Focus on Form Approach in an EFL Context

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Abstract

To investigate whether Focus on Form (FonF), which refers to activities capturing learners' attention to form while maintaining meaningful communication, has a facilitative role in language learning, the following FonF model was developed: Input-oriented tasks, explicit focus on form, and output-oriented tasks. In this research, the quantitative research method was employed to analyze the performance of 167 Iraninan first grade English major university learners on grammar knowledge and performance tests. The results of the study suggested that FonF in comparison with Fs furnishes an excellent means for developing the ability to use the grammatical knowledge of the target structure in context.

Introduction

Among the major issues raised by classroom SLA research is the controversial question of whether and how to include "grammar" in second language classrooms (Doughty & Williams, 1998). This question has been reexamined in terms of the role of what has come to be known more recently as *focus on form* in second language learning and teaching.

As Nassaji (1999) pointed out, indeed, with the introduction of the communicative approach in second language teaching and learning, there appeared a strong tendency not to focus on linguistic forms and a consequent downplaying of the status of grammar teaching. However, the perspectives on language teaching and learning have changed dramatically. New perspectives advocate a principled focus on form approach to L2 learning, arguing that "a totally message-based approach is inadequate for the development of an accurate knowledge of language" (Nassaji, 1999, para. 4).

FonF is against the belief that grammar instruction is synonymous with explicit techniques. FonF, as Fotos (1998) mentioned, is a context based presentation of grammatical forms, rather than overt teacher-led instruction.

Thus, the traditional notion of formS always entails isolation of linguistic features from context or from communicative activity, while focus on form integrates attention to form, meaning, and use (Doughty & Williams, 1998). The major advantage of the integration of form, meaning, and use is that students negotiate the meaning in their L2.

FonF is in sharp contrast with Fs which refers to traditional grammar instruction. What comes next is a brief explanation of problems of Fs according to Long (1997):

1. There is no needs analysis to identify a particular learner's or group of learners' communicative needs, and no means analysis to ascertain their learning styles and preferences. It is a one-size-fits-all approach.

2. Linguistic grading, both lexical and grammatical, tends to result in pedagogic materials of the basal reader variety --"See Spot run! Run, Spot, run!"-- and textbook dialogs and classroom language use which are artificial and stilted --"Hello, Mary. Hello, John. Are you a student? Yes, I'm a student. What are you doing? I'm reading a book, etc." and in classroom input that is functionally restricted and "impoverished" in various ways. "Simplification" is also self-defeating in that it succeeds in improving comprehension by removing from the input the new items learners need to encounter for the purposes of acquisition.

3. Focus on forms ignores language learning processes altogether or else tacitly assumes a long discredited behaviorist model. Of the scores of detailed studies of naturalistic, classroom and mixed L2 learning reported over the past 30 years, none suggests anything but an accidental resemblance between the way learners acquire an L2 and the way a focus on forms assumes they do, e.g., between the order in which they learn L2 forms and the sequence in which those forms appear in externally imposed linguistic syllabuses.

4. Leaving learners out of syllabus design ignores the major role they will play in language development, nonetheless. Despite the best efforts even of highly skilled

teachers and textbook writers, focus on forms tends to produce boring lessons, with resulting declines in motivation, attention, and student enrollments.

5.   The assertion that many students all over the world have learned languages via a focus on forms ignores the possibility that they have really learned despite it (studies of language acquisition in abnormal environments have found the human capacity for language acquisition to be highly resilient), as well as the fact that countless others have failed. A focus on forms produces many more false beginners than finishers.

Purpose

Accordingly, in order to investigate whether the FonF approach has any effects on the language achievement of Iranian EFL learners, the following research question was developed: Is there any significant difference between FonF Group and Fs Group on the achienvement of the grammatical knowledge of the target structure and its use in context?

Method

Participants

The participants were 167 Iranian English major freshmen at Islamic Azad University of Tabriz. The learners were assigned to classes by the university registration office, which made the design of the study a non-probability sampling design.

Instruments

An achievement test containing two sections was used in this study. Section 1 of the achievement test was made to evaluate the knowledge of the target structure -- simple present, present progressive, future, and passive with Multiple Choice (MC) and Cloze Test (CT) test formats. Section 2 of the achievement test required the learners to demonstrate their ability to

implement the knowledge of the target structure in language use through controlled writing and free writing.

Procedure

The study started with data collection on the achieveement test, composing of Section 1 and Section 2. A standard test of CELT (Comprehensive English Language Test) was administered for validation purposes.

The instructional treatment was provided during 12 sessions each of which lasted one hour and a half.

Focus on form approach refers to activities that capture learners' attention to form while maintaining meaningful communication. Thus, meaningful communication, crystallized through pedagogical tasks, was the basis of the FonF treatement.

Accordingly, the following FonF Model was developed.

Phase 1   Input-Oriented Task

       Communicative Task (typographical input

       enhancement)

Phase 2   Contextualized Explicit Teaching

Phase 3   Output-Oriented Task

       Pictorial Dictogloss

       (Learners'reconstruction of the originl

        text in groups)

      Language Focus: Analysis by the

learner   Reporting

      Feedback (Recast)

The target structures, in this study, were simple present, present progressive, future, and passive. The following procedure was followed in the teaching of each target structure.

In Phase I, the participants were exposed to an input-oriented task in which input enhancement was carried out typographically. It took the learners about twenty minutes to complete this task. The reason that this phase was called input-oriented was that learners were exposed to the use of the target structure in context. As it is indicated in the following example, the words study and read were underlined to apply typographical input enhancement -- one of the techniques of FonF.

Input Enhancement

Step 1

Read each statement about learning English grammar. Circle the number that describes you best.

1 = never   2 = rarely   3 = sometimes   4 = often   5 = always

a. I **<u>study</u>** *grammar books and memorize the rules. 12 3 4 5*

 b. I **<u>read</u>** *newspapers, watch TV and movies, and listen to songs. 1 2 3 4 5*

After being exposed to the target language, the learners were ready to relate their teacher's explicit instruction in Phase II -- Contextualized Explicit Teaching -- to the features of language they had already attended to meaningfully. Similarly, this created opportunity for the teacher to contextualize explicit teaching by the use of examples from the tasks in Phase I. Phase II took about half an hour of the class time. The following demonstrates how the examples were related to the topic of the previous task.

Contextualized Explicit Teaching

Examples

    a. *I **ask** questions when I **do not understand**.*

    b. *Elzbieta **uses** English as much as possible.*

Explanations

Ask, do not understand, and *uses* are simple present verbs. Use the simple present to talk about habits -- things you do again and again).

Phase III, which took about 30 minutes of the class time, was performed through different activities. First, a dictoglass was carried out. The teacher read three times a text containing the target structures. The participants initially listened to the readings, next made notes, and later checked their notes with the other members of their group. Subsequently, through pairwork and/or groupwork, the participants reconstructed the original text by the help of the pictures, which were based on the description of the sentences which contained the target structure, their notes, and pair/group discussions. Pair/group discussion was based on the metalinguistic analysis or metatalk -- talking about language or attending to grammatical structures through reflection (Swain, 1998). In this particular case, the text was about routines and habits in a country life, which required the use of simple present tense. The participants were required to analyze the sentences of the text and to recall all what they could remember from the previous two phases. In other words, while the learners were reconstructing the original text, whenever they came across the target structure, they used to discuss the particular use of the target structure; for example, "This sentence expresses an habitual activity, so simple present verb must be used."

The metalinguistic analysis had already been done for a few sentences of the text -- as a model -- by the teacher, in advance, so that learners could do it properly. The metalinguistic analysis done by the learners -- metatalk --, first, helped them to review what they had already learned in the previous stages. Second, it could help them to reconstruct the original text successfully. Then while the participants were reporting the reconstructed text to the class, the teacher provided them with feedback in the form of recast whenever needed. The following example indicates the use of the pictorial dictoglass in the classroom.

Output-oriented Task: Dictogloss

The teacher read the following passage three times, and the learners in different groups were cooperatively trying to reconstruct the original text by the help of the pictures, metatalk, and metaliguistic analysis.

*Sara Davis **lives** in Dalton, Australia, where her parents **own** a sheep farm. Dalton **is a***

Result and Discussion

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA)[1] was run for the comparison of the FonF and Fs on the two sections of the achievement test, Section 1, knowledge of the target structure and Section 2, the ability

To use this knowledge in context.The F-value for the comparison of the groups' total mean scores on the two test was 5.03. This amount of F at 3 and 161 degrees of freedom was greater than the critical F-value (3.92). Without regard to the test type, there were significant differences among the means.

The F observed value for the two types of the test was 0, indicating that there was no significant difference between the two tests. However, the F value for the joint effect of the group and the test type was significant. The F value was 9.23 which exceeded the critical F at 3 and 161 degrees of freedom, 3.92.

The post-hoc scheffe's test was run to compare the mean scores of the groups on the two sections of the achievemwnt test. The following Table and Figure indicate the significant difference between the FonF and Fs groups on the Section 2 of the achievement test.

Table

post-hoc scheffe's test for the comparison of Section 2 between FonF and Fs groups

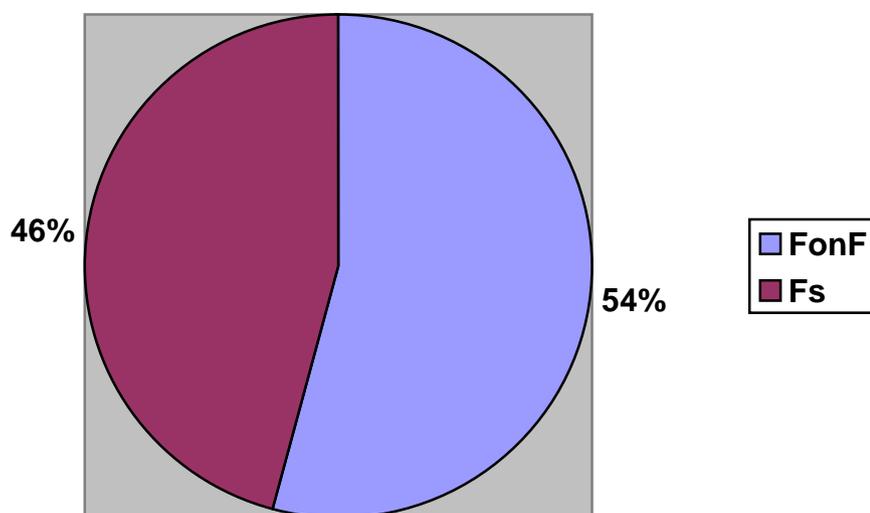| Comparison					Observed F	Critical F
F onF Section 2 M = 50.3509	VS.	F s Section 2 M = 42.7273			2 1.10	1.61

Figure: Comparison of Section 2 between FonF and Fs Groups

As the results of this study indicated, the participants in FonF group developed the ability to use their grammatical knowledge in context more than Fs group, which, in turn, led to rejection of the null hypothesis; that is, there was a significant difference between the two groups on the Section 2 of the achievement test, which refers to the ability to use the grammatical knowledge of the target structure in context.

Conclusion

As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) asserted, talking about focusing on form without also examining the meaningfulness and appropriate use of the form is an oversimplication. Gaining grammatical knowledge is only one side of the issue; the other side is to be able to use your grammatical knowledge in appropriate context. Similarly, Skehan (1996) argued that it is important to make form-function connections clear by "devising methods of focusing on

form without losing the values of communication tasks as realistic process" (p. 42).

In contrast to FonF, Fs entails the well-known pitfall that too much attention to form results in knowledge about language rather than the knowledge of language use. In this regard, the proponents of FonF made an attempt to draw a line between the traditional grammar teaching -- F**s** -- and the FonF instruction.

Fotos (1998) stated that FonF helps learners "to recognize the properties of target structures in context and develop their accuracy in their use" (p. 302). The results of this study indicates that FonF provides learners with an understanding of the interdependence between grammar and communication. In other words, learners, while learning grammar, focus on three primary aspects of grammar: Form, meaning, and use.

The results of this study might be of interest to practitioners, as well as material developers, in designing tasks with focus on form, meaning, and use , as well as implementing FonF techniques, to attend to both accuracy and fluency in language learning.

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