Focus on Form in Second Language Learning: Highlighting Contributions and Contradictions

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of focus on form (FoF) in second language learning, which is a topic of debate among researchers. The paper aims to highlight the ways in which form-focused instruction can contribute to the development of communicative ability, which is the primary goal of second language learning, as well as the contradictions to this idea. The writer use review literature as method for this paper. The paper reviews the literature on the basis for FoF, intentional and unintentional ways for FoF, and communicative ability and FoF. The research suggests that FoF may not be the best method for achieving the primary goal of second language learning, but it can still be useful in certain contexts and for certain learners. The paper concludes that language teachers should be aware of the potential benefits and drawbacks of FoF when designing their lesson plans. The paper provides practical insights for ELT teachers and researchers interested in applied linguistics. The implications of this research are that language teachers should consider the advantages and disadvantages of FoF when deciding whether or not to incorporate it into their lesson plans.

Keywords: Focus on Form, Second Language Learning, Intentional FoF, Unintentional FoF

Introduction

The search for effective teaching methodologies in English Language Teaching (ELT) and second language acquisition has been an ongoing effort, with scholars, educators, and policymakers constantly seeking innovative strategies to improve language efficiency. Stated differently, the majority of current approaches to teaching foreign and second languages place a high value on the successful fusion of formal education and communicative language learning (Lyster, 2015).

The "Focus on Form" (FoF) approach is one such methodology that has received a lot of attention and debate. Focus on form refers to 'alternating in some principled way between a focus on meaning and a focus on form' (Long, 1991). It occurs when teachers implement a task-based curriculum while focusing students' attention on particular linguistic features during communicative activities. Maintaining the "focus on the need for communication" while debating "the extent to which teachers must direct student focus to understanding grammar" has been the main topic of discussion (Sheen, 2002 cited in Haque, 2016: 63).

Traditional grammar instruction has been criticized for focusing too much on form and not enough on meaning, resulting in a lack of communicative ability. Recent research, however, has shown that focusing on form can improve linguistic knowledge and contribute to the development of communicative ability, which is the primary goal of second language learning. One of research

findings show that focus on form and task-based practices are more effective in teaching an agglutinative language and it also looked into how much these materials can improve target structure usage (Cetin, 2022).

For L2 learning, instructional materials and teachers share equal responsibility. Thus, a focus on form can also be explicitly incorporated into the classroom through the use of various teaching resources, such as input enhancement (which involves bolding certain words to draw students' attention to that particular linguistic component). It might also exist when students interact subtly in tasks involving communication, like when they converse with one another to bridge a two-way gap, negotiating meaning and sharing information, with or without a focus on particular language items (Loewen, 2020).

The gap between the idealized role of focus on form in second language learning and its reality in the classroom is addressed in this paper. Focus on form research in ISLA makes a distinction between intentional and unintentional focus on form (Ellis, 2001). While some researchers believe that emphasizing form is essential for language development, others believe that emphasizing meaning is sufficient. This paper seeks to add new research value by conducting a thorough review of the literature, highlighting various perspectives, and identifying the most effective techniques and activities for implementing focus on form instruction in the classroom.

This paper's theoretical framework is based on the assumption that acquisition occurs best when learners' attention is drawn to language items when they are required for communication. This viewpoint, known as focus on form, is supported by research that demonstrates the efficacy of incidental focus on form in promoting second language learning. High levels of communicative competence are rarely attained by language learners through solely form-focused instruction; conversely, communicative syllabuses devoid of grammar instruction are ineffective in EFL pedagogy (Mart, 2019). However, the degree of focus on form required for optimal language development remains a point of contention among researchers.

The primary goal of this paper is to provide a thorough review of the literature on the role of focus on form in second language efficiency. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- The basis or foundation for focus on form.
- Intentional ways for focus on form in the classroom.
- Unintentional focus on form in the classroom and the debates surrounding its.
- Highlight the ways in which focus on form can contribute to the development of communicative ability, which is the primary goal of second language learning.

By achieving these goals, this paper will contribute to the ongoing debate about the most effective form of grammar instruction in communicative classrooms, as well as provide practical insights for ELT teachers and researchers interested in applied linguistics.

Methods

This paper is done by literature review which is a critical and impartial synthesis of published research material pertinent to a particular subject or topic. It typically follows an organized format and incorporates both synthesis and summary. The focus topic on this paper is Focus on Form in Second Language Learning, which highlight some contributions and contradictions conducted from numerous sources.

Literature Review

The focus on form approach has both contributions and contradictions in second language learning. This paper has provided a comprehensive overview of these aspects, offering a balanced and critical analysis of its effectiveness. The findings can be valuable for both language teachers and learners in enhancing their language learning experiences.

The Basis for Focus on Form (FoF)

As mentioned before, focus on Form is a teaching strategy that aims to teach students about grammatical forms while also teaching them how to use them for genuine communicative purposes in everyday situations. It emphasizes meaning in addition to form. Long (1987) highlighted that because of the separate issues that arise in the classroom, it is crucial to combine meaning and form when teaching a language. Focus on Form (FonF) stems from the notion that language learning can be aided by providing students with authentic context in which to practice language skills in a communicative setting, with an emphasis on both form and meaning. This method of instruction is often compared to Focus on Forms (FonFs), which concentrates only on language structures. Grammar and vocabulary are presented explicitly, followed by practice exercises that are severely restricted and decontextualized. (Ellis, 2001).

Loewen (2020) says that meaning and form can be combined to create an ideal learning environment that fosters the development of both implicit and explicit knowledge as well as implicit and explicit learning. It emphasizes the significance of integrating two fundamental aspects of language learning: meaningful language use (focus on meaning) and a structured understanding of grammar and language rules (focus on form).

Monasterio (2022) discusses that students are typically exposed to this focus on form approach through input enhancement, corrective feedback, and other means. In other words, lexical items, grammar, writing techniques, and other subjects are taught in a communicative and meaningful context that allows students to produce the L2, setting up an understanding scenario and concentrating on particular linguistic forms. These scenarios are likewise grounded in actual activities, predicated on the notion that communication occurs through language.

Intentional and Unintentional Ways for Focus on Form (FoF)

The focus of the conversation has been on teaching form and meaning in the classroom by helping students identify language forms in the input (i.e., the focus on form approach). Barbieri and Eckhardt (2007) distinguished between an intentional and unintentional focus on form. The first kind of instruction is implicit, meaning that the teacher addresses students' issues with language production or comprehension on their own initiative, making the students aware of the language forms they are having difficulty with. It is also referred to as a reactive incidental focus on form since teachers respond to students' production and/or comprehension errors as they happen in the learning environment (Monasterio, 2022). When students interact and communication breakdowns occur, this spontaneous attention to form occurs, resulting in their focus to form when they ask for explanation or check for comprehension.

In contrast, In an intentional focus on form, teachers intentionally alter the teacher talk and/or instructional materials to explicitly address language forms in the input. Corrective suggestions, input recede, and input growth are a few of the form-focused strategies that are scheduled. An implicit method of teaching students the language is through input enhancement; for instance, if a particular form needs to be shown to the students, it might show up bolded, highlighted, or in a different color. This helps students focus on particular linguistic features. (Szudarski & Carter, 2016).

Unintentional focus on form refers to teaching grammatical rules or form-related usages at the precise moment when students indicate that they are having, or are anticipated to have trouble learning (Hamamci & Hamamci, 2014). The foundation of unintentional focus on form is the spontaneous awareness of linguistic forms (Ellis, 2001). Regarding the focus on form, it is mainly founded on meaning-focused interaction in which linguistic items and structures are also given conscious and/or subconscious attention; in other words, meaning and form are engaged, and both explicit and implicit knowledge are taken into consideration (Loewen, 2020).

Communicative Ability and Focus on Form (FoF)

Focusing on form can help with the development of communicative ability, which is the primary goal of second language learning. Ellis (2015) conclude that first learners must have the opportunity to focus on form in order to acquire the ability to use new linguistic forms communicatively. Second, Form-focused instruction, which focuses on form, can help learners develop fluency as well as accuracy because it creates the conditions for interlanguage restructuring to occur. Third, It is necessary to find ways to draw learners' attention to form during a communicative

activity in order for them to develop both fluency and accuracy. This can be accomplished by incorporating form-focused tasks or exercises into the lesson plan, which require learners to attend to form, meaning, and use briefly and possibly simultaneously during one cognitive event. Fourth, although communicative language teaching (CLT) is an excellent method for developing communicative competence while learning a second language, it does not address the grammatical aspects of that language. Form-focused instruction, on the other hand, allows students to advance in both grammar and communication teaching simultaneously. This combination of grammar and communication instruction can assist learners in becoming proficient in the language while also ensuring accuracy in language use. Last, from this study, incorporating form-focused tasks or exercises into the lesson plan can help learners develop their communicative ability while also improving their language accuracy.

It is in line with research from Pena and Pladevall-Ballester (2020) that studies on children' L2 acquisition have demonstrated the benefits of FFI for increasing fluency. More than that, focus on form also benefical to accuracy (Hyun, 2021). Michaud (2021) had a comparative analysis of testing periods revealed that pre-task focus on form was the most successful method for enhancing the intricacy, precision, and fluency of English subjunctive expression when compared to post-task and online-task focus on form.

In contrast, Khajavi (2019) said that FonF may not be as effective as other approaches to language learning. A study comparing form-focused, content-based, and mixed instruction, for example, discovered that the mixed approach was the most effective in developing communicative competence. This implies that FonF may not be the best method for achieving the primary goal of second language learning.

Chen and Li (2022) conclude from their research that teachers can use several negotiating and feedback ways in FoF to build communicative requirements. When communicative barriers arise, learners can thereby recognize the differences between native speakers of the target language and themselves. This will encourage individuals to focus on the linguistic forms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the role of focus on form (FoF) instruction in promoting second language (L2) learning. According to the research, while FoF might not be the ideal approach for accomplishing the main objective of second language learning, it can still be helpful for some learners and in some situations. The study concludes that when creating lesson plans, language teachers should consider the possible advantages and disadvantages of FoF. For applied linguistics researchers and ELT instructors, the paper offers useful insights. This study suggest that language instructors should weigh the benefits and drawbacks of FoF when determining whether to include it in their lesson plans.

The implication of this paper is that teachers and researchers should consider the timing and type of feedback when implementing FoF instruction in L2 classrooms. They should also consider the complexity of the target structure, the learners' proficiency level, and the instructional context. It implies that learners can benefit from FoF instruction, especially if they use the targeted language items in their own work. Therefore, teachers should provide opportunities for learners to practice using the targeted linguistic items in meaningful contexts. This paper contributes to the existing knowledge by providing a critical review of FoF research and highlighting the need for further research to better understand the effectiveness of FoF instruction in second language learning.

Acknowledgments

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