



# Impact of Focus on Form Instruction: A Comparative Study

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## ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental study with pretest-posttest design intended to compare the effect of focus on form versus. focus on forms instruction on grammar achievement among Azari-speaking EFL third-grade high school students at Bostan Abad, East Azerbaijan. Two intact classes were provided by the two different instruction methods, the scores of Forty two students out of them were taken into account. There were twenty four persons in experimental group and twenty one students in control group. To ensure comparability and homogeneity of the participating groups prior to their treatment, participants are given the Nelson test, and to measure the effects of treatment, a grammar test, taken from university entrance exam tests (Konkur), was administered. The results of Independent-samples t-test indicated that there was a significant difference in scores for experimental group ( $M=31.47$ ,  $SD=7.55$ ) and control group ( $M=26.28$ ,  $SD=8.13$ ;  $t(40)=-2.14$ ,  $p=0.03$ , two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -5.19, 95 CI: -10.08 to -0.29) was very large effect ( $\eta^2=0.10$ ). The learners in the focus on form group outperformed the learners in the focus on forms instruction. It is highly recommended that teachers should correct errors in learners' written or spoken language in ways that help them notice and learn from their errors.

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## 1. Introduction

Study of the effectiveness of purely meaning-focused communicative language teaching has led many second language researchers to maintain that communicative teaching should contain systematic instruction to draw L2 learners' attention to linguistic forms to develop well-proportioned communicative competence (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Spada, 1997; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 2003). Long (1991) conceptualized the requirement to integrate form-focused instruction into meaning-focused communicative language teaching with the term focus on form, a kind of instruction in which the main focus is on meaning and communication with the learners' attention being focused on linguistic elements only as they arise incidentally in lessons. Focus on form is in sharp contrast with focus on forms instruction which is traditional grammar instruction placing focus on forms themselves separately.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The non-interface position

The non-interface position, implemented by researchers such as Krashen (1985) and Schwartz (1993), holds that the only kind of information that is practical for L2 language acquisition is naturally happening examples of the language, otherwise referred to as "positive evidence", or, as Krashen (1985) terms it, "comprehensible input". This view claims that teaching grammar or correcting learner errors has no effect on the learner's acquired linguistic knowledge or interlanguage. Krashen (1985:1-3) claims that there is no interface between learned knowledge, which results from conscious learning, and acquired knowledge, which results from learners' exposure to comprehensible input.

### 2.2 The strong interface position

Contrary to the non-interface view, the strong interface position maintains that, through repeated practice, learned knowledge can be changed into acquired knowledge, which will lead in natural L2 use. Advocates of this position deal with the query of how this conversion may happen. One such proponent is De Keyser (1998), whose study shows that explicit FFI results in significantly larger improvements in L2 learning than does implicit learning.

### 2.3 The weak interface position

Investigators who grasp the weak-interface position sustain that if L2 material is employed within a meaningful context in an unobtrusive way, but is made adequately salient for further processing, it may attract learners' attention to "notice" the form of the target language, and consequently to acquire it (Norris and Ortega 2001:159). White (1989), who proposes that although much of an L2 can be learned through exposure to positive evidence, learners may need negative evidence when their interlanguage comprises rules that are more general than the rules of the target language (White 1989:50).

### 2.4 Focus-on-formS instruction

Focus-on-formS (FonFS) instruction is learned by a strong interface position, and happens when parts of a grammar are taught as separate 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 considered as an object to be studied and language teaching is viewed to be an activity to be practiced systematically.

Besides, learners are viewed as students, rather than users of the language (Ellis 2001:14).

### 2.5 Focus-on-form instruction

Focus-on-form (FonF) instruction, which appeals on a weak interface view, includes strategies that attract learners' attention to the form or properties of target structures within a meaningful context.

This is done mainly with structures that are potentially problematic, that are learnable according to the stages put forward in Piennemann's teachability hypothesis (Spada and Lightbown 1993:207) and that are probable to be used or needed in future communication.

As stated by Norris and Ortega (2001:167), instruction may be viewed as FonF if it has the subsequent criteria: (i) that learners involve with the meaning of a structure before paying attention to its form, through tasks that guarantee that target forms are vital to the successful completion of the tasks; (ii) that instruction in a particular form happens as a result of analyzing learner needs; and (iii) that learners' attention be focused to a form for a short time yet noticeably, "thus achieving a difficult balance between unobtrusiveness and salience".

In a study, Farrokhi, and Chehrazad (2012) examined the effects of focus on form on oral accuracy of EFL learners and concluded that the planned focus on form was an effective instrument for the progress of oral accuracy in the EFL circumstances. It was also stated that intensive recasts which were repeatedly focused on a particular structure were not different from explicit types of feedback in terms of their effectiveness.

Marzban and Mokhberi (2012) inspected the effect of reactive and preemptive focus on form instruction on intermediate EFL learners' grammar learning in task-based language teaching. They concluded that reactive FOF in comparison to preemptive FOF was a better means of increasing the ability to use the grammatical knowledge in context. They also stated that the majority of the preemptive focus on form episodes (FFE) were introduced by the teacher rather than students and concerned with vocabulary whereas the linguistic focus of reactive FFEs was largely on grammar.

Saeidi, Zaferanieh and Shatery (2012) in their study on the impacts of focus on form, focus on meaning, and focus on forms on learners' vocabulary learning in ESP context used three types of tasks, namely dictogloss task, reading and discussion task, and word lists. Their findings revealed that learners in FoF group attained significantly higher scores than those in FoM and FoFs. Likewise, learners' scores in FoM group were significantly higher than FoFs

group. The investigators thought that the very nature of the FoF tasks (dictogloss) which comprise depth of processing hypothesis, discovery learning, pushed output, noticing hypothesis, awareness raising, negotiation, collaboration, and motivation gave rise to in such findings.

Gholami and Talebi (2012) attempted to explore the role of FoF instruction in Iranian EFL context in general and the role of implicit and explicit FOF techniques on their linguistic accuracy in particular. 45 EFL learners were randomly allotted to two experimental and one control group. The instruction, using dictogloss, was presented and lasted for three weeks. The findings showed that the FoF groups performed better than the control group.

Supplementary analysis of the scores confirmed the outperformance of the implicit FoF group using clarification request and recast compared to the group receiving explicit FoF.

Spada (2010) maintained that "there is increasing evidence that instruction, including explicit FFI, can positively contribute to unanalyzed spontaneous production, its benefits not being restricted to controlled/analyzed L2 knowledge" (p. 9). Lately, FFI is considered more effective than the instruction that only focuses on meaning (Fotos & Nassaji, 2007). There are many classifications concerning grammar instruction; one of the most important ones is the difference between focus on forms (FoFs) and focus on form (FoF). Ellis, Leowen, and Basturkmen (2006) explained that "focus on form is evident in the talk arising from communicative tasks in sequences where there is some kind of communication breakdown and in sequences where there is no communication problem but nevertheless the participants choose to engage in attention to form" (p. 135). Therefore, a FoF approach is valid as long as it takes account of an opportunity for learners to practice behavior in communicative tasks (Ellis, 2006). Ellis (2006) declared that there is rising evidence that focus-on-form instruction facilitates acquisition, though it is not possible to prove the advantage of one over the other.

This study intended to compare the effect of focus on form versus. focus on forms instruction on grammar achievement among Azari-speaking EFL third-grade high school students at Bostan Abad, East Azerbaijan.

To deal with the purpose of the study, this research question was formulated: Is there a significant difference between students who attend focus on form instruction class and those of focus on forms in learning grammar? Hypothesis was developed: There is no significant difference between students who attend focus on form instruction class and those of focus on forms in learning grammar.

### 3. Methodology

This quasi-experimental study with pretest-posttest design intended to compare the effect of focus on form versus. focus on forms instruction on grammar achievement among Azari-speaking EFL third-grade high school students at Bostan Abad, East Azerbaijan. Two intact classes were provided by the two different instruction methods. There were twenty four persons in experimental group and twenty one students in control group. To ensure comparability and homogeneity of the participating groups prior to their treatment, participants are given the Nelson test, and to measure the effects of treatment, a grammar test, taken from university entrance exam tests (Konkur), was administered. The participants were all male students who attended no English classes in private institutes. Since it was impossible to disrupt the school schedules, the groups were not selected randomly. Assessment of groups was done by this instrumentation

Achievement Test: A grammar test was developed by the researchers which includes fifty multiple-choice items. The items were selected from university entrance exam (Konkur) tests. The test was used as posttest and delayed posttest. The independent variable in the study is the focus on form instruction. Students' achievement, on the other hand, is the dependent variable.

### 4. Results and Discussion

To ensure comparability and homogeneity of the participating groups prior to their treatment, participants are given the Nelson test, the results of which is shown in table 4.1 and 4.2.

## 4.1 Group Statistics

	ID	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Nelson	1.00	21	18.0952	5.18560	1.13159
	2.00	21	18.0000	6.20484	1.35401

## 4.2. Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
Nelson	Equal variances assumed	1.928	.173	.054	40	.957	.09524	1.76461	-3.47116	3.66164	
	Equal variances not assumed			.054	38.778	.957	.09524	1.76461	-3.47467	3.66514	

As the table shows the sig(2-tailed) = 0.95 > 0.05. The results of Independent-samples t-test indicated that there was no significant difference in scores for experimental group (M=18.09, SD=5.18) and control group (M=18, SD=6.20; t(40) = 0.05, p=0.95, two-tailed) prior to instruction.

The research question was:

Is there a significant difference between students who attend focus on form instruction class and those of focus on forms in learning grammar?

To find an answer to the question, the subsequent hypothesis was developed:

There is no significant difference between students who attend focus on form instruction class and those of focus on forms in learning grammar.

To answer the research question, an independent-samples t-test was run in SPSS. The results of posttest are shown in the tables 4.3 and 4.4

The results of Independent-samples t-test indicated that there was a significant difference in scores for experimental group (M=31.47, SD=7.55) and control group (M=26.28, SD=8.13; t(40) = -2.14, p=0.03, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -5.19, 95 CI: -10.08 to -0.29) was very large effect (eta squared = 0.10). So our hypothesis that there is no significant difference between students who attend focus on form instruction class and those of focus on forms in learning grammar is rejected.

The learners in the focus on form group outperformed the learners in the focus on forms instruction

The result of the study is in contrast with Krashen (1985) and Schwartz (1993) view that the only kind of information that is practical for L2 language acquisition is naturally happening examples of the language, otherwise referred to as "positive evidence", or, as Krashen (1985) terms it, "comprehensible input". This view claims that teaching grammar or correcting learner errors has no effect on the learner's acquired linguistic knowledge or interlanguage.

This study in line with the researchers mentioned in the literature (i.e. Norris and Ortega (2001), Marzban and Mokhberi (2012), Saeidi, Zaferanieh and Shatery (2012), Gholami and Talebi (2012), Ellis, Leowen, and Basturkmen (2006) and Ellis (2006)) supports the use of focus on form instruction.

## Conclusion

The conclusion that the learners in the focus on form group outperformed the learners in the focus on forms instruction is supported by Schmidt's (1990; 2010) "noticing hypothesis" which claims that in order for learning to take place, learners should notice to linguistic forms in input. This seems to be more significant for lower proficient learners who are not aware of the gaps between their knowledge and the correct target language forms. Therefore, it is necessary to try to draw their attention to linguistic forms during interaction; and this aim can be achieved by incidental focus on form.

Even though we should be wary in generalizing the results of the study because of the intact group design, the findings of this study suggests that grammar instruction should focus on form, meaning, and use, without sacrificing one at the expense of another. Grammar instruction should produce inspiring and meaningful language experiences to help learners become more able and successful language learners.

The potential recommendation that can be made based on the results of this research is that devoting some parts of the classroom time to explicit grammar instruction followed by meaningful input-based activities might assist language instructors to effectively teach grammatical rules. The results of this study can be valuable for English teachers and curriculum developers particularly in a foreign language context where exposure to English is restricted. By the way, teachers may need to study different tasks they apply in their

## 4.3 Group Statistics

	ID		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	1.00	21	26.2857	8.13107	1.77434
	2.00	21	31.4762	7.55393	1.64840

As the table 4.4 shows the sig(2-tailed) = 0.03 < 0.05.

## 4.4 Independent Samples Test.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
posttest	Equal variances assumed	.557	.460	-2.143	40	.038	-5.19048	2.42189	-10.08529	-.29566	
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.143	39.785	.038	-5.19048	2.42189	-10.08611	-.29484	

lessons to see if they offer learners the chance of processing both forms and meanings of the target forms.

Limitations of the study propose several areas for future research. This study was narrow in scope. The participants of the study were very little and the structures confined to third-grade high schoolbook .So it is suggested that further research could be done:

1. with learners at higher and lower language proficiency (e.g. first-grade and second-grade high school students.
2. with other grammatical structures.
3. with other language skills and subskills (e.g. vocabulary, reading writing, pronunciation).

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