctive was administered by the researchers to determine the participants' knowledge of the subjunctive. Afterwards, the researchers began the treatment and employed a textbook entitled *Summit 2A* (Saslow & Ascher, 2012) to teach the subjunctive. It is worth noting that the treatment took five weeks. The classes were held once a week and each session lasted for one and a half hour(s). Thus, both classes had the same syllabus and coursebook. This book was designed for students at the advanced level and comprised various passages with related grammar rules. Therefore, the researchers taught the subjunctive based on unit four of the textbook along with some passages taken from Reader's Digest magazine throughout five sessions. A reading sample from the textbook is provided in Figure 1.

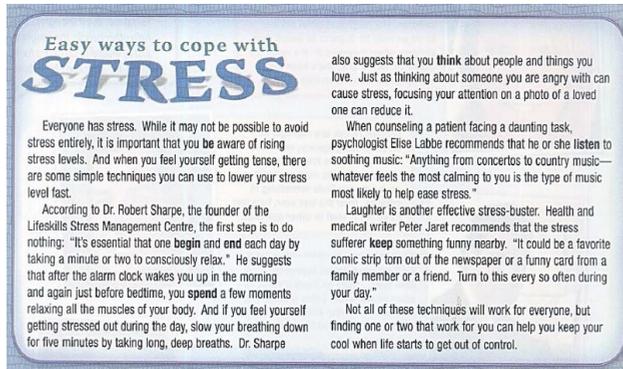


Figure 1. Reading Sample from the Textbook

In the FonF group, the subjunctive was taught by resorting to focus on meaning strategies, and the importance of communicative language teaching principles and authentic communication were highlighted. Therefore, the teacher drew language learners' attention to the subjunctive through accomplishing communicative activities and employed an indirect and context-based presentation of the subjunctive, rather than a teacher-led instruction, in order to assist students in recognizing the properties of the subjunctive in context. Thus, it is worth noting that in the FonF group, the classroom was student-centered. Besides, the teacher provided the students with a reading passage each session and made the subjunctive salient through bolding, italicizing, and underlining verbs as in the following sample sentences:

- a) The doctor suggested she **exercise** more and **not work** on weekends.
- b) Sam's manager demanded that he **be** fired immediately.
- c) John proposed that he **continue** cooking dinner while we clean the house.
- d) Our manager insisted that no one **be** late for the divisional meeting.
- e) The doctor recommends that the stress sufferer **keep** something funny nearby.
- f) It is important that you **be** aware of rising stress levels.

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- g) It is essential that one *begin* and end each day by taking a minute or two to consciously relax.
- h) It is necessary that your father *avoid* taking on more than he can handle.
- i) It is critical that Laura *learn* how to deal with pressure at work.
- j) It is crucial that Rachel *not accept* more projects than she can handle.

After reading each passage, the language learners were expected to practice the subjunctive in different contexts while concentrating on meaning. For example, one of the passages in unit four of the textbook was on *some easy ways to cope with stress*. First, the students listened to the text. Second, they were asked to read the text. After reading the passage, the teacher divided the language learners into groups of four, and asked them to take notes and use their notes to reconstruct the text as closely as possible to the original version. Upon completion of the text, the students received a communicative group discussion task. Finally, the instructor asked them to compare and analyze the different versions they produced. Further, as another example, in the FonF group, the teacher asked the language learners to discuss ways to manage stress in groups and take turns giving advice using the subjunctive (e.g. *I suggest . . . I recommend . . . I think it is important . . . I believe it is essential . . .*). Besides, the instructor asked the students to interview their partners about the causes of stress in their life, list them on their notepad, and offer a tip for each one using the subjunctive.

On the other hand, in the FonFs group, there was no focus on meaning trend and the teacher taught the subjunctive by explicit explanation. To this end, the teacher deductively taught the subjunctive based on the grammar focus box in unit four of the textbook. Thus, she provided the language learners with a crystal-clear definition of the subjunctive and noted that the subjunctive form of a verb is always the same as the base form no matter what the time frame is, and it is used in noun clauses following verbs or adjectives of urgency, obligation, or advisability. Afterwards, the teacher

wrote on the board some sample sentences along with the verbs and adjectives after which the subjunctive form of a verb must be used as in: **(a) Verbs:** advise, ask, command, demand, desire, insist, propose, recommend, request, suggest, and urge. **(b) Adjectives:** best, critical, crucial, desirable, essential, imperative, important, necessary, recommended, urgent, and vital. Ultimately, after practicing the subjunctive through examples, the teacher asked the language learners to create their own sentences and read them aloud in turn.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Data for this study were collected from two sources: (1) Data analysis based on 40 pretest papers, and (2) analysis of 40 posttest papers of the learners. Furthermore, in this study, two types of variables were involved. The independent variables were FonF and FonFs instruction, and the dependent variable was the acquisition of the subjunctive. Paired samples statistics, parametric statistics through the independent samples t- test, and non-parametric equivalent of independent samples t-test (Mann Whitney U test) were run to test the null hypotheses of the study.

### **4. Results**

Prior to analyzing the data, the researchers would rather state the research hypotheses formulated in the study to help provide a reader-friendly account of the results.

**H01:** FonF instruction does not have any significant impact on the acquisition of the subjunctive by the Iranian advanced EFL learners.

**H02:** FonFs instruction does not have any significant impact on the acquisition of the subjunctive by the Iranian advanced EFL learners.

**H03:** There is no significant difference between FonF and FonFs instruction with regard to their impacts on Iranian advanced EFL learners' acquisition of the subjunctive.

#### 4.1. Results Obtained for Research Question One

In dealing with the first research question of this study, paired samples statistics were run on the data obtained for pretest and posttest of FonF group. Table 1 indicates the descriptive results and Table 2 illustrates the inferential statistics obtained with regard to the first research question.

Table 1

*Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing the Results of FonF Pretest and Posttest*

		Mean	N	SD	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest FonF	3.95	20	1.97	.44114
	Posttest FonF	12.95	20	3.15	.70515

As shown in Table 1, the pretest and posttest mean scores for the FonF group were 3.95 and 12.95, respectively. Furthermore, the standard deviations thus obtained were 1.97 and 3.15. A glance at the mean scores reveals the notable improvement from pretest to posttest in this group. However, to see whether this difference is statistically significant or not, the inferential statistics were also run, the results of which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*The Results of Paired Samples t-test for FonF Group*

		Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest FonF Posttest FonF	-9.00	2.44	.547	-10.14	-7.85	-16.43	19	.000

As it can be clearly observed in Table 2, the difference between pretest and posttest scores of the FonF group is statistically significant ( $p = .00 < .05$ ). Thus, the first null hypothesis of the study postulating that FonF

instruction does not have any significant impact on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners was rejected.

#### 4.2 Results Obtained for Research Question Two

To analyze the second research question, paired samples statistics were run on the data obtained for pretest and posttest of the FonFs group. Table 3 shows the descriptive results and Table 4 depicts the inferential statistics obtained with regard to the second research question.

Table 3  
*Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing the Results of FonFs Pretest and Posttest*

		Mean	N	SD	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest FonFs	3.9250	20	2.278	.50948
	Posttest FonFs	17.6000	20	2.303	.51504

As it can be observed in Table 3, the pretest and posttest mean scores for FonFs group were 3.92 and 17.60, respectively. Furthermore, the standard deviations obtained for this group were 2.27 and 2.30, respectively. Drawing on the mean scores, it appears that a great amount of enhancement has taken place from pretest to posttest in the performance of this group. However, to see whether this difference is statistically significant, the inferential statistics were also run (see Table 4 for the results).

Table 4  
*The Results of Paired Samples t-test for FonFs Group*

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.
		Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Mean	Lower			
Pair 1	Pretest FonFs - Posttest FonFs	-13.67	2.79	.62	-14.98	-12.36	-21.86	19	.000

As Table 4 indicates, the difference between pretest and posttest scores of FonFs group is also statistically significant ( $p = .00 < .05$ ). Thus, the second null hypothesis of the study positing that FonFs instruction does not have any

significant impact on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners was also rejected.

#### 4.3 Results Obtained for Research Question Three

To analyze the third research question, initially the normality of distribution of the pretest scores was explored. Table 5 below indicates the descriptive statistics for pretest scores, and Table 6 illustrates the test of normality results.

Table 5  
*Descriptive Statistics for Pretest Scores*

		Statistic	Std. Error
Pretest Scores	Mean	3.9375	.33262
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3.2647
		Upper Bound	4.6103
	5% Trimmed Mean	3.9167	
	Median	4.0000	
	Variance	4.425	
	Std. Deviation	2.10368	
	Minimum	.00	
	Maximum	9.00	
	Range	9.00	
	Interquartile Range	2.75	
	Skewness	.179	.374
	Kurtosis	-.177	.733

As revealed in Table 5, the mean score on pretest equals 3.93, and the variance and standard deviation of the scores are 4.42 and 2.10, respectively. Moreover, the maximum score is 9.00 and the minimum score is .00.

Table 6  
*Test of Normality for Pretest Scores*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest Scores	.087	40	.200*	.980	40	.689

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As presented in Table 6, pretest scores are normally distributed ( $p > .05$ ). Due to the normal distribution of data, parametric statistics through

independent samples t-test was run to compare the means of the two groups on pretest. Table 7 shows the group statistics for pretest and Table 8 illustrates the results of independent samples t-test.

Table 7  
*Group Statistics for Pretest Scores*

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest Scores	FonF	20	3.9500	1.97284	.44114
	FonFs	20	3.9250	2.27847	.50948

Table 8  
*Independent Samples t-test for Pretest Scores*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest Scores	Equal variances assumed	.177	.67	.037	38	.97	.025	.67	-1.33	1.38
	Equal variances not assumed			.037	37.23	.97	.025	.67	-1.34	1.39

As the analysis of data in Table 8 shows, there is no significant difference between the two groups (FonF and FonFs) on pretest. To analyze the posttest data, initially test of normality was run on posttest scores the results of which are shown in Tables 9 and 10.

Table 9  
*Descriptive Statistics for Posttest Scores*

		Statistic	Std. Error	
Posttest Scores	Mean	15.2750	.56951	
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	14.1231	
		Upper Bound	16.4269	
	5% Trimmed Mean	15.4722		
	Median	16.0000		
	Variance	12.974		
	Std. Deviation	3.60190		
	Minimum	5.00		
	Maximum	20.00		
	Range	15.00		
	Interquartile Range	5.00		
	Skewness	-.835	.374	
	Kurtosis	.198	.733	

As shown in Table 9, the mean score on posttest equals 15.27, and the variance and standard deviation of the scores are 12.97 and 3.60, respectively. Besides, the maximum score is 20.00 and the minimum score is 5.00.

Table 10  
*Test of Normality for Posttest Scores*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Posttest Scores	.159	40	.012	.923	40	.010

Lilliefors Significance Correction

As it can be seen in Table 10, posttest scores are not normally distributed ( $p < .05$ ). Since the posttest data did not enjoy normal distribution, to compare the mean scores of two groups on posttest, the non-parametric equivalent of independent samples t-test (Mann Whitney U test) was employed. Table 11 depicts the results of Mann-Whitney U Test and Table 12 illustrates the rank orders obtained for the two groups.

Table 11  
*Mann-Whitney U Test for Posttest Scores*

	Posttest Scores
Mann-Whitney U	34.500
Wilcoxon W	244.500
Z	-4.504
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.000 <sup>b</sup>
a. Grouping Variable: Group	
b. Not corrected for ties.	

Table 12  
*Ranks Obtained through Mann-Whitney U Test for Posttest Scores*

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Posttest Scores	FonF	12.23	244.50
	FonFs	28.78	575.50
Total	40		

Based on Table 11, the differences between the scores of the two groups on the posttest were found to be significant. In other words, a significant difference was found between the two groups on posttest. Thus, the third null hypothesis assuming no significant difference between FonF and FonFs instruction with regard to their impacts on Iranian advanced EFL learners' acquisition of the subjunctive was rejected.

## 5. Discussion

This study intended to investigate the impact of FonF and FonFs instruction on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners. The first and second research hypotheses of this study were rejected. Therefore, the researchers found that in Iranian language schools, FonF and FonFs instruction have significant positive impacts on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners. Further, the third research hypothesis of this study was also rejected. Another eye-catching finding of this study is that there is a significant difference between FonF and FonFs instruction with regard to their impacts on Iranian advanced EFL

learners' acquisition of subjunctive. Thus, the students who were taught through FonFs instruction significantly outperformed the learners who received FonF instruction.

One plausible justification for this finding is that in some Iranian language schools, there is a large number of students in each class. Thus, individual attention and meaningful interaction are not possible. Besides, EFL teachers cannot address the language learners' problematic forms via discussion. Therefore, since class size is a crucial factor in instruction, teaching grammar rules based on FonF instruction might be a demanding task for EFL teachers in classes with too many students.

Such findings also emanate from the fact that in many EFL contexts, teachers lack time to teach incidentally and thus, it is important to rely on explicit instruction. Moreover, EFL teachers might believe that their language learners internalize the rules better compared to when an inductive approach was taken to grammar instruction. Further, exposure to comprehensible input resulting from natural interaction is insufficient to enable students to learn the subjunctive.

This may also be owing to the fact that in Iranian language schools, FonFs instruction is more desirable for older English language learners rather than young ones. In the same vein, Ellis (2015) pointed out that, undoubtedly, in an EFL setting, intentional learning is beneficial, particularly for older students. Besides, since adult students are mostly accustomed to explicit learning and instruction, they might gain more from FonFs instruction (Loewen, 2018). In line with the findings of this study, Loewen (2018) asserted that while there has been a paradigm shift away from explicit instruction, recent research has shown that explicit instruction can be useful in improving students' explicit knowledge as well as their implicit knowledge in some cases.

Furthermore, the results of this study are in line with the previous studies (e.g., Andrews, 2007; Dekeyser, 1995; Dorji, 2018; Lopez Diaz et al., 2019; Housen, 2005; Onalan, 2018; Robinson, 1996; Zamani et al, 2019). In this regard, Dorji (2018) demonstrated that instructors should teach grammar explicitly and pointed out that explaining the grammar rules was outstandingly helpful and attached a paramount importance to correcting language learners' errors.

In like manner, Onalan (2018) explored the perceptions of 75 EFL teachers on grammar instruction and collected the data by a scale with 15 items that addressed a number of major issues in teaching grammar. The results of the study revealed that adult EFL learners' teachers had a strong tendency toward explicit grammar teaching. In contrast, instructors with higher academic degrees (Ph.D. or MA) preferred to teach grammar implicitly. However, these instructors preferred to teach grammar more explicitly as the age and proficiency level of their language learners increased.

The results of the study demonstrated that FonFs approach was more effective than FonF approach for adult learners. Thus, FonFs instruction of the subjunctive raised Iranian advanced EFL learners' awareness of grammar rules and facilitated their comprehension and production. In this regard, Shakhshi Dastgahian (2021) examined three Iranian EFL teachers' incentives for supporting their established grammar instruction approaches through observations and interviews. The findings demonstrated that Iranian EFL teachers were required to use communicative pedagogies to enhance students' communicative ability at secondary schools. On the other hand, due to the instructors' strong beliefs in the importance of accuracy, they employed explicit grammar instruction approach in their language classes in order to develop their students' English proficiency. In the same line, Kisselev,

Dubinina, and Polinsky (2020) demonstrated that EFL teachers were required to provide their students with at least some form of explicit grammar instruction to enhance structural accuracy.

In another study, Ebrahimi et al. (2015) examined the impact of FonF and FonFs instruction on grammar acquisition of conditional sentences by 90 Iranian intermediate EFL students. The participants of the study were selected from a language school in Shiraz. The researchers used an Oxford placement test to ensure the homogeneity of the language learners. Then, they administered a pretest to identify the participants' knowledge of conditional sentences. Afterwards, the first experimental group received FonF instruction of conditional sentences while the second experimental group received FonFs instruction. The findings of the study revealed that FonFs instruction on conditional sentences was more efficient than FonF instruction.

Further, in much the same way, Zamani et al (2019) underscored the importance of structural complexity and noted that depending on the degree of difficulty, explicit instruction might function differently for different structures. Moreover, Dekeyser (1995) and Robinson (1996) pointed out that explicit instruction is more effective for basic structures than implicit instruction, whereas Housen (2005) illustrated that explicit instruction works more effectively for complex structures. Andrews (2007) taught simple and complex rules to two experimental groups through implicit and explicit instruction. The participants of the study included secondary school students and their ages ranged from 13 to 19. The findings revealed that explicit instruction made a significant difference to their learning of complex rules, while both explicit and implicit instructions were similarly efficient for learning the basic rules. Moreover, the results of the study indicated that instructors should teach complex rules through explicit instruction while allowing language learners to learn basic rules implicitly.

On the other hand, the results of the current study are in contrast with some of the previous studies (e.g., Bahari, 2019; Bandar & Gorjian, 2017). For instance, Bandar and Gorjian (2017) examined the effects of FonF and focus on meaning instruction on acquisition of wh-questions. The participants of their study were 60 high school students from Abadan, Iran, with the age range of 15-17. The researchers administered a grammar test to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. After administering the teacher-made pretest, the participants were assigned to experimental and control groups. In the experimental group, wh-questions were taught through focusing on form and meaning. However, the control group was taught through the traditional way of teaching wh-questions. After eight weeks of treatment, the researchers administered a posttest. Then, independent paired samples t-test was run to analyze the data. The findings demonstrated that the students in the experimental group outperformed the participants in the control group. Therefore, FonF and meaning-based instruction of wh-questions was more effective than traditional instruction of this grammatical feature. In contrast to the findings of the present study, Bahari (2019) underscored the significance of employing FonF instruction and maintained that incorporating FonF approach enables language learners to focus on meaning and use grammar communicatively. Besides, instructors should employ interactive tasks to integrate meaning-focused activities toward communicative purposes (Bahari, 2019).

## **6. Conclusion**

The present study aimed at identifying the impact of FonF and FonFs instruction on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by 40 Iranian advanced EFL learners and investigating whether there is any significant difference between FonF and FonFs instruction with regard to their impacts on Iranian advanced EFL learners' acquisition of the subjunctive.

In conclusion, this study found that although FonF and FonFs instruction have significant positive impacts on grammar acquisition of the subjunctive by Iranian advanced EFL learners, the students who were taught through FonFs instruction significantly outperformed the learners who received FonF instruction. Thus, explicit instruction of the subjunctive can raise students' awareness of specific grammar rules, which can then help them notice the language forms in subsequent input. Therefore, in the context of the teaching and learning the subjunctive, EFL learners' attention to detailed analysis of grammar rules facilitates comprehension and production.

The results of this study can be of benefit to syllabus designers and material developers, EFL teachers, and learners in Iranian language schools. EFL teachers do not need to view FonF and FonFs approaches as oppositional in grammar instruction. EFL students can obviously benefit from both approaches. Thus, syllabus designers and material developers should take it into account that it is unquestionably desirable to provide a program that integrates both of these approaches.

This study faced certain limitations that need to be taken into account in interpreting the findings. The first limitation of this study concerns the small number of the participants. Thus, further research can include more participants to yield more generalizable results. Moreover, the participants of this study were selected from a language school in Karaj, Iran. Therefore, future studies can replicate this study with language learners from different cities of Iran. Besides, since the participants of this study consisted of only male students, strong claims cannot be made since the results may not be generalizable to female students. Moreover, this study calls for further investigation to explore the participants' performance considering the differences in their age. Finally, the duration of instruction which lasted for five weeks might be regarded as another limitation in the current study, and

future researchers interested in the topic are hence recommended to take this and other afore-said limitations into account.

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