

The Role of Form-focused Feedback on Developing Students' Writing Skill

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Abstract—Current interest in focus on form feedback is motivated in part by the findings of immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies that suggest when classrooms in second language learning is entirely meaning-focused, some linguistic features do not ultimately develop to target-like levels. It seems that attention to form has positive effect in negotiation of meaning. Also attempt to produce the target language – output – encourages learners to notice their linguistic problems precisely. This study tries to find out the role of form-focused feedback on developing writing skill. The result of comparing three writing groups shows that writing skill of those students who received form focused feedback improved considerably.

Index Terms—focus-on form, focus-on forms, writing skill

I. INTRODUCTION

Both teachers and students feel that teacher-written feedback is an important part of the writing process. This is especially true for second language (L2) writing since the goal of (L2) writing is often to teach both the conventions of writing in a particular culture as well as (L2) grammatical forms. Some teachers correct the grammar of their students' written work in the belief that this will help them improve the accuracy of subsequent writing. Other teachers, however, may provide grammatical, lexical, and mechanical correction principally for a different purpose. These teachers believe that giving certain kinds of corrective feedback helps their students to improve the communicative effectiveness of a particular piece of writing. This issue of feedback on learner's language errors has been examined in terms of negative evidence by linguists, as corrective feedback by second language teachers, as repair by discourse analysts, negative feedback by psychologists, and focus on form in second language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 1994; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Current interest in focus on form feedback is motivated in part by the findings of immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies that suggest when a classroom in second language learning is entirely experiential and meaning-focused, some linguistic features do not ultimately develop to target-like levels. They believe that attention to form has positive effect in negotiation of meaning (Swain, 1993). There are different ideas on feedback in second language acquisition.

Long (1998, as cited in Doughty & Williams, 1998) distinguished between focus on forms and focus on form. Focus on forms, which is a synthetic approach to language, studies language elements, but focus on form overtly draws students attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication.

Lightbown and Spada (1994) found that learners who received the most focus on form were most accurate in their use of the possessive determiners (his and her).

Rivers (1980) believes that individual efforts at writing should be read by the teacher as soon as possible after completion, then corrected and sometimes rewritten by students without delay. A great deal of uncorrected writing is merely a waste of time and it may cause fossilization of errors in students' mind.

The term form-focused instruction (FFI) is defined by Ellis (2001, p. 2) as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form". It serves as a generic term for analytic teaching, focus on form, focus on forms, corrective feedback/error correction, and negotiation of form. The term form-focused instruction is used to describe both approaches to teaching forms based on artificial syllabuses, as well as more communicative approaches, where attention to form arises out of activities that are primarily meaning-focused (cf. Long & Robinson, 1998). FFI comprises two subcategories, namely: focus-on-forms and focus-on-form instruction.

II. LEARNING AND TEACHING GRAMMAR

Although grammatical knowledge is necessary, it should not "be learned for its own sake" (Stranks, 2003, p. 338). Sometimes, grammar exercises fail students because they present highly contrived sentences and make the students to

internalize them in out of context forms. Some textbooks usually contain some isolated sentence-level exercises and students are expected to learn the grammar points without linking them to their functions in meaningful situations. However, if instructors contextualize grammar points, the students can also learn the social use of the language and develop their sociolinguistic and discoursal competence besides their linguistic competence. The university students have already studied grammar at school, so that they only need to put their knowledge into use.

As Ellis (2006, p. 86) argues, “there is now convincing indirect and direct evidence to support the teaching of grammar.” In fact, explicit presentation of grammar can facilitate and speed up learning, and provide input for noticing patterns and communicative use as well as stylistic variation of language. To this end, Brown (2000, p. 280) emphasizes that “form-focused instruction” can boost students’ proficiency and help to strengthen their communicative competence. However, Long (2001, p. 183) stresses “focus on form rather than focus on forms.” That is, focus on form is non-interfering and the students’ attention is drawn to grammatical forms whenever necessary during the lessons where the emphasis is on use, meaning and communication. But in focus on forms the stress is mainly on language forms to the exclusion of their function in discourse environment. At this juncture, the main issue is which grammatical items should be included in a textbook and how they should be sequenced. The number of grammatical forms is practically large. Ellis (2006, p. 87) also states that “the choice of which grammatical structures to teach is controversial.” The general consensus is that the grammar points can be selected and sequenced from simple to complex. Meanwhile Ellis (*ibid.*) suggests that it is better “to base selection on the known errors produced by learners.”

The instructors had better focus on the form of the language when the need arises. It is because the form of the language is as important as its function. If the students acquire the correct grammatical structure of the language, they can be able to produce accurate sentences and utterances. If the form and function of the language are not internalized concurrently, the students will not be able to use language in written or spoken discourse. In fact, there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar will be meaningless. So, it is advisable that the instructors provide the students with clear and elaborate explanations of language rules and enough examples. However, grammar cannot be acquired in out of context sentences and in vacuum.

III. FOCUS-ON-FORMS INSTRUCTION

Focus-on-forms (FonFS) instruction is informed by a strong interface view and occurs when parts of a grammar are taught as discrete units in order of their linguistic complexity. This is the traditional approach to grammar teaching and is based on an artificially reproduced as opposed to an organic syllabus. In this approach, language is treated as an object to be studied and language teaching is viewed to be an activity to be practiced systematically. Furthermore, learners are seen as students rather than users of the language (Ellis, 2001, p. 14).

IV. FOCUS-ON-FORM INSTRUCTION

Focus-on-form (FonF) instruction, which draws on a weak interface view, involves strategies that draw learners’ attention to the form or properties of target structure within a meaningful context. This is done primarily with structures that are potentially difficult, that are learnable according to the stages put forward in Pienemann’s teachability hypothesis (Lightbown & Spada, 1994, p. 207), and that are likely to be used or needed in future communication.

FFI (form-focused instruction) techniques draw attention to target language features that learners would otherwise not use or even notice in communicatively oriented classroom input. Unlike more traditional language instruction, form-focused instruction entails “a set of psycholinguistically motivated pedagogic options” (Ellis, 2001, p. 12) that are considered most effective when implemented in communicative contexts to ensure that learners will be able to transfer what they learn in the classroom to communicative interaction outside the classroom.

Swain (1993) proposed that modified output is representation of the leading edge of a learner’s interlanguage. Swain emphasized the role of output maintaining that the attempt to produce the target language encourages learners to notice their linguistic problems precisely, to test hypotheses, and to promote the reflection that enables them to control and internalize linguistic knowledge.

Swain (1993, as cited in Lyster & Ranta, 1997) described gaps in immersion pedagogy in the following way:

1- comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for successful L2 learning; comprehensible output is also required, involving, on one hand, ample opportunities for student’s output and, on the other, the provision of useful and consistent feedback from teachers and peers.

2- subject matter teaching does not on its own provide adequate language teaching; language used to convey subject matter needs to be highlighted in ways that make certain features more salient for learners (p. 41).

Long and Robinson (1998) stated that explicit corrective feedback provides learners with a meta-linguistic explanation or overt error correction; on the other hand, implicit corrective feedback indirectly and incidentally informs learner’s non-target like use of certain linguistic features.

Doughty (as cited in Doughty & Williams, 1998) found that without noticing learning is impossible. Focus on form may not be absolutely necessary but it can speed up natural acquisition processes.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) developed an observational scheme which describes different types of feedback that examines student uptake, i.e. how they immediately respond to the feedback.

- 1- Explicit correction refers to the explicit provision of correct form.
- 2- Recasts involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error.
- 3- Clarification involves repetition or a reformulation of student's ill-formed utterance.
- 4- Metalinguistic feedback contains either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form.
- 5- Elicitation refers to teacher's techniques to directly elicit the correct form from students.
- 6- Repetition refers to the teacher's repetition of the student's erroneous utterance.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) noted that recasts were the most common type of feedback. However, they asserted that other types of feedback, such as clarification, elicitation, and metalinguistic feedback are more likely to lead to immediate self-correction.

Johnson (as cited in Saeidi, 2007) suggested that the instructional sequence is best seen as "learn-perform-learn" rather than the traditional sequence of "learn-perform". During and after the "perform" stage, learners must have the opportunity to receive feedback. This feedback should consist of mistake correction, i.e. negative evidence about the misuse of features that the learners already have knowledge of but cannot yet use automatically.

Form-focused instruction refers to "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (Lightbown & Spada, 1994, p. 73). Form-focused instruction differs from the traditional grammar translation method because target forms are usually introduced during communicative interaction or embedded in meaning-based tasks and are thus expected to be retrieved more easily in similar communicative contexts. In contrast, the grammar points presented in a traditional decontextualized manner may be remembered in similar contexts, such as a discrete-point grammar test, but difficult to retrieve in a communicative context.

The extent to which knowledge gained from explicit instruction can, over time, become part of a second language (L2) learner's underlying system of implicit knowledge, and thus available for spontaneous language production, is still an open question. Some L2 acquisition theorists clearly downplay the role of explicit instruction in favor of a more implicit and incidental language learning (e.g. Long & Robinson, 1998). However, reviews of empirical studies show that explicit attention to form in communicative contexts is more effective.

V. STUDY

By defining the meaning of focus on form and regarding different points of view on feedback, it is clear that for developing students' writing skill we need form-focused feedback. The purpose of this study is to develop students' writing skill by providing form-focused feedback. Therefore, the present study intends to show in which groups (experimental or control) students' writing skill will improve.

Research in the area of form-focused instruction is of interest to both researchers and teachers, because it allows researchers to develop and test theories of L2 acquisition and yet has as a primary goal of identifying the effective pedagogical practice (Ellis, 2001). Accordingly, this article aims to present an analysis of five classroom-based studies on form-focused instruction and to identify effective pedagogical options in the light of two well-known theoretical orientations: the interaction hypothesis and cognitive theory.

VI. METHOD

A. Participants

Sixty English as a foreign language learners (EFL) who took part in the study were students at Tabriz Worker House English Institute, Tabriz, Iran. Based on their scores on the internal language program proficiency test, the learners were assessed as being at pre-intermediate level. The learners were randomly distributed into three intact writing groups of control, the first experimental (E1), and the second experimental (E2) group. Approximately, all of the learners in the study reported taking the TOEFL exam. Their scores ranged from 420 to 500, with a mean score of 489.5. The ages of the learners ranged from 18 to 41, with an average age of 24.2. The majority of the learners were natives of East Azerbaijan, mostly from Tabriz city. All the learners were level four students. The learners came from various first language backgrounds, including Azeri and Persian.

B. Instruments

The main instructional materials which were used in this institute were *Interchange* books, each unit of book consists of different sections: reading, listening, writing, etc. The focus was on writing section of this book. The learners were asked to write composition on topics in the writing section. All classes followed communicative approach in which both accuracy and fluency were considered to be significant. The classes met three times a week. Each lesson lasted about 90 minutes. Each class lasted for about six weeks. The four language skills were taught in an integrated manner.

C. Design

The design of this study was quasi-experimental – intact group design with pre-test, post-test, and control group. The control group was not exposed to any kind of treatment. The experimental (E1) group was exposed to meaning-based feedback (i.e. attention was on meaning not grammatical errors), but the second experimental group (E2) received form-

focused feedback (i.e. attention was on both meaning and form). To find the difference between these three groups, the researchers used one-way ANOVA to compare means. The researchers also used Paired sample t-test to find differences in pre-test and post-test results.

D. Procedure

The researchers in this study used three classes. At the beginning of the program the learners' compositions were collected and Anderson's analytic scoring for scoring the papers without giving any kind of feedback were used (Hughes, 2003). The learners' scores in this stage were considered as pre-test scores. Then, in one class, which was selected as experimental (E2), the learners were asked to write about titles, which were in *Interchange* book's writing section. The learners were given form-focused feedback (i.e. six types of corrected feedback were used as mentioned by Lyster and Ranta, 1997) to their written compositions. At the end of the program, on the final exam, the learners were again asked to write a composition on three titles that they had worked before in the class and they had received form-focused feedback for those compositions. The results of the learners' mean scores are available in Table 2 as post-test and pre-test scores in result section. Here are some samples of the learners' compositions who received form-focused feedback during class writing activities:

Student: I have twenty years old.

Teacher: when you speak about your age, you must use TO BE verbs. Then you must write:

I am twenty years old.

→ EXPLICIT CORRECTION

Student: my sister can cooks food.

Teacher: my sister can cook food.

→ RECASTS

Student: I like to reading.

Teacher: to reading?

→ REPITITION

Student: I am a reseptionist.

Teacher: are you sure about spelling?

→ METALINGUISTIC

Student: If I were a police officer, I would fine people.

Teacher: you would fine people, if you...?

→ ELICITATION

Student: I want to talk about our base fifty years ago.

Teacher: About what?

→ CLARIFICATION

The experimental (E1) class wrote the same topics as the E2, but the focus was only on the ideas and content of compositions. Grammatical errors were not important. The result of the learners' mean scores on the final exam is available in Table 3 in the results section.

The control group worked on the same compositions as the experimental groups, but they did not receive any kind of feedback. Their compositions were scored holistically.

VII. RESULTS

According to the means of error correction in different feedback types, explicit correction had the highest mean (19.79), whereas the other feedback types, though close to each other, were lower on this measure. However, the frequency of recast type of feedback is more than the other types but it leads to less development on writing skill by mean of (12.87). It should be clarified that total number of errors and error types were not counted. It was considered that the total number of errors and error types had little relevance to main objectives of this study.

According to table 1, recasts were used with the highest frequency (38.7%). The second most frequently used feedback was explicit correction (19.4%). The third most frequently used feedback was metalinguistic (16.1%). The fourth most frequently used feedback was elicitation (12.9%), and repetition and clarification had the least frequency (6.5%).

TABLE 1
FEEDBACK

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	recast	12	19.7	38.7
	explicit corection	6	9.8	19.4
	meta linguistic	5	8.2	16.1
	elicitatin	4	6.6	12.9
	repitition	2	3.3	6.5
	clarification	2	3.3	6.5
	Total	31	50.8	100.0
Missing	System	30	49.2	
Total		61	100.0	

According to the findings of table 2 the means of scores in post-test is 15.11. That is more than pre-test scores. The number of students who participated in the study was sixty. The relationship between the two tests with the mean score = - 1.58, (df) = 59, $p < .001$ is valuable.

TABLE 2
PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test average	13.5333	60	2.59378	.33486
	POST	15.1167	60	2.70650	.34941

PAIRED SAMPLES TEST

PAIRED SAMPLES TEST									
		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	pretest average - POST	-1.5833	3.39137	.43782	-2.4594	-.7072	-3.616	59	.001

According to the results of table 3, gained by ANOVA test, the experimental (E2) group which received form-focused feedback did better on the written exam. The (E2) group's mean is (17.76) and (E1) group has mean of (14.66), and control group, which did not receive any kind of feedback, has the mean of (11.93). The obtained data by (df) = 2 and $p < .001$ is valuable.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVES

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1.00	15	14.6667	1.63299	.42164	13.7623	15.5710	13.00	20.00
2.00	30	17.7667	1.67504	.30582	17.1412	18.3921	14.00	20.00
3.00	15	11.9333	1.90738	.49248	10.8771	12.9896	10.00	15.00
Total	60	15.5333	2.98281	.38508	14.7628	16.3039	10.00	20.00

1 = first experimental (E1), 2 = second experimental (E2), 3 = control

ANOVA

POST

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	208.550	2	104.275	26.578	.000
Within Groups	223.633	57	3.923		
Total	432.183	59			

According to the findings of table 4, it appears that explicit correction with a mean of (19.79) provides learners with the highest opportunity for self-correction and developing writing skill. After clarification with the mean of (16.50), it provides learners with the highest opportunity for self-correction and developing writing skill. Repetition with the mean of (15.50) and elicitation with the mean of (14.00) have less effect on developing students' writing skill. At the end, recast with the mean of (12.83) has the least effect on developing students' writing skill.

TABLE 4
DESCRIPTIVES

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
recast	12	12.8333	2.40580	.69449	11.3048	14.3619	10.00	17.00
explicit correction	6	19.7917	.40052	.16351	19.3713	20.2120	19.00	20.00
meta linguistic	5	12.4000	2.19089	.97980	9.6797	15.1203	10.00	14.00
elicitation	4	14.0000	.00000	.00000	14.0000	14.0000	14.00	14.00
repetition	2	15.5000	.70711	.50000	9.1469	21.8531	15.00	16.00
clarification	2	16.5000	.70711	.50000	10.1469	22.8531	16.00	17.00
Total	31	14.6694	3.25665	.58491	13.4748	15.8639	10.00	20.00

ANOVA

POST

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	233.505	5	46.701	13.789	.000
Within Groups	84.669	25	3.387		
Total	318.173	30			

This study by $X^2 = 46.70$, (df) = 5, $P < .001$ confirms that there is a statistical significant difference between different types of form-focused feedback, suggesting that feedback types have different effect on developing students' writing skill.

VIII. DISCUSSION

As one can see in the result, the researchers found out that there is a direct relationship between Form-focused feedback and improving student writing skill. It seems that in this way students pay more attention to linguistic elements, so accuracy and fluency of the text is observed. As Long and Robinson (1998) believed and noted that focus on form overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. Writing composition and receiving feedback from teacher and peers also helps students to be aware of linguistic elements. As Swain (1993) notes, comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for successful L2 learning; comprehensible output is also required, involving, on the one hand, ample opportunities for learners' output and, on the other, the provision of useful and consistent feedback from teachers and peers.

As one can see the result of pre-test and post-test, students who received form-focused feedback (E2) have improved their writing more than the other groups who did not have access to form-focused feedback.

According to the results shown in Table 1, the researchers found that among the six different corrective feedback types employed by the teacher, recasts were the most frequently used feedback type, though recasts elicited the least repair and the most no-uptake from the students. It means that recasts did not help students to improve their writing skill. However, explicit correction was the second most frequently used feedback which led to more uptakes and developed students writing skill. After providing students in the second experimental group (E2) with form-focused feedback their scores in the post-test increased.

This study had some limitations. The researchers did not know that students who participated in the study had any previous experience of form-focused feedback in other English Institutes or not. The researchers also did not take into account the total number of errors and error types. It was considered that the total number of errors and error types had little relevance to the main objectives of this study. At the end, it can be concluded that the form-focused feedback can help students to improve their writing skill.

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