The Efficacy of Focus on Form on Promoting Second Language Learning

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Abstract

The disparity between the linguistic knowledge and the communicative abilities which is often observed in the performance of second language (L2) learners has recently shifted the focus of the researchers toward the FonF paradigm. Having the ability to draw the learners' attention to the target linguistic features in the input, FonF, as an appealing approach is thought to balance between the linguistic knowledge and communicative abilities. The present paper attempts to investigate the conditions under which the acquisition of passive syntactic structures and morphological markers of tense can be maximized, and to examine differences in noticing and learning of syntactic structures vs. morphological markers of tense. On this account, the adult college students, who had enrolled for general English, were selected for the study. They were assigned to three classes, and each class received one of the three different types of instructions: non-enhanced (NoFonF), enhanced (implicit FonF), and enhanced plus practice (explicit FonF). Results of the study revealed that explicit FonF group performed significantly better than the implicit FonF group. The study argues for the adoption of a particular type of explicit instruction – one which promotes noticing and understanding of the target linguistic features.

Key words: Focus on form, second language acquisition, passive syntactic structures, and morphology markers of tense and linguistic features

2   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

1. Introduction

In an attempt to account for the imbalance between the linguistic knowledge and the communicative abilities evident in the performance of L2 learners, recently a shift from a mere focus on meaning-based, or communicative-based approach to the effectiveness of explicit instruction has been made with this assumption that provision some degree of attention to linguistic forms in L2 learning can promote accuracy. This kind of interest has best emerged itself in the FonF paradigm. FonF takes meaning and communication into consideration. As Long (1991) explains "focus on form…overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is meaning and communication"(pp. 45-64). There are two ways to put FonF in practice: proactive and reactive focus on form. Teachers may advocate a proactive stance by planning in advance the specific form that will be put in focus in the classroom (Doughty &Williams, 1998). On the other hand, teachers may adopt a reactive stance by drawing attention to students' errors in the production of messages; a way that is more congruent with communicative language teaching (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991; Long& Robinson, 1998). FonF claims to activate and promote the learners' attention to the linguistic forms that may otherwise go unnoticed (DeKeyser, 1994; Doughty & Williams, 1998). It has, thus, renewed the interest in the role of instruction as a possible basis for a teaching strategy that might work as a real alternative to the traditional, grammar-based approach, on one hand, and to the communicative meaning-based, on the other since it can handle both communication and cognition simultaneously. The majority of researchers and scholars interested in this line of research maintain that FonF is a useful formal instructional approach that can assist L2 learners to acquire the target linguistic forms (DeKeyser, 1995; Ellis, 1990). Thus, FonF as an approach wins a part of its reputation as a reaction to the idea that second language acquisition (SLA) is largely an unconscious process. The other part is due to the attempt made to modify the problems that exist with traditional teaching

approaches. On this account, Doughty & Williams (1998) maintain that:

> The proposed advantage of focus on form over the traditional forms --isolation type of grammar teaching-- is the cognitive processing support provided by the overriding focus on meaning or communication. To state this advantage rather simply, the learners' attention is drawn precisely to linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand (p.3).

This approach as middle ground avoids any extreme positions that the other approaches are virtually blamed for. The current dominant approaches have so far emphasized form to promote accuracy or meaning in order to encourage fluency. In the same line of argument Lightbown & Spada (1993) argue:

> Classroom data from a number of studies offer support for the view that form–focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of a communicative program are more effective in promoting second language learning than programs which are limited to an exclusive emphasis on accuracy on the one hand or an exclusive emphasis on fluency (p.123).

The question remaining unanswered is whether this approach enjoys sound theoretical justifications and practical applications. The idea of FonF emerged from this reasonable assumption that linguistic data or input is necessary for L2 learning, and in order to make learning of these linguistic data possible, the learners' attentional resources should be allocated to convert the input into intake. FonF can apparently provide the attentional resources needed for L2 learners to grasp the target linguistic forms. It also gains its own theoretical justifications from the theory of learning that Schmidt has introduced to the literature of SLA.

2. Background
2.1 Theoretical underpinnings of FonF
FonF gains most of its theoretical justification from the "noticing hypothesis" (Schmidt, 1990, 1995). According to this hypothesis, to

4   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

be converted to intake the input must first be noticed, and to be noticed it should be consciously attended by learners. That is, as Leow (2001) puts it "noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input into intake for learning." (p. 118). This hypothesis has been based on his former strong belief that attentional resources, in any case, are required to be directed to the target features in the input, and thus are likely to be attained by the learner.

Schmidt (1995) claims that conscious noticing of a stimulus is necessary for learning to occur. He argues that what learners notice in the input is what becomes available for intake. In his view, awareness at the point of learning is crucial in order for learning to occur. Thus, he claims that" SLA is largely driven by what learners pay attention to and notice in the target language input and when they understand the significance of the noticed input" (Schmidt, 2001). Robinson (1995) uses Schmidt's model to claim that conscious noticing is required for information to move from the input stage to the intake stage. Input that is noticed is more likely to become intake and to eventually be acquired than input that is not consciously attended to. As Schmidt (1995) argues, the amount of learning generally increases with the level of awareness. The idea of noticing has also been welcomed by Ellis (1997), and thus he also considers noticing as an essential event for input to become intake but he argues that intake to become acquisition requires some tasks (Ellis, 2002).

Another attractive model, which has contributed to the emergence of FonF instruction, is Van Patten's Input processing Model. This model posits that L2 learners are likely to allocate more cognitive activation to meanings, and thus no more attentional resources are left for the language forms. On the basis of this assumption, VanPatten (1998) proposes a method of "processing instruction" or a kind of explicit FonF which is input based. This model does not focus on the production of output. Rather, it "seeks to alter the way in which learners perceive and process linguistic data in the input in order to provide the internal learning

mechanisms with richer grammatical intake" (VanPatten & Sanz, 1995: 169). VanPatten & Sanz (1995) have posited three sets of distinguishable processes in acquisition. The first set of processes converts input to intake; the second promotes the accommodation of intake, and the restructuring of the developing linguistic system; and the third accounts for monitoring, accessing, and controlling of language production.

VanPatten (1998) researched a series of hypotheses concerning learner attention during input processing. First, VanPatten posits, "learners process input for meaning before they process it for form" (VanPatten, 1998:114). Second, "for learners to process form that is not meaningful, they must be able to process informational or communicative content at no (or little) cost to attention"(114). Although VanPatten gives priority to the role of meaning, he does reconcile extremes by recommending that capacity "be freed up during real-time comprehension so that internal processors can attend to grammatical devices that were previously skipped" (1998: 116). Furthermore, VanPatten has posited some principles and sub-principles in his model, which can best justify the use of FonF if this natural process of L2 learning is supposed to be sufficiently tilted toward formal aspects of L2.

Finally, the important theoretical aspect underpinning FonF is seeded in the Interactional hypothesis proposed by Long, which suggests that negotiated interaction can facilitate SLA. One reason for this could be that, during interaction, the learners may receive feedback on their production. On this account, Long (1996) suggests that through interactional adjustments the L2 learner will become aware of the divergent form which, in turn, and thus this leads to the acquisition. The connection between interaction and learning probably rests upon the notion that through interaction, some aspect of L2 learners' attention may be directed to the parts of their language that deviate from the target language forms, or through interaction, their attention may be focused on the forms not yet in their repertoires.

6   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

2.2 Empirical research on the practicality of FonF

A number of empirical studies in the two previous decades flatly (e.g., Long& Robinson, 1998; Ellis, 1990; Fotos, 1993) argued that formal instruction is needed to promote advanced level of target language attainment. Since formal instruction is a type of awareness – raising activity, it can draw learners' attention to a linguistic form in the input and as a result acquisition of that form can occur (Ellis, 1990; Schmidt, 1990). As Fotos (1993) puts it, this happens since noticing functions as an interface between the development of explicit knowledge of a form through formal instruction and the final attainment of that form. The general consensus is that; (1) focused L2 instruction results in large gains; (2) the effects of L2 instruction seem durable; and (3) L2 instruction incorporates to explicit techniques which lead to more effects in comparison to implicit instruction. Ellis (2002), though with more precautions, has also reviewed 11 empirical studies encompassing free production as a measurement of language attainment. He then argues that FonF instruction seems favorable to the attainment of target linguistic forms. N. Ellis (2002) similarly argues that "language acquisition can be speeded up by explicit instruction" (p. 174). He further argues that language acquisition is a slow process, which can occur as a result of form – function mappings. It seems that N. Ellis (2002) like R. Ellis (2002) shares this idea that focus on forms (FonFs) only brings about declarative knowledge and plays a small role on the task of language use, but FonF instruction, "which is rich in communicative opportunities and which at the same time makes salient the association between communicative function and structure can facilitate language acquisition" (p. 175).

FonF seems to win its advantages not only from theory but also empirical studies (Doughty & Williams, 1998). However, as a relatively new idea in SLA research, the implementation of FonF has given rise to a number of questions amongst which are the following: to what is the extent FonF treatment should be 'reactive' rather than 'proactive', how 'explicit' the techniques should be, how obtrusive vs. unobtrusive the instruction is, how much the intensity and how long the duration of the instruction should be and,

the most important one, which 'form' should be selected and when. On this account, R. Ellis (2002), after reviewing eleven empirical studies implementing FonF instruction, concludes that there are some variables which have impacts on the success of the instruction e.g. age, the length of instruction, the complexity of target structures and the types of FonF. He believes that these variables should be taken into consideration in future research if a safe conclusion is to be made from the effects of FonF instructions. SLA research seems to be still young in this field and thus much progress should be made in gaining a better understanding of both theoretical and pedagogical aspects of FonF.

Despite second amazing progress in generating new L2 instruction horizons, SLA has also intensified confusion and perplexity. For example, Long's FonF paradigm and Interactional hypothesis (Long, 1996), DeKeyser's skill-learning theory (DeKeyser, 1998), VanPatten's input processing theory (VanPatten, 1998) and Ellis's instructed language learning (Ellis, 1994) all attend to the role of instruction in L2 acquisition. The diversity and controversy in opinion and application have led to more pedagogical confusions. For example, there is no conformity as to whether instruction should be based on a traditional FonFs approach, or on FonF approach. Nor is there agreement about the efficacy of teaching explicit knowledge or about what type of corrective feedback to provide or even when explicit grammar teaching should commence. Accordingly, this paper attempts to investigate the efficacy of explicit instruction on the attainment of passive forms and verbal inflection in general, and to match the impact of no FonF, implicit FonF and explicit FonF approaches in particular.

On this account, this study seeks to gain insight into the following research questions:

1. Are there any significant differences among the L2 learners in noticing and attaining passive syntactic structures and inflectional morphology of tense under non-enhanced (noFonF),

8   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

enhanced (implicit FonF), and enhanced plus practice conditions (explicit FonF)?
2. Are there any differences in noticing and attaining of syntactic structures vs. inflectional morphology of tense?

3. Method
Participants were initially 130 Persian speaking adults who were L2 learners of English and had enrolled for general English course. The participants were given a standard placement test to ensure that they were homogeneous and enjoyed the same level of proficiency. Then they were given the pretests on both English passive syntactic structures and morphological tense markers. Finally, 99 participants (both male and female with average age of 19.5) who had problems with the target linguistic features and their performances were virtually below 50% became the favorable candidates for the study and those who performed above 50% were excluded. Then, the candidates were randomly but equally assigned to the three classes i.e., implicit FonF, explicit FonF, and NoFonF ones.

The materials were 10 reading passages that were chosen to provide the written input presenting the target linguistic features to the students. The target linguistic features were highlighted in the two FonF instructional conditions. The two groups received the texts that had been manipulated for target linguistic features to capture the attention of the learners. However, these texts were not highlighted for the control group. It is worth mentioning that all the texts enjoyed comprehension questions, writing activities and vocabulary practices, but the case for Explicit FonF class was different. The reading passages were also followed by some form awareness activities, while in the writing activities the emphasis was on the target forms through on spot explicit correction of wrong passive forms through reminding the students of the missed inflectional morphological markings in their oral or written productions.

To observe the effects of the instructions, and to check out the attainments of the learners on the target linguistic forms, the

subjects were given translation tests (TrTs) at both posttests and delayed posttests.

The reading passages were language – related texts (Williams, 2001) in the sense that they were seeded with the targeted linguistic forms and all the three classes received the same reading passage texts; however, the way that these texts were dealt with was due to the nature of the research conditions. That is to say that NFonF class received the reading passages as their input and the focus was on message; therefore, attempt was made to prime their attentional activation to the targeted forms. The assumption was that the students would unconsciously acquire the forms and thus these targeted forms were no exceptions (Krashen, 1985). Implicit FonF class also received the same texts as their input, but the targeted linguistic forms were orthographically made salient. In this kind of input enhancement the attempt was to make the targeted linguistic forms salient to the students by manipulating characteristics of the input. Consequently, for explicit FonF class the reading comprehension texts were not only made salient, but they were accompanied with some deductive explanation of the rules and practices to promote their meta-linguistic awareness on the target linguistic forms. The assumption was that this explicit linguistic knowledge would be of any help while they were interacting with texts for decoding the message.

The students, after attending their assigned 10 sessions were given the immediate posttests and the delayed posttests were given 4 weeks later. Then their performance on the pretests and immediate/delayed posttests were compared using statistical measurements of SPSS.

As mentioned, the participants selected for this study were the students whose scores at the pretests were virtually below 50%, since the main aim of the study was to see if they could meliorate their performance on the targeted linguistic forms under the research conditions offered by TrTs. In the tests the students were asked to translate the Persian sentences. The sentences were on both inflectional morphology markers of tense i.e. /s/ and /ed/ and

10   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

passive syntactic structures. After being administered, the post and delayed posttests were corrected and scored. In the scoring procedure 1-point was given to the correct translation of the given sentence and 0 point to the wrong one. It is worth mentioning that the correctness was only observed for the morpho-syntactic aspect of the sentence translation, not the other aspects.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The ANOVA results of the study showed the learners could not exert significant correct knowledge of passive syntactic structures on the pretest. It was found that there were no significant differences between the groups on the attainments of passive forms, $F_{(2, 96)}$ 2.143, P=.413. However, after the FonF instructions, it seemed that their attainments of correct uses of passive syntactic structure significantly improved on both posttest, $F_{(2, 96)}$ =112.1, P<.0001 and delayed posttest, $F_{(2, 96)}$ = 92.621, P<.0001. Scheffe post hoc contrast analyses showed the location and distribution of the significant differences between the groups at both posttest and delayed posttest.

Table 1: ANOVA Results for Accuracy Mean Scores (%) of the Learners' Use of Passive Forms on Translation Tests

Group	Sources	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	Between Groups	632.323	2	316.16	2.143	P=.413
	Within Groups	25969.697	96	270.518		
	Total	26602.020	98			
Immediate Posttest	Between Groups	51886.869	2	25943.4	112.10	P<.0001
	Within Groups	19442.424	96	202.525		
	Total	71329.293	98			
Delayed Posttest	Between Groups	34109.091	2	17054.545	92.62	P<.0001
	Within Groups	19763.636	96	205.871		
	Total	53872.727	98			

Moreover, significant differences were observed on the attainments of passive forms at both posttest, F (2, 96) =112.1, P<. 0001 and delayed posttest, F (2, 96) =92.62, P<. 0001.

After that, Scheffe post hoc contrast analyses were also applied. The ANOVA results of the study indicated the attainments of the three groups on /ed/ as English past tense marker. The results indicated that the three groups did not exert significant differences at pretest, F (2, 96) =. 545, P=. 712, while significant differences were observed on the attainment of /ed/ at both posttest, F (2, 96) =46.23, P<.0001 and delayed posttest, F (2, 96) =20.31, P<.0001. Scheffe post hoc contrast analyses also showed that the distribution between the groups was significant except in the case of ImFonF and ExFonF groups which did not exert any significant differences.

Table 2: ANOVA Results for Accuracy Mean Scores (%) of the Learners' Use of Past Tense Marker/-ed/ on Translation Tests

Group	Sources	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	Between Groups	298.990	2	149.495	.545	P=.712
	Within Groups	28969.697	96	301.768		
	Total	29268.687	98			
Immediate Posttest	Between Groups	17026.263	2	8513.131	46.23	P<.0001
	Within Groups	23175.758	96	241.414		
	Total	40202.020	98			
Delayed Posttest	Between Groups	12517.172	2	6258.586	20.31	P<.0001
	Within Groups	30933.333	96	322.222		
	Total	43450.505	98			

Finally, the ANOVA results also displayed the attainments of /s/ as an English present tense marker for the three groups at pretest, posttest and delayed posttest. The ANOVA results indicated that no significant differences were found between the groups at the pretest, F (2, 96) =.226, P=.756, but the significant differences were

12   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

observed between the groups at both posttest, F (2, 96) =54.63, P<.0001 and delayed posttest, F (2, 96) =50.61, P<.0001.Scheffe post hoc contrast analyses were also applied to locate the exact significant differences. It was found that there were significant differences between the groups.

Table 3: ANOVA Results for Accuracy Mean Scores (%) of Learners' Use of Present Tense Marker/-s/ on Translation Test

Group	sources	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	Between Groups	129.293	2	64.646	.226	P= .756
	Within Groups	49381.818	96	514.394		
	Total	49511.111	98			
Immediate Posttest	Between Groups	49220.202	2	24610.101	54.63	P<. 0001
	Within Groups	39612.121	96	412.626		
	Total	88832.323	98			
Delayed Posttest	Between Groups	40606.061	2	20303.030	51.61	P<. 0001
	Within Groups	32266.667	96	336.111		
	Total	72872.727	98			

Table 4: Summary of the Posthoc Results (Scheffe) of the Target Linguistic Features

	Immediate Posttests	Delayed Posttests
Passive Syntactic Forms		
	NoFonF<ImFonF P<.001	NoFonF<ImFonF P<.001
	NoFonF<ExFonF P<.001	NoFonF <ExFonF P<.001
	ImFonF<ExFonF P<.001	ImFonF<ExFonF P<.001

Past Tense
Marker /ed/

NoFonF<ImFonF P<.001	NoFonF<ImFonF P<.05
NoFonF <ExFonF P<.001	NoFonF <ExFonF P<.001
ImFonF<ExFonF P<.001	ImFonF<ExFonF P<.05

Present Tense
Marker **/s/**

NoFonF<ImFonF P<.001	NoFonF<ImFonF P<.001
NoFonF <ExFonF P<.05	NoFonF <ExFonF P<.001
ImFonF<ExFonF P<.001	ImFonF<ExFonF P<.001

That is to say that ExFonF outscored ImFonF and NoFonF groups, and ImFonF also outscored NoFonF group.

5. Discussion

The first research question addressed whether differences in the types of instructional treatments woud lead to differences in language (measured by Translation Tests). The answer is positive.The learning which are operationalized in the present study by written production results suggest that differences in the types of instructional treatments lead to language learning and the learners' correct productions of both passive syntactic structures and morphological markers of tense increased in immediate and delayed posttests.However, the results demonstrate that ExFonF outperformed ImFonF and NoFonF groups in both immediate and delayed posttests.The results also demonstrate ImFonF outperformed NoFonF group in both immediate and delayed posttests. Based on the results of the ANOVA on the pre-tests there were no differences in scores among the groups assigned to the three classes. Therefore, any differences among pretests, posttests and delayed posttests must be attributed to instructional treatments. The findings of this study point most clearly to an important role for FonF as it occurs during the instruction that focuses primarily on meaning. More importantly, the findings indicate the role of explicit FonF to maximize the learner's attention to the target linguistic forms in a variety of ways like conscious language tasks and practices leading to the automatic use of that form since tasks of this sort prompt learner's awareness of the target forms by

14   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

prefabricating units of language. These task procedures perhaps ensure a balance between FonF and focus on communication. On this account, Robinson (2002) also sees no fundamental difference between implicit and explicit learning processes. He considers them to be in the same continuum contributing to the efficiency of long-term learning. The findings of this study seem to support this idea stated by Robinson through indicating this fact that when the maximal attentional activation is exerted on a particular form, that form is more likely to be learned.

The second research question addressed if there were any differences in noticing and attaining syntactic structures vs. inflectional morphology of tense. The answer is also poitive in the sense that all groups were significantly different in their posttests in comparison to their pretests, regardless of the nature of the taget linguistic forms. However, as the results showed, ExFonF group not only significantly improved in the posttests over the pretests , but they also significantly outperformed the other two groups for passive syntactic structures and morphological markers of tense. ImFonF also significantly improved in the posttests over the pretests. In addition, they significantly outperformed NoFonF group. The efficacy is a matter of degree and as the results indicated even NoFonF group could improve in the postestts over the pretests.That is to say that NoFonF group,which received unenhanced texts in the course of instruction could improved their performance to a small degree in the posttests. This fact shows that meaining-oriented instruction,in which the learners were presented with a number of contexts for the target forms and exposed to a large number of frequent uses of the target forms,may have had some effects on L2 learning. However, as the results showed, this efficacy is not considerable in comparison to FonF instruction.

Thus, the evidence supplied by this study demonstrates that learners receiving both ExFonF and ImFonF can exert better performances on the target linguistic features in comparison to those whose attention to the target linguistic form is not activated. This finding, in fact corresponds with the current belief in SLA

research emphasizing the need to incorporate FonF instruction into meaning-oriented communicative language teaching (Long, 1991; Muranoi, 2000). Besides, there is no evidence to support the claim that L2 acquisition is merely the by-product of a meaning –focused procedure (Krashen, 1982).

6. Conclusion

The findings of the prsent study can purport this idea that adopting a single –sided teaching approach, to be either communicative-based,or grammar-based, is leading us nowhere other than deciding between alternative approaches. The FonF approach seems to play this role well as the middle ground between the available extremes. The meaning- based disdains the role any explicit attention to linguistic features, and instead recommends provision of plenty comprehensible input with this claim that L2 learner would acquire the linguistic features effortlessly without any explicit attention to these forms (Krashen, 1994), and the communicative approach which only emphasizes the fluency and devalues linguistic forms and accuracy. There are still counterpart approaches which explicit knowledge is their ultimate aim such as grammar –translation and audio- lingual that stress merely linguistic accuracy. However, FonF approach concerns both meaning and form and seeks to circumvent the problems with these extremes, and thus encompasses both fluency and accuracy.It can help to integrate grammar instruction into communicative language teaching. Of great interest, therefore, is that FonF instruction can draw the learners' attention to the forms in the input that otherwise might go unnoticed.

The findings of the study also demonstrates that the explicit FonF would be more effective than mere implicit FonF or input enhancement since it provides sufficient attentional resources required for target forms to be detected, extracted and segmented as intake. This efficacy is perhaps due to the provision of priming which appears to occur in the tasks and awareness raising activities.Thus, based on the results, it can be concluded that FonF has a positive and, to some extent, durable effects on the development of SLA when compared to exclusive FonM or

16   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

communicative exposure to the language. Both implicit and explicit types of FonF lead to significant increase of mastery of the target linguistic forms when compared to NoFonF group who do not benefit from salient forms in the input and the tasks on the target linguistic forms. However, implicit FonF in comparison to explicit FonF displays weaker immediate effects on mastery of the target linguistic forms. Finally, the other interesting finding of this study is that FonF approach is effective regardless of the nature of the target linguistic features.

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18   The Efficacy of FonF on Promoting Second Language Learning

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