

IN THE NAME OF GOD

'Focus-on-Form Instruction: A Review of Related Literature.'

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## ABSTRACT

In this literature review I have first provided an introduction in which I've clarified the meaning of focus on form issue and some debates about its advantages and disadvantages and the needed degree of focus on form in teaching structures in classroom. Then I have stated some features of focus on form and the ways that focus on form can contribute to the development of communicative ability which is the main purpose of second language learning. In the third section I have stated some linguists' ideas about focus on form which contains some agreement and disagreements between researchers. In the fourth section I have categorized some structure-based proposals by some linguists and consider their suggestions on activities and techniques. I have compared their viewpoints. This section is followed by different techniques of focus on form in instructions in the classroom settings and instructional activities. I also have listed some suggestions of researchers about different kinds of activities. In the fifth section I have examined the effectiveness of focus on form instruction within a variety of instructional circumstances as proposed by some researchers. They have done some practical researches in focus on form and I have listed their results in a kind of comparison form of their works. In the sixth part I have listed some limitations of focus on form mentioned by some researchers which can be considered in curriculum designing and the practical teaching. In the last part I have written the conclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the topics in second language acquisition has been how language input should be presented to the second language learners in the classroom and the applied linguistics concern is centered on the most effective form of grammar instruction in the communicative classroom (Doughty and Williams 1998; Lightbown 2000; Norris and Ortega 2000). Form focused instruction is one of the ways to attend the learners to concentrate on forms which are necessary for production a language. Form focused instruction refers to attention to the formal aspects of language. Long (1991:45-6) refers to focus on form as drawing" ... students` attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication." Focus on form derives from an assumed degree of similarity between first and second language acquisition positing that the two processes are both based on an exposure to comprehensible input arising from natural interaction. So focus on form refers to bringing grammar to the attention of language learners as a part of communicative language practice. For years, SLA researchers have debated about whether or not to pay attention to linguistic forms. Some argued that language learning is fairly autonomous process that occurs spontaneously if instruction provides plentiful opportunities to deal with the target language. Others have claimed that effective second language instruction involves explicitly teaching the rules of the target language.

After a long time of debate on the advantages and disadvantages of form-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the mainstream view on this issue seemed to agree that second language teaching that is primarily meaning-focused can be improved if some degree of attention is paid to forms. Some second language acquisition researchers like Schmidt, 1993; Sharwood Smith, 1993 and Van Patten, 1989 claim an approach that includes a focus on the grammatical form of the

second language and a major issue in second language acquisition is the role of form-focused instruction (FFI) in teaching a language.

There is also another debate around the degree to which teachers need to direct learners` attention to understanding grammar and keep the focus on the communication at the same time. Some linguists like Doughty and Varela 1998 advocate no interruption in communication and some others like Dekeyser, 1998 advocate separate attention to grammar and subsequent integration of the knowledge provided in increasingly communicative activity.

## FEATURES of FOCUS on FORM

Focus on form has two main features. Firstly, focus on rules is less important than meaning. That is, the emphasis is on the meaning of the language which is primary and a shift towards a focus on formal aspects occurs only when meaning is not accurately conveyed or when the instructor suspects the shift is necessary for comprehension. Secondly, this shift entails attention being directed towards the grammatical features of the language. As a summary focus on form requires the students to focus on the grammatical correctness or incorrectness of the second language.

Research into the focus on form type of ESL grammar instruction suggests three possible ways that contribute to the development of communicative ability. First, direct ESL grammar instruction may help raise learners' consciousness of a form which they have not noticed when they have read or heard it, so that learners may learn to recognize the feature and listen for it in future (Sharwood Smith, 1981; Ellis, 2000). A second purpose for grammatical knowledge is that it may serve as a memory device, helping ESL learners remember how to produce a particular form until they can produce it automatically (Blair, 1982). The third, ESL grammar instruction can be a means of "flooding" learners with examples of a form which occurs infrequently, giving them more intensive practice with a form that they might not encounter in everyday speech.

## Linguists' ideas about Focus on form

In this section I want to propose different linguists' ideas about focus on form and provide their view points. Grammar teaching in second language teaching pedagogy has attracted many researchers over the years. Therefore, the focus on grammar teaching concerns many language teaching researchers and practitioners. In task-based language teaching proposals, focus on form has been a dilemma. Prabhu (1987) advocates the position that grammar instruction should be neglected in favor of focus on meaning. Prabhu argues that grammar is best learnt through focus on meaning. Others such as Ellis (1997), and Nunan (1989) try to graft a synthetic syllabus with structural based tasks.(Long and Robinson, 1998). Robinson (1998, 2000) and other researchers such as Skehan (1998) critics Nunan and Ellis's emphasis on task. They argue that tasks should not be used to force attention to, or to practice a particular structure, function or sub skill. Skehan (1998) refers to these as structure trapping tasks where tasks are used to implement a linguistic syllabus. In the next part, some examples of structured-based proposals will be presented along with some researchers' effort to solve his problem. I think that there is no proved idea that what type of teaching form is suitable and each technique of teaching forms has its own advantages and disadvantages.

## Structure-based proposals

In this section, I want to compare some structure-based proposals in which the linguists propose some arguments.

Ellis(1997) argues that form-focused activities have two problems:

- 1- FFA(form focused activities) will be useful when the learner is ready to acquire the matter in question, that is Teachability hypothesis proposed by Pieneman(1985)
- 2- Learners might feel anxious when they are corrected after failing to produce certain structures which they find difficult to produce, that is psycho-affective block to learning proposed by Krashen(1997)

Considering these shortcomings Ellis (1997) proposes two other activities:

- 1- Interpretation-task which enables learners to understand the meaning of a certain structure.
- 2- Conscious-raising task which gives some forms of second language to the learners and the learners need to perform on them.

These activities are kind of input processing while the form focused activities are output processing, moreover interpretation tasks enable learners compare their production of a structure and see how it works correctly which enhance interlanguage development but Ellis doesn't guarantee interpretation-task because they require teacher intervention in learners' second language acquisition, which might not be successful and the limitation he proposes for conscious-raising task is that it is not good for young learners and beginners.

Robinson and Long (1998) and Doughty and Williams (1998) advocate focus on form. Long and Robinson argue that their approach is motivated by interaction hypothesis

(that most language development occurs through interaction between learners and other speakers such as learners, teacher and written text), and shows a positive effect on interlanguage development. Long and Robinson suggest that the outcome of focus on form would be noticing and the idea of noticing was proposed by Schmit(1993). Focus on meaning will not develop learners` language to the target level in spite of years of exposure to language and engagement in communicative interaction.

Loschky and Bely-Vroman(1993) work in structure trapping and distinguish three types of structure-task relationships:

- 1- Task-naturalness which is a structure that would arise naturally and the use of a it is unforced.
- 2- Task-utility which uses a particular structure and would help completing the task perfectly but avoided in using other structures and it is difficult.
- 3- Task-essentialness which is essential to attend to the structure in order to complete the task successfully and needs more control and adjustment. Task-essentialness will force learners` attention to certain structures and improve interlanguage hypothesis.

Bygate(1996), Willis(1996), Skehan(1998), Long(1997), Richards(2000) and Samuda(2000) provide practical solutions for addressing grammar in task-based teaching. They suggest that focus on form can be achieved through the teachers` role in guiding "from behind" to form-meaning relationships as the task progress, following the frame of "meaning→form→meaning" progression for task design.

Samuda (2000) argues that the teacher can direct the learners` attention to form implicitly and explicitly, while maintaining topic continuity.

## Focus on Form in Instruction

Instructors encourage learners to focus on form in several ways that are:

- Planned and focused on preselected structures
- Incidental, arising spontaneously at any point in a communicative activity
- Implicitly
- Explicitly
- Reactive including explicit corrections to student language
- Recast (saying what students have said, but differently)
- Clarification request

Focus on form is most frequently teacher-initiated, but it is also initiated by learners through questions and requests for explanation (Poole, 2005b).

Ellis, Basturkmen, and Lowen (2001) found that learners who engaged in communicative, focus on form activities improved their grammatical accuracy and their use of new forms. Some empirical studies have found that various focus-on-form techniques have led to more accurate use of target structures (Camhi & Ebsworth, 2008; Doughty & verela, 1998; Jourdenias, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughty 1995; Loewen, 2005; Williams & Evans, 1998). A synthesis of the findings from a large review of research on the needs of English language learners suggested that they learn best with instruction that combines interactive approaches with explicit instruction (Goldenberg, 2008)

Ellis 2006, Spada and Lightbown 1999 suggest that focus on form should not be initiated with begging learners. Instead, learners should be encouraged to attend to form only

after they have acquired basic structures and vocabulary and have developed a basic ability to communicate.

## Instructional Activities

There are some implicit and explicit techniques:

Implicit Techniques:

- 1- Input flood
- 2- Input enhancement
- 3- Structure-based task (Fotos 2002)

Explicit Techniques:

- 1- Consciousness-raising strategies
- 2- Focused communication task (Ellis,2001)
- 3- Error correction strategies (Doughty and Williams, 1998)
- 4- Garden path technique (Tomasello and Herron, 1988)

Celce Murcia (2007) suggest that instead of creating grammar correction exercises using decontextualized sentences from learners` writings, teachers should create short texts that include common error types made by students in their writings, students can work together to edit the more authentic texts which helps them to correct their own work.

Larsen-Freeman (2003) suggests focus on form activities and techniques as follows:

- 1- Collaborative dialogues which are conversations in which students work together to discuss and use a new form, constructing a sentence together.
- 2- Prolepsis is an instructional conversation that takes place between a teacher and a student and the teacher coaches the student through the process of task.

- 3- Language experience approach is a technique in which learners dictate to the instructor, in English, something they would like to be able to say. The instructor then writes students` message in correct, grammatical English and gives them to the students.

The effectiveness of focus on form instruction within a variety of instructional circumstances

I have chosen some studies and described the effectiveness of form focus instructions.

I have numbered them in order to make distinctions between them.

1- Leeman, Arteagoitia, Fridman and Doughty (1995)

In this study focus on form was compared with focus on meaning

Participants: 2 groups of US college students in advanced Spanish classes

Group 1 → Focus on form

Group 2 → Focus on meaning

In posttest group 1 were more accurate in their production of Spanish verbs than group 2.

2- Doughty & Verela (1998)

In this study they studied the differences in the acquisition of English tense.

Participants: 2 groups of US junior high, ESL science students

Group 1 → Corrective recast

Group 2 → Teacher-led instruction in the form of lectures

In posttest group 1 performed better.

3- Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson & Doughty (1995)

In this study they studied the concept of textual enhancement with highlighted forms.

Participants: 2 groups of Spanish college students

Group 1 → enhanced text

Group 2 → no enhanced text

In posttest group 1 performed better.

#### 4- Williams and Evans (1998)

In this study they used passive voice and adjectival participles.

Participants: 2 groups of intermediate-level ESL learners

Group 1 → received input flooding

Group 2 → no treatment

In posttest group 1 showed more accurate use of the passive than the control group.

*There were no differences in the use of adjectival participles.*

#### 5- Van Patten & Oikkinen (1996)

In this study they examined the effect of processing instruction involves explicit explanation of a certain grammatical rule followed by contextualized practice activities.

Participants: 3 groups of intermediate secondary students studying Spanish

Group 1 → explicit explanation of rules

Group 2 → contextualized practice activities

Group 3 → contextualized and explicit explanation

In posttest group 2 and 3 had higher scores and group 1 retained the fewest grammatical rules.

#### 6- Roberts (1995)

In this study he studied the effectiveness of error correction.

Participants: beginning level Japanese students at university of Hawaii

Results→ focusing on learners` written grammatical errors was more successful when errors were contextualized and understood by learners.

#### 7- Williams (1999)

He studied 8 students of various proficiency levels in an English institute in the Us, he tape recorded the participants daily, 45 minutes for 8 weeks. He sought out to describe the types of forms that they attended to them.

Results→ students infrequently attended to grammar (20%) in favor of vocabulary (80%)

#### 8- Poole (2003a)

He replicated Williams` study (1999) with 19 ESL students in advanced writing class in a large US university. He tape recorded the students for 10 weeks, 9 hours. They had a variety of communicative group activities.

Results → vocabulary (89.8%) & grammar (10.2%)

## LIMITATION OF FOCUS ON FORM

### Curricular problems

- 1- Focus on form instructions has taken place in fewer countries, in US, New Zealand and Japan. (Poole, Sheory, 2002)
- 2- No studies take place in crowded classes and up-to-date materials are generally not available and teachers receive less than adequate training in language skills and pedagogy.
- 3- No study supporting focus on form instructions appears to have taken place in a developing country where the socio-economic, political and pedagogical realities may differ significantly from those in more developed countries. So instructors and curricula designers have little information on which to judge whether or not focus on form instruction would be appropriate in their programs.
- 4- Focus on form instruction appears to be currently undoable in many circumstances due to curricular constraints.
- 5- In many secondary and university language programs, teachers are obliged to teach certain forms in a specific order by using government mandated materials and "teachers have little place in designing the curriculum or developing assessment technique and all of which are controlled by Board of studies composed of senior members of the English faculty." (Sheorey & Nayar, 2002, p. 18) so the teachers are

not allowed to use their own materials or means to incorporate focus on form instruction and they also may feel pressure not to do.

- 6- Class size is an important factor in focus on form instruction, mentioned by Poole (2003b). Doing focus on form instructions that needs the instructor to verbally address the students` problematic forms via discussion and other techniques, needs small size class. For example in writing exercises, it needs the instructor to frequently evaluate students` writing so small classes would be needed. In many cases, classes are large and individual attention and student-student interaction is not possible.
- 7- Teachers need to have native like or near native like competence fluency because they would need to be able to spontaneously recognize students` form-based errors and provide them with the correct ones and many English language teachers lack a high level of English oral proficiency and don`t have opportunities for developing it. For example Butter (2004) reports the low self-ratings of the Japanese EFL teachers report their own L2 proficiency in the area of grammar, and Yu (2001) reports the similar low proficiency of Chinese EFL teachers who feel that their only option is the grammar-translation method. Vavrus (2002) demonstrates in a study of English teachers in Tanzania in which teachers mostly used Swahili, even though the medium of instruction was officially English. I think in Iran also we have such problems and teachers especially in junior high school and high school have low oral proficiency.
- 8- Common first language of teachers and students can be a source of problem in focus on form instruction because both teachers and students can easily code-switch in order to overcome communicative difficulties or fill communicative gaps. (Poole 2003b) Aden dorff (1998) shows that in Zulu-speaking areas of South Africa, teachers and students frequently speak Zulu during English instruction in order to overcome communication barriers. Cleghon and Rollnick (2002) demonstrate that code-

switching is a common phenomenon in Africa and many other parts of the world such as India. (ramanathan, 1999; Sridhar, 2002) I think this is also the case in Iran. For example I myself as an English teacher have used code-switching many times in my classrooms to overcome the communication barriers because when the students do not understand the task and there is no way to make them understand the teacher has to code-switch, and I think it is not that much bad, but the important point is that, if problematic grammatical forms can be addressed using another language, then focus on form instruction could be seen by teachers and learners as either unnecessary or impractical. Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) don't address how the issue of code-switching should be approached.

- 9- Focus on form instruction is highly individualistic and related to culture in that errors are frequently addressed on individual basis. Hofstede (1986) suggests that collectivist societies, which tend to focus more on the general goods of all students. Many find focus on form at odd with their cultural values. Successful focus on form instruction would need to take place in a cultural atmosphere that allows students to actively participate in daily activities that is a kind of student-centeredness which can be considered disrespectful and or a breach of tradition (Poole, 2003b). Li (1998) reports that in Korea many teachers feel that communicative approaches to teaching- which focus on form instruction would be part of- threaten to overturn long-held Korean customs and values regarding student-teacher roles. Similar concerns can be seen in China, where educational practices have been formed by confusion thought, which places a high premium on teachers` knowledge: "teachers are viewed as knowledge holders. If teachers don not display their knowledge in lectures, or if they play games with students or ask students to role- play in class, then they are not doing their job!" (Hui, 1997, p.38: Cited in Yu, 2001, pp. 196-197)

## Conclusion

I think to be able to speak and understand a second language does not just know a long list of vocabulary or grammatical structures as the students of high school know but they are not able to communicate in English. For producing a second language, let`s say English in our case, the most the most important thing is to know the grammatical rules in meaningful way. It means that material designers should design books in which the students will be guided to use structures in meaningful way as Long (1991) refers to it. If the students` attention is just directed to meaning, it would be useful but for a short period of time because the structures of the language wouldn`t be internalized for future use in the long term memory. So some degree of attention should be paid to forms.

Comparing the structure-based proposals, I think the students should be involved in tasks that don`t give them the feeling of pressure to produce the forms. They should use the forms in an unforced manner as Loschky and Bely-Vroman (1993) mention in Task-naturalness. To teach the students specific structures the teacher can get help from the Task-utility which is also mentioned by Loschky and Bely-Vroman (1993). So I think that as Ellis, Basturkmen and Lowen (2001) found, the learners who engaged in communicative, focus on form activities improved their grammatical accuracy and their use of new forms. I think focus on form activities can lead the students to produce more accurate structures. I think the results of some researches have shown the effectiveness of focus on form.

Considering the limitations of focus on form, I think as the process of second language learning is very complicated it has its own limitations and overcoming or lessening them can't be impossible to ignore using focus on form in instruction for second language learners.

In sum, form- focused classes with traditional curriculum cannot help students acquire language. Moreover, this will discouraged them from learning a second language and, therefore, they should experience a rich diet of comprehensible input to acquire language.

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