

## **(Mis)Conceptions Regarding Teacher-Generated Preemptive Attention to Form**

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### **Abstract**

Preemptive focus on form (FonF) is perhaps the most under-researched area in the field of incidental focus on form. However, between the two subsets of preemptive focus on form, teacher-initiated preemptive FonF seems to be the least favored one. To put this stance into a test, 18 sessions of an intermediate EFL class were observed, audio-recorded and analyzed for the instances of learner- and teacher-initiated focus on form episodes (FFEs), as well as the rate of uptake moves following them. To triangulate the observational data on uptake, an elicitation instrument, namely, a think-aloud *incidental focus on form sheet* was also devised to collect on-the-spot, written instances of learner and teacher generated FFES. The quantitative results derived both from the audio-data and the sheets demonstrated that teacher-initiated FFEs strongly came first regarding their frequency and the rate of follow-up uptake moves. An in-depth

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qualitative analysis of the uptake sheets also revealed that after certain teacher-initiated FFEs, some learners produced multiple uptake moves, while after some others no one or just a single learner produced uptake. The findings from uptake sheets indicate that specific teacher-initiated FFEs are highly effective in tapping the linguistic holes of all or majority of EFL learners in a given class. Based on the quantitative and qualitative results, the researchers call for a reconsideration of the role and effectiveness of teacher-generated attention to form as an important component of communicative classes.

**Keywords:** incidental focus on form,; preemptive; teacher-initiated; uptake

## 1. Introduction

The field of focus on form (FonF) instruction has been developed as a reaction to the inadequacies of pure communicative language teaching (CLT). It has its roots well-established at the heart of three rigorous hypotheses in the area of second language acquisition (SLA), namely, Long's *Interaction Hypothesis* (1983, 1996), Swain's *Output Hypothesis* (Swain, 1985), and Schmidt's *Noticing Hypothesis* (Schmidt, 1990).

Through a series of studies, pure communicative language teaching was proved to be inadequate in helping L2 learners reach high levels of accuracy along with their remarkable fluency (e.g. Harley & Swain, 1984; Harley et al., 1990; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Swain, 1998). This problem led some SLA scholars to call for an integration of meaning-focused teaching with focus on form instruction. This, however, is not to be taken as going back to grammar instruction or what Long and Robinson (1998) refer to as "focus on formS". Rather, this approach advocates integrating a careful measure of linguistic forms as they arise incidentally during meaning-oriented activities. Long and Robinson (1998) define focus

on from instruction as follows: "During a meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more of the students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (p. 23).

### **1.1 Incidental Focus on Form**

Several dichotomies have been made in the literature between different subsets of focus on form resulting from the growing body of research in this area. One of such distinctions has been made between *proactive* and *incidental* FonF. As Ellis (2001) puts it, incidental FonF runs counter to proactive FonF in that it arises spontaneously without any prior planning during meaning-focused activities. Another feature of incidental focus on form that differentiates it from proactive practices is its extensive nature. Proactive focus on form is usually used to draw students' attention to a limited number of preplanned forms intensively. On the other hand, incidental focus on form targets a wide variety of linguistic items but only one or two times, as the need for them arises in the context of meaning-focused communicative activities (Ellis et al., 2001a).

Incidental focus on form has received much attention lately since it is believed that it occurs when learners themselves experience some difficulty with a linguistic form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998) and thus it is believed that incidental focus on form addresses a real gap in the linguistic knowledge of the L2 learners.

In another widely accepted distinction, Ellis et al. (2001b) divided incidental FonF into *reactive* and *preemptive* FonF. By definition, while reactive FonF (also known as corrective feedback) occurs as a reaction on the part of the teacher to the erroneous utterances of learners, preemptive FonF happens when either a teacher or a learner initiates attention to form, upon perceiving an actual gap in the learner's linguistic knowledge during a meaning-focused activity, even though no actual error in production has been spotted. Ellis et al. (2001b) further argue that the significance of preemptive FonF lies in

the fact that it is utilized upon perceiving an actual gap in the learners' linguistic knowledge.

Between the two types of incidental FonF described above, reactive FonF has been extensively researched in different contexts and the frequency of its occurrence, its attributes, and its effectiveness have been well-investigated.

### **1.2 Teacher-Initiated Preemptive FonF**

Ellis et al. (2001b, p. 422) define teacher-initiated preemptive FonF as when "the teacher either asks questions from or provides unsolicited information about specific linguistic items to the learners". The following is an example of teacher-initiated preemptive FonF taken from Ellis et al. (2002, p. 428):

#### **Extract 1: Teacher initiated preemptive focus-on-form**

T: What's an alibi?

T: M has an alibi

T: Another name for girlfriend? (*laughter*)

T: An alibi is a reason you have for not being at the bank robbery (.)  
okay

(.) not being at the bank robbery.

Ellis et al. (2001b), who carried out their study in a private language institute in New Zealand, found that just over 9% of all the identified focus on form episodes (FFE) were teacher-initiated (and the other 91% were learner-initiated and reactive focus on form). Ellis et al. (2001b) maintain that while in learner-initiated preemption the linguistic gap which is focused on seems to be a real one, in teacher-initiated preemption the perceived gap may not be an actual gap. Later, Ellis et al. (2002, p.428) explain their stance further:

One problem with this is that they [the teachers] cannot know for sure whether the gaps they assume to exist in the students' knowledge are actual gaps. If learners already know the forms the teacher raises to attention little is gained. In this respect, student-

initiated preemptive focus-on-form is to be preferred. It might be argued, then, that teachers would do better to limit themselves to providing corrective feedback (i.e. to reactive focus-on-form), where the need for their assistance is clear.

This viewpoint has led some researchers to exclude teacher-initiated preemptions from their studies on focus on form (e.g. Loewen, 2005; Zhao & Bitchener, 2007).

### **1.3 Effectiveness of Focus on Form Instruction**

As far as the evaluation of the effectiveness of focus on form is concerned, whereas in planned focus on form pre-tests and post-tests are commonly utilized to measure gains in learners' ability to use the target structures (Loewen, 2005), the unpredictability of the linguistic forms raised in incidental focus on form has made pre-testing and post-testing impossible (Swain, 2001, cited in Loewen, 2005). Perhaps the best measure of the effectiveness of incidental focus on form is the learners' subsequent spontaneous production of the targeted linguistic forms i.e. *uptake* (Loewen, 2005).

Lyster and Ranta (1997) define uptake as "a student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback and constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student's initial utterance" (p.49). Later on, Ellis et al. (2001a) extended the concept of uptake to cover preemptive as well reactive FonF and thus, in their new definition, uptake was not only to be spotted following teacher-provided corrective feedback, but also to be observed following teacher's provision of linguistic forms following preemptive FonF. Uptake, as defined by Ellis et al. (2001a), is a voluntary move, and as such, learners may simply choose not to produce uptake even if they have the chance. Moreover, as Oliver (2000) states, learners may even have no opportunity to react to teachers' feedback if, for instance, the teacher continues his or her turn.

## 2. Literature Review

A good number of empirical studies also examined different techniques of reactive focus on form including experimental and quasi-experimental as well as a large body of descriptive studies (Egi, 2010; Gholami, 2009; Lyster, 1998, 2004; Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Nassaji, 2009; to name but a few). However, preemptive FonF has enjoyed much less attention and remains an under-researched area. For instance Ellis et al. (2001b) expressed great concern over the lack of empirical studies on preemptive FonF and the necessity to investigate preemptive as well as the reactive FonF.

In one of the studies carried out in the EFL context of Iran as a response to the gap mentioned above, Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) investigated different characteristics, frequency of occurrence, and the effectiveness of two categories of incidental focus on form, i.e. reactive and preemptive focus on form in the EFL context of Iran. They also investigated the two categories of learner- and teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form. The results of their study indicated a significantly higher frequency of preemptive focus on form (73.8%) over the reactive FonF (26.2%). With regard to learner- and teacher-initiated distinction, Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) found that teacher-initiated preemptive episodes were overwhelmingly more frequent (84.1%) than the learner-initiated episodes (15.9%). The results of this study lend more evidence to the importance of preemptive focus on form.

A number of studies have been carried out to determine the frequency of occurrence of uptake, most of them studying uptake following reactive FonF which found different rates of uptake moves in different contexts (e.g. Egi, 2010; Ellis, 1994; Ellis et al., 2001a; Farrokhi & Gholami, 2006, 2007; Loewen, 2004a; Lyster, 1998; Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Nassaji, 2009; Zhao & Bitchener, 2007; Reinders, 2009).

However, studies on uptake following preemptive focus on form, also, remain in the minority (e.g. Ellis et al., 2001a, 2001b; Farrokhi & Gholami, 2005, 2007; Gholami, 2009; Loewen, 2004a, 2004b; Zhao & Bitchener, 2007). Furthermore, the studies that exist on the frequency of occurrence and the characteristics of uptake following focus on form episodes (FFE), in general, and preemptive FFEs, in particular, have resulted in very different and sometimes contradictory results. For instance, while Ellis et al. (2001a and 2001b) found a high frequency of uptake following preemptive FFEs, the results of Farrokhi and Gholami's study (2007) indicated a very low amount of uptake (15% of the cases only) and that uptake was more frequent after reactive FFEs in the latter study.

### 3. Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the occurrence of teacher-generated preemptive focus on form in an EFL class and based on the qualitative and quantitative findings sheds further light on the nature and effectiveness of such teacher-initiated focus on form interventions in a meaning-oriented EFL class.

### 4. Method

This descriptive study investigates different characteristics of teacher-initiated preemptive FonF in the EFL context of Iran. It is also the purpose of the study to gauge the effectiveness of teacher-initiated FFEs (i.e. uptake) through an elicitation instrument called '*incidental focus on form and uptake sheet*', along with the traditional procedure of measuring uptake through audio-recorded data, so as to obtain a more lucid picture of uptake by cross-checking the results from both procedures. As Ellis et al. (2001b) argue, unlike planned focus on form, incidental focus on form cannot be studied using experimental methods since such research requires the pre-selection of linguistic features for investigation.

The observational data for this study were collected from an intact intermediate EFL class in a private language school in Iran, where Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is highly advocated and the tasks and exercises used by the teachers are predominantly meaning-oriented.

#### **4.1 Context of the Study**

The data for the present research were collected in a private language institute in Qom, Iran. This particular language institute, in which the researcher himself had had the experience of teaching over 7 years, seemed a suitable site for data collection for a number of reasons. Firstly, the course book employed in this private institute is the *Interchange* series by Richards et al. (2005) which is a course book developed based on communicative language teaching. The books include all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The *Interchange* series incorporate many types of communicatively-oriented activities to help learners improve their communicative language abilities including speaking activities such as role plays, pair works, group works, and free discussions etc.

Secondly, there is a strong supervision policy taken up by the board of management in this institute including a regular classroom observations by 2 highly qualified and experienced supervisors in order to ensure that the teachers adhere to the principles of communicative language teaching at all times.

Thirdly, in order to raise the learners' motivation and provide them with opportunities to interact with native speakers, the institute holds regular extra-curricular free discussion classes with native-like proficient teachers where the focus is primarily on meaning, and where interaction and communication are emphasized.

## 4.2 Participants

An intermediate EFL class was chosen as the most suitable site for data collection. The participants included 12 L2 learners of English and one teacher who all shared Farsi as their mother tongue. The learners aged between 17 and 26 and were mostly senior high school or university students. They all paid tuition and were generally reasonably motivated (as observed by the researchers in their observations of the class) and attended the class regularly. The teacher was a qualified graduate of English language and literature, had a rich experience in language teaching, and had attended several in-service training programs and workshops on language teaching.

## 4.3 Procedure

The observational audio-data were collected using two small mp3 recorders, one placed in front of the class to record a clear voice of the teacher and the other put in the back of the class to get a clear sound of the learners. One of the researchers, also, attended five sessions of the class in person and took extensive field notes. As it was explained above, to do away with the shortcomings of the traditional procedure of studying uptake, a think-aloud incidental focus-on-form and uptake sheet was also employed to elicit written instances of FFEs and subsequent uptake moves. A sample uptake sheet can be found in Mackey and Gass (2005) and a different uptake sheet which has been modified to meet the needs of research in the field of incidental focus on form can also be found in Gholami and Bassirian (2010). The latter uptake sheet is the one employed in this study (see appendix for sample uptake sheets).

In this study, the researchers were only able to capture the teacher-whole class interactions, therefore the teacher-individual learner interactions and learner-learner interactions in pair works were not audible and thus were excluded from the analysis. After the completion of the data collection phase, the researchers listened to the

audio-data, transcribing the instances of preemptive FFEs that were raised during meaning-focused activities.

Extract 2 is an instance of teacher-initiated preemptive FFE which led to oral uptake, adopted from the data of the present study. The underlined part is an instance of oral uptake move.

**Extract 2: Teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form with oral uptake**

T: ... Did you "set this up" means?

S1: Like this?

S2: Did you (*inaudible*) this?

T: Did you "arrange" this!

Ss: Arrange!

T: Did you "set this up" means did you "arrange" this?

As regards the elicitation of data using uptake sheets, the researchers distributed the sheets among the learners at the beginning of every session and collected them immediately after the class was over. This particular procedure was followed to ensure that the uptake sheets elicited immediate, on-the-spot uptake moves. Furthermore, the learners were instructed to write in their uptake sheets only those language forms which they noticed in the class, whether they were presented by the teacher, other learners or the forms that they themselves raised questions about. They were asked, however, to exclude the forms based on the content provided through the book. The learners were also told to indicate who raised each particular linguistic form by placing a tick mark in the right cell: whether the teacher, other learners, or themselves. Finally, there was a part in the uptake sheets where they were instructed to indicate whether the form in focus has been new to them or not.

Finally, it should be noted that no effort was made to manipulate the frequency or the characteristics of preemptive FFEs or the uptake, whether the immediate oral uptake or the uptake identified in the uptake sheets. The teacher was unaware that the researchers intended to examine preemptive FFEs in his class. He was merely told that the study was to analyze classroom interaction during communicative

lessons. Thus, these observations can be representative of what normally occurs in such EFL classes. The learners were also unaware of the intention of the researchers in giving them the uptake sheets. They were simply told that the researcher is interested in exploring what linguistic forms they noticed in the class.

After the identification and transcription of teacher-initiated FFEs and the instances of oral uptake, the researchers cross-checked the audio-data with the uptake sheets to identify the rate of the written acknowledgements of the learners following the identified teacher-initiated FFEs. The data derived both from the audio-recordings and the uptake sheets were then coded and analyzed using Chi-square analysis. Regarding inter-coder reliability, Kappa coefficient indicated a 0.91 agreement.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Frequency of Teacher-Initiated Preemptive FFEs

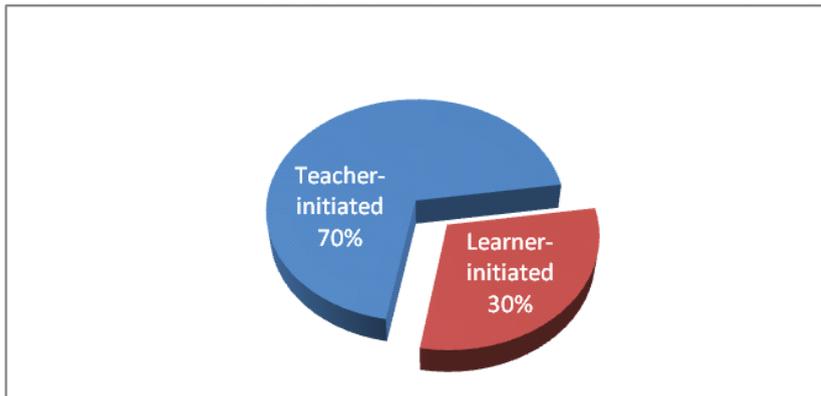
In the total amount of 18 hours of meaning-focused instruction in an intermediate EFL class, a total number of 229 preemptive (FFE) were identified, in which either the learners or the teacher made a departure from the meaning-focused activities to focus, preemptively, on matters of linguistic nature. This would be one preemptive FFE every 2.35 minutes. Table 1 represents the findings regarding the frequency of preemptive FFEs identified in the audio-data.

**Table 1:** Frequency of learner-initiated and teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs

Type of FFE	Frequency
Learner-initiated preemptive FFEs	69
Teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs	160
Total	229

## Teacher-Generated Preemptive Attention to Form

As illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1, there are many more instances of teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs than learner-initiated ones, namely 160 (70%) and 69 (30%), respectively.



**Figure 1:** Frequency of learner- and Teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs

This indicates that, generally, teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs were the most frequent type of preemptive FFEs in this class. Chi-square analysis also indicated a statistically significant difference  $\chi^2 = 36.16$  (1 *df*,  $p < .05$ ).

## 5.2 Uptake

As stated earlier, due to the shortcomings of the traditional method of studying uptake, *uptake sheets* were used to triangulate the audio-data on uptake. Uptake sheets were, then, employed to elicit written instances of learner uptake. Table 2 represents the frequency and percentage of the uptake moves following teacher-initiated and learner-initiated FFEs from both sources mentioned above.

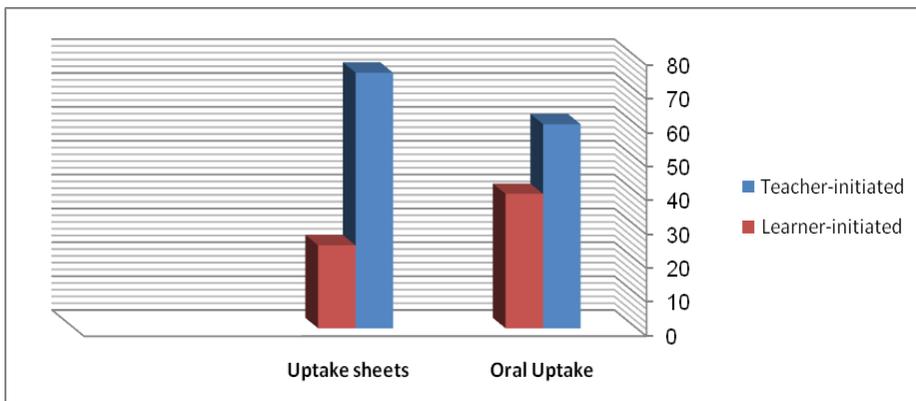
**Table 2:** Uptake rate following preemptive FFEs based on audio-data and uptake sheets

Uptake based on: Type of FFE:	Audio-data		Uptake sheet	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Teacher-Initiated</b>	47	60.3%	71	75.5%
<b>Learner-Initiated</b>	31	39.7%	23	24.5%
<b>Total</b>	78	100%	94	100%

Table 2 reveals that the total frequency of uptake moves identified in the uptake sheets were considerably more than the ones captured in the audio-data as they occurred naturally in the intended EFL class. Moreover, as far as the oral uptake moves are concerned, Table 2 demonstrates that while only 39.7% of all uptake moves occurred after learner-initiated FFEs, 60.3% of them followed teacher-initiated FFEs.

On the other hand, data driven from the uptake sheets demonstrate that 24.5% of the learners' written uptake moves followed learner-initiated FFEs, whereas 75.5% of these written uptake moves occurred after teacher-initiated FFEs. As demonstrated by the results obtained from the audio-data, learner-initiated FFEs resulted in fewer uptake moves than teacher-initiated ones. Interestingly, the new set of data driven from the uptake sheets are also in complete agreement with the audio-data, further demonstrating that teacher-initiated FFEs strongly come first regarding the subsequent uptake moves. The percentage of uptake moves based both on oral uptake and uptake sheets is illustrated in Figure 2.

## Teacher-Generated Preemptive Attention to Form



**Figure 2:** Percentage of uptake moves based on oral uptake and uptake sheets

Chi-square analysis, also, revealed a significant difference regarding the frequency of uptake moves occurring after learner-initiated and teacher-initiated FFEs,  $\chi^2 = 3.93$  ( $df, p < .05$ ).

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Variations in the Frequency of Preemptive FFEs

As it was demonstrated in the introduction, the studies carried out on preemptive FonF have all revealed that incidental focus on form is as likely to be preemptive as reactive in meaning-oriented communicative classrooms. The results of the present study demonstrated that there were a total number of 229 preemptive FFEs identified in 18 hours of meaning-focused instruction in an EFL classroom. Ellis et al. (2001b) have identified 225 instances of preemptive FFEs in 12 hours of meaning-oriented ESL classroom in New Zealand which occurred at the rate of 1 every 1.6 minutes. Compared to the study by Ellis et al. (2001b), though not significantly different regarding the number of the identified FFEs, preemptive FFEs seem to have occurred at a lower rate in this study, namely 1

every 2.35 minutes. Nonetheless, taken all together, the findings of this study regarding the number and the rate of occurrence of preemptive FFEs seem more or less in line with those of Ellis et al. (2001b). However, the results of the present study are in sharp contrast with the findings of Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) where they identified overwhelmingly more instances of preemptive FFEs, namely 473 preemptive FFEs in 20 hours of meaning focused instruction.

The results also indicated that there were much more teacher-initiated FFEs than learner-initiated ones; that is, while teachers attended to form in meaning-focused activities 160 times (69.9%), learners did so only 69 times (30.1%) during 18 hours of meaning-focused instruction. Such a great difference in the frequency of learner-initiated and teacher-initiated FFEs is similar to the findings of Loewen (2004b), and Williams (1999), and very much like the findings of Farrokhi and Gholami (2007), but contrasts those of Ellis et al. (2001b). Loewen (2004b) found a low rate of learner-initiated FFEs (365; 26.5%) out of a total of 1373 identified FFEs in 32 hours of communicatively-oriented instruction. Similarly, Williams (1999) in her study of learner-generated attention to form found that learners did not initiate attention to form very often. Farrokhi and Gholami (2007), also, found that learners instigated attention to form only 72 times (16%) out of the total 473 preemptive FFEs identified. In contrast to the above-mentioned studies, Ellis et al. (2001b) found most of the preemptive FFEs in their study to be learner-initiated, i.e. 165 instances out of the total of 225 FFEs identified.

One of the reasons of this variation in the frequency and characteristics of preemptive focus on form may be the teachers' attitude towards the incorporation of incidental focus on form techniques in their classes. As Borg (1998) points out, some teachers may regard incidental focus on form as an effective means with which to address linguistic items within meaning-focused lessons, and so incorporate it frequently into their lessons. Some other teachers, on the other hand, may find incidental focus on form disruptive of the flow of communicative activities in their classes. These teachers may

fear that the side effects of focus on form may damage conversational coherence in their classes (Lyster and Ranta, 1997).

Ellis et al. (2002) also addressed this problem, arguing that the differences in the frequency of teacher-initiated FFEs might be the result of the diverse inclinations of the teachers toward the communicative tasks, where some interject the task frequently to focus on form and the others prefer to maintain the flow of communication. Moreover, Mackey et al. (2004) found that experienced ESL teachers used more incidental focus on form techniques than inexperienced teachers.

These points might partially elucidate the higher frequency of teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs in the present study compared to that of Ellis et al. (2001b). The teacher whose class was the site of data collection in this study had a rich experience in communicative language teaching for several years and also had the experience of attending several workshops and in-service training programs. However, he did not have a high academic qualification in language teaching. This latter issue can be a partial reason why Farrokhi and Gholami found much more instances of preemptive focus on form employed by teachers compared to that of the present study since the teachers whose class they observed and recorded were PhD students of TEFL. The results of the follow-up study of Mackey et al. (2004) also authenticates this claim, as they found that education, especially in the form of teacher education workshops can highly improve the teachers' use of incidental focus on form techniques.

## **6.2 Uptake Based on the Audio-Captured Observational Data**

The results of this study demonstrated that of a total number of 229 preemptive FFEs identified, 78 FFEs were followed by an oral uptake move. That is to say, learners in this study incorporated into their immediate production or acknowledged their understanding of the linguistic forms which were highlighted preemptively in the class merely in 34% of the FFE cases. The results also show that 39.7% of

all uptake moves occurred after learner-initiated FFEs, whereas 60.3% of them happened following teacher-initiated FFEs. Chi-square analysis also revealed a statistically significant difference.

The results of the study by Ellis et al. (2001a) are in sharp contrast with the findings of the present study both in terms of the uptake moves following learner-initiated and teacher-initiated FFEs and the total rate of uptake; that is, in the study by Ellis et al. (2001a) 74% of all the FFEs resulted in uptake whereas in the present study only 34% of the FFEs were followed by the oral uptake. Moreover, Ellis et al. (2001a) found that most of the uptake moves occurred after learner-initiated FFEs. In contrast, the results of the present study indicated that uptake moves occurred more following teacher-initiated FFEs. There are a number of reasons that might have contributed to this discrepancy. For one, different attitudes of the learners in ESL and EFL settings might have affected the rate of uptake moves. While in the ESL settings, the learners receive input from a variety of sources (the supermarket, the bank, etc.), in EFL settings the teacher is the primary, and the most important source of L2 knowledge for the learners. The learners in EFL settings rely heavily on their teacher to provide them with materials, help them in realizing cultural differences between their native language and the target language, and also to correct their errors as well as to provide them with rich linguistic input. This has naturally led EFL learners to take their teachers as the best L2 speakers they have access to and so to deem their teaching (including teacher-initiated preemptive FonF) as the only correct way of learning the second language. Thus, in turn, the learners do their best to accommodate teacher's interventions in their own further productions or simply acknowledge their noticing of such FFEs. In our own experience of teaching EFL classes in Iran, we have witnessed many learners who came up and asked us to correct their utterances more in the class and to provide them more not with listening, reading, or speaking tasks, but with the right linguistic forms, including vocabulary items, structures, idioms and expressions, and pronunciation tips. This difference between ESL and EFL settings might partially explain why Ellis et al. (2001a) found a low frequency

of uptake following teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs while the results of the present study demonstrated, by far, a higher frequency of uptake occurring after teacher-initiated FFEs.

### **6.3 Uptake Based on the Uptake Sheets**

As the results derived from the audio-data indicated, only 34% of the preemptive FFEs were accompanied by subsequent oral uptake. However, the new set of results derived from the uptake sheets indicated that 41% of the preemptive FFEs were followed by the learners' written uptake moves. This improvement in the rate of uptake moves, indicated in the uptake sheets, could be due to the fact that uptake sheets provided more opportunities for the learners to, voluntarily, produce uptake where nobody interrupted them or deprived them of the opportunity to indicate their noticing of the form in focus.

In addition to the rate of uptake, the attributes of the uptake moves noted down in the uptake sheets were also much more different from those of the oral uptake. For instance, whereas data on oral uptake showed that 39.7% of all uptake moves occurred after learner-initiated FFEs and 60.3% of them followed teacher-initiated FFEs, the uptake sheets indicated that only 24.5% of the learners' written uptake moves followed learner-initiated FFEs, and 75.5% of them occurred after teacher-initiated FFEs. Amazingly, our new set of data driven from the uptake sheets robustly corroborates the results from the observational data demonstrating that 75.5% of the uptake moves recorded in the uptake sheets occurred following teacher-initiated FFEs.

### **6.4 (Mis)Conceptions on Teacher-Initiated FonF**

To the best of our knowledge, so far all of the studies concerning incidental focus on form have focused on when an FFE occurs, and when it does, whether a learner produces uptake following it, regardless of the attributes of that uptake. However, we cannot be

utterly sure that a successful uptake is indeed due to the noticing of a form and not merely a repetition of the teacher's correct utterance. Similarly, we cannot say for certain whether an unsuccessful uptake is due to the absence of noticing of a form or is simply because the learner has opted not to produce the correct utterance in front of the whole class or that s/he has not gotten the opportunity to produce it rightly. These factors might be the ones that have blurred our view on the relationship between producing uptake and L2 acquisition. These issues, therefore, constitute a major shortcoming of the current body of research in the field of incidental focus on form in general and the studies of uptake in particular.

As an attempt to make up for these shortcomings as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and the attributes of uptake, the researchers employed an elicitation instrument, a think-aloud *uptake sheet*. The idea of obtaining data on uptake using an elicitation instrument was originally inspired by the thought that the mere observational, audio-data were incapable of unveiling more details about uptake than what they have done so far.

It was demonstrated by the quantitative results derived from the audio-data that teacher-initiated FFEs were more effective than learner-initiated ones regarding the rate of the uptake moves. The quantitative data from the uptake sheets, also, further corroborated this stance. Yet, the qualitative aspects of the uptake sheets seemed even more promising in this regard. Therefore, the researchers undertook an in-depth qualitative analysis of the uptake sheets where they came across interesting results, some of which are reported below.

The qualitative analysis of the uptake sheets showed that some learners had indicated uptake on their uptake sheets for a number of FFEs with a single linguistic feature as their focus (e.g. vocabulary) in more than one category (e.g. vocabulary and pronunciation). That is to say, not only did the learners produce uptake in the same linguistic category as the FFE itself, but also produced uptake in the other categories. For example, in the following extract from the presents study (Extract 3), the teacher focused on a vocabulary item, specifically on the meaning of a lexical item, namely 'run-down', but

learners produced uptake in their uptake sheets in 2 linguistic categories, namely, vocabulary and grammar.

**Extract 3: Teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form with no oral uptake**

T: ... pretty a "run-down" means?

Ss: (*inaudible*)

T: Yeah. You have a lot of (*inaudible*).

S1: Stay in home?

T: Yeah. I'm feeling pretty a run-down ... aaah ... yeah, like you're very sick ...

S2: R.U.N? run-down?

Such instances, which we call *multiple uptake moves*, indicate that learners in an L2 classroom might have multiple problems concerning one linguistic entity and that, if addressed properly, they might naturally produce multiple uptake moves after such FFEs if they get the chance.

This also entails that in the study of uptake we should not merely focus on single learners but to take into account all of the learners and their responses following focus on form episodes. These particular types of uptake moves also signify that, although teachers raise linguistic forms preemptively in their classes based on their reckoning of a possible gap, all or most of the learners in one class might benefit from this type of preemptive FonF in some way.

Some scholars argue that teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs are based on the teachers' individual conjectures about some possible gaps and not based on real gaps. Therefore, their preemption is ineffective and may be counterproductive (e.g. Ellis et al., 2001b; Ellis et al., 2002). However, a two-fold counter-evidence regarding this stance has been provided by the qualitative data driven from the uptake sheets.

If the above-mentioned view were true, then one might expect marked discrepancies indicated in the uptake sheets regarding the linguistic focus of the teacher and the linguistic focus of the uptake

moves that learners produced through their written acknowledgements. Yet, only in one teacher-initiated FFE were the teacher and the learners different in this regard, that is, the teacher focused on grammar but the learners indicated uptake in the pronunciation section of their uptake sheets. Moreover, if we were to acknowledge the ineffectiveness of teacher-initiated FFEs, there should have been few written acknowledgements after teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs in the uptake sheets where all (and not just one) of the learners were given the chance to produce uptake, voluntarily, following every single FFE. However, to the researchers' surprise, much more instances of uptake were recorded in the uptake sheets following teacher-initiated episodes than the learner-initiated episodes. There was a part in the uptake sheets where the learners could indicate, by placing a check mark, whether the forms they have noticed have been new to them or not. It was observed in the uptake sheets that they mostly checked teacher-initiated FFEs as 'new' in their uptake sheets.

### **6.5 Single or Multiple Uptakes for One FFE**

A very important issue regarding uptake is concerned with the ultimate goal of second language teaching that is to help all learners in ESL/EFL classes to learn a second language more easily and accurately. To accomplish this, ESL/EFL practitioners have to make sure that all learners benefit from focus on form in their classes.

However, to the best of our knowledge, all studies that have previously investigated uptake have only examined it in its categorical sense. In other words, in these studies, whenever learners produced uptake following an FFE, the researchers tallied their coding sheets as one instance of uptake regardless of the number of learners who produced a particular uptake in a given class.

Analysis of the uptake sheets also revealed, yet another very interesting fact. To the researchers' surprise, in many instances of preemptive FFEs, and mostly following teacher-initiated FFEs, more than one learner produced uptake in their uptake sheets. It was

observed that following some teacher-initiated FFEs as many as six learners produced uptake in their uptake sheets. This is robust evidence that noticing has indeed occurred at a large scale rather than a single case. This also indicates that there has probably been a special quality in these FFEs, whether in the FFEs themselves or in the manner of their administration, that made them so outstanding that so many learners produced uptake after them.

Based on these observations, the researchers advocate including all of the learners in the analysis of the uptake moves since an FFE which is followed only by one learner's uptake move is not, and should not be considered, as effective as the one which is followed by, for instance, five learners' uptake moves. The obvious reason is that when more than one learner produce uptake following an FFE, it is a sign that the form raised in that FFE has been overwhelmingly more noticeable to the whole class and thus could tap the linguistic holes of many learners rather than just one. This can be a sign that the form which was raised in the FFE has been a gap for a lot of the learners and not just one learner and thus more useful to the whole class. Therefore, if we can identify, in subsequent research studies, the characteristics of the FFEs which make them so noticeable as to be followed by a lot of uptake moves from different learners, this could help us constitute a framework for the manner of the integration of incidental FonF in general, and teacher-initiated preemptive FonF in particular, in meaning-focus activities in a way that all of the incidentally highlighted forms become so noticeable to more, if not all, of the learners.

## **7. Conclusion**

The present study dealt with the characteristics and the effectiveness of teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form. It was demonstrated that teacher-initiated FFEs were the most frequent type of preemptive FFE in the observed EFL class. It was also found that teacher-initiated FFEs were also more effective than learner-initiated FFEs in

addressing the EFL learners' linguistic gaps in that they were followed by considerably more uptake moves. The effectiveness of teacher-initiated FFEs further corroborated by the qualitative results revealed that learners produced multiple uptake moves following some teacher-initiated FFEs. Very interestingly, the qualitative results showed that in some cases as many as six learners produced written uptake following single teacher-initiated FFEs. Finally, the researchers called for a reconsideration of the effectiveness of teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form as an effective means with which to address the linguistic problems of the L2 learners.

This study is a new contribution to the line of research on incidental focus on form and particularly the preemptive focus on form that can be provided to the learners especially in the EFL context of Iran. Thus, it is hoped that this study might contribute to as well as pave the way for further research in this area. Another implication of this study to the field is the development and application of a novel data elicitation measure called uptake sheet. It was utilized to elicit instances of uptake, which, considering the importance of uptake and the variations in the findings of the previous studies, seems to be a considerable implication made by this study. This is because this instrument helped gain more accurate and richer data both qualitatively and quantitatively on the frequency of occurrence and the attributes of uptake. Furthermore, it was demonstrated by the findings of this study that conditions of ESL settings do not always apply to EFL settings. For instance, the lower frequency of learner-initiated FFEs and higher frequency of teacher-initiated FFEs are in contrast with the studies in ESL settings. It was also demonstrated that teacher-initiated focus on form is not as ineffective as it was previously deemed in the literature. Therefore another implication of this study is for the teachers to make informed decisions particularly regarding the use of teacher-initiated preemptions to help their learners enhance their linguistic competence or lubricate their attempts to communicate meaningfully.

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Appendix: Sample Uptake Sheets

What are you noticing about ...	Who said it? (check as many as you wish)			Was it <b>NEW</b> to you?	
	Teacher	Classmate	Me	Yes	No
<b>Pronunciation</b> /n/ cut- <del>up</del> -what-but /a:/ not /ɑ:/ father /ɒ//o//ɔ://o:/ talk-dog-bought.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Vocabulary</b> -fake an action. - ~ ~ meo, sure.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Grammar</b> -she was working you! -can I have a friend come over for dinner? -It's not all it's cracked up to me.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Teacher-Generated Preemptive Attention to Form

What are you noticing about ...	Who said it? (check as many as you wish)			Was it <u>NEW</u> to you?	
	Teacher	Classmate	Me	Yes	No
Pronunciation /ɛ/ /ɒ/ ɔ /ɪ:/ /i:/ ɔ: ^	✓			✓	✓
Vocabulary in the first place. where are you off to don't even bother are you still mad at me It's not all it's cracked up to be leave me alone.	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓				✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
Grammar may I <del>is</del> <sup>more</sup> polite than can	✓	✓		✓	