

*In the Name  
of God*



*Ferdowsi University of Mashhad*

***Incidental v.s. Proactive Focus on Form and  
Learner Uptake in Iranian EFL Communicative  
Classrooms***

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**Abstract:**

This study has compared the two types of focusing on form, namely, Incidental and Proactive, in terms of the amount of learner uptake following each. Two grammatical forms have been chosen as the forms to be focused on in this study: the Passive, and Past Continuous vs. Simple Past (P.C. vs. S.P.). Eighty one Intermediate-level-students of English as a foreign language (EFL) and one teacher (the researcher herself) participated in this study, in two private language institutes with task-based syllabi in Bojnord, Northern Khorasan. For each grammatical form and each treatment type one class period (90 minutes) was considered (all in all, four sessions). The results of some picture-and-task-based pre-, post- and delayed post-tests suggested that both types of focusing on form were indeed effective, given both grammatical forms. Also, it was shown that both treatment types led to the maintenance of the grammatical forms uptaken in the delayed post-tests, except for the Passive with the Incidental group, which showed a decrease compared with their own performances on the post-test. The findings suggest the integration of both types of focus on form (F-on-F) into communicative curricula. Also, it is implied that necessarily not all the linguistic forms benefit from the same type of F-on-F.

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**1. Form**

**2. Focus on Form**

**3. Incidental Focus on Form**

**4. Proactive Focus on Form**

**5. Uptake**

## *Abstract*

This study has compared the two types of focusing on form, namely, Incidental and Proactive, in terms of the amount of learner uptake following each. Two grammatical forms have been chosen as the forms to be focused on in this study: the Passive, and Past Continuous vs. Simple Past (P.C. vs. S.P.). Eighty one Intermediate-level-students of English as a foreign language (EFL) and one teacher (the researcher herself) participated in this study, in two private language institutes with task-based syllabi in Bojnord, Northern Khorasan. For each grammatical form and each treatment type one class period (90 minutes) was considered (all in all, four sessions). The results of some picture-and-task-based pre-, post- and delayed post-tests suggested that both types of focusing on form were indeed effective, given both grammatical forms. However, the results of a qualitative type of post-test (dictoglosses) showed that given the Passive form, none of the treatment types was effective. Also, it was shown that both treatment types led to the maintenance of the grammatical forms uptaken in the delayed post-tests, except for the Passive with the Incidental group, which showed a decrease compared with their own performances on the post-test. The findings suggest the integration of both types of focus on form (F-on-F) into communicative curricula. Also, it is implied that necessarily not all the linguistic forms benefit from the same type of F-on-F.

***Key Terms:*** Form, Focus on form, Incidental focus on form, Proactive focus on form and Uptake.

## *Table of Contents*

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Page</i>
Acknowledgments .....	i
Table of Contents .....	ii
List of Figures .....	v
List of Tables .....	vi
List of Abbreviations .....	viii
Abstract .....	ix

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

1.0. Background .....	2
1.1. Statement of the Problem .....	4
1.2. Significance of the Study .....	4
1.3. Purpose of the Study .....	5
1.3.1. Research Questions .....	5
1.3.2. Research Hypotheses .....	6
1.3. Key Terms .....	7
1.3.1. Form .....	7
1.3.2. Focus on Form .....	7
1.3.3. Incidental Focus on Form .....	7
1.3.4. Proactive Focus on Form .....	7
1.3.5. Uptake .....	7
1.4. Limitations of the Study .....	8

### **Chapter Two: Review of the Related Literature**

2.0. Introduction .....	10
2.1. Definitions of Key Terms and Theoretical Backgrounds .....	10
2.1.1. What Is Form? .....	10
2.1.2. What Is Focus on Form?.....	11
2.1.3. Types of Focus on Form .....	11
2.1.4 F-on-F Is Necessary and Effective: a Brief Rationale .....	13
2.1.5.What Is Uptake?.....	15

2.1.6.Uptake as a Scale: a Brief Rationale .....	16
2.1.7.Task & Focus on Form .....	17
2.1.8.Choiceof Form .....	18
2.2. Classroom Studies on F-on-F & Learner Uptake .....	19

### ***Chapter Three: Methodology***

3.0. Introduction .....	36
3.1. Setting and Participants .....	36
3.2. Instrumentation .....	37
3.3. Procedure .....	37
3.3.1.Homogenizing the two Groups, Step 1 .....	37
3.3.2.Homogenizing the Two Groups, Step 2 (Pre-tests) .....	38
3.3.3 Test Characteristics .....	38
3.3.3.1 Reliability .....	38
3.3.3.1.2.Phase I: (KR—21) .....	38
3.3.3.1.3. Phase II: Test-retest .....	38
3.3.3.1.4.Phase III: Inter-rater Reliability .....	40
3.3.3.1.5.Phase IV: Inside-the-test Factors .....	40
3.3.3. 2. Validity .....	41
3.3.3. 3.Practicality .....	41
3.3.3.4.Scoring Procedure .....	42
3.3. 4. Data Gathering Procedure, Phase I: Pre-tests .....	42
3.3.5. Focusing on Form in the Classrooms .....	43
3.3.5.1. Incidental F-on-F .....	43
3.3.5.2. Proactive F-on-F .....	47
3.3.6. Data Gathering Procedure, Phase II: Post-tests .....	48
3.3.7. Data Gathering Procedure, Phase III: Delayed Post-tests .....	48

### ***Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Results***

4.0. Introduction .....	50
4. 1. Homogenizing, Step 1 .....	50
4. 2. Homogenizing , Step 2 (Pre-tests) .....	51
4. 2.1. Pre-test; Passive .....	51
4. 2.2. Pre-test; P.C. v.s. S.P. ....	52

4. 3. Variability between Groups Due to Types of Treatment, Phase 1:	
Pre- v.s. Post-tests .....	53
4. 3.1. Passive; Pre- v.s. Post-test .....	54
4. 3.2.P.C. v.s. S.P.; Pre- v.s. Post-test .....	55
4. 4. Variability between Groups Due to Types of Treatment, Phase 2:	
Post- v.s. Post-tests .....	56
4. 4.1.Passive Form; Incidental v.s. Proactive F-on-F .....	56
4. 4.2. P.C. v.s. S.P. Form; Incidental v.s. Proactive F-on-F .....	57
4. 4.3.Both forms, Incidental vs. Proactive F-on-F .....	58
4. 5. Variability between Groups Due to Types of Treatment, Phase 3:	
Post- v.s. Delayed Post-tests .....	59
4.6. Discussion .....	62
<b><i>Chapter Five: Conclusion, Pedagogical Implications &amp; Suggestions</i></b>	
5.0. Introduction .....	67
5.1. Conclusion .....	67
5.3. Implications .....	67
5.4. Suggestions for Further Studies .....	69
References.....	71
Appendices.....	76

## *List of Figures*

<i>Figure</i>	<i>Page</i>
Figure1-1 <i>Options in language teaching</i> .....	2



## *List of Tables*

<i>Table</i>	<i>Page</i>
Table 3-1 <i>Paired samples t-test for comparing the means of the test-retest scores of the Passive test</i> .....	39
Table 3-2 <i>Paired samples t-test for comparing the means of the test-retest scores of the P.C. v.s. S.P. test</i> .....	39
Table 4-1 <i>Independent samples t-test for Nelson test scores</i> .....	51
Table 4-2 <i>Independent samples t-test of Passive voice pre-test</i> .....	52
Table 4-3 <i>Independent samples t-test of P.C. v.s. S.P. pre-test, comparing the two treatment groups</i> .....	53
Table 4-4 <i>Paired samples t-test of passive pre- v.s. post-test scores of Incidental group</i> .....	54
Table 4-5 <i>Paired samples t-test of passive pre- v.s. post-test scores of Proactive group</i> .....	55
Table 4-6 <i>Paired samples t-test of P.C. v.s. S.P. pre- v.s. post-test scores of Incidental group</i> .....	55
Table 4-7 <i>Paired samples t-test of P.C. v.s. S.P. pre- v.s. post-test scores of Proactive group</i> .....	56
Table 4-8 <i>Independent samples t-test for Incidental v.s. Proactive post-test scores of passive</i> .....	57
Table 4-9 <i>Independent samples t-test for Incidental v.s Proactive post-test scores of P.C. v.s. S.P.</i> .....	57
Table 4-10 <i>Independent samples t-test for Incidental v.s Proactive post-test scores, both forms</i> .....	59
Table 4-11 <i>Paired sample t-test for Incidental Passive post- v.s. delayed post-test scores</i> .....	60
Table 4-12 <i>Paired samples t-test for Proactive Passive post- v.s. delayed post-test scores</i> .....	60

Table 4-13 <i>Paired samples t-test for Incidental P.C. v.s. S.P. post- v.s. delayed post-test scores</i> .....	61
Table 4-14 <i>Paired samples t-test for Proactive P.C. v.s. S.P. post- v.s. delayed post-test scores</i> .....	61
Table 4-15 <i>Pre-, post- and delayed post-test results of both groups, both forms</i> .....	62

## *List of Abbreviations*

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
C.F. ....	Corrective feedback
EFL .....	English as a foreign language
ESL .....	English as a second language
F-on-F .....	Focus on form
F-on-M .....	Focus on meaning
FFI .....	Form-focused instruction
Fs .....	Focus on forms
P.C. vs. S.P. ....	Past continuous vs. simple past

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# *Chapter One*



According to Dekeyser, this should be followed by thoughtful exercises so that declarative knowledge can be firmly anchored, and subsequently followed by production activities which require learners to notice how their own production may differ from the target, a process known as *noticing the gap*. An alternative instructional strategy to what was mentioned by Dekeyser (1998) is that more direct instruction should be delayed until learners have demonstrated at least some emerging knowledge of the form.

Research by Swain (1998) lent support to this position. The learners in her study were inaccurate in their use of a variety of forms, but as it was claimed in that study, it was clear that they had noticed their errors at some level. For this population, Swain suggested the use of explicit rule presentation, followed by activities that require the learners to use output to reflect, in effect, on their own linguistic inadequacies, what is called by Doughty & Williams (1998) *noticing the hole*.

On the other hand, Spada and Lightbown (1993, as cited in Doughty & Williams, 1998, p. 251) did not insist on the presentation of initial explicit rule explanation; rather, they emphasized on the necessity of a *sustained* and *long-term* attention to form: "even the acquisition of forms, such as questions, that are abundant in the input may be better aided by sustained integrated focus on form." Doughty & Williams (1998) elaborated on the above statement by pointing out that the ideal intensity and duration of F-on-F is closely tied to long-term curricular decision. Moreover, they believed that in order to have lasting effects, a sustained and integrated attention to form treatment is needed, and this requires integrating attention to form throughout the course, rather than to limit it to a single activity or unit.

Furthermore, still another possibility to attention to form is through giving corrective feedback (C.F. from now on, in this study) to learner production while doing a meaningful activity. According to Long (1990, as cited in Long & Robinson, 1998) this is the main definition of F-on-F. To speak more specifically—according to Ellis, 2001, as cited in Loewen, 2005—F-on-F is of two main types: Incidental and Proactive. While the former refers to the teacher's providing C.F. to learner production errors on any linguistic form, the latter refers

to the teacher's providing first, rule instruction on a specific form, second, some tasks related to that specific linguistic form, and finally, some C.F.—if necessary—to learner production errors, while doing the meaningful tasks and activities.

The third possibility of attention to form in the classroom context (i.e., the provision of C.F. to learner production while doing a meaningful activity, or, put simply, F-on-F) can be delivered in short or long-term curricular periods: most of the related literature in this field have been based on long-term curricular periods, e.g., Lyster (1998a, 1998b), Lyster & Ranta (1997), Doughty & Varela (1998), Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen (2001a and 2001b), and Loewen (2003), to mention a few. However, there have been some other studies in this field which have been based on short-term curricular periods, eg., Leeman et al. (1995) who chose two 50-minute-long class periods, Oliver (2000) who chose two class sessions, and Dabaghi (2006) who chose one class session. As for the present study, this third possibility of attention to form has been chosen to be studied, which is of two types: Incidental and Proactive. In the current study, Incidental and Proactive F-on-F have been compared with each other. Both types of F-on-F have been delivered in short-term periods (four 90-minute-long class sessions).

### ***1.1. Statement of the Problem***

A major curricular choice involves whether to be Proactive or Reactive (i.e., Incidental) in focusing on form. That is to say, teachers can plan in advance to ensure that a F-on-F will occur (that is, they Proactively pay attention to form), or they can wait for a pressing learner need to arise and develop an on-the-spot F-on-F lesson in response (that is, they Incidentally pay attention to form).

### ***1.2. Significance of the Study***

Both Incidental (i.e., unplanned) and Proactive (i.e., planned) F-on-F are two ways of error treatment in our classes, regarding the learners' oral production. However, to the researcher's knowledge, and also according to Doughty and Williams (2006), at the present time, there is no definitive research upon which to base a choice of one over the other. In addition, given that there is increasing



support for the incorporation of some F-on-F into communicative curricula, it would seem essential to ascertain what sort of focusing on form is more effective (i.e., would lead to more learner uptake and further, would lead to the maintenance of the uptaken form in long terms. As a result, our teachers can revise their use of Incidental and Proactive F-on-F in the classroom context.

### ***1.3. Purpose of the Study***

This study has compared the two types of oral F-on-F, namely, Incidental and Proactive, in terms of the amount of uptake following each. Therefore, the purpose of this study has been to see first, if the two types of F-on-F would lead to any uptake, regarding the two grammatical forms—ie., the Passive form and Past Continuous vs. Simple Past (P.C. v.s. S.P.). Second, which type of F-on-F would lead to more learner uptake in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context regarding the two chosen forms (i.e., the Passive and P.C. v.s. S.P.), and finally, which type of F-on-F would lead to the maintenance of the two uptaken linguistic forms over a long period of time. To reach these ends, three main research questions have been addressed, which all in all include nine questions:

#### ***1.3.1. Research Questions***

*1.a. Would the students in the Incidental group uptake any Passive form through the treatment?*

*1.b. Would the students in the Proactive group uptake any Passive form through the treatment?*

*1.c. Would the students in the Incidental group uptake any P.C. v.s. S.P. through the treatment?*

*1.d. Would the students in the Proactive group uptake any P.C. v.s. S.P. through the treatment?*

*2.a. Which type of F-on-F (Incidental or Proactive) would lead to a higher amount of learner uptake, regarding the Passive form?*

*2.b. Which type of F-on-F (Incidental or Proactive) would lead to a higher amount of learner uptake, regarding the P.C. v.s. S.P. form?*

*2.c. Which type of F-on-F (Incidental or Proactive) would lead to a higher amount of learner uptake, regarding both forms?*

*3.a. Which type of F-on-F would lead to the maintenance of the uptaken Passive form on the delayed post-test?*

*3.b. Which type of F-on-F would lead to the maintenance of the uptaken P.C. v.s. S.P. form on the delayed post-test?*

Thus, the following null-hypotheses have been formulated:

### ***1.3.2. Research Hypotheses***

*H<sub>0</sub> 1.a.: There is no significant difference between the pre- and post-test performances of the students in the Incidental group, regarding the Passive form.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 1.b.: There is no significant difference between the pre- and post-test performances of the students in the Proactive group, regarding the Passive form.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 1.c.: There is no significant difference between the pre- and post-test performances of the students in the Incidental group, regarding the P.C. v.s. S.P.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 1.d.: There is no significant difference between the pre- and post-test performances of the students in the Proactive group, regarding the P.C. v.s. S.P.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 2.a.: The Incidental and Proactive groups would show no significant differences in their accurate use of the Passive form.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 2.b.: The Incidental and Proactive groups would show no significant differences in their accurate use of the P.C. v.s. S.P. form.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 2.c.: The Incidental and Proactive groups would show no significant differences in their accurate use of the grammatical forms under study.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 3.a.: The Incidental and Proactive groups would show no significant difference in their maintenance of the uptaken Passive form.*

*H<sub>0</sub> 3.b.: The Incidental and Proactive groups would show no significant difference in their maintenance of the uptaken P.C. v.s. S.P. form.*

Throughout this study, the above null-hypotheses have been tested to answer the nine mentioned research questions.

### **1.3. *Key Terms***

The current study has five key terms: Form, Focus on Form, Incidental Focus on Form, Proactive Focus on Form, and Uptake. More complete definitions of these key terms are presented in chapter two; here some brief ones are given, as they have been used and meant in this study:

#### **1.3.1 *Form***

The term 'Form' has been used as to refer to Grammatical structures and points.

#### **1.3.2. *Focus on Form***

It is defined as the peripheral and temporary attention to form while doing a meaning-based communicative task or activity.

#### **1.3.3. *Incidental Focus on Form***

Reactive, unplanned and extensive type of Focus on Form is referred to as Incidental type of it.

#### **1.3.4. *Proactive Focus on Form***

Preplanned and intensive type of Focus on Form is referred to as Proactive type of it.

#### **1.3.5. *Uptake***

It has been defined as what the learner attempts to do with the teacher's feedback or instruction at the end of the lesson, and the necessary condition for it to take place has been considered as there being a gap in the learner's knowledge.

#### ***1.4. Limitations of the Study***

This study, like any other one, has encountered a number of limitations which are mentioned below:

First of all, only two grammatical forms had been chosen as the forms to be focused on throughout the study. An ideal condition might have been to choose more linguistic forms to be focused on and be compared with each other, but that would have needed more time and energy! After all, most of the related studies in this field have chosen only one or two forms to be focused on (for example, Carroll and Swain, 1993, who chose *English dative alternation*, Leeman et al., 1995, as cited in Long and Robinson, 1998, who chose *imperfect tenses* in Spanish, Doughty and Varela, 1998, who chose the two forms of *simple past* and *conditional*, Williams and Evans (1998) who chose *participle adjectives* and *the passive*, Mackey and Philip, 1998, as cited in Doughty and Williams, 1998, and Mackey and Oliver, 2002, who chose *question forms* only, to mention a few.

Second, unfortunately, "gender" has not been considered as an independent variable in this study. All the participants were female.

Finally, a longer experimental period should have been chosen to compare the effects of the two treatment types. However, because the syllabi in both of the language institutes—where the classes were held—allowed for one session of the whole program for each grammatical form, the researcher was limited to only one 90-minute session for each form. Of course, there are many related studies in this field which have chosen the same—or even shorter—experimental periods, e.g. Leeman et al., (1995, as cited in Long and Robinson, 1998) who chose two 50-minute-long class periods, Oliver (2000) who chose two class sessions, and Dabaghi (2006) who chose one class session.

To begin with, the necessary theoretical backgrounds and related studies in this field are presented in the next chapter.