

Incidental Focus on Form Techniques in Iranian EFL Classrooms: A Comparison between Expert and Novice Teachers

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to test whether there is an association between teachers' level of experience and frequency and type of FFEs they use in EFL classes. Also, it investigated the distribution of FFEs across two different proficiency levels, which were elementary and pre-intermediate. Six teachers (three experienced and three less experienced) participated in this study. Thirty-six classes were audio-recorded, with six sessions for each teacher. Then data was first transcribed, codified, and was then analyzed statistically. The results of statistical analysis revealed that less-experienced teachers used FFEs more frequently than experienced teachers. Also with regard to level of proficiency, both groups of teachers were found to use more FFEs at pre-intermediate level. It was also found out that more experienced teachers were different in terms of type of FFEs compared with their novice counterparts. These findings may have implications for teacher training programs.

Keywords: Focus on form, Preemptive focus on form, Reactive focus on form, Teacher experience, Corrective feedback.

1. Introduction

Focus on form has been one of the hotly- debated issues over past decades. Considerable number of studies has examined the probability of integrating form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in the second language acquisition, (Ellis, 2001 and Skehan, 1998). In form- focused instruction there is some attempts to draw learners' attention to linguistic form while meaning-focused instruction requires learners to attend to the context or what they want to communicate (Ellis, 2001). Focus on form enables learners to take time out from a focus on meaning and notice linguistic items in the input, thereby overcoming a potential obstacle of purely meaning- focused lessons in which linguistic forms may go unnoticed (Loewen, 2003).

2. Literature Review

Long (1991) believes that attention to form should be incorporated with meaning-focused activities, and calls this approach focus on form . He offers the following definition of focus on form: "Focus on form . . . overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991:45-46. cited in Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001a). He claims that focus on form takes place when learners participate in interactions in which communication problems arise, and this leads them to negotiate for meaning. Doughty and Varela (1998) suggest that the aim of focus on form instruction is to add attention to linguistic properties of a communicative task rather than to depart from the communicative objective, so it is effective.

Focus on form is sometimes compared with form-focused instruction. Spada (1997) defines form-focused instruction as "

pedagogical events which occur within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction but in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways"(Spada, 1997:73). Spada believes that form-focused instruction can be preplanned or incidental; and this is different from Long's original definition in which focus on form is incidental. But since other researchers, for example Doughty and Williams (1998a), have expanded the definition of focus on form to include preplanned activities, their initial difference is not considered. Ellis (2001) conceptualizes form-focused instruction as "any planned or incidental activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form"(Ellis, 2001:1-2; cited in Mackey, Polio, and McDonough, 2004). He also claims that focus on form can be categorized into three types of form-focused instruction, depending on (a) where the primary focus of attention is to be placed and (b) how attention to form is distributed in the instruction (Mackey, Polio, and McDonough, 2004).

The first type of form-focused instruction is focus on forms. According to Long (1991), focus on forms is nothing but the traditional structural syllabus in which linguistic forms are isolated in order to be taught and tested one at a time. The second type of form-focused instruction is planned focus on form. Ellis (2001) categorized focus on form into planned and incidental focus on form. Planned focus on form involves the use of communicative tasks designed to elicit preselected forms in a meaning-centered context. The third type of form-focused instruction is incidental focus on form. In incidental focus on form, attention is given to linguistic problems as they arise spontaneously in the course of instruction and have not been explicitly chosen for teaching. Particularly, it involves the use of unfocused communicative tasks designed to elicit general samples of the language rather than specific forms (Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2002).

Ellis et al. (2001b: 294) define a Focus on Form Episode (FFE) as the unit of analysis in incidental focus on form studies. Each (FFE) includes "the discourse from the point where the attention to linguistic form starts to the point where it ends, due to a change in topic back to message or sometimes another focus on form". He further distinguishes two types of incidental focus on form episodes: preemptive and reactive episodes.

2.1. Preemptive FFEs

Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001a: 414) define preemptive focus on form as occurring when teacher or learner initiates attention to form "even though no actual problem in production has arisen". Ellis et al. (2001a) distinguish between teacher-initiated focus on form in which the teacher asks questions or gives information about particular linguistic items and student-initiated focus on form in which students raise questions about linguistic items. In teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form teachers interrupt the flow of a communicative activity to draw students' attention to a particular form. They do this because they consider it acceptable on the ground that the form in question may be problematic to some students (Farrokhi, Ansarin, and Mohammadnia, 2008). Teachers differ in terms of their use of teacher-initiated focus on form based on their opinion about communicative tasks. Some teachers prefer keeping the flow of communication so they do not interrupt frequently. Others, on the other hand, intervene frequently because they consider explicit learning necessary for communicative activities to be accomplished in the class.

Alcon and Garcia Mayo (2007) report that teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form directs learners' selective attention to linguistic features, which results in learners' noticing; and according to Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis, this is fundamental for learning. Several studies have examined this kind of preemptive focus on form. These studies suggest that student-initiated focus on form seems to be more beneficial for learners because students themselves initiate them, so it focuses on gaps in the students' linguistic knowledge (Loewen, 2003). One disadvantage of student-initiated preemptive focus on form is that it can distract students' attention away from the communicative activity. This is why some teachers refuse to answer some of students' questions. Moreover, since learners are different their gaps will be different too and this causes some teachers to ignore some of questions that are asked in the class (Zhao, 2005).

2.2. Reactive FFEs

In reactive focus on form, the teacher perceives the learners' utterance as inaccurate or inappropriate and draws their attention to the problematic feature through negative feedback. So, reactive focus on form is known as error correction, corrective feedback, or negative evidence/feedback in different studies (Long, 1996). Feedback can be positive or negative. Positive feedback affirms that a learner response to an activity is correct. It may signal the veracity of the content of a learner utterance or the linguistic correctness of the utterance. Negative feedback signals, in one way or another, that the learner's utterance lacks veracity or is linguistically deviant. In other words, it is corrective in intent (Ellis, 2009).

Corrective feedback has recently attracted many researchers in SLA. On theoretical ground there are different views on the role of corrective feedback in SLA. Krashen (1982, 1985) is one of those researchers who believe that corrective feedback is not only useless but also harmful because it disrupts the flow of discourse. On the other hand there are many studies that show the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Schmidt (1990), Swain (1998), and Long (1996) are among

those researchers who assign a facilitative role to feedback. They argue that corrective feedback draws learners' attention to form, and this noticing to form helps them to recognize the gap between their interlanguage and target language. Van Patten (2003) suggests that corrective feedback in the form of negotiating for meaning can help learners notice their errors and create form-meaning connections, and this facilitates acquisition (Ellis 2009).

Lyster and Ranta (1997) investigated different types of reactive focus on form in teacher-student interaction in French immersion classrooms. They distinguished six types of feedback:

1. Explicit correction (i.e., the teacher supplies the correct form and clearly indicates that what the student said was incorrect).
2. Recasts (i.e., the teacher implicitly reformulates all or part of the student's utterance, minus the error).
3. Clarification requests (i.e., the teacher indicates to students that their utterance has been misunderstood by the teacher and a repetition or reformulation is needed).
4. Metalinguistic feedback (i.e., the teacher provides comments or questions related to the well formedness of the student's utterance).
5. Elicitation (i.e., the teacher directly elicits a reformulation from the students).
6. Repetition (i.e., the teacher repeats the student's ill-formed utterance, adjusting intonation to highlight the error).

Lyster (1998) collapsed the six feedback types used in Lyster and Ranta (1997) into the following three categories: explicit correction, recasts, and the negotiation of form. In this classification system, the negotiation of form contains the former categories of elicitation, metalinguistic cues, clarification requests, and repetitions. In negotiation of form, the teacher withholds correct form and prompts students to retrieve correct forms from what they already know. Because of this unique feature, Lyster (2001) classified these feedback types as 'prompts'.

More recently, researchers have developed hierarchical taxonomies of strategies based on a theoretical view of how corrective feedback works for acquisition. In the case of written corrective feedback, the key distinction is between direct, indirect, and metalinguistic forms of correction (see Ellis, 2009). In the case of oral corrective feedback, two key distinctions are made: (1) explicit vs. implicit corrective feedback and (2) input-providing vs. output-prompting corrective feedback (Lyster, 2004; Ellis, 2009).

Farrokhi (2005a) also proposed a more comprehensible and applicable classification of feedback types which is summarized as follows:

- Unmarked recasts (i.e., teacher's implicit corrective reformulation of student's non-target like form)
- Marked recasts (i.e., teacher's corrective reformulation and highlighting or marking the reformulation)
- Explicit correction (i.e., teacher's direct treatment of students' non-target like form by explanation, definition, examples, etc.)
- Negotiated feedback (i.e., teacher provides students with signals to facilitate peer- and self-correction).

Clearly type of corrective feedback used by teachers and the uptake shown by learners depends on different factors, for example context of the study, whether it is ESL or EFL, (Zhao, 2005). Sheen (2004) has compared teachers' feedback and learners' uptake in different EFL and ESL classrooms. Other researchers have investigated the relationship between learners' age and feedback types (e.g., Oliver, 2000; Mackey et al. 2003). Another important issue regarding corrective feedback is teachers' characteristics and beliefs that directly influence their choice of different types of feedback in their classes. One of these characteristics is teachers' level of experience.

2.3. Teachers' level of experience

Since incidental focus on form techniques are online decisions that teachers make in classroom, teachers' level of experience plays an important role in their use of incidental focus on form techniques. Pica and Long (1986) investigated the classroom discourse of L2 teachers with different levels of experience. They observed that there were no significant differences between experienced and less experienced teachers' use of reactive focus on form. However, Mackey et al. (2004) suggest that teachers' use of incidental focus on form techniques is closely related with teachers' experience and education. They argue that experienced ESL teachers utilize more incidental focus on form techniques than novice teachers.

The differences observed in studies addressing the role of teacher experience in use of incidental focus on form techniques highlight the need for more research in this area. In addition in these studies ESL classes have been investigated. So, the purpose of the present study is to address the association between teachers' experience and the type and frequency of incidental focus on form techniques they use in EFL classrooms in Iran. To meet this objective, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated:

3. Method

3.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: Are there any significant differences in type and frequency of incidental focus on form techniques used by less experienced vs. experienced EFL teachers?

H01: There are no significant differences between less experienced and experienced EFL teachers in terms of type and frequency of incidental focus on form techniques they use.

H1: There are significant differences between less experienced and experienced EFL teachers in terms of type and frequency of incidental focus on form techniques the use.

RQ2: Are there any significant differences in type and frequency of incidental focus on form techniques used by less experienced and experienced EFL teacher across proficiencies?

H02: There are no significant differences between less experienced and experienced EFL teachers in terms of type and frequency of incidental focus on form techniques they use across proficiencies.

H2: There are significant differences between less experienced and experienced EFL teachers in terms of type and frequency of incidental focus on form techniques they use across proficiencies.

3.2. Participants

Teachers

Six teachers participated in this study. All teachers were non-native speakers of English with at least BA degree in English Language Teaching or Literature and had gone through Teacher Training Courses (TTCs) in the institute in which they taught. They were divided into two groups as follows:

- Experienced teachers: teachers who have more than 8 years of teaching experience.
- Less-experienced teachers: those teachers who have less than 3 years of teaching experience.

Learners

Twenty- four EFL classes were audio recorded. The classes ranged in size from ten to fifteen students from both genders. Their ages varied from 15 to 25. The English proficiency of the learners, as was revealed by their course books, was either elementary or pre-intermediate. They learn English in two language institutes located in Tabriz, Iran. The syllabus in these institutes is a meaning-based one that provides students with different opportunities to take part in communicative activities. The course books taught in these institutes are *Interchange* series (Richard et al., 2005).

3.3. Procedures

First of all a questionnaire was prepared to collect teachers' personal information, including their experience as EFL teachers and different levels they have taught. Then their classroom interactions were audio-recorded using an MP3 recorder. For each teacher an average of 6 hours of communicatively oriented classroom interactions was recorded. After recording classes, FFEs were identified and transcribed and coded according to Ellis'(2001) categorization of focus on form types as reactive or preemptive. Farrokhi's (2005a) classification of different types of corrective feedback was also used to code different kinds of reactive FFEs.

Then frequencies and percentages of each FFE types were calculated for each teacher, for both elementary and pre-intermediate level. Yates chi-square analysis was performed in order to test whether there was an association between the two variables, namely teachers' level of experience and FFEs they used in their classes.

4. Results

4.1. Teachers' experience and their use of FFEs

In order to find out whether there existed a statistically significant association between FFE types and teachers' experience, the chi-square test was used. The result ($X^2 = 22.22$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.05$) revealed that there is a statistically significant association. So the first null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is confirmed. This suggests that experienced teachers are different from less-experienced teachers in terms of type and frequency of FFEs they use in their classes. Table 1 shows the distribution of FFEs in all teachers' classes.

< Table 1 about here >

4.2. Proficiency level and frequency of FFEs

The chi-square test was used to find out whether there is a statistically significant association between experienced and less-experienced teachers' use of FFEs and proficiency levels. The result ($X^2=12.23$, $df=5$, $p<0.05$) showed that there is a significant association. So in the case of second research question, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of FFEs across proficiencies.

< Table 2 about here >

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As different tables show, experienced teachers were different from less-experienced teachers in terms of type and frequency of incidental FFEs they used in their classes. With regard to the overall frequency of FFEs, less-experienced teachers used more FFEs comparing with experienced ones. This finding is in sharp contrast with Mackey et al. (2004) who suggest that experienced teachers utilize more incidental focus on form techniques than novice teachers. But it should be noted that they investigated the ESL classrooms and this study is done in an EFL context.

In terms of type of FFEs both experienced and less-experienced teachers used reactive FFEs more than preemptive FFEs. This contrasts with Ellis et al.'s (2001a) research which dealt with both student-initiated and teacher-initiated preemptive incidental focus on form. It was found in that research that preemptive incidental focus on form occurred as frequently as reactive incidental focus on form in communicative ESL classrooms. In the case of preemptive FFEs, SIPFFE had a lower frequency in comparison with TIPFFE. This finding is in line with Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) and Mohammadnia (2008) who also reported a low rate of SIPFFE in comparison with TIPFFE. This can be due to cultural background, classroom atmosphere, and personal factors. Another reason for low frequency of SIPFFE in this study is the face-threatening nature of SIPFFE.

The second research question focused on the frequency and type of incidental FFEs used by experienced and less-experienced EFL teachers across proficiencies. In this case, both groups of teachers used more FFEs at pre-intermediate level. With regard to preemptive FFEs, both groups of teachers have used more TIPFFE at elementary level. However, the frequency of SIPFFE has somehow increased from elementary to pre-intermediate level. This is in contrast with Mohammadnia (2008) who suggests that teachers do not differentiate between levels of proficiency. She investigated the occurrence of TIPFFE in EFL classes across two proficiencies (elementary and advanced).

In the case of reactive FFEs, or corrective feedback types, both groups of teachers have used more reactive FFEs at pre-intermediate level than at elementary level. This is in line with other studies. For example, Han (2002) and Philip (2003) believe that learners must be developmentally ready to notice the target structure (Han, 2002; Philip, 2003; cited in Li, 2009). It also should be noticed that the difference between their uses of RFFE across two levels is more noticeable in the case of experienced teachers. It may be due to their teaching experience. After at least eight years of teaching, now they know that it is better to encourage students in lower level rather than de-motivating them by addressing their errors.

6. Implementations

This study described what teachers actually do in EFL classroom with regard to focus on form instruction. Some pedagogical implementations can be derived from this study. Since some focus on form techniques provide learners with more learning opportunities, they can help teacher training programs (TTCs) to equip teachers with knowledge of different types of focus on form techniques that they can use in their classes. Also some workshops can be held for teachers to show them the ways in which they can integrate different FFEs into their classroom activities.

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Table 1. Distribution of FFEs in all teachers' classes

FFEs Teacher	TIPFF	SIPFF	Explicit RFF	Marked Recast	Unmarked Recast	Negotiated Feedback	Row Total
Experienced Teachers	51	25	44	39	56	24	239
Less-experienced Teachers	85	32	46	124	96	68	451
Column total	136	57	90	163	152	92	Grand Total 690

Table 2. Distribution of FFEs across proficiencies

Proficiency \ FFEs	TIPFF	SIPFF	Explicit RFF	Marked Recast	Unmarked Recast	Negotiated Feedback	Row Total
Elementary	81	26	45	66	69	40	327
Pre-Intermediate	55	31	45	97	83	52	363
Column Total	136	57	90	163	152	92	Grand Total
							690

Appendix: Samples of FFEs*Extract 1: Teacher-initiated preemptive FFE*

T: who is a COLUMNIST? A person, who writes in a newspaper. He or she answers people's letters.

Extract 2: Student-initiated preemptive FFE

S: What is CARPENTER?

T: A person, who makes things with wood, woks with wood, makes doors, etc.

Extract 3: Explicit reactive FFE (Explicit correction)

S: I WANNA to visit the US.

T: NOT wanna to! Wanna means want to.

Extract 4: Marked recast

S: I was a little STRESS.

T: STRESSFUL.

Extract 5: Unmarked recast

S: We went BY friends.

T: You went WITH your friends. And then what did you do?

Extract 6: Negotiated feedback

S: Yesterday my grandmother IS at home.

T: Yesterday?!

S: WAS at home.