A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Focus-on-form and Meaning-focused Instructions in the English Classroom

Ying-Ying Chuang
Department of Applied Foreign Languages, Cheng Shiu University

Abstract

One of the rather recent topics which preoccupied the language teaching circles for a while is the Focus-on-form (FOF) instruction originally proposed by Long (1991). Many language teachers, educators, and researchers “praised it as if it were the miracle method they had always been searching for” (Poole, 2005, p. 47) and many research projects have tried to prove it being more effective than meaning-focused (MF) instruction and some researches also attributed the effectiveness of FOF instruction to the way it is performed and the personality factors of learners and teachers. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of FOF and MF instruction in EFL settings especially for the beginning learners who were in a more crucial need of developing a grammatical competence in L2. Therefore, the effectiveness of FOF and MF instruction was examined to see if any significant difference existed in the effect of meaning-focused and focus-on-form activities on Taiwanese junior high school students’ learning grammatical points in the English classroom. The researcher chose two classes randomly and assigned them as two groups: experimental and control groups, and the instructors used FOF instruction in the experimental group and MF instruction in the control group to teach the same grammar unit (relative clauses) for a four-week period. After that, a reading test was conducted to see if any significant difference occurred in the scores of these two groups. However, the result did not reach the statistic significance, but the greater means of the experimental group on the total and the two subsections of the test imply that FOF instruction may bring about more satisfactory results. The study implied the confirmation of previous research which has shown the effectiveness of FOF over MF instruction in grammar teaching of the Taiwanese junior high school English class.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; focus-on-form instruction; meaning-focused activity; explicit and implicit instructions.
比較「形式為中心」與「意義為中心」英語教學法於國中生英語課堂的文法教學成效之研究

莊媖纓
正修科技大學　應用外語系

摘 要
「形式為中心」教學法是一種在最近幾年受到注意的新形態外語教學模式，它得到許多教師及研究學者的重視並推崇其理念。從許多國外的研究報告中，幾乎都可獲得證實：在英語課堂教學過程中及學生的學習效果中，它比起「意義為中心」教學法，更來得有效果。本研究的目的，是要就實施「形式為中心」及「意義為中心」教學法於臺灣國中一年級學生的英語課堂，尤其是在英語初學者的文法學習成效中，來比較這兩種教學法是否有達到顯著差異，及是否與國外研究報告有相似之結果。筆者將兩班學生各分配為實驗組及對照組，兩班分別施以不同教學法，在四星期的期間來教授同樣的文法單元(關係子句)，最後再以初級英檢題目之閱讀測驗來評量兩組學生的學習成效。本研究所得到的結論，由兩組學生的英語閱讀評量測驗成績中，雖未達統計學上的顯著差異，但較高的平均值仍顯示「形式為中心」教學法在國中生英語課堂的文法教學上，比「意義為中心」之教學法是有更好的學習效果。

關鍵字：英語學習；形式為中心教學法；意義為中心教學法；演繹法；文法規納教學法。
I. Introduction

Teaching and learning a foreign language is influenced by a plethora of factors. One of the major controversies in learning especially the syntactic component of the language is over the explicit (direct) or implicit (indirect) instruction of grammatical rules. In fact, the extent to which knowledge obtained from explicit instruction could over time become part of a foreign language learner's underlying system of implicit knowledge and therefore available for spontaneous language production was still an open question (Lyster, 2004). While on the assumption that foreign language learning was like first language acquisition, experiential approaches to L2 acquisition proposed that language developed principally out of experience with real-life communication and pure meaningful activities, as Nassaji (1999) maintains that many second language acquisition researchers believed in the inadequacy of pure meaning-focused activities in which the learners exposure to language for developing L2 competence.

However, Long (1983) questioned about Krashen’s (1985) and Prabh’s (1987) meaning-focused position, and later he argued that instead of more focus on message-based activities. There should be some room for referring to the problems that language learners have with linguistic forms. This position was known as ‘focus-on-form’ position, and it had been widely noticed by many researchers (e.g. Nassaji, 2000; Muranoi, 2000; Ellis, Badturkmen & Loewen 2001; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2002; Chan & Li, 2002, Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2002; Sheen, 2002; Loewen, 2003; Lyster, 2004; Poole, 2005). Poole (2005) said that it presented “a source of great enthusiasm for English language teachers and researchers so much so that many have praised it as if it were the miracle method they had always been searching for” (p. 47). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of focus-on-form and meaning-focused instruction, and to see if any significant difference exists in the effect of meaning-focused and focus-on-form activities on Taiwanese junior high school students’ learning grammatical points in the EFL classroom.

II. Review of Literature

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Focus on Form

Researchers endorsing focus on form position in language instruction usually justify their position by resorting to interactive and cognitive epistemological perspectives on language acquisition.

2.1.1. Interactive View

Interactive or interactionist approaches to second language acquisition, which were based on functional views of language as a symbolic system that developed from communicative needs (Gass, 2003), focus on the relationship between learner internal and external processes in L2 acquisition (Norris and Ortega, 2003). Long’s (1991) interaction hypothesis held that negotiation of meaning was particularly beneficial for learning in second language because it involved learners in having to pay closer attention to linguistic forms when there was a breakdown in communication. In his account,
during meaningful interaction the learners used different communicative strategies, ranging from modifying and adjusting input to using facilitative strategies such as requests for clarification, requests for repetition, and comprehension checks (Nassaji, 1999). Referring to Schmidt’s (1990) emphasis on the role of attention in learning, Gass (2003) maintained that “it is through interaction (e.g. negotiation, recasts) that a learner’s attention is focused on specific part of the language, especially on those mismatches between target language forms and learner-language forms” (p. 244). While this negotiation of meaning took place in everyday communication, Long (1991) argued that it can also occur in the classroom and identifies this as focus-on-form. In addition, Lyster (2004) pointed out that resolving communication breakdowns through negotiation for meaning involved the use of communication strategies; therefore, did not aim to effect changes in a learner’s underlying inter-language system. Thus, he concluded, the interaction hypothesis was “an unlikely candidate for explaining instructed L2 development, especially in classroom contexts where mutual comprehension of inter-language forms reduces the need to negotiate for meaning” (2004, p. 323).

2.1.2. Cognitive View

The theoretical foundation of focus-on-form position in cognitive views was justified by McLaughlin (1987) and Skehan (1998). According to McLaughlin (1987), learning an L2 involved two cognitive processes: automatization and restructuring. ‘Automatization’ refers to quick and effortless responses to linguistic stimuli, initiated with controlled processes which then turn into routinized and automatized responses through subsequent practice. ‘Restructuring’ has to do with sudden moments of insight and refers to the time when the learner understands the input in a different way. It is characterized as a total, discontinuous, or qualitative change in an already existing cognitive patterning. In restructuring view, L2 development not only involved moving from controlled to automatized processes, but also it was a constant process of reorganizing, refining, and integrating new information into previous internal representations (Nassaji, 1999, 2000; Lyster, 2004). Central to restructuring process was attention to form, and it argued that restructuring of grammar principally took place when learners attended to and notice features in input and there was no learning without attention (Schmidt, 1990; Nassaji, 1999; Gass, 2003).

In Skehan’s (1998) information processing model, the learner’s conscious awareness of rule based representations was identified as a key factor in inter-language development. In this model, noticing plays a central role in converting input to intake during input processing and is triggered by input qualities such as frequency and salience and by input features that have been contrived for instructional purposes (Lyster, 2004). Intake reached a central processing mechanism that operated a dual mode system composed of two interrelated representational systems: an ‘analytic rule-based’ and a ‘memory-driven exemplar-based’ system. Skehan (1998) argued that, during online communication, communicative pressure and the need for fact access would make the exemplar-based system the system of choice. While the exemplar-based system was especially useful for spontaneous oral production in interactional contexts, Skehan argued that inter-language change was more effectively
activated through rule-based system and the conscious awareness predisposed learners towards such rule-based perspective. In addition, Ellis, et al. (2001) also referred to Felix’s (1985) and Schachter’s (1989) claim that since L2 learners did not have access to the same acquisitional mechanisms as children’s acquiring their L1, i.e. a specific language faculty which operated solely on the basis of positive evidence, adult L2 learners needed to call on general inductive learning mechanisms which made use of negative evidence. On this account, they argued that “form-focused instruction that makes such evidence available is not only helpful but even necessary for adult learners to acquire an L2” (p. 408-409).

2.2. Dichotomies on Focus on Form

2.2.1. Focus-on-Form vs. Focus-on-Forms

Focus-on-form position was often contrasted with what was called focus-on-forms position. Focus-on-form as defined by Long (1991) was a type of instruction in which the primary focus was on meaning and communication, with the learners’ attention being drawn to linguistic elements only as they arose incidentally in lessons. Here, the teacher and the learner were primarily concerned with using language communicatively, not with learning about the language. Despite this focus on meaning, occasions might arise when the participants chose or needed to focus on form. Focus-on-form then provided learners with “opportunity to take time-out from focusing on message construction to pay attention to specific forms and the meaning they realize” (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2002, p. 2). Long (1991) made a distinction between this position and what he called focus-on-forms which consisted of pre-planned presentation of discrete linguistic items as in a traditional grammar lesson. As Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis, (2002) referred to ‘structure-of-the-day approach,’ it was in accordance with a synthetic syllabus. Focus-on-forms position assumed that “classroom foreign or second language learning derives from general cognitive processes and thus entails the learning of a skill—hence its being characterized as a ‘skills leaning’ approach” (Sheen, 2002, p. 303) in which providing understanding of the grammar by variety of means, including even explanation in the L1 or pointing out the differences between L1 and L2 may be effective.

According to Spada’s (1997) explanation that “Long’s definition of focus on form is restricted to meaning-based pedagogical events in which attention is drawn to language as a perceived need arises rather than in predetermined ways” (p. 73), she therefore preferred the term form-focused instruction which referred to pedagogical events which occurred within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction but in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways. Spada (1997) therefore introduced a new dichotomy: planned vs. incidental focus on form.

2.2.2. Form-focused and Meaning-focused Instructions

The acquisition of language knowledge was influenced by the type of instruction the learner receives. Trosborg (1994) drew a clear distinction between form-focused and meaning-focused
instructions. She explained that in form-focused instruction, learners were engaged in activities that had been specially designed to teach specific grammatical features. In contrast, in the case of meaning-focused instruction, the learners were engaged in communication where the primary effort involved the exchange of meaning and where there was no conscious effort to achieve grammatical correctness. Moreover, the two types of instructions differed with regard to their communicative properties: meaning-focused instruction was likely to afford the learners more opportunities to listen to and to perform a greater range of language functions than form-focused instruction.

The meaning-focused approach to second language instruction corresponded with the non-interface view, as Norris and Ortega’s (2001) explanation, by providing exposure to rich input and meaningful use of the target language in context, which was intended to lead to incidental acquisition of the target language. A Form-focused instructional approach could be widely found in contemporary English language classrooms, in techniques such as Krashen and Terrell’s Natural Approach, some content-based ESL instruction and immersion programs (Ellis, 1994).

Park (2000) investigated if forms-focused, meaning-focused, or forms and meaning-focused instruction affected L2 learners participating in communication to explore the relationship between instructional approach and phonological acquisition. Her results indicated that both the forms-focused group and forms and meaning-focused group showed significant improvement after treatment. However, analysis also showed that the forms and meaning-focused group obtained significantly more improvement than the forms-focused group. It can be stated that forms and meaning-focused instruction had the most effect on L2 learners’ phonological acquisition.

2.2.3. Reactive vs. Pre-emptive Focus on Form

Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001) maintained that whether the focus-on-form was proactive (planned) or incidental a further distinction could be made between reactive and preemptive focus-on-form. Reactive focus-on-form which was also known as error correction or negative evidence/feedback occurred when in the context of meaning-based activities, learners’ attention was drawn to errors in their production. Preemptive focus-on-form, on the other hand occurred when either the teacher or a learner initiated attention to form even though no actual problem in production had been arisen. Loewen (2003) believed while reactive focus on form had been investigated extensively, preemptive focus on form had received much less attention.

2.2.4. Teacher-initiated vs. Student-initiated Focus on Form

Student-initiated focus-on-form was when learners raised questions about linguistic items, and teacher-initiated focus on form was when teachers either asked questions or provided unsolicited information about specific linguistic items. It had been suggested that student-initiated focus on form in particular might be more beneficial for L2 learners because students themselves were actively participating and topicalizing linguistic items (Slimini, 1989 cited in Loewen, 2003). Loewen (2003) believed student-initiated focus-on-form was one way in which learner autonomy such as involving learners in taking more responsibility of their learning was possible. However, it was possible that the
cultural differences in the norms of classroom conduct in general and in the predisposition to ask
questions in particular could affect the number of focus on form episodes students raise.

2.3. Focus-on-form and Second Language Acquisition Studies

Focus-on-form instruction as already stated has been welcomed with great enthusiasm by
researchers and many research projects have been instigated to investigate and corroborate its
effectiveness. First of all, Loewen (2003) in a study on the role of focus on form instruction on
learner autonomy found that student-initiated focus-on-form accounted for over 26.6% of the episodes.
Second, Loewen (2003) in a thorough study on the variation in FOF suggested that cultural background,
classroom atmosphere and personality factors all might play role in how focus-on-form occurred in the
classroom. He further assumed teachers’ beliefs about the effectiveness of implicit focus-on-form and
about their role in the classroom could affect the frequency with which FOF is applied in the classroom.
In addition, Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis (2002) in a study found that meta-language occurred in
focus-on-form and that it was largely of a non-technical nature and was more likely to be used by
teachers. They also found that meta-language occurred variably. It occurred more frequently in
preemptive focus-on-form than in reactive focus-on-form.

Lightbown and Spada (1990) observing communicative ESL courses in Quebec reported
positive effects of focus-on-form. Long (1996) took the view that instruction that included focus on
form had at least two advantages over purely meaning-focused instruction: it can increase the salience
of positive evidence, and it could provide often essential evidence in the form of direct or indirect
negative feedback. Also, Muranoi (2000) in his study on focus-on-form concluded that having even
a limited number of students participate in focus-on-form tasks could be beneficial to the entire class.
Moreover, focus-on-form treatments involving both implicit and explicit formal instruction can help
learners improve their performance on not only oral tasks but also written tasks. These studies
provided strong support for the assumption that “a timely combination of formal instruction and
communication-oriented instruction is highly beneficial to L2 learners” (Muranoi, 2000, p. 623).

III. The Method

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effect of teacher-initiated preemptive
focus-on-form instruction and focus-on-meaning instruction on the learning of grammatical points in
an EFL classroom with Taiwanese elementary students and the effectiveness of both instructions.
Since ‘relative clause’ has already been used in SLA studies, (e.g., Schachter, 1974; Schachter and
Rurherford, 1978 studied relative clause formation by Farsi speakers of English, cited in Schachter,
1996; Doughty, 1991, cited in Muranoi, 2000) and on the ground that learners participating in this
study were not taught the relative clause formation yet, it was decided to choose this grammatical point
for the study. In this study, the researcher would like to test that if there was any significant difference
between the effectiveness of focus-on-form and focus-on-meaning instruction in learning relative
clauses by the beginning-level EFL students.
3.1. Participants of the Study

The participants in the study were ninety-five first graders of Chi-Shen Junior High School, Kaohsiung City, who formed two intact groups. These classes were selected from the ten available classes on the ground that the teacher judged these two classes as homogeneous in terms of language abilities based on previous performance in the class and on achievement tests.

3.2. Instrument

The material used in the study was an English reading test including four reading passages. The reading passages were selected from the elementary level of General English Proficiency Test. The passages were further modified in order to simplify the structures which are not familiar to students and to enrich the texts with relative clauses. The test used in the study included two main parts which totally were composed of twenty items. The first section (eight items) was a recognition part in which students were required to underline the part which functioned as an adjective (the relative clause); the second section (twelve items) was a production part which required students to produce relative clauses in response to questions.

3.3. Procedure

The two classes in the study were randomly assigned into two groups. One group was taught through teachers-initiated preemptive focus-on-form activities and the other group was taught through focus-on-meaning activities for four weeks in the second semester of school year 2007, and each week included a 2-instructional hour session. At the end both groups were asked to write the test which was mentioned above. In the production part of the test, the teacher tried to clarify the instruction for students and even provided examples in Chinese language to make sure that students understand the task they were required to perform.

3.4. Data analysis

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of focus-on-form and meaning-focused instruction, and to see if any significant difference exists in the effect of meaning-focused and focus-on-form activities on Taiwanese junior high school students’ learning grammatical points in the EFL classroom. Therefore, an independent sample t-test was used to compare the performance of the two classes on the test. The significance level was set at p< .05 for all statistical analyses. To analyze the data, the researcher utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 13.0 for Windows for all the data processing.
IV. Results and Discussion

Having collected the data, an independent t-test was performed to test if any significant difference exists between the effectiveness of focus-on-form and focus-on-meaning instruction in learning relative clauses by beginning-level EFL students. Table 1 showed the descriptive statistics and the results.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number (N)</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
<th>Standard Deviations (SD)</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus-on-form Instruction</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14.25</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus-on-meaning Instruction</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12.42</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the significance level of t value (p=.08) for this result was greater than .05, it indicated that no significant difference existed between the effectiveness of focus-on-form and focus-on-meaning instruction in this study. In other words, although the FOF group had a greater mean, this difference was not statistically significant. But as it was explained before, the test used in the study had two major sections: a recognition part in which students were required to underline the relative clauses and multiple choice items where students needed to choose the best alternative for the relative pronoun.

In the second section, students were required to produce adjective clauses in response to combination items and reading comprehension items. So, to see whether the performance of the two groups had been different on different sections of the test, the researcher tried to test if any difference existed between FOF and MF groups’ performance on the recognition part of the test, and if there was any difference between FOF and MF groups’ performance on the production part of the test.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number (N)</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
<th>Standard Deviations (SD)</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus-on-form Instruction</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>6.86</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus-on-meaning Instruction</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6.84</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 depicted the descriptive statistics and the results. According to the data, no significant difference existed—the result showed that the two groups had very close performance on the recognition part of the test. This indicated that FOF and MF instruction could not bring about differences in grammatical knowledge as far as recognition tests could measure.
Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for FOF and MF Groups’ Performance on the Production Part of the Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number (N)</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
<th>Standard Deviations (SD)</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus-on-form Instruction</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus-on-meaning Instruction</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.052</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 displayed the descriptive statistics and results of t-test. The significance level of t-value in table 4 (p=.053) showed that statistically there was no significant difference between the performance of FOF and MF groups on the production part of the test. Despite this, with regard to the significance level of t-value (p=.053), one might conclude that although the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, the FOF group had a better performance and there was even a trace for significant difference between the performance of the two groups. In sum, the results seemed to support the claim by Van Patten, (1990, cited in Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2002) that in beginning-level FOF can render better effects because these students cannot simultaneously focus on both form and meaning.

V. Conclusion

One of the current concerns of applied linguists was centered on the most effective form of grammar instruction in the second/foreign language classroom (Lightbown, 2000; Norris & Ortega, 2003). The debate has revolved around the degree to which language teachers need to direct students’ attention to understanding grammar while retaining a focus on the need to use the target language. Focus-on-form instruction derived from an assumed degree of similarity between first and second language acquisition positing that the two processes were both based on an exposure to comprehensible input arising from natural interaction, while focus-on-meaning instruction was based on the assumption that classroom second or foreign language learning derived from general cognitive processes, and thus involved the learning of a skill—a skills-learning approach (Sheen, 2002).

Concerning the effectiveness of using focus-on-form and meaning-focused instruction in beginning-level English class of junior high school in Taiwan, according to the results of this study, there was no significant difference. However, the greater means of the focus-on-form group on the total and the two subsections of the test imply that focus-on-form instruction might bring about more satisfactory results. Although the results in this study could not reach statistical significance, the findings of previous studies in literature review have attested the effectiveness of focus-on-form instruction. The reason may be the fact that the amount of exposure to comprehensible input for the learners in a foreign language settings is inadequate and especially in beginning levels this paucity of comprehensible input and the low proficiency level which make simultaneous attention to both meaning and form difficult (Van Patten, 1990 cited in Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2002) for learners may lead to a more promising role for focus-on-form instruction. In sum, this indicates the necessity
of providing ample grammatical support for all language learners to compensate for the paucity of comprehensible input. As Long (2000) proposed the focus-on-form method which integrated the strengths of both focus-on-forms and focus-on-meaning approaches since focus-on-form method was concerned with how attentional resources were allocated and involved briefly drawing students’ attention to linguistic elements in context as they arised incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus was on meaning or communication. Finally, language teachers should keep in mind as Norris and Ortega (2003) pointed out that focus-on-form should meet these criteria: designing tasks to promote learners’ engagement with meaning prior to form, seeking to attain and document task essentialness or naturalness of the target language forms, and seeking to ensure that instruction was unobtrusive.
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