



## FOCUS ON FORM IN AN EFL COMMUNICATIVE CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** This descriptive study examines the nature of focus on form in an EFL communicative classroom in Iran. The study found that in 10 hours of meaning-focused instruction there were only 41 focus on form episodes (one in every 15 minutes), which is a much lower rate compared to a similar study reported in the literature. Furthermore, the findings of the study revealed that there were very few instances of preemptive focus on form in the observed instructional setting. The article concludes that teacher training courses should play a more active role in informing trainee teachers of the instructional value of focus on form.

**Keywords:** focus on forms, preemptive focus on form, reactive focus on form.

**Özet:** Bu betimsel çalışmayla, İran'da İngilizce'nin yabancı dil olarak öğrenildiği iletişime dayalı sınıflarda dil yapısı öğretiminin içeriği incelenmiştir. Çalışma bulgularına göre, 10 saatlik anlam odaklı öğretim sürecinde sadece 41 defa yapının üzerinde durulduğu kısım (her 15 dakikada bir) yer almaktadır ve bu sonuç alanyazında aktarılan benzer bir çalışmanın sonuçlarının çok altındadır. Araştırmanın bulguları göstermektedir ki gözlemlenen eğitim ortamında hata önleme amaçlı yapı odaklı öğretim çok az sıklıkla tercih edilmiştir. Çalışma, öğretmen eğitiminde katılımcılara yapı odaklı öğretiminin önemine dair bilgilendirmenin daha etkin şekilde verilmesi önerisiyle sonuçlandırılmıştır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** yapı odaklı, hata önleme, hata düzeltme.

### Introduction

The term meaning-focused instruction has now become a widely-used and often-heard term in the literature of language teaching (Willis and Willis 2007). This term was born in reaction to language teaching methods which emphasized the mastery of language forms (Hedge 2000). Gradually, methods like the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) fell out of favor because of their inadequacy in preparing students for natural communication out of the classroom (Richards and Rodgers 2001). It was the firm belief of the proponents of the meaning-focused instruction, crystallized in what is known as the strong version of the communicative approach (Howatt 1984), that learners acquire a foreign language best when their attention is focused on meaning rather than on language forms. This approach to language teaching very soon found a number of fervent supporters (Krashen 1982, Krashen and Terrell 1983, Prabhu 1987), based on which a number of theories and models of second language acquisition were developed. Krashen and Terrell (1983), for instance, became so involved in meaning-focused instruction that they developed their own methodology known as the Natural Approach, which claims that it is possible to acquire a second language within the classroom context only if teachers provide learners with plentiful comprehensible input and give them an opportunity to naturally communicate with each other in a stress-free fashion. Prabhu (1987), on the other hand, doing away with any kind of emphasis on language forms, established the cornerstone of task-based language pedagogy through the Bangalore Project. According to Prabhu, students learn best when

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classroom time is spent on doing meaning-focused activities such as information, reasoning, and opinion gap tasks.

Thus, what we can gather from the above discussion is that meaning-focused instruction appears in different forms and versions, which according to Williams (1995:12) share the following characteristics:

- They emphasize using authentic language.
- They emphasize tasks that encourage the negotiation of meaning between students, and between students and teacher.
- They emphasize successful communication, especially that which involves risk taking.
- They emphasize minimal focus on form, including: (a) lack of emphasis on error correction, and (b) little explicit instruction on language rules.
- They emphasize learner autonomy.

It is precisely these characteristics of meaning-focused instruction, listed above, which made it attractive to both language teachers and language teaching theorists for many years. Gradually, however, voices of doubt were heard. Language teaching experts (Ellis 1993, Long 1991, Richards 1984, Rutherford 1987,) wondered whether meaning-focused instruction, without any emphasis on form, would be sufficient to ensure success in acquiring a second language. Evaluations of communicative classes revealed that there are at least three major problems with language teaching approaches which emphasize meaningful communication and overlook language forms. First, learners who learn a second language through communicative classes do not gain high levels of language proficiency (Higgs and Clifford 1982). Long's (1983) classic review article demonstrated that second language instruction makes a difference and there are rate advantages for learners who receive formal instruction. Today, therefore, many scholars are firmly convinced that formal grammar instruction should not be swept out of second or foreign language teaching classes (Cullen 2008, Ellis 2006, Nassaji and Fotos 2004).

The second problem with meaning-focused instruction is concerned with immersion programs in Canada. In recent years many English L1 students have received their education through French. These students have been exposed to a lot of meaning-oriented input in French and their progress has been carefully studied. The results of these studies (e.g. Swain 1985, Swain and Lapkin 1995) indicate that although the majority of these students achieve native-like comprehension skills, their productive skills remain far from native-like norms. This suggests that meaning-focused instruction results in fossilization (see, e.g. Lotherington 2004).

The third and the final problem with meaning-focused instruction is that it ignores the role of negative evidence in second language teaching, and depends too much on positive evidence. Recent studies, however, suggest that adult L2 learners do not have complete access to the same acquisitional mechanisms as do children acquiring their L1. These mechanisms operate on the basis of positive evidence and since adult learners have partial access to them, they need to benefit from negative evidence to compensate for this lack (Felix 1985, Schachter 1989, White 1991). White (1991), for instance, argues that English learners of French as an L2 tend to make sentences like \*Jean a envoyé Marie des fleurs (John sent Mary some flowers), which are ungrammatical in French, but acceptable in English. Anglophone learners of French who only receive positive evidence may never discover that the form that they

produce is ungrammatical unless they are corrected. This suggests that negative evidence plays a more crucial role in L2 acquisition than it does in L1, and meaning-focused instruction which ignores this fact is not efficient enough in producing successful L2 learners (Ellis and Sheen 2006).

### **Focus on Form**

All the arguments in the preceding section lend support to the assumption that meaning-focused instruction devoid of any attention to form is unlikely to create optimum conditions for effective L2 learning. In recent years, a number of solutions have been offered to compensate for the inadequacies observed in meaning-focused instruction, which have resulted in the coinage of specific terms in the literature of L2 teaching. To support this claim, it is sufficient to refer to terms such as *consciousness-raising* (Cook 2008, Ellis 2003, Rutherford 1987), *input enhancement* (Sharwood Smith 1993), and *focus on form* (Long 1991, Fotos and Nassaji 2007). Of the three terms cited here, it is the last one, however, which has received both theoretical and empirical support in recent years. It was Long who, in the early 1990's, drew the attention of language teaching scholars to the distinction between *focus on forms* and *focus on form*. According to Long, focus on forms is nothing but the traditional structural syllabus, whose shortcomings have been discussed in the literature (Wilkins 1976, Yalden 1983). Focus on form, on the other hand, is a term that he reserves to refer to instruction that draws learners' attention to form in the context of meaningful communication. Long (1991, pp.45-46) defines focus on form as follows:

Focus on form...overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication.

Based on the above definition, it could be argued that focus on form has some psycholinguistic plausibility in that it encourages learners to pay conscious attention to certain forms in the input, which they are likely to ignore. Such attention, according to Schmidt (1990), is necessary for acquisition to take place. Therefore, focus on form can be thought of as a useful device which facilitates the process of interlanguage development.

Because of its widespread appeal, the term focus on form has been stretched beyond Long's original definition quoted above. As Doughty and Williams (1998: 5) rightly observe "there is considerable variation in how the term *focus on form* is understood and used." In many of the studies which appear in an edited volume by Doughty and Williams (1998), focus on form is not treated as something occurring *incidentally* (contrary to Long's original definition of the term); rather, it is treated as a proactive attempt to teach certain linguistic forms communicatively, best exemplified in the study conducted by Williams and Evans (1998). In this study, Williams and Evans had already preselected two forms, one simple (participial adjectives) and the other complex (the passive), and then provided their learners with intensive form-focused instruction. As can be observed, this kind of focus on form was preplanned and not incidental.

In the study reported here, there has been an attempt to stick to Long's (1991) original definition of focus on form. As Ellis et al. (2001a: 411-412) put it, based on this definition of Long, focus on form has the following characteristics:

- It occurs in meaning-centered discourse.
- It is observable, i.e. it occurs interactionally.
- It is incidental, i.e. it is not preplanned.
- It is transitory.
- It is extensive, i.e. it attends to several different forms in the context of a single lesson.

It follows from the features listed above that the present study should be a descriptive one. As Ellis et al. (2001a, p.412) rightly argue:

The study of incidental focus on form requires an approach to research that is necessarily descriptive (i.e., entailing observation of meaning-focused instruction to subsequently identify and analyze the focus-on-form episodes that occur) rather than experimental (i.e., constructing conditions in which focus on form is systematically varied across conditions).

### **Reactive Versus Preemptive Focus on Form**

Two kinds of focus on form have been distinguished in the literature (Ellis et al., 2001b: 285): *reactive* focus on form and *preemptive* focus on form. Reactive focus on form occurs when a learner has said something erroneous and the teacher or another learner reacts to this error by correcting him. So this kind of focus on form is a good source of supplying learners with negative evidence. Preemptive focus on form, as the name suggests, is an attempt by the teacher or a learner to initiate explicit attention to a linguistic form to prevent the occurrence of an erroneous form. A very clear example of preemptive focus on form occurs when teachers or learners ask questions like “How do you spell...?” or “How do you pronounce...?” to preempt probable errors. The following example taken from Ellis et al. (2001a: 414) gives a clear picture of what preemptive focus on form is. In this case, the teacher predicts a gap in his students’ knowledge and addresses it as follows:

T: What’s the opposite of landing?  
S: Take off  
T: Take off  
SS: Take off

So very simply, reactive focus on form addresses errors (i.e. performance problems) which have emerged in the context of meaningful communication. Preemptive focus on form, on the contrary, addresses problems which are *predicted* to occur and thus block communication.

There is now a huge bulk of research to support that both negotiation of form and meaning arising from focus on form promote acquisition. Ellis and He (1999) found that when learners negotiate and produce words, they comprehend better and acquire more words than when they have access to premodified input. Likewise, De la Fuente (2002), addressing Spanish as L2, showed that acquisition and retention were greater when learners had an opportunity to negotiate and produce than when they were exposed to manipulated input. These two studies were concerned with vocabulary. There are other studies that demonstrate the effect of meaning and form negotiation on grammatical development. Mackey (1999), for example, showed that the negotiation process resulted in learners progressing along the developmental sequence of English question formation. Pica (2002) demonstrated that form-focused

instruction within a meaningful context was an aid to learners to master developmentally difficult forms. Similarly, Loewen (2005) reported that incidental focus on form helped learners recall targeted linguistic information provided for them. For further information regarding effectiveness of focus on form, see Ellis et al. (2006).

## **Defining Form**

The term *form* has often been used to refer to grammar, but this is not really what is meant by form. As Ellis et al. (2001a) argue, focus on form can be directed at phonology, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and even spelling. Taking this broad definition of form into account, we can now shift our attention to the research questions of the present study. This study, due to the lack of descriptive studies which examine the nature of focus on form in classroom contexts, was conducted in an EFL conversation classroom in Iran. Thus, it sought to answer the following research questions:

- How frequently do reactive focus on form episodes (FFEs) occur?
- What kinds of form do they address?
- How frequently do preemptive focus on form episodes (FFEs) occur?
- What kinds of form do they address?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 11 adult students (2 males and 9 females) who were taking an intermediate conversation course at a private language institute in Tehran. All the participants were young people – with an average age of 22 – who were studying various fields at different universities.

The course instructor was a young teacher with a B.A. degree in English. She had passed a rather long teacher education course at the Iran Language Institute, a renowned language teaching center in Iran, for six months. She had long experience of teaching English at different language schools and was very well familiar with the principles of communicative language teaching.

### **Procedure**

The main tool of data collection in this study was observation. This conversation class was observed by the researcher for six consecutive sessions. Each session lasted for 100 minutes, so the main data for this study consist of 10 hours of meaning-focused instruction. The course was taught on the basis of a textbook compiled by the researcher. Each lesson in this textbook starts with a certain topic followed by a short reading passage and a number of thought-provoking questions for discussion. The second activity in each lesson is a picture story in which learners make up a story by looking at a number of comic strips. The third activity following the picture story is another story-telling task. This time students read about a proverb and after negotiating its meaning, they relate it to real life situations by narrating their personal experiences or making up stories of their own. Finally, there is a listening task in which students listen to a story or a debate and then take part in further classroom discussions guided by specific follow-up activities. The overall description of each lesson in this textbook demonstrates that there is no grammar section included in it. Thus, it could be claimed that

the course is a meaning-focused conversation course designed to promote oral/aural skills of the learners. What the researcher was going to discover in this class was the nature and the frequency of focus on form occurrences. To do this, the following checklist was prepared. Every time a focus on form episode (FFE) occurred, a tally was put in the appropriate box. For example, every time the teacher reacted to a lexical problem the related vocabulary box was ticked or every time there was a focus on a cohesive device the discourse box was checked.

In the first two sessions of the observation process a tape recorder was taken to the classroom to record everything that was exchanged between the teacher and the learners. However, as will be shown in the next section, the number of FFEs was so infrequent that they could be easily marked without the aid of a tape recorder, so the classroom events were not recorded in the next four sessions of observation.

Type of FonF	Reactive	Preemptive
Linguistic Focus		
Grammar		
Vocabulary		
Pronunciation		
Spelling		
Discourse		

## Results

On the whole, 41 FFEs occurred in the 10 hours of meaning-focused instruction observed by the researcher. This means that focus on form occurred at a rate of every 14.63 minutes, i.e. every quarter of an hour. Of the 41 FFEs identified, there were 39 reactive FFEs and only 2 preemptive FFEs. The following table displays the data more clearly.

Frequency and Percentage of Occurrence of Reactive and Preemptive FFEs

Type of FonF	Reactive		Preemptive	
	f	%	f	%
Linguistic Focus				
Grammar	12	30.7	0	0.0
Vocabulary	4	10.2	1	50.0
Pronunciation	23	58.9	0	0.0
Spelling	0	0.0	1	50.0
Discourse	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	39		2	

This table reveals some other interesting facts. First of all, there were no instances of discursal focus on form in the ten hours of observed instruction. Second, the focus on pronunciation had the highest percentage of occurrence (58.9%). Third, there were only 2 instances of preemptive FFEs, both of which were student-initiated. In one case one of the students asked for the meaning of the word “sleep over” and in the second case, another student asked for the spelling of the word “turtle”.

## Discussion

The most interesting finding of this study is the low frequency of FFEs. It was previously mentioned that in the 10 hours of observed instruction, focus on form occurred every 15 minutes. This rate of occurrence, compared to Ellis et al.'s (2001a) study, is very low. In their study, Ellis and his colleagues observed 12 hours of meaning-focused instruction. What they report, however, is very fascinating. In these 12 hours, focus on form occurred every 1.6 minutes!

In order to further investigate this rather odd case, the researcher had a brief interview with the course instructor after the last session of his data collection. Her students made a lot of ungrammatical forms, which were simply ignored and not corrected. Some of these ungrammatical forms are as follows:

- \*I said her that ....
- \*When we was in high school ...
- \*I had a problem physics ...
- \*She was jealous to me.

The researcher asked her why she did not react to so many errors. In reply to this question, she admitted that these wrong forms were abundant in the output of her students; however, she insisted that these ungrammatical forms were mistakes (lapses in performance) not errors (lapses in competence). Thus, she argued that it would not be useful to interrupt and correct her students for the wrong forms which occurred as a result of being under the pressure of saying something.

As for the educational background of the teacher in this study, it was previously mentioned that she had passed a rather long teacher education course for six months at the Iran Language Institute. In the course of the interview with her, the researcher realized that she had good theoretical knowledge of language teaching principles. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that the two teachers in Ellis et al.'s (2001a) study were far superior to her in terms of their theoretical knowledge inasmuch as she had studied almost the same materials which are widely used in CELTA training courses such as Harmer's *The Practice of English Language Teaching* and Scrivener's *Learning Teaching*. They had completed the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) at a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand and had teaching experience of at most 4 ½ years. Therefore, the big difference between the findings of these two studies cannot be attributed to the educational background of the teachers. What then could account for this difference? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the language proficiency level of the learners. Ellis and his colleagues just report that the learners in their two classes were in levels 4 and 5 (pre-intermediate and intermediate levels) of an eight proficiency level course. The learners in this study were also at an intermediate level. However, it is quite obvious that terms such as 125pre-Intermediate, intermediate, etc. do not provide clear-cut definitions for research studies unless they are

operationally defined. So it could be argued that perhaps learners in Ellis et al.'s (2001a) study were at a lower level of language proficiency and thereby needed more corrective feedback.

## Conclusion

This article was an attempt to explore the nature of focus on form in a meaning-focused class in an EFL setting. The findings of the study are based on the data gathered from 10 hours of classroom instruction, which do not permit any generalizations. However, it was found that the instructor was still working on the assumption that in communicative language teaching learners should not be overcorrected and thus do not need much corrective feedback. This is not very much in line with latest developments in language teaching which emphasize the role of supplementary devices such as consciousness-raising, input enhancement and focus on form.

In the researcher's opinion, the findings of this study, though not generalizable, have valuable implications for teacher training courses. Perhaps by informing the young trainee teachers about the value of incidental focus on form and corrective feedback, the experienced teachers who teach at pre-service or in-service classes would contribute more to the practice of the would-be teachers. What needs to be further investigated, however, is tracing the effect of incidental focus on form on the interlanguage development of learners in EFL settings.

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