Focusing on form: A teacher's research update on form-focused instruction

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Abstract

Many second/foreign language (L2/FL) teachers do not see the relevance of research to their teaching. This article aims to help bridge this gap by addressing form-focused instruction (FFI), a current pedagogical and research issue of particular interest to both teachers and students. The article begins with background from second language acquisition research and outlines two main types of FFI. Next it addresses three main topics. First, it considers the role of FFI in communicative language teaching. Second, it reviews various influences that impact whether teachers should choose to use integrated or isolated FFI in their classes. Third, it discusses the connection between error correction and focus on form in FFI. In establishing these points, the article introduces literature that argues for clear connections between FFI and L2/FL learning. In essence, this article answers the question: how does focusing on form appear to help L2/FL learning, and how can teachers encourage ESL/EFL students? The article argues that form-focused instruction makes a positive difference. Research implications are summarized on grammar and vocabulary learning, and reference is made to key resources dealing with focusing on form. Teachers should thus think about how an understanding of FFI can improve their teaching and students' learning.

Key words: ESL/EFL, focus on form, form-focused instruction, grammar, vocabulary, SLA

Background: SLA perspectives on focusing on form

Second language acquisition (SLA) is the field of research and theory in applied linguistics that deals with learning a second or foreign language. Research reveals that there are many approaches to SLA, although cognitive ones seem to continue to dominate (e.g., Gass & Selinker, 2008). Most approaches to both L2/FL teaching and learning in the literature recognize and encourage a mainly meaning-based, communicative orientation to language teaching (e.g., Brown, 2007a, 2007b). One issue of interest to both language teachers and students is the value of focusing on form during language teaching.

Spada (1997) defined "form-focused instruction" (FFI) as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (p. 73). Two main types of FFI have been discussed in recent years, namely *Focus on Form* (FonF), where attending to the linguistic elements of language is usually part of a communicative or content-based activity, and *Focus on FormS* (FonFs), where discrete linguistic structures are taught in lessons separate from communication or content, often following some kind of language syllabus (Doughty & Williams, 1998a; Ellis, 2001; Laufer, 2006), as in PPP – presentation, practice, and production (see, e.g., Harmer, 2007). More recently, Spada and Lightbown (2008, pp. 185-187) have written about this difference by distinguishing between what they call *integrated* and *isolated* form-focused instruction. These two types of FFI are outlined briefly below in Figure 1.

	Integrated Form-focused Instruction	*Isolated* Form-focused Instruction
Type	is generally *FonF*, focus on form	is generally *FonFs*, focus on forms
Primary focus	is on *meaning* within language use during L2/FL teaching	is on *the language feature* in L2/FL teaching
When form is emphasized	learners' attention is mainly focused or drawn to form *during* L2/FL communicative activities	focus is *separate* from (usually before or after) communicative or content-based activities in teaching

Figure 1 Types of FFI, their primary focus, and when form is emphasized

Spada and Lightbown (2008) are quick to point out that both "isolated and integrated FFI can include explicit feedback on error, metalinguistic terminology, the statement of rules, and explanations" (p. 187), and that this is largely a continuum, with a place for both types of FFI in various kinds of ESL/EFL classes. One example of *integrated* FFI is provided from some teacher-student interaction during a game for Grade 6 ESL students, with "is":

S1:   Is George is in the living room?
T: You said "is" two times, dear. Listen to you – you said, "Is George is in…" Look on the board. "Is George in the…." and then you say the name of the room.
S1:   Is George in the living room?
T: Yeah.
S1:   I win!   (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 167)

In *isolated* FFI, the teacher would most likely first introduce and explain the form or structure, perhaps following a grammatical or other syllabus, and then move on to exercises or activities which might enable students to practice the form being focused on.

What does the research literature on FFI seem to say?

First, one important topic is the role of FFI in communicative language teaching. With much communicative pedagogy and content-based ESL/EFL instruction (and related

research) it has become clear in recent years that beyond childhood and with classroom learning students generally "appear to benefit from FFI that helps them make more efficient use of their limited exposure to the sounds, words, and sentences of the language they are learning" (Spada & Lightbown, 2008, p. 182). One significant point evident in that quote, however, is that FFI does not just focus on grammar – the 'form' teachers and students focus on in language teaching may involve pronunciation (the sounds), vocabulary (specific words or phrases), or other types of linguistic form central to language learning (Ellis, 2008b).

In a helpful survey, Williams (2005) discusses four issues related to integrated FonF. Problematicity is a key element, as "FonF...resolves around a learner problem or difficulty" (p. 674). Overall lesson planning is also significant, as teachers need to consider "whether a technique or approach is proactive or reactive, and...the degree to which a technique or activity has a specific instructional target (i.e., a form that will be focused on)" (p. 675). Obtrusiveness concerns "the degree to which an activity or technique interrupts the flow of communication", and more specifically whether the focus on form interrupts the students' "processing of meaning" (p. 676). Finally, Williams (2005) raises the issue of responsibility, noting that until now the emphasis has been on the teacher taking responsibility for FonF, but she argues that there should be guided opportunities for learners to focus on form themselves, without teachers taking the main responsibility for highlighting form in classes (p. 679). One challenge, however, seems to be that students may simply not be aware of which forms to focus their attention on, and in most L2/FL contexts they consider that to be the teacher's role. In Doughty and Williams (1998b) the activities, tasks, and techniques offered for FFI do not really feature anywhere where the FonF is not instigated by the teacher. It is also the L2/FL teacher who is to take responsibility for the six decisions Doughty and Williams (1998b) use to organize the responses to pedagogical choices about FFI: 1) whether or not to focus, 2) to use reactive vs. proactive focus on form, 3) the particular choice of linguistic form, 4) the explicitness of the focus on form, 5) whether to use sequential (i.e., isolated) vs. integrated focus on form, and 6) the role of FonF in the course curriculum (pp. 199ff.).

Byrd (2005) summarizes recent issues on instructed grammar and suggests planning ahead to allow for FonF in the classroom, using recasts carefully and effectively, and recognizing grammar in context. FFI thus has a role in communicative language teaching, though as Brown (2007a) notes, "research on learner characteristics, styles, and strategies supports the conclusion that certain learners clearly benefit more than others from FFI" (p. 280). Teachers need to know their students and determine what FFI will best help them learn.

Second, research has revealed that there are many factors that appear to influence whether teachers should choose to use integrated or isolated FFI in their specific classes.

Following their overview of FFI, Spada and Lightbown (2008) offer nine possible influences. The first is students' first language (L1), which may influence L2/FL forms, so "isolated FFI may be needed to clarify misleading similarities between the L1 and L2" (p. 194). One example is English's typical subject, verb, object (S-V-O) order, which may be similar to or different from the usual sentence order in students' L1. Second is when salience in oral input is not clear, isolated "FFI may be beneficial with features that are relatively simple to explain or illustrate" (p. 195). One example of this is English "third-person –s." Third, input frequency is key, and isolated "FFI may also help ensure that students have opportunities to learn forms that are rare or absent" in classes or textbooks (p. 195). One instance Spada and Lightbown refer to concerns input frequency from their research and deals with the *tu/vous* distinction in French. Fourth, though sometimes difficult to distinguish, rule complexity suggests that "integrated FFI may be more suitable for complex/abstract features, such as the article system in English" (p. 196). Students thus usually need lots of exposure to and opportunities to practice the correct use of English articles during course activities. Fifth, teachers need to consider the communicative value of the form they would like to emphasize: "Integrated FFI may also be particularly useful with features in which errors are more likely to lead to communication breakdowns (e.g., English possessive pronouns *his* and *her*)" (p. 196). If the incorrect use of the specific form teachers are working with will hinder communication during pair or group work, for example, it is likely one to focus on in class.

Sixth, the learners' level of language development is important to evaluate in choosing to use integrated or isolated FFI. As students begin to use language structures, according to Spada and Lightbown (2008), "more fluent and accurate use of that feature may best be encouraged through integrated FFI," such as through "recasts (where the teacher provides the correct form) or prompts (where the teacher elicits a correction from the student)" (p. 197). Seventh, teachers should consider their students' age or stage in life: "In general, older learners…are more receptive to isolated grammatical instruction," while "children do not always recognize integrated FFI…as responses to language form rather than meaning," as adults tend to be more aware (p. 198). In general, isolated FFI may thus be useful for teaching children ESL/EFL, while older adolescent and adult students may pick up on the form in integrated FFI more easily. Eighth, teachers should consider their students' language learning aptitude. Spada and Lightbown (2008) declare that "learners who perform well on language aptitude tests or have more metalinguistic knowledge and skill in their L1 may be better able to notice and focus on language form within a communicative context" than those who don't (p. 198). Teachers need to know their students in order to use FFI well.

Ninth, and finally, Spada and Lightbown recognize that there are learner and teacher preferences for learning and teaching about form. In Schulz (2001), "virtually all students expressed a desire to have their errors corrected, but very few teachers felt this was desirable" (Spada & Lightbown, 2008, p. 199). Students who have learned language structures more traditionally may prefer isolated FFI, while those who learn languages more informally may prefer integrated FFI (see also Spada et al., 2009, and Loewen et al., 2009). Spada and Lightbown rightly note that "teachers often teach grammar in the way in which they were taught it themselves" (p. 199), and their knowledge and views of grammar usually influence their FFI approaches. Both integrated and isolated approaches to FFI are valuable, and should be used as appropriate. In essence, the implication is that it's important for ESL/EFL teachers to know their *students* (their L1s, L2/FL levels, ages, language aptitude, preferences), the *linguistic forms* they are teaching (input salience, frequency, rule complexity, communicative value) and *themselves as teachers* (their strengths, learning and teaching preferences, etc.).

Third, it is helpful to consider the connection between and value of error correction and focus on form in FFI. Focusing on form is <u>not</u> only about errors; in isolated or integrated FonF(s) it may involve introducing correct linguistic forms. However, particularly in reactive FonF, FFI may involve learners' errors. In SLA, authors like Gass and Selinker (2008) suggest that there are two types of evidence that can be useful in terms of input, interaction, and output. Positive evidence might be in the form of well-formed example sentences or models, while negative evidence may be explicit or implicit information about the incorrectness of one's language use. Gass and Selinker state that "it may be the case that negative evidence is a necessary condition for adult second language learning" because positive input alone may be insufficient (p. 347). Students can learn from their mistakes.

In terms of error correction, two useful distinctions are between 'mistakes', which reflect learners' inabilities to use what they know of the language, and 'errors', which occur when the learner doesn't know what is correct, and spoken and written contexts (see Brown, 2007b, pp. 344ff.). Written errors are clearly more permanent, their correction may be noticed more easily, and they can be responded to over time in a course. Repeated oral 'mistakes' may be corrected and explained face to face, as appropriate. In oral error correction, Lightbown and Spada (2006) emphasize the positive role of recasts. Another approach may simply be to prompt learners to notice that they have made a mistake. In discussing a process approach to FFI, Nassaji (1999, p. 396) gives one such example:

Learner: He pass his house.
Teacher: Uh.
Learner: He passed, he passed, ah, his sign. (from Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993)

Brown's (2007a) helpful framework for error treatment notes the difference between global errors that impede communication and local ones that do not, but sometimes it's hard to tell the two apart. I believe Brown rightly suggests striving for balance between politeness and dealing with learner's expectations for error correction and affect and their ego. Brown (2007a) emphasizes 1) distinguishing between a local or global problem, 2) a mistake and an error, and 3) deciding to treat or ignore the problem (pp. 273-280).

In form-focused instruction, a key principle is to correct errors in learners' written or spoken language in ways that actually help them notice and learn from their errors. As teachers we need to avoid any correction or explicit focus on form that may cause further misunderstanding. I believe it is also important to remember to provide praise and positive feedback to students on their work, whether it is oral (in class) or written (in homework, etc.). In summary, then, the implication is that teachers should provide their students with FFI opportunities for written and spoken output and interaction in their classes, as well as helpful feedback on their language use. Good error correction and focus on form is helpful.

A FFI example from vocabulary research

To show that focus on form and FFI are not just about grammar, I would like to summarize one study that specifically compared "the effectiveness of FonF and FonFs tasks for learning new L2 words" in English, with two phases (Laufer, 2006, p. 153). In Phase 1 on incidental learning, with 158 Grade 11 high school EFL students in Israel whose L1s were Hebrew or Arabic, Laufer (2006) used a reading task for the integrated FonF condition, and students could use a dictionary or consult with their teacher about 12 target words. For the isolated FonFs condition, students just received "a list of the 12 target words with their translations and explanations in English," and again they could receive clarifications from their teacher (p. 157). The time on task was identical in both cases, and at the end each group was given a drop quiz that asked them to give the meaning of the target words in English or their L1. The results showed that the isolated FonFs group that received the word list and focused tasks significantly outperformed ($p < 0.0001$) the group that had completed the reading and used a dictionary as they did so (Laufer, 2006, p. 158).

After Phase I, for Phase II (the next 90 minute class) on intentional learning all participants in both conditions "received a list of the 12 target words with definitions of meaning, examples, and translations" and were told to "spend 15 minutes on memorizing the words and their meanings for an upcoming test" (p. 158). On the first test, of active knowledge, L1 translations of the target words were given, and "learners had to provide the target L2 words" in English. After that test, papers were collected and then students received

a second test, which was the same as the one in Phase 1 (passive knowledge, translating/explaining the L1 words in English). "The same two tests were repeated two weeks later," as delayed post-tests (Laufer, 2006, p. 159).

The results for Phase I revealed that "the Focus on FormS condition yielded significantly higher results than Focus on Form: 72% as opposed to 47% of word meanings were retained" (p. 160). Yet after Phase II of the study, differences "disappeared and similar results emerged in the two groups" for immediate and delayed recall (p. 161). Laufer therefore concluded that FFI is "indispensable for L2 vocabulary learning," and since "learners cannot be expected to study all vocabulary for tests" an isolated focus on forms (FonFs) approach is particularly useful (p. 149). The implication of this study is that both integrated and isolated FFI are useful for EFL vocabulary learning, and an isolated FonFs approach to intentional learning and teaching (and memorization) of specific vocabulary items may be helpful (see also Laufer & Girsai, 2008, on contrastive analysis and vocabulary, and Laufer, 2009, for a research timeline on FFI and vocabulary acquisition).

Conclusion

SLA perspectives on focus on form in FFI offer insights into L2/FL learning and teaching, and I have noted three main points here and summarized one specific research study. I believe that one main value of the research literature is that it reminds us that FFI can be effective for learning *various* types of linguistic forms, including vocabulary.

Although Krashen (2003) or others may see little value in formal language instruction, and FFI in particular, there is ample evidence in the SLA literature that focusing on form in ESL/EFL teaching is effective (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2001; Spada, in press), although the results may not be evident immediately, and both integrated FonF and isolated FonFs instruction are effective (Ellis, 2008a, pp. 900-902). One recent study by Loewen and Reissner (2009) further confirms the role of the teacher in FFI. Theorists such as Dornyei (2009) suggest that "the jury is still out on…useful guidelines that teachers can follow in their everyday classroom practice" for FFI (p. 285), but there are nonetheless guidelines (as above), and recent articles and books that are accessible and useful in helping classroom ESL/EFL teachers think through SLA perspectives on focusing on form in FFI within a communicative approach to L2/FL education (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998b; Nassaji, 1999; Fotos & Nassaji, 2007; Spada, in press; Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Williams, 2005).

Echoing the research here and referenced below, helpful focus on form in form-focused instruction takes into consideration the whole learner and is used by teachers who are aware of their preferences, and thus are better able to help their students learn ESL/EFL.

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