Focus on Form in Second Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of “Focus on Form” (FonF) instruction in second language development has long been a matter of interest to both researchers and teachers. This article provides a comprehensive overview of FonF in second language teaching. The article begins with a discussion on how Long’s original definition of the term has stretched over time, and what it means in present teaching/learning context. A theoretical discussion followed by a classification of different types of FonF strategies is then presented. The article finally addresses some issues related to syllabus and tasks in FonF, and critically examines the necessity of FonF instruction in EFL context.

Keywords: Form-focused instruction, meaning-focused instruction, corrective feedback, EFL context

Introduction

In language teaching pedagogy, a distinction between meaning-focused instruction and form-focused instruction is often drawn. In recent decades, Focus on Form (henceforth FonF) in second language teaching has received considerable attention from both language teachers and researchers. FonF is a central construct of task-based language teaching (TBLT), and it is often considered a response to a purely meaning-focused instruction which has been found to be ineffective in achieving the desired outcome in many countries. Unlike meaning-focused instruction, FonF instruction draws learners’ attention to linguistic forms while the main focus still remains on meaning and communication. However, the relevance of FonF in second language acquisition has long been a matter of debate from both theoretical and pedagogical perspectives. There are theoretical arguments both for and against FonF instruction in second language teaching. From a pedagogical viewpoint, there is considerable disagreement among researchers about the effectiveness of different types of FonF strategies employed in language teaching. So, the issues need to be reviewed from different perspectives.
Besides, there is a need to define the term “FonF” in present day context as Long’s (1991) original definition of the term has undergone considerable changes over the last decades.

**Definition of FonF**

From a layperson’s perspective, form-focused instruction can be defined as “a trade off between form and meaning” in language teaching. “Form” here does not necessarily mean grammatical forms. It can refer to a range of phonological, lexical, syntactic and discoursal aspects of language. The term “FonF” was first introduced by Michael Long (1988, 1991) who made a distinction between *focus on form (FonF)* and *focus on forms (FonFs)*. According to Long (1991), “FonF overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (pp. 45–46). FonFs, on the other hand, refers to traditional language teaching where linguistic items are drawn from structural syllabus and taught in a discrete manner. For Long, FonF instruction is an implicit way of teaching linguistic forms as they arise incidentally during communicative activities. But not all researchers agree with Long’s definition of FonF, and hence the term has undergone substantial changes over the years to accommodate other views about FonF instruction.

Dekeyser, Swain and Lightbown do not agree that FonF should always be implicit as they argue that explicit and metalinguistic FonF is equally important for second language development. So, it can be said that a narrower definition of the term refers to only implicit types of FonF whereas a broader definition of the term accommodates more explicit types of FonF. It is also important to understand that FonF and FonFs are not mutually exclusive concepts. According to Doughty and Williams (1998a), “FonF *entails* a focus on formal elements of language whereas FonFs is *limited* to such a focus” (p. 4). However, Long himself has moved away from his original view of FonF. Long, 2015 (as cited in Ellis, 2016) has recognized that FonF can also be non-interactive and explicit, and can include metalinguistic explanations. Ellis (2016) also presents a different view of FonF instruction. He argues that FonF, in present context, should be viewed as specific types of “activities” or “procedures” rather than an “approach” to language teaching.
Theoretical issues in FonF

From theoretical perspectives, FonF is a highly debated issue in the field of SLA. Since FonF instruction often takes the form of negative evidence (as in corrective feedback), it has received criticism from those who do not believe that negative evidence can lead to language acquisition. For example, Krashen (1982, 1985) argues that second language acquisition is a subconscious process which cannot be altered by negative evidence. Another criticism against FonF instruction comes from Pienemann’s (1989) Teachability Hypothesis. According to Teachability Hypothesis, learners will be able to acquire only the features for which they are developmentally ready. If they are presented with grammatical features for which they are still not ready, that input would not transform into intake. However, probably the strongest theoretical support for FonF instruction comes from Schmidt’s (1990, 2001) Noticing Hypothesis, which advocates that “noticing” of linguistic features in the input is a necessary pre-requisite of language learning, and hence it is important to draw learners’ attention to the forms. But the concept of “noticing” is also not beyond theoretical debate. While Schmidt (1994, 2001) argues that conscious attention to form is necessary for learning, Tomlin and Villa (1994) argue that “detection” can occur without conscious awareness. For N. Ellis (2005), conscious attention is needed in order to establish a new form in long-term memory, but subsequent attention to this form in the input can occur subconsciously. However, the theoretical basis of FonF instruction is also derived from Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 2005), and Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983, 1996).

Swain’s Output Hypothesis advocates that output can work as “auto input” when learners notice “the gap” in their existing L2 knowledge. FonF draws learners’ attention to that gap, and the “pushed output” enables learners to produce correct language. Long, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on interaction. He agrees with Krashen that comprehensible input is necessary for successful second language acquisition, but focuses more on “modified interaction” which he argues is more important for making the input comprehensible. The input can be either in the form of positive evidence or in the form of negative evidence.
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Types of FonF

FonF instruction has been understood and classified in different ways, and there might not be very clear demarcations among the types of FonF instruction found in the literature.

Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001) made a distinction between reactive FonF and pre-emptive FonF. As mentioned in Ellis (2016), reactive FonF can be both conversational and didactic. Conversational FonF occurs when negotiation of meaning takes place in the course of dealing with a communication problem. Didactic FonF, on the other hand, occurs when attention to form arises even though no communication problem has occurred. In this case, negotiation of form becomes the focus rather than negotiation of meaning. In terms of explicitness, reactive FonF can be either explicit (i.e. directly pointing out the error with or without metalinguistic information) or implicit (i.e. providing some sort of indication without directly pointing out the error). Pre-emptive FonF, unlike reactive FonF, is always preempted even when no problem has actually arisen. It is based on the assumption that certain linguistic problems might be encountered in course of the following communicative activities, and hence there is a need to address those problems before the actual activities begin. It addresses either an actual or a perceived gap in the learners’ interlanguage. Pre-emptive FonF can be both teacher-initiated and student-initiated.

Nassaji and Fotos (2007) also referred to a very similar distinction in FonF instruction. They talked about planned vs. incidental FonF. Nassaji and Fotos (2007) mentioned that planned focus on form involves treatment of pre-selected forms while the learner’s primary focus is on processing meaning (e.g. communicative input containing the form, textual enhancement, or communicative task using the form). In contrast, incidental focus on form occurs incidentally while the learner’s primary focus is on meaning (e.g. recasts and negotiation of meaning during communicative interaction). Incidental FonF occurs spontaneously and has an extensive focus whereas planned FonF is not spontaneous and usually targets a limited number of forms by addressing them frequently.

Finally, based on the timing of grammatical instruction, Spada and Lightbown (2008) made a distinction between isolated and integrated FonF. Both types of FonF instruction takes place in primarily meaning-focused communicative classrooms. The only difference between the two types of
instruction is that isolated FonF takes place without communicative activities whereas integrated FonF occurs during communicative activities. In isolated FonF, learners’ attention is drawn to forms separately from the communicative task, and it can occur either before or after the task. In contrast, in integrated FonF, learners’ attention is drawn to forms during the communicative task.

**Corrective feedback as FonF**

Corrective Feedback (CF) is probably the most widely investigated type of FonF in second language teaching. This is an area that has drawn considerable attention from both teachers and researchers. It is a reactive type of FonF, and often alternative terms like *negative feedback*, *negative evidence* are used to refer to CF.

Most of the empirical studies (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Egi, 2007; Kartchava and Ammar, 2014) with a proper research design have found positive effects of different types of oral and written CF on EFL/ESL learners’ language development. Some meta-analysis (e.g., Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Russell & Spada, 2006) have shown that CF can have significant positive impact on second language development. But it is also important to note that not all types of CF are equally effective, and the success of CF largely depends on the proficiency level of the learners and the specific linguistic form it addresses. For example, recast is an implicit type of CF which has been found less effective than prompt. One problem with recast is that it is often mistaken as a feedback on the content rather than a feedback on the form. This is quite evident in case of low proficiency learners and for complex morphosyntactic structures. However, there are some studies that have investigated if CF promotes “noticing”. For example, Egi (2007) found that learners notice even implicit types of CF like recast. In another study, Kartchava and Ammar (2014) found a dependency of noticing on target grammatical form as feedback on past tense errors was noticed more than feedback on questions. Overall, learners in both prompt and mixed groups were able to notice the teachers’ corrective intent more than those in the recast group. However, it is still not very clear whether this type of “noticing” leads to acquisition in the long run.

There is also a growing body of research on interactional feedback. Interactional feedback can be generally defined as a kind of corrective feedback that occurs in communicative interaction. In a review article,
Nassaji (2016) provides a comprehensive overview of interactional feedback in second language acquisition. He mentions that interactional feedback is effective, but warns against making overgeneralization of research findings. He emphasizes that since interactional feedback occurs in various forms and contexts, learners might learn differently from different types of feedback depending on the situation in which the feedback occurs. He then suggests that language teachers should be aware of contextual differences and adjust their feedback strategies according to their own specific instructional contexts.

From the above discussion, we can see that there is sufficient evidence in favor of the effectiveness of different types of CF. The research findings from CF studies probably provide the strongest support for the effectiveness and necessity of different types of FonF instruction in second language teaching.

**Some studies on the effectiveness of FonF**

Over the years, a lot of studies have examined the effectiveness of different types of FonF instruction in improving second/foreign language learners’ linguistic accuracy both in spoken and written discourse. Though both preemptive and incidental FonF have been investigated, incidental FonF has been the central focus in most studies. One of the reasons behind it is probably incidental FonF had been viewed as the only type of FonF (as originally conceptualized by Long, 1988, 1991) for a long time. In this section, I briefly review some important studies that found positive effects of incidental and pre-emptive FonF on learners’ second/foreign language development.

Abdollahzadeh (2015) investigated the effect of incidental FonF on grammatical accuracy of Iranian L2 learners. The results of the study showed an overall positive effect of incidental FonF on grammatical accuracy of L2 learners, but the effect of incidental FonF on articles was greater than pronouns and tenses. Incidental FonF did not have any effect on the accuracy of prepositions. In another study, Shintani (2015) examined incidental acquisition of two grammatical features (plural -s and copula be) in two types of instruction: focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs). The study was conducted with children, and the findings revealed that incidental FonF is not equally effective for all grammatical forms as the children only acquired plural -s but not copula be from FonF instruction. Neither structure
was acquired by the children in the FonF classroom. However, Nassaji (2013) investigated the role of incidental FonF, but in adult English-as-a-second-language classrooms. His study explored the extent to which the amount, type, and effectiveness of FonF are related to differences in classroom participation structure (i.e. the organization of classroom talk within which FonF may occur). It was found that there is a relationship between participation structure and the effectiveness of FonF. A stronger effect was found when the teacher participated in small group work than in whole-class interaction. Again, an interaction between participation structure and proficiency level (i.e. beginner, intermediate and advanced) was also identified. So, Nassaji concluded that classroom participation structure is an important contextual factor that might impact the provision and success of incidental FonF. In another study, Loewen (2005) found that incidental FonF might be beneficial to learners, particularly if they incorporate the target linguistic items into their own production. Zhao and Bitchener (2007) also found that high frequency of immediate uptake facilitates opportunities for L2 learning.

There are also a few studies that have investigated the effects of pre-emptive FonF on second language acquisition. One such study was conducted by Gholami and Aliyari (2015). The researchers explored the applicability of planned preemptive FonF in writing classes. They specifically investigated the relative impact of indirect comprehensive written corrective feedback with and without planned preemptive FonF on two groups of advanced Iranian EFL learners’ essay writing ability. The findings demonstrated that when learners received reactive feedback accompanied with planned preemptive FonF, they crafted essays in a much better way. In another classroom-based study, Nassaji (2010) examined the role of both reactive and pre-emptive FonF in second-language development. The data analysis revealed that both reactive and pre-emptive FonF occurred in interaction. It also showed that pre-emptive FonF led to higher individualized post-test scores than reactive FonF. In addition, it was found that the amount, type, and effectiveness of FonF were strongly related to the learners’ level of language proficiency. Nassaji concluded that spontaneous attention to form in the context of meaning-focused activities facilitates L2 acquisition.

Form the above discussion it is quite evident that both pre-emptive and incidental FonF can lead to second language acquisition though we need more empirical studies on pre-emptive type of FonF. It is also clear form the
findings of different studies that FonF instruction might not be successful in achieving the desired result in certain situations. So, the question that arises at this point is what factors determine the success or failure of FonF instruction. In the next section, I highlight certain factors that can substantially affect the outcome of different types of FonF instruction.

**Factors that can affect the outcome of FonF instruction**

Although FonF instruction in general is effective in developing second learners’ linguistic knowledge, there are a number of factors that can impede the success rate of different types of FonF strategies. Some of these factors are briefly discussed in the following points:

(a) It has been found in numerous CF studies that not all errors are equally treatable with negative feedback mainly because some forms are inherently more difficult than others. Ferris (1999, 2002), for example, made a distinction between what she called “treatable” and “untreatable” errors. According to Ferris, non-idiomatic or idiosyncratic errors are untreatable errors (e.g. lexical errors), and categorized rule-governed errors are treatable errors (e.g. article errors). Again, within grammatical errors, we have ample evidence that shows that implicit types of feedback (e.g. recast) are less effective in case of complex morphosyntactic errors.

(b) Saliency in the input is another important factor. Salient features are more likely to be noticed by the learners than non-salient features.

(c) Learners’ proficiency level is also an important issue in FonF instruction. For example, Nassaji (2010) found that the effectiveness of reactive and preemptive FonF differed depending on learners’ language proficiency, and advanced level learners got more benefit from reactive FonF than less advanced learners.

(d) The communicative or functional need to acquire and use a particular form can also be a determining factor. It is less likely that learners would notice and acquire a particular form if there is no immediate functional need for it. For example, the Japanese children in Shintani’s (2015) study acquired plural -s as a result of FonF instruction but failed to acquire copula *be* even though Japanese has equivalent of copula *be*. Shintani found that there was less functional need to process copula for classroom interaction.
(e) Finally, it has been found that the relationship between uptake/repair with learning depends on the type of repair. Nassaji (2011) found that learning takes place when repair involves incorporation of the target form into new utterance than when it involves only the repetition of the feedback.

**Syllabus and tasks in FonF instruction**

Syllabus is one area where the difference between FonF and FonFs is very evident. FonF follows an analytic syllabus whereas traditional FonFs follows a synthetic syllabus. In synthetic syllabus, language items are presented and taught in a discrete manner and the learners’ role is to synthesize the discrete elements to use in communication (Wilkins, 1976). In contrast, in analytic syllabus, language is not viewed as an object rather it is viewed as a means of communication, and hence the syllabus is designed to address real-life communicative issues. The content of analytic syllabus consists of a series of “pedagogical tasks”, and the basis of it is the assumption that the content or tasks would meet the current or future requirements of the particular group of learners (Long & Robinson, 1998). However, defining FonF based on a purely analytic syllabus might be an over-simplification of the concept. There is a theoretical problem with analytic syllabus. The theoretical basis of an analytic syllabus is that second language learners can acquire language from exposure to natural language samples, and there is no need to draw attention to the structural aspects of the target language. But we now know that this assumption is problematic because it has been found in several studies on content-based instruction that only exposure to target language might not be sufficient to achieve the desired outcome. Also, Long (1997) has pointed out that there are some grammatical forms that cannot be properly learnt from positive evidence alone. So, there is a need to focus on form during communicative activates. The focus on form can either take place during communicative activities or separate from communicative activities (i.e. integrated vs. isolated FonF). Furthermore, DeKeyser (1998), drawing on skill learning theory, advocates to promote PPP (Presentation-practice-production) model of language teaching. Thus, PPP which was once viewed as a synthetic approach is now seen as incorporating FonF. Therefore, in present scenario, it can be said that FonF builds on the strengths of analytic syllabus, but also addresses the limitations of it.

FonF is often considered as the central construct of task-based instruction. But unlike a purely meaning-focused instruction, tasks in FonF instruction incorporate both meaning and form. Skehan (1996b) suggests that
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there is a need to focus both on form and meaning when organizing task-based instruction. He advocates for making a balance between focus on grammatical forms and focus on communication for optimal learning outcome. However, tasks in FonF instruction can take different shapes depending on the objective of the lesson as well as the strategy employed. Also, tasks can be both interactive and non-interactive. Broadly speaking, tasks and activities in FonF instruction can be divided into two major categories: input-based FonF and output-based FonF. Nassaji and Fotos (2010) have provided very useful guidelines on how to develop effective tasks and activities to teach grammatical forms in communicative context. They have discussed both input-based and output-based FonF instructional strategies for grammar teaching. Some of the input-based strategies discussed by the authors are: input processing instruction, text enhancement through input flood or other means, and teaching grammar through discourse. The output-based strategies that the authors have highlighted are: interactional feedback, structured grammar-focused tasks and collaborative output tasks.

Input-based strategies are based on the assumption that grammar is best learned in input-rich environments, and task and activities are often designed to draw learners’ attention to the salient features of input. For example, in textual enhancement technique, learners’ attention is drawn to some specific features of language by underlining, boldfacing, capitalizing or italicizing those features in the text. On the other hand, output-based strategies put more emphasis on language output as an important aspect of second language acquisition and draw learners’ attention to the erroneous parts of output. For example, a number of explicit and implicit feedback techniques are used to correct learners’ errors in output.

FonF instruction in EFL context

The success of any language teaching method or strategy largely depends on the context in which it has been implemented. Many teachers and researchers tend to make mistake assuming that EFL context is very similar to ESL context. As a result, a language teaching approach that has been found effective in ESL context is usually extended to EFL context without proper investigation. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is such a language teaching approach that has been introduced in many EFL countries without properly investigating certain contextual issues. As a result, CLT (especially the stronger version) has failed to achieve the desired outcome in many countries. For example, CLT was introduced in Bangladesh with the
objective of developing learners’ communicative competence, but it has been found that most students cannot produce grammatically correct sentences even after completing their higher secondary education (Shurovi, 2014). A similar scenario can be found in other EFL countries like China, Taiwan and Iran. The main reason behind it is that there is very limited exposure to the target language in an EFL context. An approach that is purely meaning-focused and assumes that grammatical knowledge will gradually develop solely from exposure to the target language is somewhat destined to fail in an EFL context.

There is also a pedagogical issue which is often overlooked by many researchers. In most EFL countries, traditional structure-based language teaching (e.g. Grammar Translation Method) was the norm for several decades. So, when a sudden shift from a purely structure-based approach to a purely meaning-focused approach took place, many language teachers found it very difficult to incorporate new strategies into their teaching practice. Many teachers also did not like the idea of totally ignoring explicit grammar teaching in language classroom. It resulted in a mismatch between teachers’ perception of what constitutes language and their classroom teaching practices. This mismatch between teachers’ perception and practice is also partially responsible for the failure of a meaning-focused approach like CLT in many EFL countries.

It appears that a purely meaning-focused instruction cannot be the choice of language teaching in an EFL context. But we also do not want to go back to a purely structure-based approach which cannot develop learners’ communicative competence. So, the best choice we have is FonF instruction that makes a balance between focus on form and focus on meaning.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have provided an overview of FonF instruction in second language teaching covering both theoretical and pedagogical issues related to FonF instruction. However, one of my objectives in this paper was to examine the relevance and importance of FonF instruction in EFL context. As I have concluded in the previous section, FonF instruction is probably the best alternative to both meaning-based and structure-based instruction for teaching English effectively in EFL context. I have also briefly discussed what constitutes FonF tasks and activities in real classroom settings. But how to choose an appropriate FonF strategy still remains a difficult question to
answer given the availability of different types of FonF instruction. Moreover, teachers and students might have preferences for a particular type of FonF instruction. For example, Valeo and Spada (2016) found that both teachers and learners, across EFL and ESL contexts, prefer integrated FonF over isolated FonF. But it does not necessarily mean that there is no need for isolated FonF. I would rather suggest that teachers should choose the appropriate FonF strategy based on the teaching context, the learners’ proficiency level and even the objectives of a particular lesson. Finally, we should conduct further research (especially action research) to draw generalizable conclusions about the most effective FonF strategies for EFL context.

References


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