

# **THE EFFECTS OF INTEGRATED FFI AND ISOLATED FFI ON THE ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH PAST TENSE**

Danae Tsapikidou  
*University of Cambridge, Greece*

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents the results of a classroom-based study which I conducted for my PhD thesis. It is an experimental study on the comparative benefits of Isolated and Integrated FFI in primary EFL education. Greek 5th year primary learners aged 10-11 were exposed to Integrated FFI (n= 75) on the English Past Tense and their learning gains were compared to the gains of their peers who were exposed to Isolated FFI (n = 73), as these were first defined by Spada and Lightbown (2008). Integrated FFI was operationalised as the provision of comprehension and production structure-based communicative tasks; that is, tasks that were especially crafted to provide meaningful contexts for the practice of the English Past tense and its progressive aspect. In completing those tasks, learners focused on comprehension and the expression of meaning while they produced the target structures and received corrective feedback on their errors. Isolated FFI was operationalised as the explicit presentation and meta-linguistic explanations of the rules that govern the formation and use of the same target structures, coupled with grammatical consciousness-raising tasks, structural grammar exercises and controlled oral and written production activities. I taught the groups myself as a teacher researcher throughout the intervention, which lasted for 12 hours. The two groups were tested four times; each test was given after completing six hours of treatment and two months after the end of the intervention. The tests included grammaticality judgments, multiple-choice tests, tense formation tests, an open cloze, a question formation task, picture description, sentence matching and text completion tests. I will present the results of the statistical analyses from the comparisons of these groups. One suggestion is that, planned Integrated FFI targeting specific structures in context, if applied consistently for some time, produces

equivalent learning gains to Isolated FFI even for elementary-level EFL learners whose opportunities for productive use of the language are generally limited within the classroom context.

*Key words:* grammar, TESOL, young learners.

## **1. Introduction**

There is now consensus in the field of foreign language teaching that instruction is most effective when it includes attention to both meaning and form and discussion has now moved to the question of when and how it is most effective (Spada and Lightbown, 2008, p.184). In relation to this particular issue of pedagogical timing of focus-on-form, two types of FFI, Isolated FFI and Integrated FFI have been proposed by Spada and Lightbown (2008, p.187). According to the authors, both types of instruction assume a primary focus on meaning with the inclusion of attention to form, but they differ in terms of *when* attention to form is provided. In Integrated FFI, the learner's attention is always drawn to form within communicative practice and activities. In Isolated FFI, the learner's attention is always drawn to form separately from communicative practice and activities. The study reported here is a quasi-experimental study of form-focused instruction (FFI) in English-as-a-foreign language teaching in the Hellenic state primary sector. Specifically, the study compares the learning gains of 5<sup>th</sup> year Primary EFL learners aged 10-11 who received Isolated FFI and Integrated FFI for the acquisition of the English Past tense and its continuous aspect.

According to the authors, (Lightbown and Spada, 2008, p.182), Isolated FFI has been hypothesized to work better than Integrated FFI in EFL settings, where the foreign language is exclusively taught in classrooms with learners and teachers who share the same mother tongue and there are limited opportunities to use the language outside the classroom. In order to test this hypothesis, the main research question in this study was whether there are differences in the grammatical knowledge of 5<sup>th</sup> year learners who received Isolated FFI or Integrated FFI as evidenced by written measures of performance at any time during a 12-hour intervention.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1. Sample**

The study was conducted in four intact 5<sup>th</sup> year EFL intact classes that were assigned into two treatment groups. The research design was quasi-experimental with two treatments and four written measures (2x4). The treatment groups were named *Integrated FFI* and *Isolated FFI*.

The learner sample consisted of 89 native Greek 5<sup>th</sup> year primary learners of EFL aged 10-11 years old, in two state schools in Thessaloniki, Greece. Group sizes were equal, Isolated FFI N =39, Integrated FFI N=39. However, the number of students included in the statistical analysis was N=78<sup>1</sup>. There was a filter in this test and tests that scored equal to or less than 5% of the total score were excluded from the analysis. That filter excluded only students who answered just 1 out of 35 items in each test, and practically handed in a blank test.

## 2.2 Tests

I designed and administered four different tests of grammatical knowledge on the target tense form and use in pen-and-paper mode during the intervention. The Isolated FFI and Integrated FFI groups completed three distinct grammar tests – Test 2, Test 3 and Test 4. The tests had the same format; each consisted of 5 sub-tests which measured the same construct. The content of each test was different every time, as variation was necessary in order to eliminate the risk of *practice effects*. The test format included grammaticality judgments, selected response and limited production tasks that emerge from Purpura (2004) and Gass & Mackey's (2007) typologies for data elicitation techniques in linguistics- and interaction-based research.

I administered Test 1, the pre-test, two weeks before the experiment and Test 2, the mid-test, after 6 hours of experimental treatment; Test 3, the post-test, after 12 hours, the endpoint of instruction. Each test was administered systematically after 6 hours of instruction for each group. Test 4, the delayed post-test, was taken two months after the end of the experiment.

The scoring system was simple; 1 point was allocated for each correct answer out of a total of 35 answers. No point was given for an incorrect or a missing answer. Also, there was no partial credit for interlanguage forms. Each test took the whole class hour - 45 min- to complete. The test task types in all four tests were the following.

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<sup>1</sup> The reason why the number of subjects was reduced in the repeated-measures GLM was because it is a condition for running repeated measures that all students should have taken all the tests. Therefore 11 students who either missed one of the four tests or scored lower than 5% were excluded from the repeated measures analysis.

**Table 1: Test task types**

1. Grammaticality Judgement Test (10 items)
2. Multiple –Choice (MC) test (5 items)
3. Tense Formation (TF) task (5 items)
4. Word Order (WO) test (5 items)
5. Open Cloze (OC) test (5 items)
6. Picture description (PD) test (5 items)
7. Match Halves (MH) test (5 items)
8. Verb Completion (VC) test (5 items)
9. Question Formation (QF) (5 items)
10. Dialogue Completion (DC) (5 items)

**Table 2: Methodological design of the study**

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Treatment	Test x Time			
	0 (h)	6 (h)	12 hours	2 months
Integrated FFI	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Isolated FFI				

### 2.3 Target structures

The structures under investigation were the English Past Tense and its continuous aspect. These target structures are part of the prescribed syllabus for the 5<sup>th</sup> year Primary English subject. They are problematic for Greek learners of English because of cross-linguistic differences and because they are difficult to acquire without

explicit instruction. Furthermore, mastery of the Past Tense is vital for attaining accuracy in a number of more advanced and complex grammatical phenomena.

In summary, the following structures were taught in this experiment.

1. Copula be in past tense (was/were)
2. Regular verbs ending in -ed in past tense
3. Past simple questions with <i>did</i> + Subject-Verb inversion
4. Past simple negative sentences with <i>didn't</i>
5. Irregular verbs
6. Past progressive Affirmative forms (was/were + ing)
7. Past Progressive question forms with Subject-Verb inversion
8. Past progressive negative sentences (wasn't/weren't + ing)

## 2.4 Prior Knowledge

The learners had 2 ½ years of EFL instruction in primary school prior to the experiment. In addition, many learners in the study attended either a private language school or received private at-home English tuition. Therefore, their general English language learning experience was not the same and the four groups may be classified as mixed-ability classes.

Data collection took place in two phases; from September-October 2009 to December 2009 -February 2010. At that time, I had expected that most learners would have no prior knowledge of the grammatical phenomena in focus. The past tense is commonly taught toward the end of the school year around April. However, I administered Test 1, the pre-test, two weeks before the experiment to control for the possibility of learner prior knowledge. Test 1 showed that all groups were initially comparable to each other in terms of grammatical knowledge of the target structures. Hence, random assignment to the conditions was adopted. Since that point, I taught each group for three periods of 45 minutes every week over the course of four weeks.

## 2.5 Description of treatments

Following Spada & Lightbown's definition of *Isolated FFI* (2008, p.187), instruction in this group was operationalised as explicit FFI and form-focused practice plus

separate communicative tasks without feedback on form. Instructional time was equally allocated for both phases of this treatment; this means that, from the 12 hours of instruction, 6 hours in total were allocated to explicit FFI and 6 hours for communicative tasks. In the first phase of this treatment, Isolated FFI was provided through presentation of rules regarding the forms and use of the Past tense paired with practice in the form of controlled production exercises, oral and written ones as well as and grammatical consciousness-raising tasks. When students completed their exercises in this first phase of Isolated FFI, I provided whole-class feedback. In the second phase of the Isolated FFI treatment, students were given meaning-based comprehension and production tasks to complete, for which the use of the target structures was essential, useful or natural (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993). During this phase, I did not give any corrective feedback on form, but only addressed pupils' questions related to meaning and task procedure.

In contrast, *Integrated FFI* (Spada & Lightbown, 2008) was operationalized as FFI within meaning-based activities which elicited the use of the target structures. Throughout the duration of instruction in this treatment, learners received FFI as in brief explanations, corrective feedback, explicit elicitations of correct forms and input enhancement provided within the process of completing a meaning-based comprehension or production task. I used structure-based tasks, oral and written ones, which necessitated either comprehension or production of the target structures in order to complete the task successfully. This treatment also experienced FFI implicitly through task modeling, and task-planning in the course of communicative tasks; at no point during the 12 hour intervention were they given a formal presentation of the structures or any form-related exercises to do as in the previous treatment.

The materials for both the Isolated FFI and the Integrated FFI groups followed the school course book with some supplementary material that I brought specifically for this study. Both treatments were taught Unit 7 titled *Going back in time* and Unit 8 titled *All about stories* of the prescribed state-published 5<sup>th</sup> year Primary English course book series ((Kolovou & Kraniotou, 2008).

Here, a short description of representative task types is provided for illustration, due to space constraints.

In the Isolated FFI group, students listen to an interrogation scene between a policeman and a suspect concerning a bank robbery. Then, they read the audio transcript for this dialogue which comes with a worksheet. The text has gaps for the Past verbs but the verb infinitive form is given in brackets. They listen and write down the correct verb forms on the worksheet.

Example:

What time 1. \_\_\_\_\_ (leave) the restaurant?

Jack: Well, I don't remember exactly, but I think it 2. \_\_\_\_\_ (be) at about 3.30.

In the Integrated FFI group, students listen to the same input but they are not given the dialogue transcript. Instead, they do a True or False activity based on this input and then they reconstruct the dialogue and role-play the above scene as in the example:

1. Where were you during the afternoon of May 4 <sup>th</sup> ?	a. I was out of the restaurant.
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A rich variety of related tasks and activities were implemented that could not be replicated in more detail due to space constraints. In table, I provide a summary of the characteristics and activities for the two treatments.

**Table 4: Summary of the characteristics and activities for the two treatments****Characteristics of the treatments**

<b>Integrated FFI</b>	<b>Isolated FFI</b>
Attention to form always embedded in meaning-based and communicative practice	Attention to form always separate from meaning-based and communicative practice
Focus on form and focus on meaning integrated in communicative activities at the same time	Equally divided instructional time for focus on form and focus on meaning
Task-essential, task useful or task natural use of form through need to communicate	Explicit presentation of rules before practice
Attention to form explicitly through corrective feedback, brief metalinguistic explanations and negotiation of meaning during communicative activities	Attention to form explicitly through language analysis
Task modelling and task planning	Corrective and meta-linguistic feedback provided ONLY in form-focused activities but NOT provided during communicative activities
Noticing-the-gap between TL/IL	Noticing through grammatical awareness activities
Focus on accuracy within guided communicative practice	Focus on accuracy in controlled structural pattern practice

**Activities**

<b>Common for Isolated and Integrated FFI treatments</b>	<b>For Isolated FFI treatment only</b>
Interactive information exchange tasks	Controlled pattern questions/answers using visual/verbal prompts
Story comparison tasks	Tense formation exercises with gap-filling
Role-play	Dictation
Listening and reading comprehension tasks (True or false? answering questions)	Cloze task with verbal prompts
Picture-sentence and sentence matching, split sentences	Multiple choice exercises
Sentence writing	Verb recognition
Picture/sentence/paragraph ordering text re-arrangement	Error correction grammar exercises

Guessing activities	Jumbled sentences: Word order
Writing activities: story summarizing, text reconstruction, dialogue creation,	Consciousness-raising and language awareness activities
Dictogloss	Text manipulation activities
Jigsaw	Word-order exercises
	Substitution tables, transformations, sentence restorations question/answer drills

### 3. Results

The overall performance of the 2 groups in the 4 tests was examined using a repeated-measures general linear model (GLM); The Group factor contained 2 levels (Isolated FFI and Integrated FFI) and the Test factor contained 4 levels (Test 1 (0h), Test 2 (6h), Test 3 (12h), Test 4 (2m)). The number of participants was originally 89 students but the number of students included in the RM GLM was  $N=78^2$ . There was a filter in this test and tests that scored equal to or less than 5% of the total score were excluded from the analysis. That filter excluded only students who answered just 1 out of 35 items in each test, and practically handed in a blank test. Mauchly's test showed the results did not meet the assumption of sphericity, Mauchly's  $W = ,788$ ,  $\chi^2(5)=.17,766$ ,  $p=.003$ . Two corrections were applied; the Greenhouse-Geisser  $p=.870$  and Huynh-Feldt  $p=.916$ . The assumption of equality of covariance was met with Box's Test  $p=.501$ . Also, the assumption of equality of error variances was also met (See Table 1 below)

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Test 1 (0h)	1,491	1	76	,226
Test 2 (6h)	,092	1	76	,763
Test 3 (12h)	6,153	1	76	,015
Test 4 (2m)	,241	1	76	,625

<sup>2</sup> The reason why the number of subjects was reduced in the repeated-measures GLM was because it is a condition for running repeated measures that all students should have taken all the tests. Therefore 11 students who either missed one of the four tests or scored lower than 5% were excluded from the repeated measures analysis.

Within subjects analysis showed a significant main effect of the Test factor  $F(3,228)=15,185$ ,  $p<.001$ , effect size  $\eta^2_p=.030$ , observed power=.588. The between-subjects comparison showed no significant group difference  $F(1,76)=2,296$ ,  $p=.134$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.029$ , observed power=.322. The interaction between Test and Group was not significant  $F(3,228)=2.366$ ,  $p>.05$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.030$ , observed power=.588. The above results are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 6: Repeated Measures Anova for the two experimental groups in the four tests**

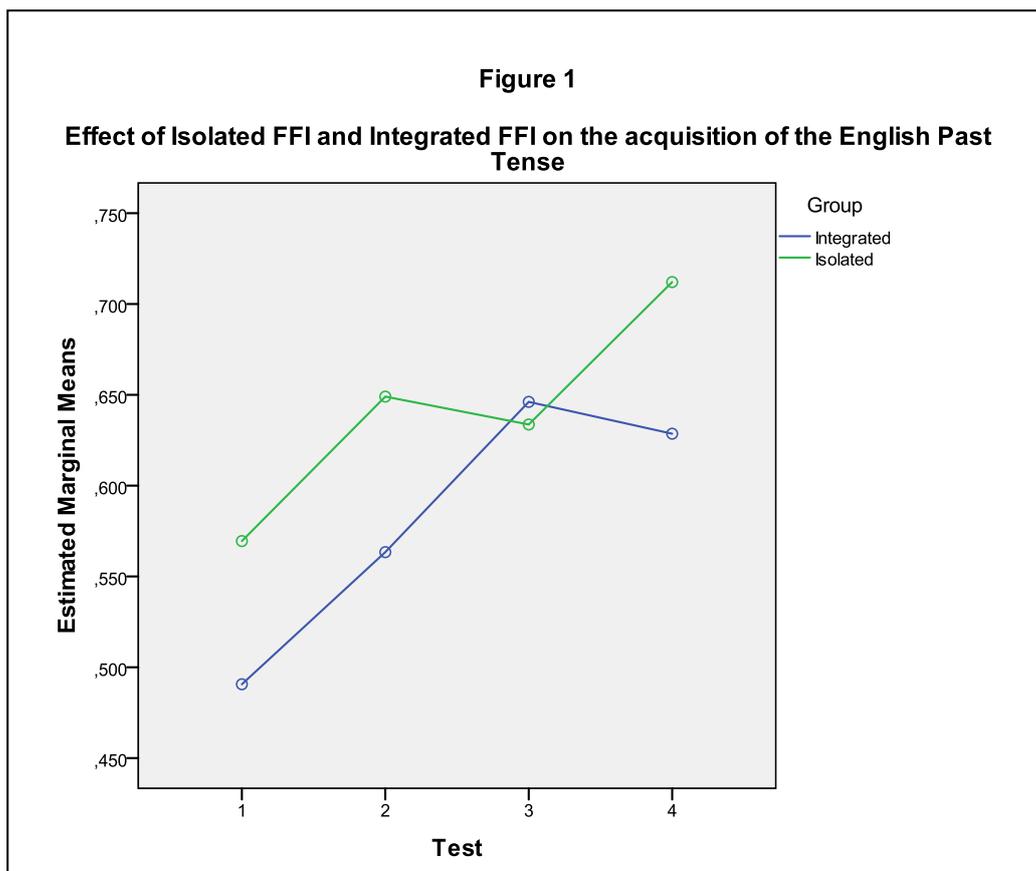
	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>Noncent. Parameter</i>	<i>Observed Power<sup>a</sup></i>
Within-subjects effects								
Test	,85	3	,28	15,18	,000	,16	45,555	1,000
Test * Group	,133	3	,04	2,36	,072	,03	7,097	,588
Error	4,26	22	,01					
Between-subjects effects								
Intercept	116,71	1	116,71	991,12	,000	,92	991,123	1,000
Group	,27	1	,27	2,29	,134	,02	2,296	,322
Error	8,95	76	,11					

a. Computed using alpha = ,05

From Table 3 and Figure 1, it appears that both treatment groups improved from Test 1 to Test 2, Test 3 and Test 4. Specifically, the Integrated FFI group started off in Test 1 with an average mean score of 49%, which became 56% in Test 2, after 6 hours of treatment and 64% in Test 3, after doubling the duration of the treatment to 12 hours. This group managed to maintain stable performance in Test 4 with 62%, a result which shows that the effect of Integrated FFI was maintained in the long-term, two months after the study had ended. Table 3 displays the mean scores, standard deviations and number of students for this analysis.

The Isolated FFI group started off with an average mean score of 56%, which shows that this group was somewhat better in their knowledge of the English past tense than the other group in the beginning of the study. This group also improved by scoring 64% in Test 2 and maintaining approximately the same result in Test 3 with 63% at the end point of the study. It is important to point out that there were no significant differences between the two groups in any of the tests, and it is noteworthy that in Test 3 even the minor differences of the previous scores had been completely evened out. The Isolated FFI class however, showed significant pre-to delayed post-test improvement with a final score of 71% versus the start-off score of 56%. This result shows that the Isolated FFI had more significant long-term effects than Integrated FFI for the acquisition of the English past tense in this EFL young learner sample of our study.

	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Test 1 (0h)	Integrated FFI	.49	.26	39
	Isolated FFI	.56	.23	39
	Total	.53	.24	78
Test 2 (6h)	Integrated FFI	.56	.20	39
	Isolated FFI	.64	.18	39
	Total	.60	.19	78
Test 3 (12h)	Integrated FFI	.64	.15	39
	Isolated FFI	.63	.19	39
	Total	.63	.17	78
Test 4 (2m)	Integrated FFI	.62	.21	39
	Isolated FFI	.71	.19	39
	Total	.67	.21	78



#### 4. Discussion

The main research question was answered with a no-difference result; that is, there was no significant difference between Isolated FFI and Integrated FFI at any point during the 12-hour experimental intervention. The pedagogical timing issue of FFI brings up the question of whether Isolated FFI should precede Integrated FFI of a new language feature. The answer from these results is that it may be beneficial, but not

necessary. Isolating a specific grammar feature to present it formally and practise it separately before any other input or output-based practice is a useful teaching technique, especially for young learners who need time to build up their interlanguage and should not be pushed to communicate before they are ready; developmentally or psychologically. Nevertheless, the provision of isolated structural practice outside of communicative tasks is not necessary for the proceduralization of these forms. Instead, explicit FFI during the completion of structure-based communication tasks can lead to equal levels of grammatical performance as more structural gap-filling exercises on forms. In this study, explicit knowledge of the target structures (form and use) gained either by presentation of the rules *before* practice – in the Isolated FFI groups- or *during* communicative activity as explicit corrective feedback – in the Integrated FFI groups- led to equal levels of proceduralization of the target structures after 12 hours of instruction. Hence, the answer to the issue of timing of focus on form as raised by Spada and Lightbown (2008) is that there is no difference as to when exactly FFI will be provided within the larger time span of a series of lessons.

This outcome may be explained as the product of explicit grammatical knowledge that both groups cultivated throughout the study. Explicit rule knowledge may have been a more prominent feature in the Isolated FFI treatment which aimed at building correct use of the target structures in controlled pattern practice for half the instructional time - 6 hours out of 12. Explicit knowledge of the rules facilitated accuracy in these exercises; The Isolated FFI classes received feedback on the grammar exercises, explicit recasts and corrections with metalinguistic explanations and rule elicitations. The explicit knowledge gained during form-focused practice in the Isolated FFI treatment may have somewhat facilitated these learners in the subsequent tests; hence their small improvement from 56% to 63% after 12 hours of instruction.

On the other hand, the Integrated FFI classes were also aware of the rules, which were taught not in a presentation format but through a range of explicit corrective feedback techniques, such as explicit correction, brief metalinguistic explanations, recasts, and prompts. Corrective feedback on form was given during task work. Learners were given time to work out the content of their task and to negotiate meaning as they engaged in oral pair work. It is known that corrective feedback gives learners the opportunity to notice the gap between the interlanguage form and the target structure (Sheen and Ellis, 2011). Thus, the Integrated FFI classes also built explicit knowledge

of the target forms as they engaged in focused communication tasks with the target structures embedded in them. It appears that focused corrective feedback on form in integrated practice of form and meaning can be particularly beneficial, equally just as Isolated FFI (Spada, Jessop, Tomita, Suzuki, & Valeo, 2014 ). However, the Isolated FFI classes were not provided with form-focused feedback on the oral and written output communicative tasks; only the Integrated FFI group received on-task feedback.

One feature of the Integrated FFI treatment was the provision of a task model before a task was implemented that directed learner attention to the use of the target structures during task-work. This was done upon Mercer and Littleton's definition on effective scaffolding that is "the sensitive supportive intervention of a more expert other in the progress of a learner who is actively involved in some specific task, but who is not quite able to manage the task alone" (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 18) p. 18). The young learners in this study relied on the task model as a frame of reference and they restructured their interlanguage after noticing the grammatical structures in the task model (Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). As suggested by Ellis and Yuan, "guided planning can succeed in creating favourable conditions for striking a pedagogical balance between communication and grammar" (ibid, 2003, p.11) even with young learners in an EFL context.

## **5. Conclusion**

From the perspective of the language teacher, Spada (Spada, 2014 ) maintains that teachers use both Isolated and Integrated FFI as they see fit and that they realize the benefits of both approaches (2008, p.199). The results of this study also show that Isolated FFI and Integrated FFI constitute complementary instructional techniques that the English teacher may utilise to maximize the benefits of instruction.

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