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Incidental Focus on Form in an EFL Talk-show Class

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Abstract

Most of the recent studies on incidental focus on form in EFL contexts have been conducted in textbook-based EFL classes where opportunities for meaning-based interaction and communicative negotiation of ideas were limited in length and scope. In talk-show classes where there are normally no predefined textbooks or linguistic focus, both EFL teachers and learners feel compelled to get engaged in meaningful interactions while drawing attention to language on a temporary and needs-driven basis incidentally. This study investigated the rate of reactive and preemptive focus on form in a talk-show discussion class. To this end, eight hours of classroom interactions between a teacher and his 16 male students in an intermediate talk-show class, where the primary attention was on negotiation of ideas and meaningful interaction, were observed and audio-recorded. The findings revealed that reactive FFEs were the most frequent type of incidental focus on form. Also, the linguistic focus of reactive and preemptive FFEs were primarily grammar and vocabulary oriented respectively. This study has implication for the teachers to think about activities they can incorporate into their lessons that provide learners with opportunities to attend to incidental FFEs.

Keywords: Incidental focus on form; reactive; preemptive; linguistic coverage

1. Introduction

From the survey of various approaches and methods in SLA research, we have witnessed that the history of language teaching in the last century has been characterize by a search for more effective ways of teaching a foreign language. This survey reveals mixed opinions about the place of teaching language forms, depending on the method, era and its theoretical foundation. In the pre-scientific era formal aspects of language received central attention. By the advent of audiolingualism in the middle of the 20th century and its incorporation with the latest insights from the

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science of structural linguistics and behavioral psychology, overt focus on form was almost forbidden while grammar was still the building block and foundation of language learning and teaching. By the 1960s American linguist Noam Chomsky questioned the theoretical assumptions that formed the basis for structuralism and proposed an alternative approach that involved meaningful learning and language use, however allowed for a conscious focus on grammar as well (Richard and Rodgers, 2003).

During the following decades some researchers attempt to abandon the grammar-accuracy tenet in favor of more communicatively-oriented approaches that focused on language use and functions, centrality of meaning and role of interaction without any form of grammar instruction. The CLT proponents advocated the fundamentality of meaning and communicative competence through formulating some hypotheses one of which is Stephan Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982, 1998). Krashen proposed that learners acquire language by understand the message intelligible to them and by being exposed to sufficient comprehensible input and believed that the soul exposure to such input would be for acquisition to happen (Basturkmen, 2006, Brown, 2000).

Upon the theoretical foundation and principles of CLT and input hypothesis, which argued that learners develop their linguistic abilities in the absence of explicit instruction, an instructional program called Immersion program initiated in Canada which taught French to English speaking students. Swain's (1985) evaluation of this program ended up with criticism of effectiveness of its underlying theoretical framework and revealed that although learners received huge amounts of comprehensible input. Their grammatical knowledge was not well improved compared with their communicative ability. Brown (2000) believes that today no language–teaching expert advocate Krashen's Zero Option of no form focused instruction at all. Long (1996) developed Krashen's Input Hypothesis, explaining that learning occurs not because of input alone, but through the interactions learners have with it Long's Interaction hypothesis stated that "through negotiation of meaning, the input becomes increasingly useful because it is targeted to the specific developmental level of the individual learner; thus input negotiated to fit the needs of the individual learner can become intake" (Basturkmen 2006, p.91).

Long's hypothesis directed the focus toward some other hypotheses proposed by Swain (1985, 1995) and Schmidt (1990, 1995) called Pushed Output Hypothesis and Noticing Hypothesis respectively. Swain argues that in being pushed to produce, learners notice holes in their linguistic repertoire and this stimulates learning of language to fill in the holes. In other words, output pushes learners to process language (Basturkmen, 2006, Adams, 2003). On the other hand, Schmidt's Noticing hypothesis states that conscious process of focus on form is necessary for learning to take place and more noticing leads to more learning.

Generally a great deal of studies has been conducted in this respect. Van Patten (1990), for instance, as Gholami and Farrokhi (2007) explain, suggests that having learners attend to form and meaning in the input simultaneously overloads their processing abilities to the extent that they fail to notice the form while processing input for meaning and fail to notice the meaning while processing input for form. To make it concise, attention to form competes with attention to meaning which led to the conclusion that intake of new forms take place only if input is easy enough to be understood.

The collection of these hypotheses paved the way and form the underlying framework to attend to linguistic form within communicative meaning focused activities called "Focus on Form which is defined as an incidental attempt to draw learners' attention to any linguistic element in context while maintaining a primary focus on meaning (Long, 1997).

2. Review of the related literature

A glance through the last decades of language-teaching practices in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) reveals a shift of attention from purely linguistic to more communicative approaches. According to Nassaji and Fotos (2007) traditional methods and instructions on isolated grammar forms were insufficient to promote learners' acquisition, yet purely communicative approaches had been found inadequate for developing high levels of target language (TL) accuracy. In other words, a communicative approach helped learners to become fluent, but was insufficient to insure comparable levels of accuracy as well (Swain, 1998; Ellis, 2001). As a result, a crucial need

arose for SLA theorists and teachers to integrate meaning-focused instructions and form-focused instruction through a new approach (Loewen, 2007). Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1982, 1998), Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983, 1996), Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985, 1995), and Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 1995) paved the way and provided the theoretical framework for the emergence of a new orientation to language teaching called Focus on Form (FonF) (Ellis, 2005; Loewen, 2004; Ellis et al., 2002; Ellis, 2001; Swain, 1998; Long, 1996).

Long (1991, 1997) defined focus on form as an incidental attempt to draw learners attention to any linguistic element in context while maintaining a primary focus on meaning. The field of incidental focus on form falls into two categories of reactive and preemptive focus on form (Ellis et al., 2001a; 2001 b). While preemptive incidental focus on form occurs when either the teacher or the learner initiates attention to a linguistic form before a problem arises, reactive focus on form occurs when the learners' attention is drawn to the problematic feature in their production through negative feedback.

There are various measures to evaluate the effectiveness of form-focused instruction one of which is uptake. Lyster and Ranta (1997) define uptake as a learner's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback. Ellis et al. (2001b) emphasizes that uptake cannot be viewed as evidence that acquisition has certainly taken place, it facilitates the acquisition. According to Ellis et al. (2001b) most of the studies in this respect focus on reactive rather than preemptive focus on form while the concept of uptake is an under researched area in EFL. Yet, no study has been carried out in the literature to examine the linguistic coverage of focus on form episodes (FFEs) and its relation to the rate of their following uptake moves. The main concern of the present study is to investigate FFEs of a meaning-oriented talk-show class where meaningful interactional patterns are of primary concern in terms of their frequency, type, linguistic coverage and the rate of uptake.

In recent years focus on form (FonF) has gained considerable ground in second language (L2) literature and a great deal of studies regarding incidental FonF have been conducted to shed more light on different concerns of this movement which attempts to inject well-considered explicit instruction back into meaning oriented language lessons without abandoning the positive features and results of communicative approach (Shak and Gardner, 2008; Loewen, 2007).

Recent research (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998; Ellis et al., 2001a, b; Basturkmen et al., 2004) has documented the fact that incidental focus on form occurs frequently in communicative language classes. For instance, Ellis et al. (2001a) and (2001b) has shown that incidental focus on form episodes varies across classes in a number of ways, such as in the complexity of episodes, in their linguistic coverage, and in the teachers' response within them.

A rich body of research has investigated reactive focus on form, which is mostly referred to as corrective feedback in literature (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Oliver, 2000; an extensive review by Seedhouse1997). The findings of these studies reveal that corrective feedback is a common event in meaning-focused settings in both EFL and ESL classes, that teachers typically favor indirect implicit correction rather than direct implicit one, and that learners rarely uptake teachers' correction, i.e. they usually do not try to produce the correct utterance that has been modeled to them.

On the contrary, preemptive focus on form has received much less attention (Williams 1999, 2001a, 2001b; Ellis et al., 2001b, 2002; Loewen 2003; Poole 2005). Ellis et al., (2001b) raised concern over the lack of empirical studies on preemptive focus on form and the necessity to examine preemptive episodes as well as reactive ones. Ellis et al. (2001b) define preemptive focus on form as occurring when "either the teacher or the learner initiates attention to form, although no actual problem in production has arisen" (p.414).

The present study involved the observation of meaning-centered classroom activities and then identification and analysis of all reactive and preemptive language related episodes (LRE) in teacher-learner interactions. As mentioned before, a great deal of research conducted in the field of focus on form has investigated reactive rather than preemptive FFEs, yet a great number have been carried out in English as a second language (ESL) contexts.

Researchers have raised concern over the lack of empirical studies on preemptive and reactive language related episodes regarding their linguistic coverage. The prime objective of this research was to determine the frequency of reactive and preemptive focus on form episodes in terms of their linguistic coverage of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in an Iranian EFL class.

The purpose of the present study was to examine two types of incidental focus on form namely reactive and preemptive in an EFL setting:

How frequently do incidental focus on form in general, and reactive and preemptive focus on form in particular take place at an intermediate talk-show class in an Iranian EFL setting?

3. Method

The present study investigated the integration of incidental focus on form into a primarily meaning-oriented EFL class and its effectiveness as well. To meet the objectives of this study and answer the research question reviewed above, a descriptive case study design was adopted.

3.1. Participants

The participants consisted of 16 intermediate male learners who were freshmen students of physics. Their age range was 18 and 26 years. They were of different linguistic and cultural background, i.e. they spoke Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian as their mother tongues. Most of the students attended the Talk Show class with a view of improving their speaking proficiency and being able to communicate in English language.

3.2. Instrument

The verbal interaction between the teacher and the students in this meaning-oriented intact class was audio recorded during 8 sessions of instruction in one semester. The researchers employed an MP3 recorder to capture whole conversations and interactions of the class between the teacher and the students.

3.3. Procedure

To collect data and analyze them, one intact Talk Show class was opted for data collection since there were no pre-planned linguistic structures in this program and the context was optimal for the investigation of incidental focus on form. The Talk Show class met once a week, and every session lasted 60 minutes. Overall, the course included 15 sessions of instruction lasting two and a half months, 8 sessions of which recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

The verbal interactions between the students and the teacher of this communicatively-oriented Talk Show class were recorded during 8 sessions using a mini-sized wireless MP3 recorder which provided the researcher with 8 hours of classroom interaction. It should be noted that merely audible interactions between the teacher and his students and possible instances of interactions between the teacher and individual students or between students in pairs were not accounted for in this study.

3.4. Data Analysis

After data collection from classroom interactions, the researchers first listened meticulously to the audio-recordings and identified all incidental focus on form episodes. Focus on form episodes (FFEs) were the classroom interactions in which participants made a departure from meaning-focused activities to deal with issues of a linguistic nature. In other words, the appearance of an FFE denotes that a linguistic form- grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary- has been focused on within the stream of the classroom meaning-focused interactions. Hence, every focus on form unit of analysis starts from the moment that the teacher or the learners interrupt a communicatively-oriented interaction reactively or preemptively and temporarily shift their attention to formal (phonological, lexical or syntactical) aspects of language.

Some instances of Reactive and Preemptive FFEs with different focuses on vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation are cited and explained to clarify data coding system further:

***Extract 1.* Reactive FFE**
(The learner makes a mistake in using the correct word "give mark" and the teacher provides him with the correct word "get mark". Following the correction the learner repeats the correct form of the word, which is an indication of an uptake move)
S: Second is when I want to give mark from my master.
T: Get mark.
S: Get mark.

***Extract 2.* Reactive FFE**
(A student makes a grammatical error and uses the verb "cope" without its required preposition. The teacher corrects him, and the student simply acknowledges it, which is an indication of an uptake move)
S: It happens when you feel you can't cope pressure.
T: Cope with.
S: Yes.

***Extract 3.* Preemptive FFE**
(The teacher preemptively calls students' attention to the word "getting promotion" via questioning)
T: Do you what is getting promotion?
S: I think it is getting higher degree.
T: Yes, higher degree in job.

***Extract 4.* Preemptive FFE**
(A student preemptively asks for the correct use of a preposition after a verb)
S: Some people smoke when they get tired…sorry, what we use after tired? of?
T: Yes, of.
**S**: Tired of their life and …

In order to make sure whether data categorization system is reliable enough to be coded just by a single researcher, another MA graduate, who was already explained about the study, its objectives, and data analysis procedure, categorized 10 percent of the coded data to establish inter-coder reliability. He also categorized them into reactive and preemptive FFEs. Analysis of the coding indicated that there was agreement for 85 percent of the episodes.

4. Results
The purpose of the present study was to investigate the learner-teacher interactions in a meaning-oriented EFL classroom to identify focus on form episodes (FFEs), which are episodes when participants took time out to deal with issues of linguistic form.

Focus on Form Episodes (FFE) refers to the incidental shift of attention from communicative activities to any linguistic element in context, while maintaining a primary focus on meaning. To answer the research question, all episodes in which either the teacher or the learner incidentally raised attention to form during the meaning-oriented activities were tallied in the analyzed interactions. Figure 4.1 gives a demonstration of the frequency of total FFEs observed in 8 hours of meaning-focused activities from an intact Talk Show class and that how frequently reactive and preemptive FFEs are distributed in the data.

Figure 1. Frequency of total focus on form episodes
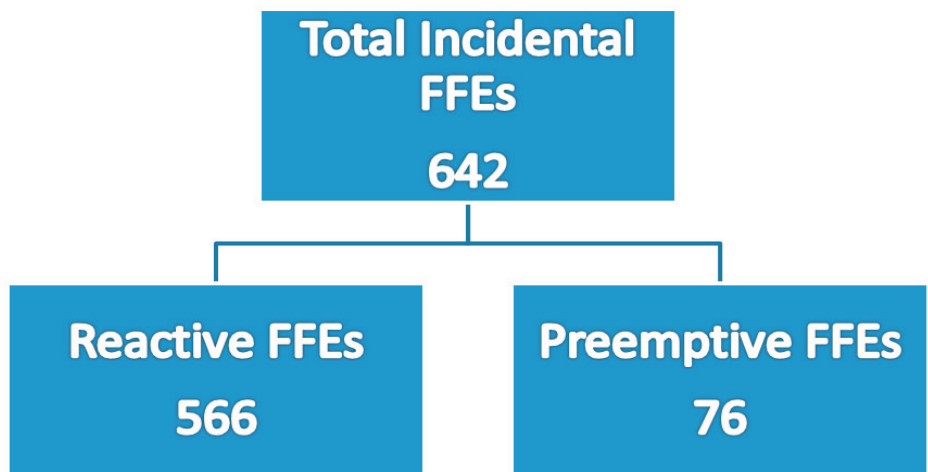
A total of 642 FFEs were identified in 8 hours of a meaning-centered lesson, 566 (88.2%) reactive and 76 (11.8%) preemptive FFE as depicted in the following pie chart. As shown in the Figure 4.2., there is a notable variation in the rate of reactive and preemptive FFEs.

Figure 2. Total reactive and preemptive FFE distributions
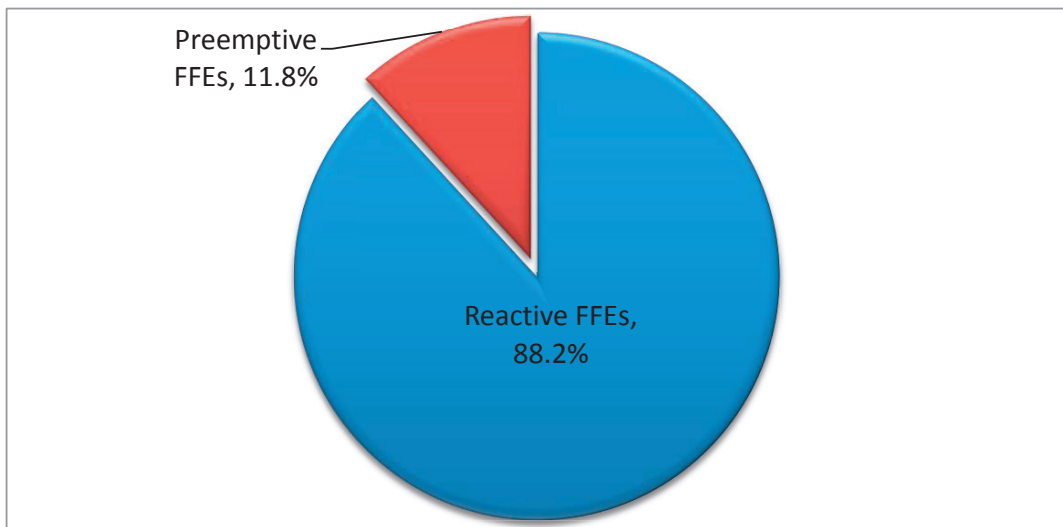
According to this figure, there is a considerable difference between FFE distribution in reactive and

preemptive categories, and a major portion of the FFEs belonged to the reactive category. The findings indicate that an average of one instance of FFE took place every 0.74 minutes.

5. Discussion

The major aim of the present study was to investigate the frequency of incidental focus on form episodes as it arose naturally in the course of a meaning-oriented Talk Show class involving adult learners in an EFL context, namely Urmia, Iran. The findings of the present study found a total of 642 instances of FFEs taking place in 8 hours of communicatively-oriented activities, a rate of one FFE every 0.74 minutes. The overall numbers of reactive and preemptive FFEs were 566 and 76, respectively.

The overall number and rate found in the present study seem more or less in contrast with the majority of the studies on FFE in literature. For instance, Ellis et al. (2001b) reported 448 instances of FFEs in 12 hours, one FFE every 1.6 minutes, with 223 reactive and 225 preemptive episodes. Similarly, Lyster (1998) identified 558 FFEs in 18.5 hours, with a rate of one FFE every 1.97 minutes. Further, in a study by Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) a total of 641 FFEs were reported in 20 hours of meaning-focused lessons, an average of one instance of FFE every 1.9 minutes.

The findings of the present study have also reported that incidental focus on form is more reactive than preemptive in this communicative EFL class. However, it is at variance with Ellis et al.'s (2001b) study in which FFEs were evenly divided between reactive and preemptive. Also, it is in sharp contrast with the findings of Farrokhi and Gholami (2007). Just contrary to the proportion of reactive and preemptive FFEs found in this study, the frequency of preemptive FFE reported by Farrokhi and Gholami was remarkably more than that of reactive ones, 168 (26.2%) instances of reactive episodes versus 473 instances (73.8%) of preemptive FFEs.

On the whole, the findings of this study regarding the rate of occurrence of reactive and preemptive FFEs are dissimilar to the results of Farrokhi, Ansarin and Mohammadnia (2008). They identified a total of 1780 FFEs in the 70 hours of communicatively-oriented lessons, an average of one instance of FFE every 2.3 minutes. Loewen (2004) also reported 1373 in 32 hours, an average of one FFE per 1.40 minutes. Basirian and Gholami (2010), investigating only preemptive FFEs, found 229 instances in 18 hours, one FFE every 2.35 minutes. In a similar study, Gholami and Safdari (2012) examined the linguistic coverage of focus on form episodes and the effectiveness of focus on form instruction within reactive and preemptive categories in an EFL setting with intermediate proficiency learners of a Talk Show class. The findings demonstrated a high prevalence of FFEs addressing vocabulary in this class with an overall rate of one instance of FFE every 2.2 minutes.

The overall rate of one instance of FFE every 0.74 minutes found in this study is higher than that of Ellis et al. (2001b), Loewen (2004), and Oliver (2000). This discrepancy implies that the linguistic forms rather than meaning received prime attention in the observed Talk Show class and that the teacher of this Talk Show class or learners opted more frequently to interrupt an ongoing meaning-oriented activity. The overall rate of this study is also in contrast with that of Lyster (1998), Farrokhi and Gholami (2007), Farrokhi, Ansarin and Mohammadnia (2008), Basirian and Gholami (2010), and Gholami and Safdari (2012), most of which have been conducted in an identical EFL context.

The variation in the extent of FFE occurrences signifies that the EFL teacher in this context did try to integrate focus on form more frequently within meaning-oriented activities. A post-study interview with the teacher revealed that he had done his entire graduate and post-graduate studies in the same context, namely Iran, with a heavy reliance on Focus on Forms instruction. Therefore, it can be contended that he was not well aware of procedures to run a Talk Show class and tried to integrate more focus on form episodes (FFE) and interrupt the flow of communication.

6. Conclusion

The present research study along with so many other empirical findings is heavily loaded with empirical and

pedagogical implications most of which can be used directly or indirectly in L2 classes. The findings of this study lend more support to the previous studies in literature that show that teachers and learners take time out to attend to linguistic forms within meaning-focused lessons.

The findings of the study, derived from 8 hours of audio-recording of a communicatively-oriented EFL class, confirmed that incidental focus on form episodes do occur in the process of meaning-focused communications in this class. Moreover, the results of this study demonstrated a differing proportion of reactive and preemptive FFEs of a total of 642 FFEs. Recently, interaction research has come to play a more important role in the studies of the second language learning and teaching. The aim of the present study was to further contribute to the body of research on different aspects of interaction and its characteristics in exploration of how second language is learned. This study supports the theoretical perspective that considers that input as a positive evidence may not be sufficient for certain aspects of L2 acquisition and that negative evidence- focus on form- is necessary for the learners for language acquisition to occur.

Therefore, this study follows the line of investigation on negative evidence and specifically the incidental focus on form as a main kind of negative evidence that can be provided to the learners particularly in the EFL contexts such as Iran. Empirical studies have shown that drawing learners' attention to form, mainly through explicit teaching of the rules, or correcting the learners' errors is far better than implicit teaching (Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Spada & Lightbown, 1993). This has led the research to recognize the importance of an integration of meaning-focused and form-focused instruction in the L2 classroom, claiming that such an approach benefits L2 learners' fluency and accuracy (Doughty, 2001; Ellis et al., 2001a, b; Long and Robinson, 1998; Williams, 1999, 2001a). Likewise, this study is a new contribution to the line of research on focus on form which attempts to inject explicit instruction into purely meaning-oriented language lessons without interrupting the flow of the communication. Therefore, one implication of this study is for the teachers to think about activities they can incorporate into their lessons that provide learners with opportunities to attend to incidental FFEs.

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