

THE EFFECT OF REACTIVE VERSUS PROACTIVE FOCUS ON FORM ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of 'focus-on-form' instruction on students' grammatical accuracy. 'Focus-on-form' instruction is a teaching method that draws brief attention to linguistic forms while learners engage primarily in meaning. Two different treatments were employed: reactive focus on form and proactive focus on form. To this end, 84 Iranian female students participated in this study. The students were first given a test to ensure their homogeneity. Then they were divided into 3 groups, namely group 1 which received reactive focus on form as treatment, group 2 received proactive focus on form, and finally group 3 which was served as the control group and received no treatment. The findings revealed that both reactive focus on form and proactive focus on form influenced students' grammatical accuracy but reactive focus on form had a greater impact on students' grammatical accuracy.

Keywords: Reactive focus on form; Proactive focus on form; Iranian EFL learners; Grammatical accuracy

1. INTRODUCTION

The pendulum of second language instruction has swung between forms and meaning. For many years, language teaching was equated with grammar teaching (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). It was believed that language was mainly composed of grammar rules and that knowing those rules would be sufficient for learners to acquire the language. With the rise of communicative teaching approaches in the 1970s, the teaching of grammar was considered undesirable. Teachers were encouraged to believe that grammar instruction was old-fashioned, uninteresting, and best avoided.

Researchers claimed that teaching grammar had little impact on learners' grammatical development and did not lead to the development of communicative competence; hence, it had to be eliminated from L2 classrooms (e.g., Krashen, 1981, 1985, 1993; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Some even went so far as to argue that grammar teaching was not only unhelpful but was also detrimental. Prabhu (1987, p. 2), for example, in describing the impetus for his procedural task-based project, pointed out: Attempts to systematize input to the learners through a linguistically organized syllabus, or to maximize the practice of particular parts of language structure through activities deliberately planned for that purpose were regarded as being unhelpful and detrimental to the desired preoccupation with meaning in the classroom. Recent research in second language acquisition (SLA), however, has led to a reconsideration of the importance of grammar. Many researchers now believe that grammar teaching should not be ignored in second language classrooms. Language teaching professionals have also become increasingly aware that grammar instruction plays an important role in language teaching and learning.

Scholars listed a number of reasons for this re-evaluation of the role of grammar. First, the hypothesis that language can be learned without some degree of consciousness has been found to be theoretically problematic (e.g., Schmidt, 1993, 1995, 2001; Sharwood Smith, 1993). In addition, there is ample empirical evidence that teaching approaches that focus primarily on meaning with no focus on grammar are inadequate (Harley & Swain, 1984; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1991; Swain, 1985). Third, recent SLA research has demonstrated that instructed language learning has major effects on both the rate and the ultimate level of L2 acquisition. In particular, research has shown that form-focused instruction is especially effective when it is incorporated into a meaningful communicative context. However, there are still many questions about how to teach grammar effectively, and in particular, how to integrate most effectively a focus on grammatical forms and a focus on meaningful communication in L2 classrooms. Richards (2002) has referred to this question as "the central dilemma," in language teaching.

The present study is aimed to investigate whether changing teaching methodology of grammar leads to more achievement in L2 linguistic forms; and if this change in classroom instruction plays a facilitative role in developing learners' grammatical accuracy.

1.1 Statement of the problem

There are numerous studies regarding the assumption that a combination of formal instruction and communication oriented instruction is highly beneficial to L2 learners. What is now highly needed in focus-on-form research is the identification of more diverse ways of making this timely combination possible. L2 researchers particularly need to examine the differential effects of the various types of focus-on-form instruction available to L2 teachers and the effects of combinations of different treatments. Most importantly, the choice of options in focus-on form instruction must be made based on psycholinguistically motivated predictions, because previous effect-of-instruction studies have suggested that instruction taking psycholinguistic and cognitive factors into account has beneficial effects on L2 acquisition (DeKeyser, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1997; Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998; Skehan, 1998; Sorace, 1985).

Another move that has guided the further integration of form-focused instruction into communication-oriented instruction comes out of recent critical evaluation of communicative tasks. Though communicative tasks (e.g., information-gap tasks and problem-solving tasks) have been used widely in L2 classroom settings because they are useful in creating opportunities to use the target language, some pitfalls have been recently pointed out.

For example, Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) argued that "in most common information gap tasks, learners seem to be able to exchange information solely through use of semantic and

pragmatic based strategies combined with their background knowledge. Such tasks, then, may do more to develop strategic than linguistic competency” (pp. 125–126). This weakness of communicative tasks has led L2 researchers to recognize a need for incorporating form-focused treatments into instruction, that is, a need for “devising methods of focusing on form without losing the values of communication tasks as realistic communicative motivators, and as opportunities to trigger acquisitional processes” (Skehan, 1996, p. 42).

Although many studies have been conducted in this field (e.g. Ellis, Basturkmen, &Loewen, 2002; Hawkes, 2012; Hyland, 2003) the dilemma still remains. Since, none of them introduces an optimal method for grammar teaching and some studies reveal benefits for form-focused instruction in the short term but not in the long term. Moreover, to the best knowledge of researcher, there are very few studies, if any, that try to consider possible impact of such changes in grammar instruction on classroom environment.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The major aim of this study is to examine the effects of reactive and proactive focus on form on grammatical accuracy, and the possible changes in learners’ grammar knowledge along this shift in grammar teaching.

1.3 Research questions

To meet the research purpose, some questions are asked. The general research questions addressed in this study are the following:

- Q1:** Does reactive focus on form influence grammar accuracy of high school third-grade students?
- Q2:** Does proactive focus on form influence grammar accuracy of high school third-grade students?
- Q3:** Does reactive focus on form have a greater effect on grammar accuracy of high school third-grade students than proactive focus on form?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Focus on Form

The notion of FoF has been widely advocated in the literature, and it has become more and more important. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to figure out what FoF exactly mean. A number of varying definitions have been emerged (Williams, Jessica, 2005; Doughty, 2003; Ellis, 2001; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Spada, 1997, Long, 1991).

In his conceptualization, Long (1991) characterized FoF mainly as a reaction to linguistic problems that occur during communicative activities. He stated that FoF “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, 1991, p. 45- 46). He excluded drawing learners’ attention to form in any predetermined manner. Long believed that learners can acquire most of the grammar of a language incidentally, while their attention is on meaning (Long, 2000). Thus, he assumed that if there is any FoF, it should be brief and occasional. Spada (1997) defined FoF as “any pedagogical effort which is used to draw learner’s attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly” (p. 73). Doughty and Williams (1998) also defined FoF as including planned lessons directed at teaching specific linguistic features, providing that the features are taught in context through communicative activities.

Ellis et al. (2002) defined FoF as an instruction in which the primary of attention is on meaning. They further argue that the attention to form arises out of meaning-centered activity derived from the performance of communicative task such as information gap task. Posed through years, the concept of FoF has been expanded to include different classification depending on how and when it is administered (Nassaji & Sandra, 2011).

Based on Long's definition (1991), where students' attention is overtly drawn to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally, it can be argued that focus on form has some psycholinguistic plausibility in that it encourages learners to pay conscious attention to certain form in the input, which they are likely to ignore. On the other hand, Spada's definition (1997) implies a range of approaches to form. On one side a long continuum are explicit, discrete-point metalinguistic explanation and discussion of rules and explanations, or curricula governed and sequenced by grammatical or phonological categories. On the other end of the continuum are implicit, incidental references to form, noticing, and the incorporation of forms into communicative tasks (Brown, 2007).

2.2.1 Reactive Focus on Form and instruction of grammar

Reactive FoF instruction enables learner to put into practice the target language knowledge they gain from proactive instructional activities during purposeful interaction (Lyster, 2007). Hence, he thinks, reactive form-focused instruction has to take the form of corrective feedback and any other attempt aimed at drawing learners' attention to language form during interaction. In other words, as Doughty and Williams (cited in Fotos & Nassaji, 2007) explained, reactive FoF encompasses responses to communication problems occurring after the event. Baleghizadeh (2010) stated that reactive FoF is considered as a good source for negative evidence since it typically occurs when learners state some unacceptable form and the teacher tries to correct them or asks other students to correct him. Furthermore, reactive FoF involves a responsive teaching intervention that involves occasional shifts in reaction to salient errors using devices to increase perceptual salience (Long & Robinson, 1998). Lyster (2004) compared the relative effects of the recasts and prompts on the acquisition of French gender. He noticed that both resulted in learning but prompts seemed more facilitative.

2.2.2. Proactive Focus on Form

This type involves attempts to make a specific form the topic of conversation even though no error has occurred (Farrokhi & Talabari, 2011). It is initiated by means of a query that students addresses to the teacher. The participants take a time-out from communication to talk about some linguistic features (Farrokhi & Talabari, 2011). It involves the teacher or the learner initiating attention to form even though no specific problem in production has occurred. It addresses an actual gap in the learners' knowledge, and usually consists of exchanges involving a query and a response (Ellis, Basturkmen, Loewen, 2001b, 2002).

3. METHODOLOGY

To accomplish the objectives of this study, 120 high school third-grade female students of Narjes State Exemplary High school in Sabzevar, Iran, between the ages of 16-18, were given the Oxford Placement Test as a homogeneity test. Eighty-four students met the necessary condition, being homogenous at the level of lower intermediate, to enter the second phase. In the second phase, these eighty-four homogenous participants were divided into three similar groups including 28 persons; two groups as the experimental groups, and the other as the control group.

In order to carry out this study, two research instrumentations namely a validated teacher-made test, and some grammatical communicative tasks were used.

The first instrument of this study was a validated teacher-made test based on three grammatical topics including simple past tense, present perfect tense, and second conditional in multiple-choice format. To construct this test, a fifty-item test based on simple past tense, present perfect tense, and second conditional in multiple-choice format was piloted with 20 similar learners to determine item characteristics, i.e., item facility, item discrimination, and choice distribution. Out of 50 grammar structure items, finally 30 items were selected for the final version of the test. A time allocation of 25 minutes was also estimated for the final version of the test. Furthermore, the reliability of the test was calculated through KR-21 method which turned out to be 0.82.

The test aimed at determining the grammar accuracy level of the participants which was used as pre-test and post- test given to both experimental and control groups of the participants. Some grammatical communicative tasks could be also considered as the other instrument of this study through which the proactive and reactive focus on form treatments are applied and given to the learners within the classrooms.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Data Analysis for First Hypothesis

To test the first research hypothesis and to compare participants' scores in the post test for control group and the experimental group which received reactive focus on form, the analysis of covariance (Ancova) was used. The hypothesis is as follow:

H_0 : Reactive focus on form does not influence grammar accuracy of high school third-grade students.

The presupposition in using the analysis of covariance is the homogeneity of variance between groups. Therefore, first, the homogeneity of the variance should be checked in control and the experimental groups. To this end, Levene's test was employed. If the level of significance is more than 0.05, the variances' homogeneity will be confirmed with 95% certainty. The Levene's test results are shown in table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances - Dependent Variable: Reactive Focus on Form (post test)

F	df1	df2	Sig
2.918	1	54	.093

As can be seen in table 4.1, the F value equals 2.918 and the level of significance is 0.093. Since the level of significance is more than 0.05, the presupposition regarding the homogeneity of variances is accepted, so, the analysis of covariance can be used to test the first hypothesis.

Table 4.2 shows the results obtained from the analysis of covariance on students' grammatical accuracy in both control group and the experimental group which received reactive focus on form in post test.

Table 4.2.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects - Dependent Variable: Reactive Focus on Form (post test)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2122.111	2	1061.055	461.979	.000
Intercept	306.015	1	306.015	133.238	.000
Reactive pre	394.950	1	394.950	171.960	.000
group	1792.890	1	1792.890	780.617	.000
Error	121.728	53	2.297		
Total	23421.000	56			
Corrected Total	2243.839	55			

In this analysis, the pretest variable is controlled and modified due to its correlation with posttest. To test this hypothesis, the group variable (including control and experimental) should be analyzed. Based on table 4.2., significance level of group variable is 0.00 which is less than 0.05 (sig= 0.000 < 0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected with 95% certainty. So, it can be concluded that reactive focus on form had a significant effect on grammatical accuracy in post test. The mean of grammatical accuracy in post test is 25 and 13.892 in the experimental group and control group, respectively. Therefore, it can be said that in post test the grammatical accuracy had a significant increase in the experimental group compared with control group.

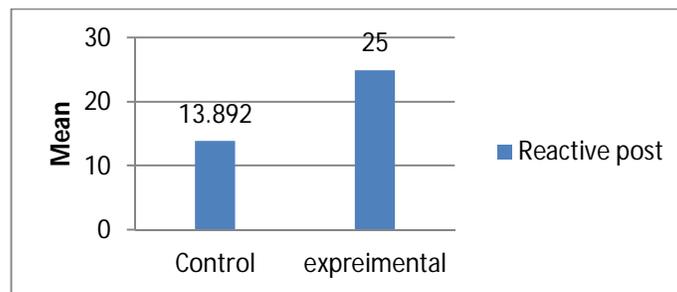


Figure 4.1 Bar plot for the Grammatical Accuracy of Control and Experimental Groups for Reactive Focus on Form –Posttest

4.2 Data Analysis for Second Hypothesis

Similarly, the analysis of covariance was used to compare the participants' scores in control group and the experimental group which received proactive focus on form. The hypothesis is as follow:

H_0 :Proactive focus on form does not influence grammar accuracy of high school third-grade students.

The results of the Levene's test are shown in table 4.3. According to this table, the value of F is 2.053, and the level of significance is 0.06. Since the level of significance is more than 0.05, the variances are homogenous. Therefore, Ancova can be used to test this hypothesis.

Table 4.3

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances - Dependent Variable: Proactive Focus on Form (post test)

F	df1	df2	Sig
2.053	1	54	.060

Table 4.4. depicts the results of Ancova on participants' grammatical accuracy in posttest for both control group and the experimental group which received proactive focus on form.

Table 4.4.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects - Dependent Variable: Proactive Focus on Form (post test)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	635.295	2	317.648	53.499	.000
Intercept	220.750	1	220.750	37.179	.000
Proactive pre group	259.849 352.732	1 1	259.849 352.732	43.764 59.408	.000 .000
Error	314.687	53	5.937		
Total	16163.000	56			
Corrected Total	949.982	55			

In this analysis, the pretest variable is controlled and modified due to its correlation with posttest. To test this hypothesis, the group variable (including control and experimental) should be analyzed. According to the above table the level of significance for group variable is 0.000 which is less than 0.05 (sig= 0.000 < 0.05). Therefore, with 95 percent certainty, it can be said that group (proactive experimental group and control group) had a significant effect on grammatical accuracy in posttest.

The mean of grammatical accuracy in posttest was respectively 19.071 and 13.892 for the proactive experimental group and control group. So, it can be concluded that, the grammatical accuracy had a significant increase in posttest in the proactive experimental group compared to control group.

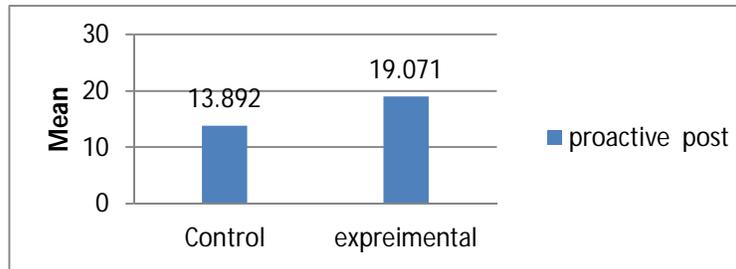


Figure 4.2 Bar plot for the Grammatical Accuracy of Control and Experimental Groups for Proactive Focus on Form –Post test

4.3 Data Analysis for Third Hypothesis

Since this study examines three groups, including one control group and two experimental groups, through pretest and posttest, one-way ANOVA was used to test this hypothesis and compare the effects of each group on participants' grammatical accuracy. In this test, the mean of grammatical accuracy (obtained by the difference between grammatical accuracy in pretest and post test) is investigated among the three groups of control and experimentals, namely reactive focus on form and proactive focus on form. In the case there exists such a significant difference; two by two comparison of means will be done by means of Tukey post hoc at 5% level of probability. The hypothesis is as follow:

H₀ :Reactive focus on form does not have a greater effect on grammar accuracy of high school third-grade students than proactive focus on form.

It should be mentioned that, when the level of significance is less than 0.05 (sig < 0.05), it means that there is a significant difference between groups. And by comparing the amount of difference between the three groups, it can be shown that which group influences grammatical accuracy more. Table 4.5. demonstrates the obtained results with regard to this hypothesis.

Table 4.5

The Results of One-way ANOVA for Changes in Students' Grammatical Accuracy in Pretest and Post test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1828.167	2	914.083	140.476	.000
Within Groups	527.071	81	6.507		
Total	2355.238	83			

As table 4.5 shows, the level of significance is 0.000 which is less than 0.05, therefore, it can be said that there is a significant difference among these three groups(control and experimental groups) on grammatical accuracy. To compare the means, Tukey post hoc was used at the level of 0.05. This test determines in which pair of groups there is a significant difference in the students' grammatical accuracy. The results of Tukey test are shown in table 4.6.

Table 4.6
Multiple Comparisons Tukey HSD

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
reactive	proactive	6.46429	.000
	control	11.3928	.000
proactive	control	4.92857	.000

Based on table 4. 6 and the results of Tukey test, there is a significant difference in the amount of grammatical accuracy between the following pairs of groups: 1.experimental groups, namely reactive focus on form and proactive focus on form, 2. Reactive focus on form and control group, and 3. Proactive focus on form and control group.

Table 4.7 reports the statistical analysis regarding grammatical accuracy changes between the three groups. According to this table, the changes in grammatical accuracy in three groups of reactive focus on form, proactive focus on form, and control are 11.85, 5.39, and 0.46, respectively. The maximum amount of these changes is for the experimental group that received reactive focus on form, so it can be said that reactive focus on form had a greater impact on grammatical accuracy of students than proactive focus on form.

Table 4.7
Descriptive Statistics Related to the Rate of Students' Grammatical Accuracy Changes among the Three Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
reactive	28	11.8571	2.08548	7.00	16.00
proactive	28	5.3929	3.69524	-4.00	13.00
control	28	.4643	1.23175	-1.00	4.00

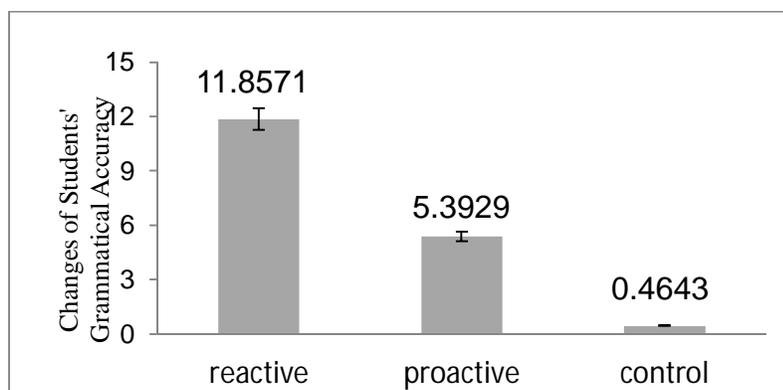


Figure 4.3 *The Comparison of Mean Changes of Grammatical Accuracy among the Three Groups*

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter the obtained results will be discussed, implications and suggestions for further researches will be given as well. This study aimed at investigating the teaching methods of reactive focus on form and proactive focus on form on students' grammatical accuracy. The results of the analysis of Covariance showed that students benefit from reactive focus on form and proactive focus on form. These findings are consistent with Doughty and Williams' claim (1998) that generally Focus on Form has an advantage over traditional methods of grammar teaching since it requires some extra cognitive processing as the result of overriding focus on meaning or communication. To put it simply, they believed that "learners' attention is drawn precisely to a linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand" (p. 3).

To compare the two approaches of Focus on Form, namely reactive focus on form and proactive focus on form, and to examine which approach had a greater impact on students' grammatical accuracy, the Tukey post hoc test was used. The obtained results showed that students' scores who were taught grammar through reactive focus on form were higher than those of students who were taught through proactive focus on form. These findings imply that learners can benefit more when they put into practice the target language knowledge during purposeful interaction. These findings also confirm Baleghizade's case (2010) that reactive focus on form is considered as a good source for negative evidence since it typically occurs when learners state some unacceptable form and the teacher tries to correct them or asked other students to correct him. The advantage of reactive focus on form over proactive focus on form may also be due to the fact that reactive focus on form involves responsive teaching intervention that involves occasional shifts in reaction to salient errors using devices to increase perceptual salience (Long And Robinson, 1998). The findings of the present study are also in line with Thornbury (2004) who found that reactive teaching is more effective than proactive teaching. He contended that following each learner's developmental trajectory is easier by responding to their communicative errors rather than by preselecting the errors through pre-teaching. As Mennim (2003) asserts, reactive focus on form is a treatment which deals more specifically with student output where the focus is on structures that students themselves have used, or have tried to use, during a communicative task. To put it simply, reactive instruction of grammar entails responding to communication problems of learners occurring after the event (Long & Robinson, 1998), so it can be justified why reactive focus on form had greater impact on students' grammatical accuracy. Also, Willis and Willis's (2007, p. 121) list of reactive focus on form's characteristics justify the results of the present study. These major characteristics for reactive focus on form are:

- It helps prevent fossilization. Learners are alerted to the fact that they still have some way to go in mastering a given fact.
- If used sparingly it helps motivate learners. Almost all language learners expect and want correction. They see it as a necessary part of the teacher's role.
- It provides useful negative feedback. Sometimes negative feedback is the quickest and most efficient way of putting learners on the right track.

Generally speaking, the results of this study suggest that when students face problems and difficulties in their production and comprehension of language, it is the responsibility of their teachers and peers to help them notice their erroneous forms and provide them with the correct and appropriate forms. But this should not emulate teachers to focus on instructing specific grammatical items, leading to focus on forms instruction which progresses as learners master sequentially presented grammatical structures.

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