

A Focus-on-Fit Approach: The Explicit Instruction of Grammar to TOEFL Candidates in an EFL Context

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Abstract

This study reports how to teach grammar depends on students' needs. Focus-on-form may not be useful for teaching-to-testing programs like preparation for TOEFL test with a limited time frame during which grammar cannot be learned through extensive communicative tasks. Instead, they need an intensive explicit grammar instruction. Hundred and fifty TOEFL candidates underwent explicit grammar instruction during 20 sessions. The result showed students performed better after explicit grammar instruction. Besides, a good performance prior to explicit grammar teaching predicts better performance after an intensive grammar instruction. These results value focus-on-fit rather than focus-on-form approach when teaching is directed towards testing.

Keywords: Focus on Fit, Explicit instruction, Grammar, EFL learners

1. Introduction

The controversy on the priority of focus on form over focus on forms (henceforth FonF & FonFS respectively) has long occupied the minds of scholars involved in language teaching. With Long (1988, 1991) introducing the divide between FonF and FonFS, this lack of consensus gained momentum. There have been many who strongly supported FonF leaving little or no space for explicit formal grammar instruction; also, some believe that efficacy of each perspective (or inefficiency thereof) may be contingent on the context of language learning, individual differences, age, level of proficiency, students' views about which approach would best fit their needs, and the goal of second language learning.

Long (1988) is among the first to suggest that teaching linguistic items separately supported by behavioral and structural linguistics is quite ineffective. That's why he introduced FonF which combines grammar instruction with communicative language use. In fact, he views FonF as directing "students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (p. 45-46). FonFS, on the other hand, concerns the teaching of discrete grammatical features in separate lessons. Ellis (2005) differentiates the two; with FonFS involving in "systematic teaching of grammatical features in accordance with structural syllabus", and FonF "involving attention to linguistic features in the context of communicative activities derived from a task based syllabus or some kind of combination of the two" (p. 210).

Perhaps, for the advocates of FonF, the significance lies in the meaning rather than form. Just as children learn language to express a certain meaning, L2 learners need language to communicate. This is the reason why people like Doughty and Varela (1998), Doughty and Williams (1998), Krashen (1993), Lightbown (1998), Skehan (1996) and Truscott (1996, 1998) have supported FonF approach without much of interrupting communication on the part of teachers. Meaning is, in fact, highly valued and all pedagogical activities should be in tune with negotiation of meaning rather than mastery of structures. There are a number of questions the answers to which may clarify the need to reconsider the efficacy of FonF as an approach irreplaceable by other pedagogical perspectives. The first question is: do all FonF proponents disregard FonF completely?

There are few scholars who believe that teaching grammar is quite "peripheral and fragile" (Krashen, 1993, p. 725). If FonFS is a periphery, then what can be taken as the *core*? As was previously stated, if meaning is not the core, then we may follow a communicative based instruction with several shifts to grammatical features when necessity arises (e.g., Dekeyser, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998, Ellis, 1990, 1993, 2005; Ellis, Basturksmen, & Loewen, 1995; Fotos, 1994, 1998; Hayashi, 1995; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Long, 1988, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998; Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993; Muranoi, 2000; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004; Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1994, 2001; Swain, 1995). Now, the question is whether the learners' implicit knowledge amounts to their explicit knowledge.

On the basis of Interface hypothesis, three propositions were made: people like Krashen (1981) supported non-interface position, that is explicit knowledge cannot be converted to implicit knowledge, hence supporting focus on meaning and a "zero-grammar" (p. 215)

approach; people like Sharwood-Smith (1981) backed up interface position which draws on skill-based learning theory proposed by Dekeyser (1998). This position supports a PPP approach where a grammatical structure is first presented, then practiced, and followed until it is proceduralized; and finally, there is a weak interface position supported by Ellis (1990, 1993) and Schmidt (1994) which emphasizes noticing and noticing the gap. This approach considers consciousness-raising tasks where learners extract explicit grammatical rules from data they are exposed to.

The weak interface position may have found its way into the approach favored by FonF advocates. Noticing or awareness of rules may remedy the shortcomings of both FocF and FonFS, that is why a number of scholars have put emphasis upon the quintessential nature of noticing (e.g., Bialystock, 1994; Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Dekeyser, 1998; Doughty, 2001; Ellis, 1990, 1993, 2001, 2002; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Fotos, 1993, 1994, 1998; Hayashi, 1995; Nassaji, 1999, 2000, 2002; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Robinson, 1995, 2001; Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1994, 2001; Skehan, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2001); they think that if learners are exposed to continued meaning-based input, target forms can be noticed and learned by incorporating a number of tasks involving learners in consciousness-raising activities (see Fotos, 1993, 1994, 1998, 2002; Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Leow, 2001; Sheen, 1992).

Considering pros and cons of FonF, we cannot conclude FonF, with noticing as the point of departure for communicative activities governing the L2 classrooms, can be prioritized in all contexts of learning. Here, we need to find an answer to the question, can FonF be approached in both EFL and ESL context? Fotos (1998) states that “strong version of form focused instruction, where learners are only exposed to target grammatical form through modified communicative input is not, by itself, suitable for the EFL situation” (p. 304). Also, she believes that FonF can guarantee success with abundant communicative opportunities in class and much exposure outside of the class. This issue is the main difference between EFL and ESL context (Fotos, 2002). Sheen (2002) contrasts FonF with FonFS saying that “the assumption underlying FonF is the similarity between L1 and L2 acquisition with the emphasis upon enough exposure to comprehensible input, the factor which makes a rather different result in ESL vs. EFL context of learning” (p. 304). Tanaka (2004) believes that in an EFL context, there are fewer opportunities for extensive input than those present in ESL context.

Context of learning is not the only problem associated with FonF approach. Individual differences and age (Dekeyser, 2005) are among factors affecting FonF instruction. Individual learners are different as to their stage of development, therefore, FonF instruction should adapt communicative activities to the learners’ level of interlanguage development (Ellis, 1992; Hayashi, 1995; Lightbown, 2000; Pienemann, 1984, 1988, 1999). In any context of learning, two parties are involved: Teachers and students. Another question is, do students support FonF as much as their teachers do?

Research has shown that teachers’ perspectives about these two approaches are different from those of students. Brindley (1984) states that teachers favor FonF whereas students favor

FonFS. Schultz' papers (1996, 2001) indicate that students take more interest in formal teaching of grammar and explicit corrective feedback. It is quite important to know if teachers consider the wishes and preferences of students about focusing on form or forms (Borg, 1998, 1999; Macrory, 2000). According to Burgess and Etherington (2002), these different views of teachers and students "weigh heavily enough with teachers to influence their decisions, despite personal reservations about the pedagogical effectiveness of such grammatical treatment" (p. 435).

All in all, despite a great amount of support for implicit teaching of grammatical features through FonF as we went through the previous discussion, there exist a number of studies which give priority to explicit teaching of grammar (Alanen, 1995; Andrews, 2007; Harley, 1998; Hayashi, 1995; Izumi, 2002; Jourdenais, 1998; Leow, 1997; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Radwan, 2005; Robinson, 1997; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999; Sheen, 2002; Von Eleck & Oskarsson, 1973; White, 1998, 2001). Now the last question is, shouldn't the FonF or FonFS be modified in accord with the objectives learners have for their second language learning?

If the goal of L2 learning is developing communicative competence, enabling learners to use language for communication, then grammar and communication must be integrated (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Ellis, 1994, 2002, 2002, 2003; Robinson, 2001). However, for many learners communication is not the only concern. In this study, the researcher suggests that if learners need language to pass a standardized test as a prerequisite to study for higher education, then FonFS would be prioritized so as to fulfill their objectives. Two main questions comprise this study:

- 1) Does FonFS affect the performance of TOEFL candidates in grammar section of the test?
- 2) Is there any relationship between students' first and final performance in grammar section of TOEFL test?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Hundred and fifty students participated in this study. They were all TOEFL candidates attending preparatory classes before sitting for the test. They were adults whose age ranged from 25 to 35. Their gender was not controlled. Besides their homogeneity was not considered, since what the research sought was delving into whether participants, irrespective of their level, might show greater grammatical mastery after explicit grammar instruction.

2.2 Instruments and Procedures

Longman TOEFL preparation book (Phillips, 2004) served as the main instrument of the study. Almost in most books for TOEFL preparation, students become familiarized with skills required to do well on the structure and written expression part of the test; to teach these grammatical skills, the researcher prepared a handout incorporating all the skills together with the relevant exercises. Distributing the handout, the researcher told the students to go through each skill which just focused on one grammatical point thoroughly explained; besides, the researcher introduced each grammatical point in class with samples given for

further clarification. The following sample illustrates the sample exercises followed by teaching a grammatical point:

Exercise 11. Each of the following sentences contains more than one clause. Underline the subjects once and the verbs twice. Circle the connectors. Put boxes around the adjective clauses. Then indicate if the sentences are **correct or incorrect**.

1. It is important to fill out the form in the way that you have been instructed.
2. The car which I have been driving for five years for sale at a really good price.
3. I just finished reading the novel whom the professor suggested for my book report.
4. The plane that he was scheduled to take to Hawaii was delayed.
5. The movie which we watched on cable last night it was really frightening.
6. I made an appointment with the doctor whom you recommended.
7. The enthusiasm with which he greeted me made me feel welcome.
8. The story that you told me about Bob.
9. The men with whom were having the discussion did not seem very friendly.
10. I am not really sure about taking part in the plans that we made last night.

Before teaching and introducing grammatical structures, once the students were tested on the TOEFL structure and written expression section. And again after finishing the course, they sat for another test of grammar.

3. Results

We had two different occasions in which the students were tested on grammar section of TOEFL. The Paired Samples T test was conducted to evaluate the effect of exposure to explicit grammatical forms taught and practiced in the class on the performance of learners on grammar section of the test. There was a statistically significant increase of scores from Time 1 ($M = 22.82$, $SD = 4.78$) to Time 2 ($M = 29.82$, $SD = 3.39$), $t(149) = 27.07$, $p < .005$. Besides, eta squared statistic (.83) indicated a large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

Table 1. T-test Results for Comparing the Performance of Learners on Grammar Section of TOEFL

	t	df	Sig.
TOEFL 1 & TOEFL 2	27.07	149	.000

So as to know if there might be a relationship between two performances of the students on the test, we ran correlational analysis. The result of correlation corroborated our hunch about the relationship between performances of learners in two occasions. Table 2 shows that the relationship is significant, $r = .75$, $p < .005$; consequently, the good performance in the first test can be a predictor for success in the second trial after the exposure to explicit grammar instruction.

Table 2. Correlation results between the first and second performance of learners

	TOEFL 1	TOEFL 2
TOEFL 1	1	.75

To summarize the findings, there was a statistically significant difference between performance of learners on grammar section of TOEFL test before they were subjected to explicit grammar instruction and after they were directly taught grammatical forms. Moreover, those who had a good performance or a bad one in the first test did a better or worse one on the second while both enhanced their grammatical knowledge to some extent which was statistically significant though.

4. Discussion

In the past, there used to be a boundary between a teaching method which was called grammar translation and another named natural approach. Both had its own advocates depending on purpose and context of learning. However, as we passed post-method era trying to consider a number of aspects before supporting one particular teaching method, we have begun a new age of teaching. At this age, we may merge for example, FonFS into FonF or even the opposite to meet the needs of the particular group of L2 learners. Perhaps, this can be true that eclecticism responds to learners' needs as teachers endeavor to take their students' specific needs into account. In all, we, as teachers, cannot advocate an approach just because in the passage of time it has proven to be successful in for instance, a number of studies. As was previously mentioned, Norris and Ortega (2000) did such a study and found almost contradictory results to what was claimed before.

The second point is that both both FonF and FonFS studies lack strong theoretical and empirical evidence. Referring to this issue, Sheen (2003) states that "the advocacy of FonF as the most effective teaching strategy is only theoretically motivated, and lacks credibility in terms of the empirical evidence available" (p. 225). He is not alone in raising such topic; three years earlier, Norris and Ortega challenged FonF efficacy saying "the essential features that supposedly distinguish FonF and FonFS instructional approaches have been inconsistently operationalized" (p. 501). They, then, concluded that explicit FonFS instruction is as effective if not more as implicit FonF instruction.

The type of grammatical form also can affect the type of approach suitable for specific groups of L2 learners. Dekeyser and Sokalski (2001) suggest that processing instruction would be successful but it depends on morphosyntactic complexity of the target structure. This point was also considered by Ellis (1992) when he asserted that grammatical instruction depends on the structure taught and the learners' stage of development which in fact brings teachability hypothesis of Pienmann (1984, 1988, 1999) into the scene. Lightbown and Spada (1999), likewise, doubt the efficacy of FonF underscoring the importance of learners' stages of morphosyntactic development. The complexity of many structures and learners'

interlanguage development are, inter alia, two factors that can challenge the FonF supporters. In fact, Poole's (2005) reasoning questions the one-sided support of FonF:

Even though further research will be needed to determine the effectiveness of focus on form instruction within a variety of instructional circumstances, it seems most likely to meet its instructional objectives in settings in which the following elements are present: principles of CLT are accepted in activities and assessments; classes are sufficiently small enough for teachers to be able to work individually with students and learners individually with their peers; and teachers – and students, for that matter – are proficient enough in English in order to conduct classes in English and not code-switch when communicative difficulties are encountered. (p. 53)

This study does not attempt to question FonF or FonFS; rather, it has a different look at what adult learners need in a particular place within a limited time frame. This time limitation encourages a teaching method which can intensively enhance learners' performance; this cannot be realized within extensive FonF tasks learners are involved to notice and develop given grammatical forms. Hence, teachers' choice of FonF or FonFS had better be in consonant with real needs of students, that is the reason this study chose Focus-on-Fit persuading teachers to closely consider factors affecting contexts of learning where success in one approach is evaluated by the success in fulfilling the teaching program set up and intended to achieve objectives on which learners already decide.

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