Abstract

Focus on Form (FoF) as a new approach for teaching a second or foreign language has been an ongoing discussion issue among researchers and methodologists. Uptake that is learners’ response to formal instruction has been used as a gauge to measure the degree of effectiveness. While there have been several attempts to research on the extent of uptake in ESL context, similar effort is required in EFL classes. This study by implementing FoF approach in eight sessions of four classes of a language school in Iran, and searching for uptake instances in Focus on Form Episodes, tries to give a picture of uptake in an EFL context and to contribute to deepening the notion in foreign language teaching pedagogy.

Keywords: uptake; Focus on Form (FoF); Focus on Form episodes (FFE)

1. Introduction

1.1. Focus on Form

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, following a controversy on the advantages and disadvantages of form-focused versus meaning-focused instruction among methodologists and researchers, it seemed to be agreed that second or foreign language teaching can be improved if linguistic forms are paid some degree of attention.

Long (1991, pp. 45–46) defined Focus on Form (FoF) as something that “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning
or communication”. Long and Robinson (1998) described FoF as a change in attention to linguistic forms by learners’ recognised problems with production or comprehension.

Regarding the emphasis on formal aspect of the language in a communicative approach, Nunan and Carter (2001) referred to FoF as a context in which teachers and learners address the formal aspects of language and focus on the features that play a role in the meanings that are negotiated.

Doughty and Williams (1998) made a distinction between FoF and FoFS (Focus on FormS) whereby they suggest that it should be added that FoF includes an attention on the linguistic forms of language while FoFS is restricted to such forms, without any notice to the meaning. The basic supposition is that while a learner pays attention to the linguistic units, meaning and use should not be neglected (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

Ellis (2001) suggests two types of FoF: planned and incidental. Planned FoF includes integration of preplanned forms in meaning-focused activities by input (flood/enhancement) or output (corrective feedback on errors while using linguistic forms). Incidental FoF, on the other hand, is a set of unplanned time-outs of attention to forms in meaning-based activities of the classroom.

In addition Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001a, p. 294) define a Focus on Form Episode (FFE) as the unit of analysis in incidental FoF studies in which each FFE includes instances “where the attention to linguistic form started and the point where it ended. The endpoint occurred when either the topic changed back to a focus on meaning or, sometimes, to a focus on a different linguistic form.” They further distinguish two types of incidental FFES: preemptive and reactive episodes.

According to Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001b, p. 414), “Whereas reactive focus on form involves negotiation and is triggered by something problematic that an interactant has said or written, preemptive focus on form involves the teacher or learner initiating attention to form even though no actual problem in production has arisen.”

As stated, reactive FoF is in relation to the problematic performance, while preemptive FoF aims at prediction and avoidance of such problems and errors during a meaning-based instruction. Ellis et al. (2001a) discuss that preemptive FoF is related to the learners’ knowledge gap. They distinguished between student-initiated and teacher-initiated preemptive types of FoF. In the first type, students ask questions about forms whereas in the second, the teacher preempts linguistic form(s) to prevent the occurrence of errors and misunderstandings.

1.2. Uptake

The concept of uptake was initially proposed by Chaudron (1977, p. 42), who suggests that the “effectiveness of any type of corrective reaction would be a frequency count of the students’ correct responses following each type”. Lyster and Ranta’s (1997, p. 49) uptake definition is “a student’s utterance that immediately follows the teacher’s feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher’s intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student’s initial utterance”. Therefore, uptake consists of a response by the student to the information that usually the teacher of the class provides on an incorrect linguistic form generated by the student or sometimes other students. In other words, it is “what the student attempts to do with the teacher’s feedback” (Lyster & Ranta 1997, p. 49).

Additionally, Ellis et al. (2001a) developed the notion of uptake to reactive and preemptive FoF, while Lyster and Ranta (1997) studied uptake merely regarding to reactive FoF. Based on Ellis et al. (2001a, p. 286), uptake is student’s response “that occurs where learners have demonstrated a gap in their knowledge (either by making an error, or by asking a question)”. Then, as Loewen (2004, p. 155) suggested, it is the teacher who replies to such a gap by supplying explicit or implicit information on a linguistic form, and uptake, can be “the student’s attempt to incorporate that information into his or her own production”. Considering the time of students’ incorporation or production of linguistic forms,
Loewen (2004) categorised it based upon the result and mentioned successful versus unsuccessful uptake. As it is important whether the production is merely a kind of repetition or imitation, in this study, another categorisation has been suggested based on the time of uptake occurrence that is Immediate Uptake (IU) versus Delayed Uptake (DU) that will be expanded in the following.

2. Methodology

2.1. Context of the study

For this study, after selecting four classes (two advanced and two intermediate) in a private English language institute where English is taught communicatively, FoF approach was implemented to get the related results on uptake. The institute is located in Semnan, a city that is located 200 kilometers from Tehran.

2.2. Participants

The participants include four EFL teachers, three males and a female. Regarding their education, three of them have a master’s degree in TESL with three to twenty years of teaching experience and one has a bachelor’s degree in TESL with more than fourteen years of teaching experience. The teachers were teaching in an English language school based on the communicative approach and for the study, they were asked to employ FoF in their teaching.

The students were aged between 17 and 25 years old, a combination of senior high school and university students who were placed in upper intermediate classes. They participated in these classes to improve their knowledge and skills in English, as it is very difficult or impossible for them to do it in their formal classes in schools and universities. Since they came voluntarily, they have enough motivation to learn English especially through the communicative approach.

2.3. Research method

All the class interactions were audio recorded and transcribed and FFEs were tagged. An FFE has been identified as the discourse from the point “where the attention to linguistic form started and the point where it ended. The endpoint occurred when either the topic changed topic back to a focus on meaning or, sometimes, to a focus on a different linguistic form” (Ellis et al., 2001a, p. 294). Two examples of FFEs in the study, namely a preemptive and a reactive FFE are presented below:

Preemptive FFE

Student: ....but I think being... What is wealthy?
Teacher: Wealthy: rich
Student:.. in all countries is better ....

Reactive FFE

Teacher: Let's discuss something else. What next?
Student: Women must permitted to sing.
Teacher: Women must be permitted to sing.
Student: Yes
Following FFEs, the attempt was on finding occurrences of uptake in class interaction transcripts. There have been categorisations of uptake such as successful versus unsuccessful, no uptake, need repair or no opportunities in Loewen’s (2004) study. In this study, a new categorisation has been used for uptake that is, immediate versus delayed uptakes. While immediate uptake (IU) is the response or feedback to an FFE immediately after correction or preemption, delayed uptake (DU) includes occurrences of uptake that happen minutes or moments after an FFE, coming back to the communicative topic or paying attention to a new FFE. In the following two examples of uptake instances, one which is immediate and one delayed are presented:

Example of Immediate Uptake (IU)

Student: When he reads his life /ləʊ/,
Teacher: he can go in that time. For example
Student: He reads life /ləʊ/ that.

Example of Delayed Uptake (DU)

Student: I went to university. I didn’t like. ... Just I sleeped.
Teacher: Just I liked to sleep. Just I slept you can say. And ....
Student: I think it’s better you drink water and ....
Teacher: Water and liquids. Any liquids,
Student: Soups and juice for example orange....
Teacher: Uhmm. Natural juice.
Student: Yes and....
Teacher: These kinds of things...
Student: And orange juice is good
Teacher: Orange juice. Why? Because of vitamin C.
Student: Yeah
Teacher: Vitamin C.
Student: And then I slept in the bed.

3. Results and Conclusion

Based on the frequency of uptake occurrences, 95 uptake instances happened during eight sessions of FoF approach implementation. Concerning the average frequency, if the total time of the class sessions is 600 minutes (75min/session), in every 6.5 minutes, one uptake movement has happened. The frequency of uptake in the classes that includes Immediate and Delayed Uptake, (IU and DU), and the total number in advanced and intermediate classes according to preemptive and reactive FFEs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Uptake frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type / Level</th>
<th>Advanced Class I</th>
<th>Advanced Class II</th>
<th>Intermediate Class III</th>
<th>Intermediate Class IV</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preemptive (IU, DU)</td>
<td>(8, 1)</td>
<td>(4, 0)</td>
<td>(11, 0)</td>
<td>(6, 0)</td>
<td>(29, 1)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive (IU, DU)</td>
<td>(22, 3)</td>
<td>(21, 2)</td>
<td>(11, 1)</td>
<td>(5, 0)</td>
<td>(59, 6)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (IU,DU)</td>
<td>(30, 4)</td>
<td>(25, 2)</td>
<td>(22, 1)</td>
<td>(11, 0)</td>
<td>(88, 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>(55, 6)</td>
<td>(33, 1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The average percent of uptake incidents to FFE occurrences can be found by considering the total number of FFEs during the implementation of FoF in the eight classes of this study. The related FFEs frequency is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. FFEs frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type / Level</th>
<th>Advanced Class I</th>
<th>Advanced Class II</th>
<th>Intermediate Class III</th>
<th>Intermediate Class IV</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preemptive</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, the total number of FFEs in this study is 325. Since the total number of uptake is 95, its occurrence is in about 30 percent of the FFEs. By looking through the studies done on uptake, it can be seen that different uptake production levels were reported. For instance, Lyster and Ranta (1997) in their study of four classes found 55 percent of uptake. Similarly, Mackey and Philip (1998) found the rate to be 33 percent. Contrastively, Ellis et al. (2001a) found a very high rate in their study of ESL class that was 74 percent.

It should be pointed out that there are factors that might be effective in uptake production, especially successful instances. In this study, the distinction of successful versus unsuccessful uptake movements is not presented. Instead, there is a distinction of delayed and immediate uptake occurrences. Based on FoF types, 32 percent of uptake instances occurred in preemptive FFEs and the rest, 68 percent are in reactive FFEs. This shows that students’ correction can be assumed effective in their formal instruction. While in preemptive FFEs of this study, most uptake incidents were related to morphology, whereas most reactive FFE uptake instances were associated with syntax and phonology.

The rates of preemptive and reactive FFEs show that the students try to equip themselves with the meaning of words and phrases and the teachers try to correct their incorrect grammar and pronunciations. It can also be inferred that the students are trying to improve their fluency and the teachers are aiming at improving their accuracy.

Regarding immediate and delayed uptake distinction, it can be seen that more than 80 percent of instances are immediate. All immediate uptake occurrences are considered successful as the students reveal correct uptake immediately after the focused form(s). Similarly, every instance of delayed uptake is regarded as successful as the students use the related forms correctly after a time that it is focused which shows students’ learning.

Based on the result of this study, in the EFL context, it can be implied that teachers play an important role in encouraging more successful uptake incidences as students’ correction of their errors is mostly in response to reactive FFEs by the teacher. It is observed that although about 58 percent of all FFEs (188 out of 325) are preemptive, more that 60 percent of uptake incidents occurred in reactive FFEs. It is also seen that the number of DU is greater in reactive FFEs. Although the number of DU occurrences were not high in frequency, it is probable to find more instances in researches and studies that involve a large number of student participants. Furthermore, it is also found that in higher level classes, more uptake occurrences are observed. More than 64 percent of the uptake instances occurred in advanced classes. Therefore, it can be concluded that FoF approach implementation is more appropriate for higher level classes in the EFL context and the teachers’ role in improving students’ accuracy is more important in these classes.
References


