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Grammar from Context: The Effect of Explicit Focus on Form Instruction in Learning English Question Formation

Keivan Seyyedi, Ph.D. Candidate

Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail, Ph.D.

Abstract

Investigating the effectiveness of explicit focus on form on the written performance of the EFL learners is the aim of this study. To provide empirical support for this study, sixty male English learners were selected and randomly assigned into two groups of focus on form and meaning-focused. English question formation was employed for data collection. The participants in the focus on form group were taught English question formation based on explicit focus on form (error correction and rule explanation), whilst those in the meaning-focused group were taught English question formation via communicative language teaching (CLT). The participants' output was coded then analyzed utilizing Independent t-test for grammatical accuracy and fluency. Results indicated that learners in focus on form group appear to benefit from error

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correction and rule explanation as two pedagogical techniques of explicit focus on form with respect to accuracy, but regarding fluency they did not yield any significant differences compared to the participants of meaning-focused group.

Key words: Focus on form; explicit focus on form; error correction; rule explanation; accuracy; fluency.

1. Introduction

Whether to teach grammar or not, foreign and second language teaching methodology seems to be in extreme positions. First, methods such as Grammar-Translation and the Audiolingual adopted form-centered approaches until 1970s. Second, with the introduction of the communicative approach in second language teaching and learning, there appeared a strong tendency not to focus on linguistic forms and a consequent downplaying of the status of grammar teaching for most of the 1980s. However, in 1990s second language pedagogy is witnessing an increasing interest in the idea of ‘focus on form’ and the suggestion that attention to form should be encouraged in second and foreign language classrooms (Doughty & Williams, 1998). This approach has developed as a reaction against communicative and form-focused approaches which advocated and focused the exclusive use of meaning-focused or form-focused activities in language classrooms.

1.1. Focus on Form

Many researchers and teachers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) argue that exposure to language is not enough. Researchers such as Robinson, Lightbown, and Swain assert that activities which focus solely on message are inadequate to develop an accurate knowledge of the language. To compensate this inadequacy, there should be some kind of form-focused activity into communicative classroom contexts.

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Focus on form is a pedagogical technique that can compensate this inadequacy. Long (1991) originally coined “focus on form instruction” as a term referring to the occasionally, temporary, and explicit and clearly expressed oral concentration by the teachers and students on problematic grammatical or lexical items during communication. It used to draw learners’ attention to language form implicitly or explicitly. Focus on form refers to those form-focused activities that arise during, and embedded in, meaning based lessons; they are not pre-planned, as in the case with focus on forms, but occur incidentally as a function of the interaction of learners’ and their teachers’ predominant focus.

1.2. Why Focus on Form?

Focus on form instruction has arisen for two main reasons, (Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001a). Firstly, there should be a balance between form-centered instructions usually seen in traditional methods with communicative approaches. Although this kind of instruction leans more towards the latter due to its emphasis on real communication, it also validates the occasional incorporation of linguistic items during instruction. This is because teachers’ experiences have shown that drilling, repetition, and error correction can aid learning (Sheen, 2003). Secondly, learners need to use correct forms, particularly, while receiving ‘comprehensible input’ in order to acquire them. Therefore, focus on form instruction encourages students not only to use language in order to practice and automatize structures, but also the teacher and students may be able to identify the learners’ errors and form-based difficulties in order to help learners overcome them (Poole, 2005).

1.3. Explicit Methodological Techniques

A focus can be given to a task if learners are provided with explicit information relating to the targeted structure during the performance of the task. An explicit focus can be provided either proactively or retroactively. In the case of a proactive focus the teacher draws the attention to the targeted feature by asking a question or by making a meta-lingual comment. A retroactive

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focus occurs through negative feedback involving explicit attention to the targeted feature. This can be achieved in various ways, for example, by means of an explicit correction (No, what you said was wrong, or you don't say...) or a meta-linguistic comment.

Long and Robinson (1998) discuss a number of experimental studies that have compared the effectiveness of implicit and explicit teaching-learning conditions. Taken together, these findings certainly suggest that explicit focus on form is better for simple rules than implicit learning is. The findings are less clear-cut for complex rules, which generally appear to be difficult for learners in all conditions (DeKeyser, 1995; Robinson, 1996b). On the other hand, N. Ellis found an advantage for explicit instruction over implicit learning. In another study Carroll and Swain (1993) also suggest that those students who received explicit instruction combined with meta-linguistic feedback performed better in extending their knowledge to novel exemplars than did those who received implicit feedback.

2. This Study

The research undertaken here is designed to test the way error correction and rule explanation as two instruction techniques of explicit focus on form impact language production.

2.1. Rationale and Research Question

There are two cases that EFL/ESL learners, even though exposed to certain structures of the ESL, will fail to perceive in naturalistic input. In other words, the input does not become intake (Corder, 1967).

The first case is related to those aspects of EFL/ESL that the learner may neglect it. For example, some English questions are formed with the auxiliary verb 'do', as in (1):

(1) a. Does Mary like cheese?

b. Where do you work?

Such sentences are likely to be quite frequent in the EFL since learners are exposed to a variety of questions even from the first day of learning; nevertheless, they may fail to perceive the presence of 'do', deleting it because the interlanguage (i.e. the learner's production) grammar cannot analyze it.

The second case is related to those aspects of the EFL/ESL which the learner may analyze incorrectly. For example, a learner who is trying to change the sentences (2a) below to question may form the question (2b), on the basis of other question forms with auxiliary verb 'do'.

(2) a. Mary can play tennis.

*b. Do Mary can play tennis?

In this case, the learner has learned incorrect analysis of the EFL/ESL that is; she/he does not have the information about forms not possible in the English language.

Given these problems, the researcher aimed to examine the effect of explicit focus on form instruction (error correction, and rule explanation) on the learning of "English Question Formation".

For this purpose the following question had been raised:

"What is the effect of error correction, and rule explanation as two pedagogical techniques of explicit focus on form instruction on learning English question formation?"

2.2. Research Hypotheses

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In the light of the above-mentioned purposes and based on the stated research question the following hypotheses had been proposed:

1. Error correction and rule explanation as two pedagogical techniques of explicit focus on form will lead to more fluent performance on English question formation.
2. Error correction and rule explanation as two pedagogical techniques of explicit focus on form will lead to more accurate performance on English question formation.

2.3. Participants

The participants for the study comprised 60 male students, aged between 15-17 years old enrolled in intermediate EFL classes in a private institute in Mahabad-Iran. All of the subjects had finished the same English textbooks and they had achieved the average necessary for them to be accepted as intermediate students. A characteristic of this sampling was that all the students shared the same background knowledge and experience resulted from their course of study. Almost all the students had the same objectives and interests. Thus the effect of the type of course study eliminated. They were selected on the basis of their scores to ensure homogeneity.

2.4. Setting and Procedures

To investigate the effect of independent variable, the participants of the study were randomly assigned into two groups of focus on form and meaning-focused. After that, both groups were prepared for instruction. The units seek to develop in students certain abilities which prepare them for authentic or real-world topics. Units consist of conversational language, natural recordings with a variety of accents, and vocabulary-building exercises. In short, they provided opportunities for the students to share opinions and ideas. Therefore, the subjects had good reasons to increase their interest towards the materials.

The time of the instruction to the groups was the same (either in the morning or in the afternoon) with a difference of almost two hours. The materials and session time spent were the same. Both groups undertook the instruction in twelve weeks, three sessions a week, and 50 minutes each session. Meaning-focused group was taught through communicative language teaching method. For the focus on form group, instruction was based on explicit focus on form (error correction and rule explanation). The teacher is supposed to give correct forms or explain the rules when the students commit an error in “English Question Formation” field.

2.5. Measures

2.5.1. Fluency Measure (Number of Dysfluencies)

The total number of words a participant reformulated (i.e., crossed out and changed) divided by the total number of words produced (Ellis and Yuan, 2004).

2.5.2. Accuracy Measure (Error-free Clauses)

The percentage of clauses that did not contain any errors. All errors in syntax, morphology, and lexical choice were considered. Lexical errors were defined as errors in lexical form or collocation (Ellis and Yuan, 2004).

3. Results

To find out the way the independent variable affect the dependent variables, the raw scores of the participants were fed into the computer software SPSS (version 20) for further data analysis. In the following section, the results are analyzed according to the hypotheses of the study.

The first hypothesis predicted that error correction and rule explanation will lead to more fluent performance on English question formation. Thus, the paired samples t-test was employed to find out the impact of error correction and rule explanation, on the participants' performances. The results of the t-tests are presented in Table 1. Table 1 presents the results under explicit focus on form and meaning-focused condition. As it's indicated in this table, error correction and rule explanation don't affect fluency (.320 > 0.05). As a result, the first hypothesis is rejected with regard to fluency. In other words, error correction and rule explanation as two techniques of explicit focus on form have no effect on the fluency of performance compared to meaning-focused instruction. That is, explicit focus on form doesn't lead to more fluent English question performance.

Table1. Independent T Test to Compare Fluency and Accuracy in Focus on Form and Meaning-focused Instruction

Measure	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Fluency	Explicit Focus on Form	.0373	.02738	.320
	Meaning-focused	.0443	.02664	
Accuracy	Explicit Focus on Form	.8497	.06250	.043*
	Meaning-focused	.8070	.09403	

The second hypothesis also predicted that error correction and rule explanation will lead to more accurate performance regarding English question formation. As it's indicated in Table 1, error correction and rule explanation affect accuracy (.043 < 0.05). As a result, the second hypothesis is supported with regard to accuracy.

In sum, the results showed that explicit focus on form instruction affected the accuracy of language production but not fluency compared to meaning-focused instruction.

4. Discussion

The present study addressed the impact of explicit focus on form on the accuracy and fluency performance. Consequently, two hypotheses were proposed earlier predicting this impact.

The first research hypothesis claimed that **“error correction and rule explanation as two pedagogical techniques of explicit focus on form will lead to more fluent performance on English question formation.”**

Results of the present study indicated that error correction and rule explanation as two pedagogical techniques had no effect on the fluency of the English question formation.

The second research hypothesis was **“error correction and rule explanation as two pedagogical techniques of explicit focus on form will lead to more accurate performance on English question formation.”**

Data analysis revealed increase in accuracy of the performance of explicit focus on form group compared to meaning-focused group. As a result, the second hypothesis is supported regarding accuracy.

Supporting Long and Robinson’s (1998), contention that *focus on formS instruction* emphasis on specific forms within a communicative context, gives a better chance for addressing grammatical needs of English language learners in a contextualized fashion than does *a pure communicative approach*.

This implies that explicit focus on form instruction is an effective factor in learning English question formation and had caused statistically meaningful difference in English question formation knowledge of the subjects in explicit focus on form group compared to meaning-focused group. In other words, the difference among the scores of the two groups is systematic and is not due to chance.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that explicit focus on form helps learners improve their linguistic accuracy while they are engaged in meaning-focused FL lessons.

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Keivan Seyyedi, Ph.D. Candidate
School of Educational Studies
Universiti Science Malaysia (USM)
11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
kevansayyedi@yahoo.com

Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail, Ph.D.
School of Educational Studies
Universiti Science Malaysia (USM)
11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
samalik@usm.my

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