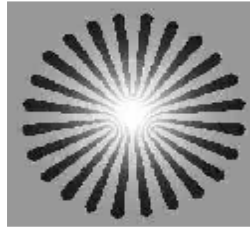


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*Potential impacts of preemptive and reactive
incidental focus on form on utterance accuracy in
meaning-oriented EFL classes*

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
M.A. in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The present study deals with a comparison between reactive and pre-emptive focus-on-form in terms of application and efficiency. It was conducted in an intermediate English class in Shahroud. 15 male learners participated in this research and their age ranged from 18 to 25. A course book, *New Interchange 3*, and a complementary book were used. Every session the learners gave lectures on units of the complementary book and then the teacher taught the course book. In this research, we used a Hi-Q Mp3 Voice Recorder to record voices during class interactions. We must point out that the teacher recorded the whole time of class, but we just addressed the conversations between the teacher and the learners. Two kinds of data sheets were utilized to collect raw data, one for registering FFEs and the other one for registering uptake episodes. In fact, they were used for counting episodes. For analyzing the data, *Chi Square Test* (χ^2) and *PHI Coefficient* (F) were used. The results of the data analysis demonstrated the superiority of pre-emptive over reactive in terms of application and efficiency according to exact statistics and valuable findings which arose from direct observations. So vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation as indispensable elements of speech under the linguistic coverage category were our variables in the study which accepted the influence of focus-on-form to render service to language improvement.

Key words: focus-on-form; reactive; pre-emptive; focus-on-form episodes (FEEs); uptake;
linguistic coverage

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

1.1. Background

Iranian English teachers sometimes believe that just provoking learners to learn and speak can be sufficient. When addressing English learning, the most important aspect, that is, speaking begins to take shape in our mind. English like other languages must be taught in the right way to communicate what it means. When communicating, correct pronunciation, accurate grammatical structures and appropriate vocabulary as the indispensable elements of speech must be involved to bear what a speaker is going to express. So all the three main elements of speaking skill must be focused on in order to transfer the exact meaning in the brain.

Actually 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; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 2003; Spada, 1997; Swain, 1985). To this end, applied linguists have called for an integration of meaning-focused and form-focused instruction (Ellis, 2001; Hulstijn, 1995; Skehan, 1998).

Although Long's (1991) original definition of focus on form stated that the attention to form arose incidentally, subsequent studies expanded the definition to include attention to form that was preplanned. Consequently, Ellis (2001) distinguished between planned and incidental focus on form. Planned focus on form involves targeting preselected linguistic items during a meaning-focused activity, either through input (e.g., input flood or input enhancement) or output (e.g., corrective feedback on errors in the use of pretargeted forms). In contrast, the linguistic items addressed in incidental focus on form arise spontaneously in the course of meaning-focused activities. Although both types of focus on form might be beneficial for learners (Doughty & Williams, 1998), their impact might vary. Planned focus on form has the advantage of providing

intensive coverage of one specific linguistic item, whereas incidental focus on form provides extensive coverage, targeting many different linguistic items (Ellis et al., 2001a). Although the effectiveness of planned focus on form has been investigated in various contexts (e.g., Doughty & Williams; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998), fewer studies have examined the effects of incidental focus on form (Williams, 2001).

A classification has been made on incidental focus on form between reactive and preemptive incidental focus on form (Ellis 2001, Ellis et. al 2001a, Long & Robinson 1998). In reactive focus on form, which has also been known as corrective or negative feedback (Long 1996), the teacher perceives the learners' utterance as inappropriate in a context of meaning focused activity and draws their attention to the produced error through one type of feedback such as explicit or implicit negative feedback, recast, elicitation, negotiation of meaning, clarification request etc. On the other hand, preemptive focus on form occurs when the teacher or the learner initiates attention to a form, before a problem arises.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) define uptake as a learner's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback. Ellis et al. (2001) emphasizes that uptake cannot be viewed as evidence that acquisition has certainly taken place, it facilitates the acquisition. According to Ellis et al. (2001b) most of the studies in this respect focus on reactive rather than preemptive focus on form while the concept of uptake is an under researched area in EFL.

Recent research (Ellis, Basturkmen, &Loewen, 2001a, 2001b; Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Lyster & Ranta, 1997) has investigated the occurrence of incidental focus on form; however, these studies have been primarily descriptive in nature and have investigated the effectiveness of incidental focus on form only in relation to learner uptake. These studies suggest that uptake might be a possible indication of learning, although they admit that uptake cannot necessarily be taken as evidence of learning.

According to Ellis et al. (2001a,b) uptake facilitates the acquisition. Thinking of this significant role motivates us to lead error correction in a more deeply thinking way. To this end,

we must get a perfect recognition of incidental focus on form approach. Applying this approach in EFL classes can be a great help to achieve accuracy along with fluency, that is, fluency must be in parallel with accuracy.

What has been dealt with in many researches is considering the role of reactive and preemptive incidental focus on form as feedback and what has rarely been paid attention to is the rate of uptake.

The present research is going to make a comparison between incidental (reactive and/ or preemptive) focus on form episodes in terms of their linguistic coverage. The second important aim is to determine the significant correspondence between the linguistic coverage of focus on form episodes (in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) and the rate of uptake.

1.2. Statement of the problem

A glance through the last decades of language-teaching practices in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) reveals a shift of attention from purely linguistic to more communicative approaches (Brown, 2001). According to Fotos and Nassaji (2007) traditional methods and instructions on isolated grammar forms were insufficient to promote learners' acquisition, yet purely communicative approaches had been found inadequate for developing high levels of target language (TL) accuracy. In other words, a communicative approach helped learners to become fluent, but was insufficient to insure comparable levels of accuracy as well (Swain, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Schmitt, 2002). As a result, a crucial need arose for SLA theorists and teachers to integrate meaning-focused instructions and form focused instruction through a new approach (Loewen, 2007). Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1982, 1998), Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983, 1996), Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985, 1995), and Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 1995) paved the way and provided the theoretical framework for the emergence of a new orientation to language teaching called Focus on Form (FoF) (Ellis, 2005; Loewen, 2004;

Ellis et Long (1991, 1997) defined focus on form as an incidental attempt to draw learners attention to any linguistic element in context while maintaining a primary focus on meaning. Focus on form is contrasted with more traditional type of form focused instruction (referred as focus on formS by Long, 1991, Ellis, 2001) where specific linguistic features are isolated for intensive treatment, often in non- communicative activities (Gholami and Farrokhi, 2007). Ellis (2001, 2005) divided the general field of focus on form into two broad categories of planned (proactive) and incidental FoF. While both combine attention to linguistic items within the context of meaning focused activity, the former is more intensive, focusing on a limited (generally one) linguistic element and the latter enjoys an extensive distribution of attention to a variety of forms.

The field of incidental focus on form falls into two other categories of reactive (also known as corrective feedback, error correction or negative feedback) and preemptive focus on form (Ellis et al., 2001a; 2001 b). While preemptive incidental focus on form occurs when either the teacher or the learner initiates attention to a linguistic form before a problem arises, reactive focus on form occurs when the learners' attention is drawn to the problematic feature in their production through negative feedback.

There are various measures to evaluate the effectiveness of form-focused instruction one of which is uptake. Lyster and Ranta (1997) define uptake as a learner's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback. Ellis et al. (2001) emphasizes that uptake cannot be viewed as evidence that acquisition has certainly taken place, it facilitates the acquisition.

According to Ellis et al. (2001b) most of the studies in this respect focus on reactive rather than preemptive focus on form while the concept of uptake is an under researched area in EFL. Yet, no study has been carried out in the literature to examine the linguistic coverage of focus on form episodes (FFE) and its relation to the rate of their following uptake moves. The main concern of the present study is to investigate FFEs of a meaning-oriented instructional class in terms of its linguistic coverage and the rate of uptake.

In recent years focus on form (FoF) has gained considerable ground in second language (L2) literature and a great deal of studies regarding incidental FoF have been conducted to shed more light on different concerns of this movement which attempts to inject well-considered explicit instruction back into meaning oriented language lessons without abandoning the positive features and results of communicative approach (Shak and Gardner, 2008; Loewen, 2007; Schmitt, 2002).

The present study will involve the observation of meaning-centered classroom activities and then identification and analysis of all reactive and preemptive language related episodes (LRE) in teacher-learner interactions. As mentioned before, a great deal of research conducted in the field of focus on form has investigated reactive rather than preemptive FFEs, yet a great number have been carried out in English as a second language (ESL) contexts. Researchers have raised concern over the lack of empirical studies on preemptive and reactive language related episodes regarding their linguistic coverage. The prime objective of this research is, as such, to determine the frequency of reactive and preemptive focus on form episodes in terms of their linguistic coverage of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in an Iranian EFL class.

From among a few number of studies carried out concerning uptake almost all focused on the learner's immediate response and immediate uptake. In this study we try to capture a deeper account of uptake and consider learners' delayed uptake as well. We will take into account not only learners' immediate verbal responses as uptake but also their nodding, note taking and delayed use of linguistic items as "camouflaged uptake" according to modified operational definition proposed by Farrokhi and Gholami (2007). Therefore exploring the linguistic coverage of FFEs in terms of the rate of the following uptake moves will be the second objective of this study.

1.3. Research questions

The following research questions have been proposed to meet the above mentioned objectives:

Q1: Is there any significant difference between incidental (reactive and preemptive) focus on form episodes in terms of linguistic coverage (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation)?

Q2: Is there any significant correspondence between the linguistic coverage of focus on form episodes (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) and the rate of uptake ?

1.4. Research hypotheses

H01: There is no significant difference between incidental focus on form episodes (reactive and pre-emptive) in terms of their linguistic coverage(vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation).

H02: There is no significant correspondence between the linguistic coverage of focus on form episodes (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) and the rate of uptake.

1.5. The purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study is to examine two types of incidental focus on form namely reactive and preemptive in an EFL setting. The study also tries to capture a deeper account of uptake which is the *camouflaged* uptake along with an already established type of uptake, namely, the immediate uptake and their frequency of occurrence following preemptive and reactive FOFs.

1.6. Significance of the study

During the following decades some researchers attempt to abandon the grammar-accuracy tenet in favor of more communicatively-oriented approaches that focused on language use and functions, centrality of meaning and role of interaction without any form of grammar instruction. The CLT proponents advocated the fundamentality of meaning and communicative competence through formulating some hypotheses one of which is Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982, 1998). Krashen proposed that learners acquire language by understanding the message intelligible to them and by being exposed to sufficient comprehensible input and believed that the sole exposure to such input would be for acquisition to happen (Basturkmen, 2006, Brown, 2000).

Upon the theoretical foundation and principles of CLT and input hypothesis, which argued that learners develop their linguistic abilities in the absence of explicit instruction, an instructional program called Immersion program initiated in Canada which taught French to English speaking students. Swain's (1985) evaluation of this program ended up with criticism of effectiveness of its underlying theoretical framework and revealed that although learners received huge amounts of comprehensible input. Their grammatical knowledge was not well improved compared with their communicative ability.

Brown (2001) believes that today no language-teaching expert advocate Krashen's Zero Option of no form focused instruction at all. Long (1996) developed Krashen's Input Hypothesis, explaining that learning occurs not because of input alone, but through the interactions learners have with it. Long's Interaction hypothesis stated that "through negotiation of meaning, the input becomes increasingly useful because it is targeted to the specific developmental level of the individual learner; thus input negotiated to fit the needs of the individual learner can become intake" (Basturkmen 2006, p.91). Long's hypothesis directed the focus toward some other hypotheses proposed by Swain (1985, 1995) and Schmidt (1990, 1995) called Pushed output Hypothesis and Noticing Hypothesis respectively. Swain argues that in being pushed to produce, learners notice holes in their linguistic repertoire and this stimulates learning of language to fill in the holes. In other words, output pushes learners to process language (Basturkmen, 2006, Adams,

2003). On the other hand, Schmidt's Noticing hypothesis states that conscious process of focus on form is necessary for learning to take place and more noticing leads to more learning.

Generally a great deal of studies has been conducted in this respect. Van Patten (1990), for instance, as Gholami and Farrokhi (2007) explain suggests that having learners attend to form and meaning in the input simultaneously overloads their processing abilities to the extent that they fail to notice the form while processing input for meaning and fail to notice the meaning while processing input for form. To make it concise, attention to form competes with attention to meaning which led to the conclusion that intake of new forms take place only if input is easy enough to be understood.

The collection of these hypotheses paved the way and form the underlying framework to attend to linguistic form within communicative meaning focused activities called “Focus on Form”.

1.7. Definition of the key terms

The following important concepts that exist in this research have been defined to have a better understanding of the present study.

- 1. *Incidental focus on form:*** focusing on a variety of spontaneously driven linguistic forms within a meaning focused activity with no prior intention of teacher.
- 2. *Reactive focus on form:*** perceiving learners’ utterance as inappropriate in a context of meaning focused activity and drawing their attention to the produced error through one type of feedback such as explicit or implicit negative feedback, recast, elicitation, negotiation of meaning, clarification request etc.
- 3. *Preemptive focus on form:*** preemptive focus on form consists of attempts by the students or the teacher to make a particular form the topic of the conversation even though no error (or perceived error) in the use of that form has occurred.

4. *Linguistic coverage*: it refers to the adjustment of errors in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.
5. *Meaning-oriented EFL classes*: teaching English as a foreign language in classes whose learners are involved in communicative activities.

1.8. Limitations of the study

This study suffered from some limitations. They are as follows:

1. Having only male learners instead of both males and females was the main limitation.
2. Gathering the data lasted five months because of a short interruption between two terms.
3. A few learners sometimes missed the class.
4. There were some interruptions between classes because of holidays.
5. We were not allowed to use a camera to film the class to have continuous observations.

Chapter II

Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Introduction

Recently, there has been a substantial number of research studies on focus on form, (Doughty, 2001; Doughty & Williams, 1998b; Basturkmen, Ellis, & Loewen, 2001a, 2001b; Long & Robinson, 1998; Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). The underlying common notion among these studies has been the emphasis on the dual need for meaning-focused and focus-on-form instruction in the second language (L2) classroom (Ellis, 2001; Hulstijn, 1995; Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993; Skehan, 1998). Ellis (2001a,b) describes focus on form as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form” (Ellis, 2001, pp. 1–2). In other words, focus-on-form instruction encompasses “any pedagogical effort to draw learners’ attention to language either implicitly or explicitly” (Spada, 1997, p. 73).

Focus on form can broadly be realized in two major ways, namely reactively or preemptively. Moreover, preemptive focus on form can be generated by teachers or learners. In this concern, it has been suggested that teachers preferably limit themselves to providing reactive focus on form, where the need for their assistance is clear (Ellis et al. 2002). This viewpoint seems to undermine the value of experienced teachers’ judgment on recognizing if and when to preemptively draw attention to a particular form which may prove problematic for learners. Furthermore, Ellis et al. (ibid) claim that teacher preemption of form is the option most likely to disrupt the communicative flow as it tells the students that the teacher is mostly preoccupied with form rather than meaning. Also, the forms teachers preempt may not constitute actual gaps in the students’ L2 knowledge. The same argument could be made about student-initiated preemptive focus on form episodes. That is, one student’s gap is not necessarily another’s.

Questioning the teachers' recognition of perceived gaps in students' knowledge has been assumed rather than proven. Arguably, then, teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form is worthy of examination before such generalizations can be made.

2.2. Planned vs. incidental focus on form

Following Long's (1991) original definition of focus on form in which he claimed that the attention to form arose incidentally, subsequent studies expanded the definition to include attention to form that was preplanned. Consequently, Ellis (2005) distinguished between planned and incidental focus on form. Planned focus on form involves targeting pre-selected linguistic items during a meaning-focused activity, either through input (e.g., input flood or input enhancement) or output (e.g., corrective feedback on errors in the use of pre-targeted forms). In contrast, the linguistic items addressed in incidental focus on form arise spontaneously in the course of meaning-focused activities. Although both types of focus on form might be beneficial for learners (Doughty & Williams, 1998b), their impact may vary. Planned focus on form has the advantage of providing intensive coverage of one specific linguistic item, whereas incidental focus on form provides extensive coverage, targeting many different linguistic items (Ellis et al., 2001a). Incidental focus on form can provide a brief time-out from focusing on meaning in order to assist learners in noticing linguistic items in the input that might otherwise go unnoticed in entirely meaning-focused lessons (Ellis et al., 2001a; Schmidt, 2001; Skehan, 1998). Although planned focus on form has been investigated in various contexts (e.g., Doughty & Williams 1998b; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998), incidental focus on form has been under-researched in the literature (Farrokhi & Gholami, 2007; Williams, 2001).

As mentioned above, a few studies have investigated the occurrence of incidental focus on form in various contexts. For example, in a study of negative feedback in French immersion classes in Canada, Lyster (1998a, 1998b) and Lyster & Ranta (1997) found that 62% of participant

errors were followed by some kind of teacher feedback. Ellis et al. (2001a, 2001b), in their study of meaning-focused lessons in a private language school in New Zealand, found that incidental focus on form occurred at the rate of one episode every 1.6 minutes. Loewen (2003), in an investigation of L2 classes in another private language school in New Zealand, found a range of 0.24 to 1.24 FFEs per minute. Likewise, in an intermediate IELTS preparation class which took place in an EFL setting, Farrokhi & Gholami (2007) reported an average of one incidental focus on form episode per 1.9 minutes. These studies suggest that incidental focus on form does occur in meaning-focused L2 classroom interaction, although the rate might be variable.

2.3. The need for focus on form

Despite relatively broad acceptance of the need for focus on form, theoretical explanations for the value of form-focused instruction vary. One claim, advanced by Felix (1985) and Schachter (1989), is that L2 learners (especially adults) do not have access (or complete access) to the same acquisitional mechanisms as do children acquiring their L1 (i.e., a specific language faculty), which operate solely on the basis of positive evidence, and thus L2 learners need to call on general inductive learning mechanisms. Such mechanisms make use of negative evidence (e.g., error correction). On the basis of this claim, one can argue that form-focused instruction that makes such evidence available is not only helpful but even necessary for adult learners to acquire an L2.

Another explanation draws on information-processing models, which posit that, due to limited processing capacity, learners—especially beginners—have difficulty in attending simultaneously to form and meaning. In contexts that require attention to meaning (as in task-based instruction), learners may find it difficult to give attention to form. Because of the need to process input in real time in such contexts, they may be forced to rely on top-down

strategies such as guessing and predicting, which may be cost-effective where communication is concerned but which obviate the need to attend closely to form. VanPatten's (1990) experimental study of low-proficiency learners found clear evidence that "attention to form in the input competes with attention to meaning" (p. 296), suggesting that intake of new forms is possible only when input is easy to understand. Clearly, if learners do not or cannot easily attend to form in meaning-focused instruction, they need specific activities that draw attention to form.

According to Schmidt's (1990, 1994) Noticing Hypothesis, such attention is necessary for acquisition to take place. Further, Schmidt argues that noticing is a conscious process. It follows that form-focused instruction that induces learners to pay conscious attention to forms in the input, especially those that they might otherwise ignore (e.g., third-person -s in the present simple tense), can assist interlanguage development. This has led to proposals for form-focused instruction based on input processing (VanPatten, 1996) and the use of interpretation tasks (Ellis, 1995). Taken together, these theoretical explanations provide a compelling rationale for including form-focused instruction in second/foreign language curricula. The question remains, however, as to how best to achieve this.

2.4. Achieving form-focused instruction

Any answer to this question needs to consider that form-focused instruction cannot work unless the instructional syllabus matches the learner's built-in syllabus. This requirement, first raised by Corder (1967) and subsequently framed as the Teachability Hypothesis by Pienemann (1989), holds that teachers must be familiar with the order and sequence of acquisition that learners in general manifest and the developmental stage that individual learners have reached. Only in this way can teachers be certain that a learner will be ready to acquire the specific linguistic features they are targeting in their teaching. As Long (1985), among others, has pointed out, teachers are unlikely to achieve this familiarity. One

reason is that knowledge of developmental orders and sequences remains sketchy after 30 years of research in SLA. A second reason is the logistic problems teachers will experience in determining the precise stage of development that individual students have reached. Thus, the effective teaching of discrete linguistic forms might not be feasible even if it can be theoretically justified. Drawing on such arguments, Long (1988) comments,

I do not think . . . that there is any evidence that an instructional program built around a series (or even a sequence) of isolated forms is any more supportable now, either theoretically, empirically or logically, than it was when Krashen and others attacked it several years ago. (p. 136)

Thus Long concludes that there is nothing to be gained by attempting to systematically teach isolated linguistic forms in accordance with a structural syllabus—an approach he characterizes as focus on forms.

However, unlike Krashen, Long (1991) believes that some attention to form is needed. He argues that attention to form needs to be incorporated into meaning-focused activity, an approach that he refers to as focus on form. He defines this as follows: “Focus on form . . . overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (pp. 45–46). Focus on form is seen as psycholinguistically plausible because it stimulates the kind of attention to form that occurs in natural language acquisition, because it addresses linguistic problems that individual learners are actually experiencing, and because it encourages the kind of noticing that has been hypothesized to aid acquisition. Long suggests that a focus on form occurs when learners participate in interactions in which communication problems arise, leading to attempts to negotiate for meaning, as in this example:

Example 1: NS: with a small pat of butter on it

NNS: hm hmm