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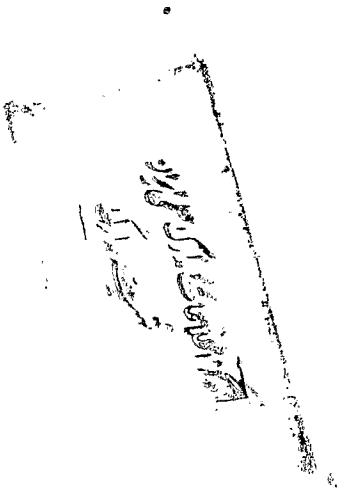

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**Faculty of Literature and Foreign Languages**

**Department of English**

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in English Language Teaching (ELT)

**Title**

# Reactive and preemptive language related episodes and uptake in EFL classes

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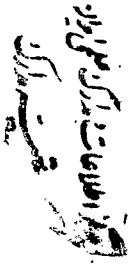

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۶۰۰۶۳

**To the Graduate Council of the University of Tabriz:**

We are submitting hereby a dissertation written by Javad Gholami entitled "Reactive and preemptive language related episodes and uptake in EFL classes". We have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT).

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# *Dedicated to:*

*My parents and wife with lots of love*

*and*

*all Iranian teachers*

*who do not waste their students' precious time.*

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**Abstract**

Considering the well-proven benefits of participation in communicative interactions and incorporation of focus on form instruction into primarily communicative classes, this study investigates how frequently reactive vs. preemptive focus on form is employed in communicatively-oriented EFL classes. Despite the extensive number of empirical studies on the type, rate, and effectiveness of planned reactive focus on form, incidental focus on form in general and preemptive focus on form in particular have not enjoyed this much attention, and an investigation of their frequency and effectiveness is almost missing from the literature on focus on form studies. In this concern, the present study expands our current accounts of focus on form instruction by investigating the role of preemptive as well as reactive Language Related Episodes (LREs) in raising learners' awareness and noticing of linguistic items in an EFL setting. An attempt is also made to examine the potentials of the two types of focus on form in leading to uptake, as the immediate measure of the effectiveness of LREs. To this end, all LREs were identified and transcribed from the audio-recordings of 20 hours of instruction from one class with two qualified instructors. The LREs were then categorized in terms of preemptive vs. reactive episodes, and teacher- vs. learner-initiated preemptive LREs. Learner notes, field notes and video-recording of the classroom interactions were collected and investigated qualitatively to shed further light on the nature and type of focus on form and its effectiveness in the observed classes. The findings indicate a significant difference in the frequency of

*abstract continued*
reactive and preemptive LREs and between two types of preemptive episodes. Surprisingly, teacher-initiated preemptive LREs were the most frequent LRE type in the observed classes. However, there was not a significant difference between reactive and preemptive LREs in terms of uptake. Consequently, this study challenges the widely held view on uptake in the literature. Based on the low amount of uptake in the findings and the results of the qualitative analyses, a new definition of uptake is suggested which encapsulates '*camouflaged*' uptakes as well as learners' immediate responses to focus on form. Since uptake is used to evaluate the efficiency of form-focused instruction within meaning–oriented one, it is concluded that SLA researchers need to employ multiple indices to examine the effectiveness of focus on form instruction. The findings demonstrate that preemptive focus on form, especially teacher-initiated LREs, are very prevalent in EFL classes and uptake needs to be redefined and expanded to take into account various sources of data which signify students' incorporation of LREs. This study finally highlights the necessity of raising EFL teachers' awareness to make informed decisions on integrating different types of incidental focus on form with communicative methodology.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... iv
ABSTRACT ..... vi
LIST OF TABLES ..... xii
LIST OF FIGURES ..... xiii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND DATA TRANSCRIPTION DEVICES ..... xiv

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** ..... 1
1.1 Introduction ..... 2
1.2. Statement of the problem ..... 4
1.3. Purpose of the study ..... 7
1.4. Research questions ..... 10
1.5. Definition of key terms ..... 11
1.6. Organization of the dissertation ..... 13

**CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE** ..... 15
2. 1. Introduction ..... 16
2.2. Historical background for focus on form instruction ..... 17
2.2.1. Traditional grammar-based syllabus ..... 18
2.2.2. Communicative-based syllabus ..... 21
2.2.3. Structural syllabus: traditional grammar-based syllabus revisited ..... 26
2.2.4. Focus on form syllabus ..... 33
2.3. Rationale for focus on form instruction ..... 36
2.3.1. Theoretical rationale for focus on form instruction ..... 36
2.3.1.1. Long's interaction hypothesis ..... 36
2.3.1.2. Historical foundations for interaction hypothesis ..... 37
2.3.1.3. Interaction hypothesis and SLA ..... 39
2.3.1.4. Interaction and language development ..... 40
2.3.1.5. Research on classroom interaction ..... 42
2.3.1.6. Interaction and contextual factors ..... 46
2.3.1.7. NS-NSS vs. NNS-NNS interactions ..... 48

2.3.1.8. NNS-NNS interactions and negotiation ..... 49
2.3.2. Output hypothesis .....53
2.3.2.1. Noticing ..... 54
2.3.2.2. Opportunities to test current hypotheses ..... 55
2.3.2.3. Metalinguistic function: conscious reflection on output ..... 55
2.3.3. Schmidt's noticing hypothesis ..... 58
2.4. Dichotomies on focus on form ..... 61
2.4.1. Focus on forms vs. focus on meaning ..... 61
2.4.2. Planned vs. incidental focus on form ..... 64
2.4.3. Reactive vs. preemptive focus on form ..... 66
2.4.3.1. Reactive focus on form ..... 67
2.4.3.1.1 Historical review of reactive focus on form..... 69
2.4.3.1.2. Empirical studies on reactive focus on form .....70
2.4.3.1.3. Experimental studies .....70
2.4.3.1.4. Quasi-experimental studies ..... 74
2.4.3.1.5. Descriptive studies ..... 77
2.4.3.2. Preemptive focus on form ..... 85
2.5. Measuring the effectiveness of focus on form instruction ..... 88
2.5.1. Studies on uptake as a measure of focus on form ..... 88
2.5.2. Importance of uptake ..... 92
2.6. Identifying the gap in the literature ..... 94
2.7. Chapter summary ..... 96

**CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY** ..... 97
3.1. Introduction .....98
3.2. Research questions .....100
3.3. Design of the study ..... 102
3.4. Participants ..... 104
3.4.1. Teachers .....104
3.4.2. Learners ..... 105
3.5. Context of the study ..... 106
3.6. Pilot study ..... 110

3.7. Main study ..... 113
3.8. Data collection procedures ..... 113
3.8.1. Quantitative data ..... ...113
3.8.2. Qualitative data .....114
3.9. Data categorization framework .....115
3.9.1. Categories of analysis and data coding system .....117
3.9.2. Uptake moves .....126
3.9.3. Summary of the coding system .....129
3.9.4. Reliability of the coding system .....130
3.10. Chapter summary ..... 130

**CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION** .....132
4.1. Introduction .....133
4.2. Results .....133
4.2.1. Focus on form instruction in general ..... 133
4.2.2. Focus on form as reactive vs. preemptive LREs ..... 135
4.2.3. Teacher-initiated vs. learner-initiated preemptive LREs ..... 136
4.2.4. Uptake moves ..... 138
4.3. Discussion ..... 140
4.3.1. Incidental focus on form ..... 140
4.3.2. Preemptive LREs: neglected episodes in focus on form studies .....142
4.3.3. Who generates more preemptive LREs .....144
4.3.4. Uptake: a partially defined construct .....151
4.3.5. Uptake revisited: a modified definition .....155
4.4. Chapter summary .....160

**CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS & SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH** .....162
5.1. Introduction .....163
5.2. Summary of the main findings ..... 163
5.3. Responding to research questions .....163
5.4. Implications of the study .....165

5.4.1. Theoretical implications ..... 166
5.4.2. Pedagogical implications ..... 169
5.5. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research ..... 175
5.5.1. Limitations ..... 175
5.5.2. Suggestions for further research ..... 176
5.6. Conclusion ..... 178

REFERENCES ..... 180
Appendices ..... 207
APPENDIX A: Reactive LREs ..... 208
APPENDIX B: Learner-initiated preemptive LREs ..... 214
APPENDIX C: Teacher-initiated preemptive LREs ..... 225
APPENDIX D: Sample collection of learner notes from meaning-oriented interactions in the observed IELTS class. ..... 230
APPENDIX E: Sample collection of meaning-oriented materials covered in the observed IELTS class ..... 253
Abstract in Farsi ..... 273
Graduate Council Form No.1 for dissertation evaluation ..... 275

# List of Tables

Table 2.1. Types of form-focused instruction ..... 66

Table 2.2. Principal incidental focus-on-form options ..... 87

Table 3.1. Description of learner participants .....105

Table 4.1. Frequency and percentage of focus on form episodes ..... 134

Table 4.2. Frequency and percentage of reactive & preemptive LREs..... 135

Table 4.3. Frequency and percentage of teacher- & learner-initiated preemptive LREs ..... 137

Table 4.4. Frequency and percentage of uptake moves..... 138

Table 4.5. Frequency and percentage of uptake in reactive and preemptive LREs ..... 139

# List of Figures

Figure 2.1. The interface between explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge ..... 28

Figure 2.2. Traditional grammar teaching..... 30

Figure 2.3. Processing instruction..... 30

Figure 3.1. Schematic illustration of the research design in this study..... 103

Figure 4.1. Total LRE distribution ..... 134

Figure 4.2. Percentage of reactive and preemptive LREs..... 136

Figure 4.3. Percentage of teacher- and learner-initiated preemptive LREs .....137

Figure 4.4. Percentage of uptake moves..... 139

Figure 4.5. Percentage of uptake in reactive and preemptive LREs.....140

## List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| LRE | Language Related Episode |
| FFE | Focus on Form Episode |
| EFL | English as a Foreign Language |
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| FonF | Focus on Form |
| FFI | Form-Focused Instruction |
| LI | First Language (i.e., Native Language) |
| L2 | Second Language |
| NS | Native Speaker |
| NNS | Non-Native Speaker |
| SLA | Second Language Acquisition |
| TEFL | Teaching English as a Foreign Language |
| UG | Universal Grammar |

## Data transcription devices

| **Symbol** | **Meaning** |
|---|---|
| S | Student |
| T | Teacher |
| CAPITALS | Emphasis |
| (.) | Micropause |
| = | Linked speech |
| ? | Rising intonation |
| . | Falling intonation |
| - | Interrupted speech |
| (...) | *Extra Information* |

# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Introduction

The role of interaction in L2 learning gained considerable importance through the work of Hatch (1978) who stressed the need to study the nature of the input given to L2 learners and its possible role in second language acquisition (SLA). This growing interest in the role of interaction emerged as a result of a reaction to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis. The input hypothesis by Krashen (1987, 1998) states that in order for input to be available for acquisition, it must be comprehensible. On the other hand, Long (1983a, 1996) claims that comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient for language learning to take place. Long argues that input shaped through interaction contributes directly and powerfully to acquisition, and that modifications to the interactional structure of conversation are important to make input comprehensible. The interaction hypothesis (proposed and updated by Long (1983a, 1996) suggests that conversational interaction can promote second language learning "because it connects input, internal learners capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (p. 452).

Central to all these studies may be the role of output in L2 acquisition. Comprehensible input alone is not adequate for language acquisition. Swain's 'comprehensible output hypothesis' (1985a, 1985b; 1995) deals with this inadequacy. This hypothesis proposes that comprehensible input may not be sufficient for certain aspects of L2 acquisition and that comprehensible output may be needed. Based on this hypothesis, learners must also be given the opportunity to produce comprehensible output. According to this hypothesis, the role of output is to provide opportunities for contextualized and meaningful use of language, to test out hypotheses about the target language, and to move the learner from a purely semantic analysis of the language to its syntactic analysis (Swain, 1995).

Long's interaction hypothesis and Swain's output hypothesis are closely associated with attention to linguistic forms within the context of performing

communicative activities which has been termed "focus on form" (Long, 1991). Focus on form contrasts with more traditional types of form-focused instruction (referred to by Long, 1991 as "focus on forms"), where specific linguistic features are isolated for intensive treatment, often in non-communicative activities. In contrast, the primary focus of attention is on meaning in focus on form instruction. The attention to form arises out of meaning-centered activity derived from the performance of a communicative task (Long and Robinson, 1998; Doughty and Williams, 1998b; Ellis, 2001a, 2001b). Long and Robinson (1998) defined focus on form as follows: "an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more of the learners – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (p. 23).

The interest in focus on form stems, in part, from the suggestion that it can enable learners to develop linguistic accuracy because it creates the conditions for interlanguage restructuring to take place (Doughty, 2001; Long and Robinson, 1998). Focus on form allows learners to take time out from a focus on meaning to notice linguistic items in the input, thereby overcoming a potential obstacle of purely meaning-focused lessons in which linguistic forms may go unnoticed. Such noticing, Schmidt (1990, 1995, 2001) argues, is necessary for L2 learning. Not only does focus on form provide learners with an opportunity to notice linguistic items, but it may also help them to 'notice the gap' (Schmidt and Frota, 1986) between models of the target language and their own language production. Furthermore, focus on form provides opportunities for 'pushed output' which stretches learners' competence through the need to express themselves in language that is accurate and appropriate (Swain, 1995, 2000; Swain and Lapkin, 1995). For these reasons, focus on form is seen as potentially beneficial for L2 learners, and these theoretical explanations provide a compelling rationale for including focus on form in second/foreign language curricula.

Recently there has been a call for an integration of meaning-focused and form-focused instruction in the second language (L2) classroom, in order to promote

both learners' fluency and accuracy. Incidental focus on form, in which linguistic items are focused on briefly within meaning focused activities, is one way such an integration might occur. The present study aims to contribute to the growing body of descriptive research investigating Focus on Form (FonF), defined as the incidental attention that teachers and students pay to linguistic elements in lessons whose principal focus is on meaning or communication (Long, 1991). To this end, transcripts from a communicative EFL classroom are analyzed in order to find out how attention to form is achieved.

### 1.2. Statement of the problem

Throughout the history of SLA, several paradigms have appeared and faded out along with the whole socio-economic and cultural-educational atmosphere. Some teaching methodologies which are praised by some classroom settings could be no help to others. Recently, in Iranian EFL classes, the authorities in charge of English teaching programs put emphasis on communicative language teaching mainly focusing on communicative competence, but this in turn has led to three main problems. First, there are not many Iranian bilingual English teachers who could meet this new trend of language teaching because most of them were educated partly based on the grammar translation method and in some part according to the audio-lingual method. Iranian English teachers are now expected to teach in a way they had never experienced themselves. Second, higher education and entering a prominent university is the main goal of general secondary school students today, and this pushes students to give primary attention to accuracy and mastery of grammar, vocabulary and formal aspects of language to prepare for the nation-wide university entrance examination. Parents, students, and even English teachers doubt the possibility of effective communicative language teaching classes in state-sponsored and privately-run classroom settings.

However, there have been numerous efforts on the part of decision–making bodies and EFL teachers concerning teaching English to materialize and operationalize