

On the effectiveness of Focus-on-Form instruction on Iranian EFL learners' grammatical competence

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Abstract.

Form-focused instruction is a method that emphasizes the value of communicative teaching standards, which include student-centered instruction and authentic communication. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the effectiveness of 'focus on form' instruction on Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of grammatical items. In an attempt to uncover the possible effects of form-focus instruction on learners' grammatical knowledge, an *empirical* study was conducted. This study used a Quasi-experimental design. In so doing, the study was performed in one of the Iranian Universities. The participants were 60 Iranian pupils (20 males and 40 females), enrolled in two classes of the second grade, and were selected through a random sampling procedure. After laying the ground for the study, participants in both experimental and control groups were pretested on the grammar measures. Afterwards, grammar instruction for both groups was carried out. The main difference between two groups lay in the methods of teaching and providing feedback on the grammatical features. While the experimental group was trained through form-focused instruction for improving their linguistic competence, the control group was received no direct focus-on-form instruction on grammatical features. And the final stage dealt with post-testing participants on the same measures that were used in the first phase. To examine whether significant differences existed between the two groups of participants prior and after the instruction, descriptive statistical procedures, and ANCOVA were applied to ascertain the extent to which form-focus instruction influenced the learners' grammatical knowledge. Upon reviewing the results of the one-way ANCOVA data analysis procedure concerning grammar knowledge of two groups, it was revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group after the intervention indicating that the form-focused instruction was successful in improving Iranian EFL learners' grammatical knowledge on those certain grammatical features [$F(1, 57) = 127$, $Sig = .000$, partial eta squared = .73].

Keywords: grammatical knowledge, form-focus instruction, focus on form, focus on forms

1. Introduction.

Language learning and acquisition is not an abstract process of memorizing vocabulary and the application of grammatical rules. On the contrary, a complex process involves an intricate interaction between the distinct personalities of the learners, the teacher and his or her actions and intentions and the overall leaning process. The language learning process is also interplay of learners' background, culture, experience beliefs, perceptions and learning environment. In this case, instruction methodology plays a crucial role in how a second language is acquired, and whether the language learner acquires adequate skills to communicate effectively in the second language, both orally and in writing.

The teaching of linguistic forms, especially grammar, continues to occupy a major place in language pedagogy. Discussions of how to teach form usually consist of accounts of the various pedagogical options available to the teacher and the relative advantages of each option (see, e.g. Ellis, 1994). Somewhat less attention has been paid to the actual methodological procedures that teachers use to focus on form in the course of their actual teaching (but see Borg, 1998). Given the growing importance that is being attached to teaching form in the context of communicative activity (see the articles in Doughty and Williams, 1998), the procedures for achieving this deserve careful consideration. Arguably, initial training courses for teachers need to ensure that teachers are equipped with the skills needed to focus students' attention on form and that they have an understanding of the potential advantages and disadvantages of the different procedures involved.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the effectiveness of 'focus on form' instruction on Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of grammatical items. Form-focused instruction is a method that emphasizes the value of communicative teaching standards, which include student-centered instruction and authentic communication. This methodology also values the study in grammatical forms of L2 that is more suggestive of non-communicative form of instruction. In this case, the responsibility to assist L2 learners in understanding problematic grammatical forms of L2 lies with both teachers as well as peers (Long & Robinson, 1998). The emphasis is giving L2 learners sufficient exposure to spoken and written discourses, which reflect real-life communication, like letter writing, engaging in debates or doing an interview.

In form-focused instruction, both teachers and peers will assist learners who are perceived to have difficulties in production or comprehension of some grammatical forms in L2. This is accomplished through providing explanation of the forms as well as supplying their models. This way, the teacher and peers will enable

the L2 learner identify forms that they are deficient in, but which are critical in their overall acquisition and development of L2. Form-focused instruction can therefore be understood as an approach that is not focused on the instruction of specific grammatical items, but a method whose aim is to enable L2 learners to acquire L2 and its use in manner that reflects realistic communicative situations.

Focus on form instruction is essentially different from meaning based instruction as though it focuses on teaching L2 in real life communicative scenarios. There is the occasional attention given to discrete forms through correction, direct explanation, negative feedback and recast (Long & Robinson, 1998). Meaning-based instruction does not pay attention to the discrete parts of language but lays emphasis on communicative language in real life. This is illustrated by the natural approach theory that does not permit direct grammar instruction (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

2. Literature Review.

In the early 1991's Michael Long extended Krashen's original input hypothesis by stating that in order to understand more fully the nature and usefulness of input for second language learning, greater attention should be paid to interaction in which learners are engaged (Long, 1981). Long believes that the more the input is queried, recycled and paraphrased, the greater its potential usefulness as input, because it should become increasingly well-targeted to the particular developmental needs of the individual learner. Long called this the Interaction hypothesis.

Long (1985) proposed a more systematic approach to linking features of language input and learner's second language development. He proposed that it could be done in the following manner.

Step 1 – Show that a) Linguistic/conversational adjustment promote b) comprehension of input.

Step 2 – Show that b) Comprehensible input promotes c) acquisition

Step 3 – Deduce that a) Linguistic/conversational adjustments promote c) acquisition (Long, 1985).

In the same paper in 1985 Long reported two studies where he showed that 'lectettes' pre-scripted and delivered in a modified, foreigner talk discourse style were comprehensible to adult second language learners than were versions of the same talks delivered in an unmodified style. This supported the argument that linguistic modifications could promote comprehension of input, which refers to Long's step 1 above.

Further, in his Doctoral research (Long, 1981, 1983) Long analyzed the speech interaction of 16 native speaker/native speaker and 16 non-native speaker /native speaker dyads carrying out the same set of face-to-face oral tasks. (Informal conversation, giving instructions for games, playing games etc.) He showed that there was little linguistic difference between the talk produced by both groups as shown on measures of grammatical complexity. However, the differences were seen in the two groups when analyzed from the point of view of conversational management and language functions performed. In order to solve ongoing communication difficulties the native speaker /non-native speaker dyads were much more likely to make use of conversational tactics such as repetitions, confirmation checks, comprehension checks and clarification requests. Long argues that this was done in order to solve comprehension problems when speaking to the non-native speakers and not any conscious motive to teach grammar (1983) which refers to Long's step 1 again. However, from the perspective of the interaction hypothesis such collaborative efforts should aid language learning. That is in terms of Krashen's terms, they receive $i+1$.

Other studies, Loschky (1994), Gass & Veronis (1994), Mackey (1999) provide evidence that taking part in interaction can facilitate second language development, which supports Long's steps 2 and 3. With regard to the effect of interaction, Larson –Freeman and Long (1991) state that:

"Modifications of interactional structure of conversationis a better candidate for a necessary (not sufficient) condition for acquisition. The role it plays in negotiation for meaning helps to make input comprehensible while still containing unknown linguistic elements, and hence, potential intake for acquisition". (Cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.168)

Based on research, both input and interaction have been considered as prerequisites for SLA. However, although they promote intake, (i.e. to process the language sufficiently to become incorporated into the learner's second language system) it does not result in successful production of the language according to some researchers. (E.g., Swain, 1985).

Focus on form was initially distinguished by Long (1991) where he made a distinction between the different types of focus on form. (i.e. Focus on form/focus on forms) According to Long, focus on forms (FonFS) refers to the lessons in which language features are taught or practiced according to a structural syllabus that specifies which features are taught and in which sequence. It may involve teaching approaches such as mimicry and memorization or grammar translation and they are all based on the assumption that language features should be taught systematically, one at a time.

Focus on form (FonF) on the other hand refers to instruction in which the main emphasis remains on communicative activities or tasks but in which a teacher intervenes to help the students use the language more accurately when the need arises. Originally Long defined focus on form as "reactive and incidental". (Spada and Lightbown, 2006).

3. Methodology.

3.1. Research Question.

The study aims to answer the following major research question: Does using Focus-on-Form instruction enhance a more accurate production of passive sentences than the non-Focus-on-Form method in Iranian Intermediate EFL learners?

3.2. Research Design.

In an attempt to uncover the possible effects of form-focus instruction on learners' grammatical knowledge, an *empirical* study was conducted. This study used a Quasi-experimental design. A quasi-experimental design is one that looks a bit like an experimental design but lacks the key ingredient- random assignment. With respect to internal validity, they often appear to be inferior to randomized experiments. But there is something compelling about these designs; taken as a group, they are easily more frequently implemented than their randomized cousins.

3.3. Participants.

Because of the school's policy and regular teaching program, it was not possible to randomize all of the participants into the two groups and thus the students were required to remain intact in their regular classes during the intervention time slots. In the current study students remained in their intact class, allocated into different experimental groups, and received different instructional interventions at the same time in the same class.

The study was performed in one of the Iranian Universities. The participants were 60 Iranian pupils (20 males and 40 females), enrolled in two classes of the second grade, and two teachers providing instruction in the classes. For this study, the researcher used a convenience sample that consisted of two classes taking part in the quasi-experimental design.

3.4. Materials: The researcher-made grammatical multiple-choice test.

A 30 item multiple-choice test of English grammar on the specific grammatical features under the investigation was developed by the researcher. The grammatical items were mainly selected from those items taught and given exposure during the course to both groups. The validity and reliability of the test was checked. The test was used as the assessment tool in the pre-test and the post-test phase of the study. Two internal consistency estimates of reliability which included coefficient alpha and a split half coefficient expressed as Spearman-Brown correlation were computed for the grammar test. For the split half coefficient, the test items were split into two halves based on odd and even numbers to nullify the effects of unwanted factors such as tiredness of the test takers. The value for coefficient alpha was .83 and the value of the split half coefficient was .90, each indicating a very satisfactory reliability.

To take validity of the test into consideration, most of the items as well as the distracters were selected from the grammatical items under the focus of the study and also a list of structures and words they had been exposed to through the course was compiled by the researcher prior to the instruction and was given to both groups of participants during the instruction. The criterion-related validity of the test revealed .83 of coefficient of determination which was satisfactory.

3.5. Procedures.

The present study took place in three general phases, namely *Before* the instruction phase, *During* the instruction phase, and *After* the instruction phase. In the first phase, after laying the ground for the study, participants in both experimental and control groups were pretested on the grammar measure and in different sections. In the second phase, grammar instruction for both groups was carried out. And the final stage dealt with post-testing participants on the same measures that were used in the first phase.

Prior to the initiation of the study, the researcher met the head of the English Department of Islamic Azad University of Rasht and explained the specific information about the purpose of the study in order to obtain the required permission. Having gained his permission, the researcher did the preliminary stages of sampling procedures for the study. Then, he obtained the required information on the schedule of different courses. A week later, after the completion of the sampling procedures and identification of the target sample for the survey study, the data collection procedure began.

Afterwards, both groups were pre-tested on Grammar Test by the researcher. Each group answered the test in a separate session spending 20 minutes. The experimental and the control groups were instructed by the researcher once a week (totally 70 minutes per week) over a 14-week period. The main difference between two groups lay in the methods of teaching and providing feedback on the grammatical features. While the experimental group was trained through form-focused instruction for improving their linguistic competence, the control group was received no direct focus-on-form instruction on grammatical features.

To counter any potential threats to the internal validity of the research and to neutralize the likely material and test effect, the researcher used the same reading materials, the same activities, the same length of teaching time, the same classroom environment, and the same examination. However, the experimental and the control groups were taught through different teaching methods.

In the final phase, both the experimental and control groups were post-tested on the same measure which were used in the pre-test, namely English Grammar Test.

3.6. Data Analysis and Results.

To examine whether significant differences existed between the two groups of participants prior and after the instruction, descriptive statistical procedures, and ANCOVA were applied to ascertain the extent to which form-focus instruction influenced the learners' grammatical knowledge.

The present study made an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of two different methods of instruction and two different approaches for providing feedback on learning certain kinds of grammatical features. In so doing, two intact classes consisting of 60 EFL learners were selected and were divided into two groups. While the experimental group was trained through form-focused instruction for improving their linguistic competence, the control group was received no direct focus-on-form instruction on grammatical features. The results of test scores were compared for the pretest and posttest of both groups to ascertain whether there has been any significant difference between the groups in terms of their linguistic knowledge on certain types of the grammatical structures under the study. It is worth noting that the first comparison group has been labeled as the experimental group and the second group as the control group by the current researcher.

3.6.1. Research Question.

Therefore, in this regard, one general research question has been set forward to be answered by the current research: Does using Focus-on-Form instruction enhance a more accurate production of passive sentences than the non-Focus-on-Form method in Iranian Intermediate EFL learners?

Based on the research question the following hypothesis is raised:

3.6.2. Null Hypothesis.

Using Focus-on-Form instruction does not enhance a more accurate production of passive sentences than the non-Focus-on-Form method in Iranian Intermediate EFL learners.

3.6.3. Descriptive Analysis of the Data.

This section of the data analysis has to do with the interpretation of the descriptive analysis of the data. The results of the groups' descriptive statistics are summarized and tabulated in Tables 1 and 2 presents the result of the descriptive statistics of the control group on both pretest and posttest measures.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the control group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
pretest	30	5	14	11.75	1.17
posttest	30	6	16	13	1.05
Valid N	30				

According to the above table, it is revealed that the pretest mean value of the control group for grammar test was 11.75 with the standard deviation of 1.17. With regard to its performance on the posttest, the control group showed some degree of improvement on the grammar test [Mean= 13, SD= 1.05].

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the experimental group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
pretest	30	8	15	12	2.03
posttest	30	12	18	15.50	1.18
Valid N	30				

Table 2 indicates the result of the descriptive statistics of the experimental group on the grammar measures before and after the treatment. Prior to the instruction, the experimental group had a mean value of 12 with the standard deviation of 2.03. However, it is revealed that its performance on the grammar test improved after the treatment. It can be inferred that the focus-on-form instruction was effective in enhancing learners' linguistic knowledge [Mean= 15.50, SD= 1.18].

3.6.4. Inferential Analysis of the Data.

A one-way between-groups analysis of covariance was conducted to investigate the possible effect of Form-Focused Instruction on Iranian EFL learners' linguistic competence. Participants' scores on the pre-intervention administration of grammar knowledge were used as the covariate in this analysis.

The main ANCOVA results are presented in the Table 3, labeled Test of Between-Subjects Effects.

Table 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
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Corrected Model	323.757 ^a	2	161.878	166.024	.000	.853
Intercept	48.247	1	48.247	49.483	.000	.465
covariate	143.490	1	143.490	147.164	.000	.721
Groups	144.852	1	144.852	127	.000	.736
Error	55.577	57	.975			
Total	11046.000	60				
Corrected Total	379.333	59				

a. R Squared = .853 (Adjusted R Squared = .848)

The findings of the Table 3 indicates that after adjusting for pre-intervention scores, there was a significant difference between the two intervention groups on post-intervention scores of grammar tests, $F(1, 57) = 127$, $Sig = .000$, partial eta squared = .73. Hence, the ANCOVA has revealed statistically significant difference between the two groups on the grammar test when the potential differences at pre-test were taken into account. All in all, it can be concluded that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group in the posttest which shows that the form-focused instruction was of the great effectiveness for teaching grammatical items to Iranian EFL learners.

Upon reviewing the results of the one-way ANCOVA data analysis procedure concerning grammar knowledge of two groups, it was revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group after the intervention indicating that the form-focused instruction was successful in improving Iranian EFL learners' grammatical knowledge on those certain grammatical features [$F(1, 57) = 127$, $Sig = .000$, partial eta squared = .73]. Hence, the null hypothesis of the study that "Using Focus-on-Form instruction does not enhance a more accurate production of passive sentences than the non-Focus-on-Form method in Iranian Intermediate EFL learners." was rejected at the level of significance of .05.

3.7. Conclusion and Discussions.

The findings of the study indicated that focus-on-form instruction was highly successful in improving Iranian EFL learners' production of passive sentences. Traditionally, language instruction has been directed at developing rule-based competence (i.e. knowledge of specific grammatical rules) through the systematic teaching of pre-selected structures – what Long (1991) has referred to as a focus-on-forms approach. While such an approach certainly receives support from the research that has investigated direct intervention in interlanguage development, curriculum designers and teachers need to recognize that this type of instruction is as likely to result in students learning rote-memorized patterns as in internalizing abstract rules (Myles, 2004). This need not be seen as an instructional failure however as such patterns are clearly of value to the learner. It points instead to an acknowledgement of what can be realistically achieved by a focus-on-forms approach, especially with young, beginner learners.

There is now a widespread acceptance that acquisition also requires that learners attend to form. Indeed, according to some theories of L2 acquisition, such attention is necessary for acquisition to take place. Schmidt (1994), for example, has argued that there is no learning without conscious attention to form. Again, though, the term 'focus on form' is capable of more than one interpretation. First, it might refer to a general orientation to language as form. Schmidt (2001) dismisses this global attention hypothesis, arguing that learners need to attend to specific forms. Second, it might be taken to suggest that learners need to attend only to the graphic or phonetic instantiations of linguistic forms. However, theorists such as Schmidt and Long are insistent that focus on form refers to form-function mapping (i.e. the correlation between a particular form and the meaning(s) it realizes in communication). Third, 'focus on form' might be assumed to refer to awareness of some underlying, abstract rule. Schmidt, however, is careful to argue that attention to form refers to the noticing of specific linguistic items, as they occur in the input to which learners are exposed, not to an awareness of grammatical rules.

Instruction can cater to a focus on form in a number of ways:

- Through grammar lessons designed to teach specific grammatical features by means of input- or output processing. An inductive approach to grammar teaching is designed to encourage 'noticing' of pre-selected forms; a deductive approach seeks to establish an awareness of the grammatical rule.

- Through focused tasks (i.e. tasks that require learners to comprehend and process specific grammatical structures in the input, and/or to produce the structures in the performance of the task).

- By means of methodological options that induce attention to form in the context of performing a task. Two methodological options that have received considerable attention from researchers are (a) the provision of time for strategic and on-line planning (Yuan and Ellis, 2003; Foster and Skehan, 1996) and (b) corrective feedback (Lyster, 2004).

Instruction can seek to provide an intensive focus on pre-selected linguistic forms (as in a focus-on-forms approach or in a lesson built around a focused task) or it can offer incidental and extensive attention to

form through corrective feedback in task-based lessons. There are pros and cons for both intensive and extensive grammar instruction. Some structures may not be mastered without the opportunity for repeated practice. Harley (1989), for example found that Anglophone learners of L2 French failed to acquire the distinction between the preterite and imparfait past tenses after hours of exposure (and presumably some corrective feedback) in an immersion program, but were able to improve their accuracy in the use of these two tenses after intensive instruction. However, intensive instruction is time consuming (in Harley's study the targeted structures were taught over an 8 week period!) and thus there will be constraints on how many structures can be addressed. Extensive grammar instruction, on the other hand, affords the opportunity for large numbers of grammatical structures to be addressed. Also, more likely than not, many of the structures will be attended to repeatedly over a period of time.

Further, because this kind of instruction involves a response to the errors each learner makes, it is individualized and affords the skilled teacher on-line opportunities for the kind of contextual analysis that Celce-Murcia (2001) recommends as a basis for grammar teaching. Ellis et al (1993) reported that extensive instruction occurred relatively frequently in communicative adult ESL lessons through both pre-emptive (i.e. teacher or student-initiated) and reactive (i.e. corrective feedback) attention to form. Loewen (2002) showed that learners who experienced such momentary form-focused episodes demonstrated subsequent learning of the forms addressed in both immediate and delayed tests. However, it is not possible to attend to those structures that learners do not attempt to use (i.e. extensive instruction cannot deal with avoidance). Also, of course, it does not provide the in-depth practice that some structures may require before they can be fully acquired. Arguably, then, instruction needs to be conceived of in terms of both approaches.

Discovering the effectiveness of form-focused instruction on Iranian EFL learners' production of passive sentences still leaves the possibilities for further study.

1. The findings of the study suggested that the application of form-focused instruction was highly influential in heightening the students' ability to produce certain grammatical features. Since the number of the participants was rather small, further studies should be conducted with a greater number of participants.

2. This study focused on teaching certain grammatical features. It is worth investigating whether form-focused instruction could be effective for teaching other language skills and components such as listening, reading, vocabulary and speaking.

Other studies should be conducted with participants from different levels of learning in EFL contexts. It would be fascinating to see if such kind of training would still be beneficial to those other groups.

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