Attention to Meaning and Form vs. Attention to Meaning Alone: The Effect of Focus on Form on Vocabulary Retention in an EFL Context

Mohammad Ahmadvand\textsuperscript{a,*}, Dariush Nejadansari\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a,b} English Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Isfahan 81746-7344, Iran

Abstract

This paper investigated the usefulness of focus on form in the retention of the vocabulary items. Two homogenous groups were chosen for this study. The teacher taught both the form deliciacies and the meaning of the words to the students of the experimental group but only the meaning of the words to the comparison group. Both groups studied 3 chapters of a book. At the end of the treatment period, the same vocabulary test was given to both groups. Statistical analysis showed that students who had learned the form and the meaning components of vocabulary together outperformed the other group.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Keywords: explicit instruction; focus-on-form instruction; focus-on-meaning instruction; vocabulary retention; input enhancement

1. Introduction

The flourishing of the communicative approach brought about a strong tendency to focus on communication and attention to meaning. It was believed that SLA should follow the principles of first language acquisition since children acquire their first language naturally without any explicit instruction on how to use or manipulate the language elements to express their ideas; this idea, for some time, led to a rejection of any kind of focus on form of any kind (planned, unplanned, explicit, incidental, etc.). This non-interventionist way of teaching is what Widdowson (1990) refers to as Pure Education. VanPatten (2004) and Wong (2001) showed that sometimes meaning and form compete for learners’ attention and that attending to form damages learners’ comprehension. The
advocates of this Zero Position believe in a ‘natural’ route of development and hence the abandonment of any kind of formal instruction; they believe that language learning will be more effective if learners are allowed to construct their interlanguage naturally through communication. Krashen (1982) believes in a non-interface hypothesis, maintaining that acquisition and learning are distinct phenomena and that learning does not turn into acquisition, that formal instruction does not develop learners’ interlanguage, concluding that instruction does not contribute to the development of implicit knowledge and the language competence is needed for normal communication. Advocates of this view believe that explicit instruction is of little value and reject any kind of intervention whether it is planned (e.g. presentation and practice of different items and rules) or it is unplanned (e.g. error correction).

Recently there has been a renewed interest in the necessity of the incorporation of focus on form and explicit grammar instruction in second language classes. The movement started in 1980s and lasted for a decade bringing about an interest in examining the importance of attention to form in language classes in different contexts. Some studies (e.g. Harley, 1998) concluded that many students exposed to communicative language teaching failed to acquire the formal features of language, although their fluency of speech was notable, that they failed to achieve native-like competence or a good knowledge of the second or foreign language. There are studies (e.g. Ollerhead and Oosthuizen, 2005; Hulstijn, 1989) which showed that implicit learning is enhanced by focus on form and that explicit learning can be converted into implicit learning by speeding up the process of learning. Ellis (2008) also points to the fact that explicit instruction improves the speed of acquisition. It is believed that general cognitive processes affect learning and that attention to form enhances the input awareness of especially adults who can use their metacognitive skills and analytical approaches to aid them in learning, leading to an improvement in accuracy of language use (Sheen, 2009; Long, 2009; Lier, 2001; Poole, 2005). This awareness can be achieved through different pedagogical interventions ranging from completely explicit metalinguistic explanations to visual enhancements (Doughty, 2000). As Ellis (1994) states, the need for input in L2 acquisition has been recognized widely, and that the input that learners are receiving in the form of their L2 instruction has significant effects on their learning asset. There have been many research studies investigating the effect of different types of instruction (focus-on-form instruction vs. focus-on-meaning instruction) on the acquisition of grammatical structures but very little has been done on the role of these input processing strategies on the development of the vocabulary span of learners. The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that a combination of both direct and indirect methods is the best method for teaching vocabulary; direct instruction, which promotes word consciousness, involves a focus on roots and affixes, word play, and word orders. It is also believed that restructuring tasks and recycling new vocabulary throughout the course enhances vocabulary development. Graves (2000) also advocates a kind of fostering word consciousness. Texas Reading Initiative (2002) suggests using descriptions, interesting metaphors, similes, and plays on words, and explaining the contexts of use to be useful techniques of consciousness-raising when teaching new words. Stahl (1999) states that vocabulary instruction must include both definitional and contextual information regarding the meaning of each word.

Some studies have investigated the effect of focus-on-form instruction on vocabulary learning. Milton and Alexiou (2012), for example, express the idea that form-focused instruction and uncommunicative approaches to vocabulary learning yield important benefits. Poole (2003) came to the conclusion that learners mostly attended to lexical forms rather than grammatical ones. Alcon (2007) studied the effect of incidental focus on form on learning vocabulary items finding it beneficial for learners. Shak and Gardner (2008) found that young learners had positive attitudes towards FonF instruction. De la Fuente (2006) investigated the role of pedagogical tasks and form-focused instruction on the acquisition of vocabulary and concluded that evidence supported the value of form-focused instruction especially of a proactive nature. A study done by Laufer-Dvorkin (2006) compared the effects of focus on form and focus on forms on second language learning and found the latter more rewarding claiming FonFs to be ‘indispensable’ to L2 vocabulary learning; in this study when all students in all groups received only the meaning of words no difference was observed in their performance in the following quiz. Saeidi, et al (2012) divided their subjects into three groups coming to a conclusion that the group who received focus on form were more successful in learning vocabulary than the other two groups who received focus on forms and focus on meaning instruction. Beltran (2005) studied the effect of focus on form in the teaching of Spanish-English false friends and found an explicit focus on form to be more beneficial in the learning of complex lexical items. There are also studies which deny the usefulness of focus on form on learning vocabulary. For example, Gass, et al (2003) studied the effect of focus on form on different language parts concluding that FonF had the greatest effect on learning grammar and the
least one on learning vocabulary. Mason and Krashen (2004) found that additional focus on form is less efficient than other techniques like hearing words in the context of stories. The purpose of this paper was to identify which input processing strategy was more effective in improving learners’ vocabulary retention, a strategy which is merely meaning-based or one which is both meaning and form-based.

2. This Study
2.1. Research question
This study aimed at answering the following question: Does teaching the forms of vocabulary items as well as their meanings enhance students’ vocabulary retention?

2.2. Research hypothesis
Based on the research question we made the following hypothesis: Students who are instructed on both the form and the meaning of vocabulary items will have a better retention of vocabulary meanings than students who receive only the meaning of the vocabulary items.

3. Method
3.1. Subjects
The subjects consisted of two homogenous groups of male and female students of University of Isfahan majoring in Economics, Accounting, and Business Administration. The first group (the comparison group) consisted of 13 male and 2 female students chosen out of 25 students and the other group (the experimental group) also consisted of 13 male and 2 female students chosen out of 27 students after both groups took the vocabulary pre-test. These groups of students continued their studies with other students of the same class and received instruction. All the students present in the classes took the vocabulary post-test but in each class only the scores of students chosen for the comparison and the experimental groups were analyzed in this study. This procedure was adopted because the researchers didn’t want to interrupt the classes.

3.2. Materials
The vocabulary pre-test and post-test of the study included vocabulary items that were taken from three chapters of ‘Basic English for the Students of Economic Sciences’ written by Azizollah Dabaghi and Mehdi Vaez Dalili, published by University of Isfahan. The pre-test included 40 vocabulary items for which the students had to write the Farsi meaning or equivalent; this is because the students’ retention was to be investigated not their knowledge of synonyms. Also multiple-choice items were not appropriate for our test because we wanted to eliminate the possibility of wild guessing. For the post-test, 25 vocabulary items covered in the pre-test were given to the students again and they had to write the Farsi meanings for each one too. For the statistical analysis of both the pre-test and the post-test only those 25 vocabulary items were considered. The pre-test included more items because the researchers didn’t want to make the students sensitive to the target vocabulary of the post-test.

3.3. Procedures
Two classes in University of Isfahan were chosen in which students were majoring in Economics, Accounting, and Business Administration. The students were taking a general English course. First a pre-test was given to the students which consisted of 40 vocabulary items chosen from the first three chapters of their book. From these 40 vocabulary items only 25 items were the purpose of this study and hence included in the post-test. The students were required to write the Farsi equivalent of each word. Students with scores either below or above the mean of the class score were identified and eliminated from the calculations at the end of the study. The t-test was calculated for the pre-test to make sure that both groups are really homogenous with regard to their knowledge of the vocabulary under study. The same teacher taught the two classes but in one class which included our experimental group, in addition to meaning of the words, he dedicated a short time to explaining the form characteristics of the words and in another class which included the comparison group the teacher continued with just meaning by giving definitions, synonyms, or antonyms. By form characteristics we mean the teacher taught different parts of speech of a word (word formation), the pronunciation, the spelling, irregular grammatical patterns (e.g. man and men), the situations a word can be appropriately used (e.g. whether it is formal, neutral, or informal), famous collocations of a word, and the affixes used in a word. After 4 weeks (12 hours), when 3 chapters of the book had been covered in both classes, the teacher gave the same vocabulary items as the post-test (25 vocabulary items) to the two classes as one of their
formative assessments. The students were supposed to write the Farsi meaning or equivalent of each word; the researchers’ purpose was to check for the students’ vocabulary retention ability. The scores of both groups (only the subjects chosen in each class) were compared and analyzed statistically to see if there was any difference between the two groups.

4. Data analysis

In order to make sure that both groups were homogenous, a test consisting of 40 vocabulary items was given to both groups. From these 40 words only 25 words were the focus of this study. The t-test of the scores of both groups was calculated and it was found that there was no significant difference between the entry knowledge level of both groups. Then a post-test consisting of the same 25 words was given to both groups and the t-test of the scores was calculated. Table 4.1. shows the descriptive statistics calculated for the post-test scores.

Table 4.1.
Descriptive Statistics of Post-Test Scores

| Group       | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-------------|----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| Comparison  | 15 | 12.00| 2.535          | .655            |
| Experimental| 15 | 15.07| 3.535          | .913            |

Table 4.2. shows the t-test calculations for the post-test scores. As the significance level calculated is .01 (less The results of independent samples t-test for the post-tests revealed that the mean score of the experimental group ($M = 15.07, SD = 3.53$) was significantly higher than that of the comparison group ($M = 12, SD = 2.53$); $t (28) = -2.73, p < .05$. The mean increase in the scores was -3.067 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -5.367 to -0.766.

Table 4.2.
Independent Samples T-Test for the Post-Test Scores

| Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances | t-test for Equality of Means | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
|---|------|---|----|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------|-------|
| Post-test Equal variances assumed      | 1.903 | .179 | -2.730 | 28 | .011 | -3.067 | 1.123 | -5.367 | -0.766 |
| Equal variances not assumed            | -2.730 | 25.391 | .011 | -3.067 | 1.123 | -5.378 | -0.755 |

5. Discussion

This study investigated the effectiveness of a combination of meaning and focus on form on the retention of vocabulary items. The results of the study show that the experimental group and the comparison group were significantly different suggesting that an explicit focus on form during teaching vocabulary items can be beneficial to learners. The subjects of this study were university students who already have a developed mental ability helping them benefit from their cognitive abilities; the researchers believe that a replication of this study for young learners can be inspiring and informative. The results of the present study reject VanPatten (2004) and Wong (2001) view that sometimes meaning and form compete for learners’ attention and that attending to form damages learners’
comprehension. On the other hand, the findings of this study are especially consistent with the claims of The National Reading Panel (2000) asking for a combination of both direct and indirect teaching of vocabulary. Moreover, findings of the study are in line with Alcon's study (2007) in which the effect of incidental focus on form on learning vocabulary items was investigated and the results proved it beneficial for learners. De la Fuente (2006) also came to similar results as he found substantial evidence supporting the value of form-focused instruction.

6. Conclusion
The main goal of any teaching is to help learners better understand, remember, and use their learned knowledge. During the teaching process the teacher should try to use all available resources to improve the effectiveness of his/her teaching; the level of the learners and their immediate and delayed needs are the most important factors affecting teachers’ decisions. And as different learners have different learning styles and abilities, usually a combination of different techniques yields better results. This study showed that a combination of meaning-focused and form-focused instruction is helpful in promoting learners’ retention of vocabulary items, although more studies are needed to confirm this finding.

References
Alcon, E. (2007). Incidental focus on form, noticing and vocabulary learning in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of English Studies*, 7(2), 41-60.
Beltran, R. C. (2005). The effects of focus on form in the teaching of Spanish-English false friends. *RESLA*, 18, 65-79.
De la Fuente, M. (2006). Classroom L2 vocabulary acquisition: investigating the role of pedagogical tasks and form-focused instruction. *Language Teaching Research*, 10(3), 263-295.
Doughty, C. (2000). Negotiating the L2 linguistic environment. *University of Hawaii Working Papers in ESL*, 18, 47-83.
Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ellis, R. (2008). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition (2nd ed.)*. (2008). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gass, S., Svetics, I., and Lemelin, S. (2003). Differential effects of attention. *Language Learning*, 53(3), 497-545.
Graves, M. (2000). A vocabulary program to complement and bolster a middle-grade comprehension program. In B. Taylor, M. Graves, & P. van den Broek (Eds.), *Reading for meaning: Fostering comprehension in the middle grades*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Harley, B. (1998). The role of focus-on-form in child second language acquisition. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 156-174). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hulstijn, J. (1989). In Ellis, R. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition (2nd ed.)*. (2008). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Krashen, S. (1982). In Ellis, R. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition (2nd ed.)*. (2008). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Laufer-Dvorkin, B. (2006). *Comparing focus on form and focus on forms in second language vocabulary Learning*. The Canadian Modern Language Review, 63(1), 149-166.
Lier, L. V. (2001). Language Awareness. In R. Carter and Nunan, D. *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. (PP. 160-165). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Long, M. (2009). Focus on form in Task-Based Language Teaching. Retrieved on 10 January, 2013 from http://www.mhhe.com/socosience/foreignlang/top.htm
Mason, B. and Krashen, S. (2004). Is form-focused vocabulary instruction worthwhile? *RELCA*, 35(2), 179-185.
Milton, J. and Alexiou, T. (2012). Vocabulary input, vocabulary uptake and approaches to language teaching. *The Language Learning Journal*, 40(1), 1-5.
Ollerhead, S. and Oosthuizen, J. (2005). Meaning-focused vs form-focused L2 instruction: Implications for writing educational materials for South African learners of English. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics*, 36, 59-84.
Poole, A. (2005). Focus on form instruction: foundations, applications, and criticisms. *The Reading Matrix*, 5(1), 47-56.
Poole, A. (2003) In Farraokhi, F. and Abbasi Talabari, F. (2011). Focus on form instruction in EFL: Implications for theory and practice. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 33, 29-47.
Saedi, M., et al. (2012). On the effects of focus on form, focus on meaning, and focus on forms on Learners’ vocabulary learning in ESP context. *English Language Teaching*, 5(10), 79.
Shak, J. and Gardner, S. (2008). Young learner perspectives on focus-on-form tasks. *Language Teaching Research*, 12(3), 387-405.
Sheen, R. (2009). Focus on Form and Focus on Forms. Retrieved on 11 January, 2013 from http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/56/3/303.pdf
Stahl, S.A. (1999). *Vocabulary development*. Newton Upper Falls, MA: Brookline Books.
Texas Reading Initiative (2002). *Promoting vocabulary development: Components of effective vocabulary instruction* (Revised edition). Austin, TX: Texas Education Agency.
The National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health.
Vanpatten, B. (2004). In Ellis, R. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition (2nd ed.)*. (2008). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Appendixes

Appendix 1
The comparison group’s scores in the pre-test and post-test

| Students | Group One (Comparison Group) Pre-Test Scores | Post-Test Scores |
|----------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1        | 7                                           | 10              |
| 2        | 8                                           | 8               |
| 3        | 7                                           | 12              |
| 4        | 9                                           | 12              |
| 5        | 8                                           | 14              |
| 6        | 10                                          | 13              |
| 7        | 11                                          | 11              |
| 8        | 8                                           | 13              |
| 9        | 11                                          | 16              |
| 10       | 10                                          | 10              |
| 11       | 8                                           | 9               |
| 12       | 9                                           | 15              |
| 13       | 9                                           | 12              |
| 14       | 11                                          | 16              |
| 15       | 7                                           | 9               |

Appendix 2
The experimental group’s scores in the pre-test and the post-test

| Students | Group Two (Experimental Group) Pre-Test Scores | Post-Test Scores |
|----------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1        | 10                                          | 17              |
| 2        | 8                                           | 19              |
| 3        | 11                                          | 19              |
| 4        | 8                                           | 17              |
| 5        | 11                                          | 20              |
| 6        | 8                                           | 15              |
| 7        | 9                                           | 17              |
| 8        | 9                                           | 12              |
| 9        | 10                                          | 16              |
| 10       | 7                                           | 8               |
| 11       | 8                                           | 14              |
| 12       | 8                                           | 10              |
| 13       | 9                                           | 14              |
| 14       | 11                                          | 17              |
| 15       | 8                                           | 11              |