THE USEFULNESS OF THE DEBATE BETWEEN FOCUS ON FORM AND FOCUS ON FORMS

Mohammad Mahmudul Haque
Senior Lecturer
Department of English and Humanities
BRAC University
email: mmhaque@bracu.ac.bd

ABSTRACT

The literature review includes 13 articles and 2 chapters from 2 books titled *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching, and Learning*, and *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* published in the last ten years focusing on the efficacy of Focus on form (FonF) or the communicative use of grammar in comparison with Focus on forms (FonFS) or the explicit use of grammar in language classrooms. The first section discusses researchers' views on the employment of FonF vs. FonFS addressing issues like when FonF arises, points in favor of and against FonF in relation to FonFS, and different variables affecting the success of FonF. The second section discusses different views of learners regarding classroom use of FonF and FonFS with a separate subsection on the views held by the US and Colombian FL learners as they represent two contrasting preferences in terms of the adoption of FonF and FonFS. The third and final section deals with teachers' views regarding the efficacy of FonF and FonFS followed by the difference in view among the US and Colombian FL teachers and how FonFS can be synthesized into FonF. The findings reveal that there is no universal efficacy of either FonF or FonFS; it is rather the context which decides on the efficacy of these two. Moreover, it is to be noted that a choice between FonF or FonFS is not mutually exclusive and one can be incorporated into the other.

Key words: FonF (focus on form), FonFS (focus on forms), explicit use, communicative use

Introduction

For the last forty years, the role of form in grammatical instruction in various language learning situations has been one of the key issues for discussions (Ellis, 2001, cited in Burgess & Etherington 434) in the field of second and foreign language teaching. The discussion has centered on "the degree to which teachers need to direct learners' attention to understanding grammar" while maintaining the "focus on the need of communication" (Sheen 2002, 303). While there are practitioners who believe in limited or no interruption, thus minimizing the focus (by providing corrective feedback) on grammar while communicating (Doughty and Varela, 1998, cited in Sheen 2002, 303), there are other practitioners who insist that conscious attention be given to teaching grammar followed by subsequent integration of the knowledge of grammar into communicative activities (DeKeyser, 1998, cited in Sheen 2002, 303).

The discussion gained momentum with Long and Robinson (1991, 1996; Long and Robinson, 1998, cited in Loewen, 2011, p. 577) analyzing form-focused instruction (FFI) into two categories- Focus on form (FonF) and Focus on forms (FonFS). Added to this, Long (1991) proposed a new dimension (cited in Burgess & Etherington 434), namely "focus on meaning". Long (1991) described FonF as "Overtly draw[ing] students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (as cited in Loewen 2011, 576-577). On the contrary, FonFS, as Long (1991) and Long & Robinson (1998) argued, refers to presentation followed by practice of discrete linguistic structures devoid of any need for communication (as cited in Loewen 2011, 577). Loewen (2011) provided an example for FonFS by referring to traditional grammar instructions in which rules of grammar are taught in an explicit fashion. In this regard, he also mentioned corrective feedback (576) which is usually

provided to correct learners' flawed/incorrect utterances.

In terms of the instructional efficacy of FonF and FonFS, Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002, 422) referred to Norris and Ortega's (2000) findings where it was argued that the success of teaching reduced when it was judged against learners' ability to use certain target structures spontaneously. Moreover, Sheen (2003), despite his belief in the communicative activities as the central focus of language classrooms, expressed his concern that since grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language were already difficult to learn, they cannot be learnt successfully at all "as a by-product of communicative activity" (226), or simply by engaging the learners in problem solving activities.

The present literature review, in an attempt to shed lights on the complexity arising out of the application of these two pedagogic approaches, analyzes three different perspectives relating to the efficacy of FonF and FonFS as held by teachers, students, and researchers in language teaching. It presents an overview of a sampling of the most notable research in this area published between 2000 to 2012. The first section focuses on researchers' views on FonF and FonFS, and presents an overview of the findings of the select pieces of research as mentioned in the abstract. The second section reviews a number of studies focusing specifically on the way learners, arguably, the most important stakeholder in the teaching-learning process, view the efficacy of FonF and FonFS. Finally, the third section discusses what the teachers think about the usefulness of these two teaching approaches in question. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, none of the research findings reviewed in the paper endorses an either-or approach, meaning a total exclusion of either FonF or FonFS.

Literature Review

Researchers' views on FonF and FonFS:

According to Long, FonF arises in meaning focused approaches to L2 instruction (as cited in Loewen 2011, 73). Spada, and Ellis (2001, p. 1-2) said that FonF, either planned or incidental, can expose language learners to linguistic forms (cited in Loewen 2011, 577). Loewen (2011), drawing up

the differences between FonF, and FonFS, argued that FonF instruction can be preplanned but has to occur within a broad communicative context, whereas, FonFS keeps its overall focus on isolated language components and views language as an object of study (577).

Long (1988), Doughty and Williams (1998), Lightbown and Spada (1990) and White, Spada, Lightbown and Ranta (1991) advocated for a pedagogical practice of teacher- centered grammar instructions (cited in Fotos, 324) that took place within a communicative setting. Expanding on this view, Long (1988) quoted Pienemann (1984) who argued that isolated teaching of grammatical forms failed to develop learners' ability to use forms in a communicative fashion (cited in Fotos, 301). However, Long (1988) was critical of purely communicative syllabus which, he believed, was a malpractice due to its negligence towards grammatical structures; he, therefore, offered a synthesis between form and function resulting in a syllabus incorporating communicative language use followed by contextualized grammar instruction (Fotos, 301).

Among other researchers, Ellis (2002, 2006), and Doughty (2003) also considered FonF to be "beneficial" (cited in Loewen 2011) for L2 language learning. Doughty and William (1988a, 3), in a similar vein, took a position in favor of FonF, which, they thought, had an advantage over FonFS "through the cognitive processing support" (cited in Burgess & Etherington, 434) provided by focus on meaning or communication. Similar results were revealed in Van Patten and Oikkenon's (1996) study on a group of secondary students studying Spanish. The study revealed that the groups, which received explicit explanation of certain grammatical rules, followed by contextualized practice activities scored higher on the post-treatment test than the groups that received only explicit explanation of grammatical rules (Poole 49).

Williams (1999) and Poole (2003a) found that most students pay more attention to vocabulary than grammatical rules (cited in Poole 50). In this regard, Long's (1996) revised interaction hypothesis, Lyster's (1998) negotiation of form and Swain and Lapkin's (2002) meta-talk assume that when a learner's attention is drawn towards the form in a communicative activity, an opportunity gets created to make a connection between form

and meaning and receive information about the form of language at the time of expressing messages (Spada, Barkaoui, Peters, So, & Valeo 2009, 71).

Conversely, Sheen (2003, 2005), regarding this issue stood on an altogether different footing as he maintained that due to the development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), FonFS faced rejection. He believes that the fact that FonF being superior to FonFS is nothing but a myth (Sheen 2003, 225). He takes side with FonFS instructions arguing that it is equally effective (cited in Loewen 2011, 580); he draws support for his claim (Sheen 2003, 229) from Von Elek and Oskarsson's (1973) comparative research:

> The only safe conclusion one can draw is that, in the teaching of foreign grammar to adults, such techniques as grammatical explanations, deductive presentations of the subject matter, translation, the use of native language, and contrastive analysis are jointly superior to the combination of techniques constituting the implicit method (201).

Sheen (2003) based his position on his study in an elementary school in Quebec where the experimental group (EG) learners were provided with an hour long FonFS instruction whereas the learners of the control group (CG) only received FonF instruction. It was found that FonFS was helpful for the EG group as they made good progress in the two targeted grammatical areas (Sheen 2003, 231), whereas the CG learners, who were treated through FonF, continued to produce largely flawed forms giving a passage to fossilization (Sheen 2003, 231). Similarly, White, in her 2001 paper, found FonFS to be more effective after comparing its effectiveness with FonF (cited in Sheen 2003, 229), which can be linked to Dekeyser's (1998) stance in this issue, who stated that grammar ought to be taught in an explicit fashion to ensure understanding of it first, which may be followed by some exercises to consolidate students' consciousness about it (as cited in Spada *et al.,* 2009, 71).

As for the variables influencing the efficacy of FonF, and FonFS, Poole and Sheorey (2002) argued that most of the FonF studies are conducted in contexts which are sufficiently funded, equipped with teaching and learning materials, and generally free of disciplinary issues in classroom (as cited in

Poole 50). In many other pedagogical contexts, classrooms are not stocked with up-to-date materials and teachers are not adequately trained in language skill and pedagogy (Poole 50). For example, in countries like India, teachers have no voice in curriculum design, the selection process of materials and textbooks, or the development of assessment techniques. All of these are controlled by Boards of Studies comprising senior English faculty members (Sheorey and Nayar 2002, 18, as cited in Poole 50).

On a similar note, Long (1991) and Long and William (1998) were of the opinion that FonF requires that the teachers have native-like or near native-like fluency and also have the ability to recognize students' errors and correct them (cited in Poole 52), whereas the reality is very grim as Yu (2001) found Chinese EFL teachers to have low proficiency in English (as cited in Poole 52) and Butler (2004) reported that Japanese elementary level EFL teachers rated themselves low regarding their oral grammar (Poole 52). Vavrus (2002, 383) referred to Tanzanian teachers who used Swahili in most of their classes due to the lack of required English proficiency of the student or the teacher or in some cases both (as cited in Poole 52).

The conclusion that can be drawn from the aforementioned studies is that, due to widely differing educational scenarios as found in different educational contexts, the efficacy of FonF and FonFS is contingent upon circumstantial issues of different classroom realities. As Loewen (2011) argued, different structures and types of learning were better for different instruction types (580). On a similar note, Spada and Lightbown (2008) suggested that it is unadvisable and unnecessary to choose between integrated (FonF) and isolated (FonFS); rather it is necessary to know which one is appropriate in a given context (185). Regarding such concerns, Norris and Ortega (2000, 501), did not take sides with either of the two approaches in their study, and concluded instead that both can be equally effective (as cited in Sheen 2003, 228). Doughty & Williams (1998c), and Long (2007) have similar beliefs that learning does not necessarily need to take place in a context where the focus is on meaning or/and it has to take place in an FonFS setting (as cited in Loewen 2011, 580). Laufer (2005), linking this issue to the teaching of vocabulary, opined that both FonF and FonFS instructions are effective ways of teaching vocabulary items (as cited in Loewen 2011, 580).

Learners' Views on FonF and FonFS:

Grotjahn (1991, 189, cited in Loewen *et al.* 2009, 92) thinks that as a significant individual difference variable (Dörnyei, 2005; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003), learners' beliefs are comparatively stable. According to Loewen *et al.* (2009, 92), in L2 learning, studying learner beliefs might be beneficial for explaining and predicting learners' behavior. They conducted a quantitative-qualitative study among 754 foreign language learners at various levels of instructions at Michigan State University. The results of the study revealed that learners of the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL) had more positive attitude towards grammar learning compared to the learners learning English (Loewen *et al.* 2009, 97).

A quantitative study conducted by Loewen et al. (2009) showed that Japanese learners do not give priority to communication over grammar (p. 98) as opposed to the LCTL, English and Italian / Portuguese learners. However, the qualitative study revealed different results in that LCTL learners scored highest in prioritizing grammar over communication as found in the answers to four open-ended questions. In the first question, *("I like studying grammar because...")*, LCTL learners said that grammar is beneficial for learning a language (Loewen *et al.* 2009, 98-99) and they enjoy studying grammar unlike their American counterparts. While responding to the second open-ended question, *("I don't like studying grammar because...")*, most learners described grammar lessons to be monotonous (Loewen *et al.* 2009, 99-100). A few learners accepted the fact that grammar is important though they do not like it. While answering the next prompt, (*"I like to be taught grammar in the following ways . . .")*, a few learners expressed their preferences for the use of more examples while teaching, whereas some others express a need for detailed explanation, and the rest reported their desire for grammar teaching "to be related to real life" (Loewen *et al.* 2009, 100). Answering the last prompt, (*"I do not like to be taught grammar in the following ways . . .")*, some ticked on "on my own" (Loewen *et al.* 2009, 101), while some did not like to rely on just the books and the rest did not prefer memorization of rules. In summary, learners opting for explicit detailed grammar teaching prefer a FonFS instruction in which they ask for more examples whereas learners preferring real life activities

(simulated) are actually showing their preferences for FonF instruction.

Schulz (1996, cited in Schulz 245) conducted a survey on US foreign language (FL) learners and Columbian foreign language learners. The US learners showed less preference for instruction in grammatical structures whereas Colombian FL learners had a more positive attitude towards FonFS instruction and believe study of grammar to be beneficial for FL learning. Almost 51% Colombian learners agreed with the survey statement, *"There should be more formal study of grammar in my FL courses"*, whereas, only 26% of American learners sided with increased focus on forms (Schulz 247). However, both American and Colombian FL learners agreed that grammar study is needed for a "mastery of FL" (Schulz 247). Although both US and Colombian FL learners accepted the importance of grammar study, they preferred practicing FL in real life than studying and practicing grammar rules (Schulz 251).

Teachers' Views on FonF and FonFS:

Although teachers' views regarding the roles of grammar instruction also vary like the researchers and the learners, there are not a considerable number of studies focusing on teachers' perspective. However, Schulz (1996) has conducted one significant study on US FL learners and teachers to examine their beliefs (as cited in Schulz, 2001. p. 251). In the latter study (2001), he conducted a similar survey among learners and teachers to compare the findings of the two studies in which he has seen that 33% Colombian FL teachers considered that "students' communicative ability improves most quickly if they study and practice the grammar of the language" (Schulz 251). Colombian teachers were more in favor of the study of grammar than the American teachers with one exception for the statement *"For adolescents or adults, the formal study of grammar is essential to the eventual mastery of an FL/L2 when language learning is limited to the classroom"* with which 64% US FL teachers agreed compared to the agreement rate of 59% Colombian teachers. Though both the US and Colombian FL teachers agreed with the fact that grammar was helpful, more than 80% of the teachers (both American and Colombian) thought "real-life communication tasks play a crucial role as well" (Schulz 254). The overall findings lead to the conclusion that Colombian teachers are more

supportive towards "traditional language teaching". In other words, they prefer FonFS.

Discussion

In the light of these studies, one can conclude that though it has been substantially proven that some learning takes place through FonFS, researchers are still doubtful about its efficacy of it in enabling learners to freely produce targeted forms in oral production (e.g. in a communicative task) (Ellis *et al.* 421). Spada and Lightbown (2008) stated that some researchers not only believe FonFS to be marginally beneficial, but also think that it has a negative impact on language acquisition (182). In this connection, they also refer to Krashen (1982, 1994) and Truscott (1996, 1999), who believe that FonFS merely "alter language performance" but do not "change learners' underlying grammar, which develops only through exposure to the language in natural interaction" (Spada & Lightbown 182).

However, such beliefs are contradicted by Harley and Swain's (1984) and Swain's (1985) study on French immersion students, where it was found that though the students had exposure to "meaningful language use over a long period", they faced "serious problems with certain grammatical forms" (cited in Nassaji 242) and thus asked for activities that pay "attention to form while maintaining meaningful communication" (Nassaji 243), in other words, he suggested "integrative activities" (245). An effective example of integrative activity is dictogloss (a classroom dictation activity where learners are required to reconstruct a short text by listening and noting down key words, which are then used as a base for reconstruction).

On the other hand, the issue of spontaneity led researchers like Long (1991), Doughty (2001) to opt for an "approach based on focus-on-form" (Ellis *et al.* 422). Long (1991), Long & Robinson (1998) are in favor of FonF activities as they spontaneously respond to learners' needs and focus on mirroring real life oral and written discourse; teachers and peers provide the learners with correct form only with comprehension and/or production problems (Poole 48). However, FonF is believed to be beneficial because "when students bring their attentional resources to bear on language input in specific ways, language acquisition is enhanced and more durable" (Anderson & Beckwith 31). Long (1991, and Long and Robinson, (1998 as cited in Poole 48) believe FonF to be a balance of

FonFS and Focus on meaning because it calls for an attention to form within a communicative setting.

Researchers like Spada and Lightbown (2008) accept both types of instruction to be "beneficial, depending on the language features to be learned" (181). They believe that FonFS can help "learners overcome problems related to L1 influence" (Spada & Lightbown 2008, 181). On the other hand, FonF may help learners in developing fluency leading to automaticity (Spada & Lightbown 2008, 181) needed for communicating outside the classroom.

An important point to note here is that preference and implementations of instructions vary from culture to culture as substantiated by Schulz's (1996, 2001) study conducted on the teachers and learners of the US and Colombia. It shows that choice of instruction is very much contingent upon the teaching and learning culture prevailing in the community concerned. Also, learner characteristics may also influence their preferences for a given approach to instructions (Schulz 245). Finally, as a resolution to this ever ongoing argument, many researchers (e.g. Nassaji) opt for FonF instruction that is integrated into communicative interaction to cater to both grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency (Nassaji 248)

Limitations

The present literature review is not free from limitations as it uses only a selection of recent articles which limits the scope of the study and does not allow it to be comprehensive. Many of the works cited here are review articles that lack original research, and therefore the claims they are not grounded in empirical findings. Finally, since FonF has undergone a number of significant redefinitions over the years, it was "difficult to disentangle pure FonF instruction from its FonFS counterparts" (Lew 1).

Conclusion

To sum up, it may be concluded that scholars, students, teachers, and researchers are in serious disagreements over the issue of instructional efficacy of FonF and FonFS. While some researchers consider FonF to be an effective way to incorporate grammar into communicative activities, others take a side with FonFS to be a more effective approach as acquisition of a second

or foreign language involves knowing its grammatical structures. Researchers like Long (1991), Long & Robinson (1998) endorse a pedagogy that urges teachers and learners to pay attention to form only when necessary within a broad communicative setting (Poole 48). Poole (2005) cites an example of classroom situations that are not always favorable for FonF instruction to language teaching. He considers FonF instructions to be "undoable" across learning circumstances because of the constraints imposed by the curriculum (Poole 50). Therefore, it is evident that the issue of variables pertaining to different educational contexts plays a decisive role in terms of the efficacy of FonF vs. FonFS, and thus further research needs to be carried out across educational contexts to decide on the suitability of FonF and FonFS in those contexts.

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