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The Use of Form-Focused Methods in Teaching Present and Past Tenses and Its Effects on EFL Writing

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Abstract

Much grammar research over the past few decades has concentrated on determining the role of different focus-on-form instructions of grammar in enhancing L2 learning. The role of grammar has been revisited and the debate on grammar has shifted from whether to teach grammar implicitly or explicitly to how much explicitness should be included in grammar instruction. The new theoretical framework of this debate is the focus-on-form approach which is in fact a revival of some traditional approaches but with new visions. This article presents findings of an experimental study which compared the effect of two options of form-focused instruction on learning rules of usage of present and past tense forms and their appropriate use in writing. The instructional strategies used are the explicit focus-on-forms and the implicit focus-on-form.

The explicit focus-on-forms is the traditional method of grammar teaching, and the implicit focus-on-forms is the method which is based on input enhancement, meaningful practice and written output with implicit feedback and no explicit rules. Pre- and post-test before and after treatment design was used in addition to focus group interviews to measure learned grammar, appropriate use of rules in writing and to investigate whether certain verb forms are better learned under one condition rather than another. Findings revealed that 1) most rules are learned by both experimental groups and without any significant difference between them, 2) focus-on-form group outperformed focus-on-forms group in the ability to use appropriately the verb forms in writing, and 3) all verb forms were better learned under the implicit focus-on-form condition.

Key words: Focus-on-Forms (FonFs), Focus-on-Form (FonF), form- focused instruction (FFI)

1. Form-focused instructional approach (FFI) and the rediscovery of grammar

The focus-on-form approach emerged as a reaction against the purely communicative teaching which showed many limitations. Findings from immersion and naturalistic studies have revealed that when instruction is purely meaning-based, certain linguistic aspects remain flawed (Doughty et al, in Gascoigne: 2001). This led scholars and practitioners to reconsider the place of grammar in curriculums with the view to improve language mastery.

For Long (1991), focus-on-form instruction is different from modes of instruction that aim at teaching specific L2 grammatical forms rather than presenting language as a mechanism for communication and modes that are purely communicative which prohibits direct grammar

teaching. In contrast, Long (ibid) has asserted that FonF maintains a balance between the two modes by calling on teachers and learners to attend to form when necessary, yet within a communicative classroom environment.

‘Focus on form (FonF)’ and ‘Focus on Forms (FonFs)’ ‘Focus’ on form’ has been proposed by Long (1991) as a way to provide for ‘noticing’ of grammatical features during a communicative task. Long (ibid) distinguishes between “focus-on- form” and “focus-on-forms”. Focus on forms refers to traditional explicit and decontextualised teaching of isolated grammatical points. During focus-on-forms activities, meaning is not stressed or may not even exist. A good example of a focus on forms lesson is one conducted by means of ‘PPP’ (Ellis, 2002). Focus on form, on the other hand, fuses explicit aspects into meaningful activities (Long, 1991). When focus-on-form emerged, focus on grammatical features within a communicative procedure was interpreted as being spontaneous reactions to perceived problems of form. Later, the interpretation to this new concept became more flexible. For example Ellis (2002) distinguishes between planned and incidental focus on form. Planned focus on form means that the features to attend to are pre-determined usually through text or task design: so a text may contain a large number of exemplars of past progressive forms, or a task may be designed to be based on interrogatives.

This type of focus on form is similar to focus on forms instruction in that forms are pre-selected for treatment, but it differs from it in the fact that during a focus on form treatment attention to forms occurs during a communicative activity and learners are not made aware that these forms are targeted (Ellis, 2002). Incidental focus on form, in contrast, is unplanned, and takes place mainly during oral interaction: spontaneous error correction, for example (Ur, 2002). In this type of focus on form many forms may be targeted in a lesson.

Options of FFI

Ellis (2012) maintains that FFI ‘is best conceptualized in terms of concrete activity options’ not in terms of abstract constructs such as FonF/FonFs, implicit/explicit and others. Ellis et al (2002) define the term 'option' as being ‘a specific strategy for delivering instruction’. We find many focus-on-form strategies in the literature: some of them are more implicit such as input flood, input enhancement, recast; others are more explicit such as input structuring and explicit feedback. There are different categorizations of FFI options in the literature. For example, Ellis (2012) used the two broad categories of FFI options: performance options as in proactive FFI and feedback options as in reactive FFI. Performance options are techniques and procedures that involve some kind of performance on the part of the learner. Feedback options are those that provide the learner with feedback on their performance. Instructional or proactive options can be either in the form of consciousness-raising techniques (direct such as explicit explanation of grammar, indirect such as self-discovery techniques), or language performance options based on input (comprehension) or output (production).

Previous research on FFI

The early research on FFI concerned itself with ‘whether FFI works’ (Ellis, 2014). But today the question is which type of FFI is more effective. Many studies have been carried out to find

out about how best grammar can be taught. One of such studies is the meta-analysis research of Norris and Ortega (2000). Norris and Ortega found that many of the studies (90%) favoured explicit instruction and that gains are durable over time. More specifically, instruction that incorporates explicit (including deductive and inductive) techniques leads to more substantial effects than implicit instruction. In addition, instruction that incorporates a focus on form integrated in meaning is as effective as instruction that involves a focus on forms. The evidence of a better effect of implicit instruction on language use is very small. One example is the study of Herron & Tomasello (1992) who found that the inductively-taught group learned better than the deductively-taught one. Other studies found that effectiveness of both explicit and implicit teaching depends on rules simplicity/complexity. For example, Andrews et al (2007) found that methods do not matter for simple rules but make a difference when it concerns complex rules since explicitly-taught groups achieved significantly higher scores over complex rules.

Much research is being concerned with saliency of input such as input enhancement, input flood and input processing. The most investigated one is textual input enhancement. Studies investigating input enhancement FFI vary greatly in their results. For example Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson and Doughty (1995) found that enhanced groups attended more frequently to Spanish verb forms than the non-enhanced groups. Other studies dealt with the impact of output on learning. Among the studies that examined the effects of output on language learning and found relative positive effects are studies of Izumi, S., Bigelow, M., Fujiwara, M. & Fearnow, S. Izumi (1999) and Izumi, S & Bigelow, H. (2000) and Leeser (2008). Izumi et al (1999) attempted to test Swain's (1991) output hypothesis which stresses that the activity of producing the target language may, under certain circumstances, prompt L2 learners to recognize some of their linguistic problems and bring relevant aspects of the L2 to their attention. The study showed that it is possible for output to lead to final intake.

2. **The study**

Participants

The study has been carried out in the department of English, university of Algiers 2. First year LMD grammar classes have been selected to be the setting of the research. 200 new students were involved in two types of treatment. 100 students (of two classes) were taught with an explicit deductive method (FonFs), and 100 students (of two classes) were taught with an implicit inductive method (FonF).

Treatment

The two treatments were used to teach 13 functions of selected grammatical verb structures. All the functions selected were explicitly presented to the deductively taught group. However, we taught fewer functions to the inductively taught group. The other functions were shown (enhanced) in texts but without great focus in practice.

Two different procedures that fit the two different methods of teaching were used. The FonFs group was taught deductively following the PPP (present_practice_produce) model. The FonF

group taught inductively was taught following the EEE (explore_express_explain) model. The subjects following the EEE model were given texts taken from pedagogic and real materials. The structures to be learned were highlighted. The students read the texts and answered some comprehension questions. They practiced the new forms in meaningful activities. The activities involved the students in communicative interaction between and among students and engaged them in collaborative writing. During practice, students were given implicit feedback in the form of recast in order to be faithful to the implicit nature of the approach.

Testing

The Pre- and post- tests were designed to measure the testees' grammatical ability in using the appropriate structures according to the 13 functions taught. In our study, knowledge of grammar is inferred from the ability to select an appropriate form from several options on multiple-choice questions, recognize appropriate meanings of a form, identify and correct errors and write paragraphs. Thus different abilities are targeted: recognition, judgement and production.

Focus group designs

We ran several homogeneous groups according to the participants' scores on the tests and the participants' grades obtained on the scale which ranges from A to F. Since most scores fell either in grade B or C so we ran two focus groups, two with implicit FonF and two with explicit FonFs groups. Each group contained 8 members. The focus groups were run after the post-test.

Research procedure

As a starting point, we used treatment with four grammar classes. We administered a pre-test about present and past tenses at the beginning of the treatment, and then both FonF and FonFs groups were taught the structures under focus during one month. At the end of this period a post-test followed. After correcting the pre- and post- test papers, we gave them back to the students and held focus groups with homogeneous groups in terms of achievement level. The participants were required to justify their responses on the post-test with reference to rules. The post-tests were also analysed to categorize and quantify the number of mistakes on each taught structure both in grammar knowledge tasks and in writing activities.

3. Results

Results from pre- and post-tests

All data were entered into SPSS 23 and various statistical analyses were conducted. First, a paired t-test was used to determine whether there is a significant post-test gain in general and in grammar

Table 1. Summary of data of pre-test-post-test total scores on present/past verb forms

		Mean	N	Sd	SE
FonF	Pre-test	59,3750	80	19,97364	2,23312
	Post-test	71,11	80	21,308	2,382
FonFs	Pre-test	56,9000	80	18,24073	2,03938
	Post-test	64,6500	80	19,49690	2,17982

and writing, in particular, after the treatments for both FonF and FonFs groups. Second, we used a t-test for independent samples to compare the two groups in terms of overall post-test scores and posttest scores in grammar and writing. We used a significance p value of 0.05.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of t-test of pre- and post-tests on present / past verb forms

		Paired differences			t	ddl	Sig. (bilatéral)
		Mean	Sd	SE			
FonF	pretest – posttest	11,73750	14,51733	1,62309	7,232	79	,001
FonFs	pretest – posttest	-7,75000	10,73914	1,20067	-6,455	79	,001

The results above reveal that FonF group scored higher on the post-test and the difference between pre- and post-test scores is significant ($t [79] = -7,232$, $p < 0.05$). The results also reveal that FonFs group scored significantly higher on the post-test ($t [79] = -6,455$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore both groups (FonF & FonFs) scored significantly higher on post-tests.

Table 3: Summary of data of pre-test-post-test of present / past verb forms in grammar knowledge and writing of FonF

		Mean	N	Sd	SE
FonF	Pre-test grammar	32,09	80	10,086	1,128
	Post-test grammarr	37,13	80	10,161	1,136
FonF	Pre-test writing	26,46	80	12,902	1,442
	Post-test writing	32,94	80	13,410	1,499

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of t-test of pre-test and post- test of present/past verb forms in grammar knowledge and writing of FonF

	Paired difference			T	df	Sig. (bilateral)
	Mean	Sd	SE			
FonF Pre-test grammar – post-test grammar	-5,038	8,265	,924	-5,451	79	,0001
FonF Pre-test writing – post-test writing	-6,475	9,582	1,071	-6,044	79	,0001

Table 5: Summary of data of pre-test and post-test of present / past verb forms in grammar knowledge and writing of FonFs

	Mean	N	Sd	Std. SE
FonFs Pre-test grammar	32,1375	80	9,76657	1,09194
Post-test Grammar	48,4875	80	64,92664	7,25902
FonFs Pre-test Writing	25,6625	80	10,37151	1,15957
Post-test writing	27,0875	80	10,34738	1,15687

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of t-test of pre-test and post-test of present/past verb forms in grammar and writing of FonFs

	Paired difference			t	df	Sig. (bilateral)
	Mean	Sd	SE			
FonFs Pre-test grammar – post-test grammar	-16,35000	64,74294	7,23848	-2,259	79	,027
FonFs Pre-test writing – post-test writing	-1,42500	7,54191	,84321	-1,690	79	,095

The results reveal that FonF scored significantly higher on both grammar and writing post-tests: $t [79] = -5,451, p < 0.05$ in grammar tests comparison and $t [79] = -6,044, p < 0,05$ in writing tests comparison. For FonFs, the results reveal that the increase is highly significant in grammar but insignificant in writing: $t [79] = -2,259, p < 0.05$ for grammar tests comparison and $t [79] = -1,690, p > 0.05$ in writing tests comparison.

Table 7: Summary of data of post-test scores on present/past verb forms of both groups

Students	N	Mean	Sd	SE mean
FonF posttest	80	71,11	21,308	2,382
FonFs posttest	80	64,65	19,497	2,180
FonF posttest grammar	80	37,13	10,161	1,136
FonFs posttest grammar	80	48,49	64,927	7,259
FonF posttest writing	80	32,94	13,410	1,499
FonFs posttest writing	80	27,09	10,347	1,157

Table 8 : Descriptive data of independent t-test of pre-test and post-test scores on present/past of both FonF and FonFs

		Levene's test for variances equality		Test t for means equality				
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig.	Mean difference	SE
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	1,973	,162	2,001	158	,047	6,462	3,229
	Equal variances not assumed			2,001	156,769	,047	6,462	3,229
postgrammar	Equal variances assumed	4,450	,036	-1,546	158	,124	-11,362	7,347
	Equal variances not assumed			-1,546	82,868	,126	-11,362	7,347
Postwriting	Equal variances assumed	4,417	,037	3,089	158	,002	5,850	1,894
	Equal variances not assumed			3,089	148,451	,002	5,850	1,894

We compared the overall scores of both FonF and FonFs groups and also their scores in grammar and writing after treatment using the t-test for independent test. As we see from the table above the Levene's test is not significant at $p > 0.05$ ($p = 0.162$) for the posttest overall scores which means that the variances are not different. Thus, having established that homogeneity of variances is met, we look at the t-test. The t-test reveals that its significance value is 0.047 ($p < 0.05$) which means that the difference between the overall means of the two groups is significant with advantage to FonF. Concerning the difference between the performance on grammar in the posttest of the FonF and the FonFs, data reveal that there is no significant difference with a significance value of 0.126 ($p > 0.05$). However, there is a

significant difference in performance on writing between the two groups with a significance value of 0.02 ($p < 0.05$) with advantage to FonF.

Results of focus group interviews

Focus group interviews have been used to crosscheck results obtained on the test concerning the learned grammar knowledge. We quantified and compared obtained data (scores of correct responses on the grammar test) using percentages. After scoring the test, we obtained four types of grades: C, D, E and F. Most students of FonF group obtained the grades ‘D’ and ‘E’ whereas most students of FonFs obtained the grades ‘E’ and ‘F’. In what follows we present the percentages of the grades obtained on the grammar test for both FonF and FonFs groups:

	<u>FonF</u>	<u>FonFs</u>	Grade meaning
A	0%	0%	Excellent
B	0%	0%	Very good
C	6%	8%	Good
D	33%	7%	Average
E	35%	43%	Below average
F	26%	40%	Failure

On the basis of such results, we divided our groups into groups with grades C & D and groups with E & F among both FonF and FonFs groups.

Different grammatical tasks	<u>FonF</u>	<u>FonFs</u>
Multiple choice at the sentence level	17%	42%
Multiple choice at the paragraph level	34%	32%
Meaning discrimination of two sentences	15%	20%
Error identification and correction	10%	15%
	Total: 22%	Total: 28%

Table 9: Summary of data of correct articulation of rules of present/past tenses by FonF and FonFs with grades C and D.

Both good and average students of both FonF and FonFs showed similar amount of grammatical knowledge. Both of these groups showed higher percentages in terms of the number of correctly articulated rules with FonFs scoring slightly higher with a difference of 5% more than the score of the FonF group. FonF group performed better at error identification and correction with reference to the rules and FonFs group performed significantly better and showed higher knowledge of rules on a sentence-level multiple choice task.

Different grammatical tasks	FonF	FonFs
Multiple choice at the sentence level	67%	82%
Multiple choice at the paragraph level	63%	65%
Meaning discrimination of two sentences	55%	62%
Error identification and correction	62%	50%
	Total:	Total:

Table 10 : Summary of data of correct articulation of rules of present/ past tenses by FonF and FonFs groups with grades E and F

No contrast between the students who obtained below the average or failed on the tests in the FonF and those who obtained the same grades in FonFs. Both of these groups showed low percentages in terms of the number of correctly articulated rules (22% and 28%) with a slight difference of 6% for FonFs group. FonFs group showed higher knowledge of rules on the sentence-level multiple choice task whereas the FonF group outperformed FonFs group in the paragraph- level multiple choice task in knowledge of rules.

Structure frequency errors in grammar tests and writing activities

In what follows, we present data related to frequent errors made with each of the structure taught during treatment. This analysis has been made to find out whether different verb forms are learned differently or equally under different conditions (FonF & FonFs). In this section we refer to errors as being developmental errors which “reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage, and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition” (Richards, 1984:6). We use the term ‘error’ and not ‘mistake’ because students had time to monitor their production during the tests. Brown (2000) regards mistakes as a failure to utilize known system when learners are not concentrating on their production. Errors, on the other hand, reveal learners' insufficient competence in producing correct grammar (Brown, *ibid*).

Table 11: Structure frequency errors with present/past verb forms

N	Functions of verb forms	FonF Grammar test	Writing activities	Fons Grammar test	Writing activities	Total number of a mistake
1	Present simple for permanent actions	12%	00%	35%	00%	38
2	Present simple with state verbs	00%	00%	32%	03%	30
3	Present progressive for ongoing actions around speaking	05%	07%	14%	47%	95

4	present progressive for speaker's irritation	40%	Not used	51%	Not used	73
5	Present progressive for temporary actions	32%	10%	40%	57%	112
6	Present perfect with repeated actions	32%	Not used	70%	Not used	82
7	Present perfect with actions connected to the Present	52%	25%	100%	75%	202
8	Present perfect continuous with focus on the activity	10%	Not used	32%	Not used	34%
9	Past progressive with past long actions	22%	00%	57%	17%	78
10	Past simple for brief actions	67%	00%	82%	05%	124
11	Past simple with finished actions	47%	57%	80%	87%	218
12	Past simple with specific points of time	42%	02%	75%	62%	92
13	Past perfect with earlier past events	35%	32%	92%	80%	192

Observation 1: The past simple with finished actions and the present perfect with connection to the present are the forms which are the most troublesome for the students followed by past perfect with earlier past events, past simple for brief actions and present progressive for temporary actions.

Observation 2: FonFs group considerably outnumbered FonF group in terms of number of errors made with all the structures.

Observation 3: FonF group shows no difficulty in using present simple with state verbs compared to FonFs group.

Observation 4: Most errors are made on tasks about grammar knowledge and not on tasks of writing. Sometimes the revealed errors on grammar tasks completely disappear in writing tasks such is the case for present with permanent actions. Both groups show zero errors in writing activities in relation to this form, though on grammar knowledge tasks errors were detected.

Observation 5: Very few errors are made by FonF on both grammar and writing separately compared to FonFs.

4. Discussion

As regards learning of rules, this study revealed significant results. It showed that both explicit focus-on-forms and implicit focus-on-form groups benefited from both instructions as both of the groups scored significantly higher on the post-test. This is in line with Ortega's findings which showed also that instruction that incorporates a focus on form integrated in meaning is as effective as instruction that involves a focus on forms.

However, if we look at performance on grammar knowledge and performance on writing in the post test we find that the FonF group performed highly better on both grammar knowledge and writing tasks. But, the FonFs performed highly better on grammar knowledge and insignificantly better on writing tasks. These specific data indicate that both explicit FonFs and implicit FonF instructions help learners to learn grammar, but explicit FonF instruction is less effective in helping learners use appropriately the verb forms in writing. This, in fact, confirms the findings of Herron & Tomasello (1992) which revealed that there is evidence of a better effect of implicit instruction on language use.

Comparison of the results of both groups showed that although the FonFs group was given rules, their performance on grammar knowledge is insignificantly higher than the performance of the FonF group in grammar knowledge. The focus group interview revealed that the difference between the two groups in term of the percentage of articulated rules is only of 5% between high achievers of both groups and 6% between low achiever of both groups. So this shows that implicit teaching through input enhancement, reading comprehension, output production with implicit feedback helped the learners to extract the rules and apply them nearly in the same way as the learners who were directly given rules without any effort.

Concerning performance in writing, a highly significant difference was revealed with advantage to FonF group. So, this again confirms that implicit focus-on-form instruction has a better effect on language use as concluded by Herron et al (ibid). Though we do not know clearly which of the FFI options used in our implicit teaching directly contributed to such a better result, we know at least that it is more likely due to either of them or to all of them combined. It may be due to input enhancement which is revealed to be as one strategy that helps learners to attend to forms as argued by Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson and Doughty (1995). The high achievement of FonF group might also be due to the impact of output on learning. This could confirm findings of studies such as those of Izumi & al (1999) and Izumi et al (2000) and Leeser (2008) which revealed positive effect of output on learning.

Concerning the kind of FFI options which are more suitable for learning certain forms, we found that all present and past structures are better learned under the implicit FonF condition. Particularly, we found that present simple for permanent actions, with state verbs and with ongoing actions around speaking in addition to past progressive with long actions are those which were much better learned by FonF group rather than by FonFs group. We might explain this by the fact that whereas FonF group was drawn to notice how these structures function in real language/authentic discourse and using them in their own output, the FonFs group was provided with rules of use which might have confused them. It is important to mention here that except from the structure of present simple for permanent actions the other

three structures were just enhanced in a text without being focused on in practice. This indicates that at least as far as these structures are concerned the textual enhancement alone has a better effect on learning than rules teaching.

Finally, findings yielded by error analysis showed that many structures appeared to be highly problematic to both groups giving the high percentages of errors made. Some of these structures are the past simple with completed actions in the past, the present perfect with connection to the present, past perfect with earlier past events, past simple for brief actions and present progressive for temporary actions. Since there is a difference in the number of errors among the structures we may conclude that some rules are easy to learn and others not. However, we did not find that explicit teaching is more effective than the implicit teaching for any kind of rules so this counterarguments Andrew (2007) who found that methods do not matter for simple rules but make a difference when it concerns complex rules. Our conclusion as regards this point is that there are obviously some rules that are easier to learn than others but the implicit teaching seems to be more effective to teach all the rules of use of present and past verb forms taught in this study.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed that both the explicit and implicit focus- on-form instructions improves knowledge of grammar and its use in writing; so this shows that grammar matters. However, we found a better effect with the implicit FonF instruction in general and in using appropriately grammar in writing. This rejects the claims about the non usefulness of implicit options in the EFL context. On the contrary, combining effective implicit strategies enhances learning and use better than the explicit traditional method for teaching grammar. And as we have found the implicit options work for all the structures. So, our EFL classrooms should incorporate strategies such as textual enhancement, reading comprehension, written production and all sorts of meaningful activities to teach any structure.

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