The Effect of Focus on Form Instruction on Intermediate EFL Learners' Grammar Learning in Task-based Language Teaching

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Abstract

One of the current concerns of applied linguistics focuses on incorporating grammar instruction within communicative classroom. The major points in the debates include whether, how and when we should integrate grammar instruction. Some studies have investigated focus on form, defined as the incidental attention that teachers and learners pay to form in the context of meaning – focused instruction. This study investigated three groups of EFL learners who completed the same task and compared the two types of approaches to focus on form (FonF) that is 'reactive focus on form' and 'preemptive focus on form'. The results of the study suggested that reactive FonF in comparison with preemptive FonF furnishes an excellent means for developing the ability to use the grammatical knowledge of the target structure in context. The results further indicated that the majority of the preemptive FFEs were initiated by the teacher rather than students and dealt with vocabulary whereas the linguistic focus of reactive FFEs was largely on grammar.

Keywords: Focus on form; Grammar; Task-based Language Teaching

1. Introduction

Careful examination of the effectiveness of purely meaning focused communicative language teaching has led a number of second language (L2) researchers to claim that communicative instruction should involve systematic treatments to draw L2 learners’ attention to linguistic forms to develop well-balanced communicative competence (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Spada, 1997; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 2003; Swain, 1985). Most importantly, we need to know more about precisely how and why formal instruction incorporated into communicative language teaching promotes interlanguage development. Long (1991) conceptualized the need to incorporate form-focused instruction into meaning-oriented communicative language teaching with the term “focus on form.” Focus on form, as Long defined it, is a type of instruction in which the primary focus is on meaning and communication, with the learner’s attention being drawn to linguistic elements only as they arise incidentally in lessons. This is in sharp contrast with traditional grammar instruction, or “focus-on-forms” instruction, which places a focus on forms themselves in isolation (Long, 1991).

It is claimed that form focused instruction involves attempts to intervene directly in the process of interlanguage construction by drawing learners' attention to or providing opportunities for them to practice specific features based

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on a linguistic syllabus and the intensive and systematic treatment of those features (Ellis, 2001; Ellis et al. 2001). Two kinds of form-focused instruction can be distinguished – focus on forms and focus on form. Two types of focus on form instruction can be further distinguished: planned focus on form and incidental focus on form. The former involves the use of focused tasks, that is, communicative tasks that have been designed to elicit the use of specific linguistic form in the context of meaning centered language use. Incidental focus on form involves the use of unfocused tasks, that is, communicative tasks designed to elicit general samples of the language rather than specific forms (Ellis, 2001; Ellis et al., 2001).

2. Reactive Focus on Form Vs. Preemptive Focus on Form

Reactive focus on form arises when learners produce an utterance containing an actual or perceived error, which is then addressed usually by the teacher but sometimes by another learner. Thus, it supplies learners with negative evidence. As Long and Robinson point out, this evidence can be explicit (e.g., the learner is told directly what the error is or is given meta-lingual information relating to the correct form) or implicit (e.g., the learner’s deviant utterance is recast in the target language form). Doughty and Varela’s (1998) study provided reactive focus on form of the implicit kind. Reactive focus on form occurs in episodes that involve negotiation. Pica (1994), for example, defines negotiation as applying “to those interactions in which learners and their interlocutors adjust their speech phonologically, lexically, and morpho-syntactically to resolve difficulties in mutual understanding that impede the course of their communication” (p. 200). In other words, negotiation arises as a response to a communicative problem. Two types of negotiation have been identified. The negotiation of meaning is entirely communicative in orientation, as it is directed at enabling the participants to achieve mutual understanding in order for communication to proceed. The negotiation of form is didactic in orientation, as it is directed at improving accuracy and precision when no problem of understanding has arisen. As Lyster and Ranta (1997) point out, both types of negotiation occur in meaning-focused instruction (e.g., immersion classrooms), and both involve corrective feedback and thus are reactive in nature. Like reactive focus on form, preemptive focus on form is problem oriented. However, the nature of the problem that is addressed is somewhat different. Whereas reactive focus on form involves negotiation and is triggered by something problematic that an interactant has said or written, preemptive focus on form involves the teacher or learner initiating attention to form even though no actual problem in production has arisen. To put it another way, reactive focus on form addresses a performance problem whereas preemptive focus on form addresses an actual or a perceived gap in the students’ knowledge.

3. Research Hypotheses

1. Preemptive focus on form affects students’ use of English tenses.
2. Reactive focus on form affects students’ use of English tenses.
3. There is no difference between the Preemptive and Reactive focus on form.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The subjects were 79 adult students who were studying English as a foreign language at an institute in Sari, Iran who were between 19 to 25 on average. The samples were chosen out of 120 students who were willing to take part in the research by piloting Nelson's test and those scoring within one standard deviation above or below the mean were considered for the study. To make sure if the criterion of homogeneity was met, the ANOVA test was employed to prove that the variances of the three groups were homogeneous.

4.2. Instruments

The following two tests were administered to measure the different variables in the study
a) Nelson English Language Test (NELT): it was used to homogenize the learners regarding their language proficiency level.
b) The teacher made grammar test consisting of 40 multiple items in a multiple-choice format was used to evaluate the subjects’ grammar knowledge.

4.3. Procedure

Before the treatment, a pretest was administered to all three groups to diagnose learners’ performance on the use of tenses.

4.3.1. Group 1: Group 1 (the first experimental group) received preemptive focus on tenses of verbs, so before they completed the main task of “picture description”, an input enhancement activity and a production activity were administered. For the input enhancement activity, students received a reading text in which the target tenses were highlighted, underlined and color-coded. And also there was a set of questions aimed at preparing students for the specific tenses that the study was going to observe. For the readings, the students read and answered questions about the text orally. The students were told to pay attention to how tenses of verbs were expressed in the text. For the production activity, the students were shown pictures of two scenes and asked to explain it. This part of the task aimed to elicit use of tenses of verbs and the teacher wrote the correct responses on the board underlining the verbs used. After the preemptive focus on form, the learners were instructed to complete the main task “picture description”. They were asked to describe pictures where they had to use tenses of verbs in the sentences.

4.3.2. Group 2: Group 2 (second experimental group) received reactive focus on tenses, so this group started directly with the main task of “picture description”. When the students had problems with using verbs and made mistakes during the task, the teacher intervened and implemented the same techniques of focus on form, which were input enhancement activity and production activity described above. After these reactive techniques were completed, the students continued to complete the main task “picture description”.

4.3.3. Group 3: Group 3 (control group) received no focus on tenses. This group completed the main task without any attention to forms.

5. Results

The result of the Nelson test is included in Table 2. Those who scored around the mean (6 or above) were regarded as having a higher level of proficiency and the rest as having a lower level of proficiency.

ANOVA was conducted to examine the difference among the performance of the three groups on grammar test before the experiment. The results (Tables 1, 2) indicated that there was not any significant difference between the mean scores of the subjects in the control group and the two experimental groups, and based on the Scheffe (Table 3) multi comparison, they had similar variances at the time of pre-testing.

| Variables  | N  | Mean  | SD    | Std. Error |
|------------|----|-------|-------|------------|
| Preemptive | 27 | 6.1852| 2.21944| .42713     |
| reactive   | 26 | 6.0769| 1.62291| .31828     |
| control    | 26 | 6.1538| 1.75937| .34504     |
| Total      | 79 | 6.1392| 1.86557| .20989     |
Table 2: the results of ANOVA

| (I) Experimental Group (Preemptive) | (J) Experimental Group (Preemptive) | Mean difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. | 95% confidence Interval Lower Bound | 95% confidence Interval Upper Bound |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Experimental Group (preemptive)     |                                   | .1083                 | .0313      | .51915 | .51915                             | .978                               |
|                                     | Control Group (None)               |                       |            |       | -1.1879                           | 1.4045                             |
|                                     |                                     |                       |            |       | .998                               | .978                               |
|                                     |                                     |                       |            |       | -1.2649                           | 1.3275                             |
|                                    |                                     |                       |            |       |                                    |                                    |
|                                    |                                     |                       |            |       |                                    |                                    |
| Experimental Group (reactive)       | Experimental Group (preemptive)    | -.1083                | .0769      | .51915 | .51915                             | .978                               |
|                                     | Control Group (None)               |                       |            |       | -1.4045                           | 1.1879                             |
|                                     |                                     |                       |            |       | .989                               | .978                               |
|                                     |                                     |                       |            |       | -1.3853                           | 1.2315                             |
| Control Group (None)                | Experimental Group (preemptive)    | -.0313                | .0769      | .51915 | .51915                             | .998                               |
|                                     | Experimental Group (reactive)       |                       |            |       | -1.3257                           | 1.2649                             |
|                                     |                                     |                       |            |       | .989                               | .998                               |
|                                     |                                     |                       |            |       | -1.2315                           | 1.3853                             |

Regarding the first hypothesis, the results show that there was not a significant difference between the preemptive and the control groups, so the first hypothesis is rejected (Tables 4).

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of preemptive group and control group

| Variables | N  | Mean  | SD    | Std. Error of Mean |
|-----------|----|-------|-------|--------------------|
| Preemptive group | 27 | 7.0000 | 1.20894 | .23266 |
| Control group   | 26 | 6.2308 | 2.19650 | .43077 |

Regarding the second hypothesis, the results show that there was a significant difference between the reactive and the control groups, so the second hypothesis is accepted (Tables 5).

Table 5: Independent Sample t-test

| Variables | Levene's Test for Equality of Variance | t-test for equality of means |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
|           | F          | Sig | df | Sig (2tailed) | Mean diff | Std Error Diff | 95% Confidence interval Lower | 95% Confidence interval Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | 6.433 | 0.014 | 3.407 | .001 | 1.6846 | .49441 | .69107 | 2.67816 |
| Equal variances not assumed | 3.439 | 41.531 | .001 | 1.6846 | .48988 | .69567 | 2.67356 |

Regarding the third hypothesis, the results show that there was a significant difference between the preemptive and reactive groups, so the third hypothesis is rejected. It can be concluded that those in the reactive group performed better on the posttest (Tables 6).
Table 6: Independent Sample t-test

| Variables                        | Levene’s Test for Equality of Variance | t-test for equality of means         |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|                                  | F           | Sig | t    | df | Sig (2tailed) | Mean Diff | Std Error Diff | 95% Confidence interval |
| Equal variances assumed          | .388        | .536 | -2.386 | 51 | .021       | -.7749     | .32478         | -1.4569 - -.12291       |
| Equal variances not assumed      | -2.387      | 50.997 | .021 | -.7749 | .32459 | -1.4265 | -.12329       |

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that an average of one instance of FFE took place every 2.3 minutes. With regard to the overall frequencies of FFEs in each group, Teachers felt the need and were more inclined to make a departure from meaning to highlight a linguistic form when they taught in the two classes.

The results showed that in both groups (experimental groups), TIP FFEs (teacher initiated preemptive) were overwhelmingly used. These findings are in sharp contrast with Ellis’s (2001) which found TIP FFEs to be too low that they decided not to include them in their analysis. The low rate of TIP FFEs in ESL settings can be due to the fact that ESL teachers did not wish to preemptively draw attention to linguistic forms unless they felt obliged to. However, in EFL settings, it may be the case that teachers feel the need to focus on gaps before an error is made. It could be concluded that these teachers believed it was appropriate to preemptively focus on linguistic items to foster accuracy, even if no misunderstanding had occurred. Furthermore, it may be argued that learners are perhaps more willing to let their teacher intervene. Learners’ expectations from their teachers may have prompted the teachers to make abundant use of TIP FFEs as the researchers believe is the case in the Iranian EFL context. Employing TIP FFEs can be one way for an EFL teacher to manifest her/his status as a qualified teacher and win learner satisfaction.

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