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Focus on Form in Teaching Passive Voice of Different Tenses

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Abstract
Degree of learners' attention in understanding grammar has been the concern of language teachers recently. This piece of research compared the effect of focus on form and focus on forms on learning of passive voice in different tenses. 56 adult EFL learners of intermediate level participated in this quasi-experimental study. After the pre-test given to both groups, participants of one group received focus on form instruction on passive voices in different tenses and the ones in the second group experienced focus on forms teaching techniques. A post-test was given to both groups after the treatment. The results of ANCOVA test revealed a significant difference between two groups with focus on form group outperforming focus on forms group in learning passive voice of different tenses. The results of this study are considered to be useful in teaching grammatical forms for language teachers and syllabus designers especially in EFL contexts.

Keywords: focus on form; focus on forms; foreign language teaching; teaching grammatical structures; accuracy; fluency

1. Introduction

A considerable number of studies has examined the probability of integrating form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in the second language acquisition. In form-focused instruction there are some attempts to draw learners' attention to linguistic form while meaning-focused instruction requires learners to attend to the context or what they want to communicate (Ellis, 2001). As a balancing solution, focus on form (FoF) avoids extremities and is an alternative for the two polarized views, i.e., focus on form (FoFs) and focus on meaning (FoM). In fact it is a rapprochement between the obsolete deductive teaching of grammar and preposterous inductive grammar teaching.

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within the so called communicative language teaching approach. FoF is the most effective way of drawing learners’ attention to language forms in the context of meaning-centered language use (Loewen, 2003).

FoF is providing some type of implicit focus on grammar during communicative language teaching. Long offers the following definition for it: "Focus on form . . . overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991, pp. 45-46. cited in Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). In other words, focus on form takes place when learners participate in interactions in which communication problems arise, and this leads to negotiation of meaning.

In FoF as Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, (2002) maintain, the attention to form arises out of meaning-centered activity derived from the performance of a communicative task. So it can provide an acceptable rationale for including communicative language use within traditional grammar-based instruction because while keeping learners’ attention on content and message, it makes occasional departures to the target forms and makes learners aware of the forms and provides noticing and the concomitant acquisition of those forms. As a result, FoF can be an efficient and feasible way to teach grammatical and linguistic forms to learners while keeping their attention on meaning and communication.

2. Review of the related literature

2.1. Focus on Form vs. Focus on Forms

There are two major types of form-focused instruction: FoFs and FoF. According to Sheen (2002), these two differ in the degree to which teachers direct learners’ attention to grammar. The aim of FoFs instruction is mastery over grammatical items rather than learning and using language for communication. So the emphasis is on the formal aspects of language through isolated linguistic structures in a sequence predetermined by a syllabus designer or textbook writer, because the assumption is that in classroom settings language competence is best achieved by a return to discrete-point grammar teaching. Intensive and systematic treatment of these linguistic elements is also practiced in class.

According to Long and Robinson (1998, p. 23, cited in Farrokhi, & Talabari, 2011) FoF, in contrast to FoFs consists of “an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features- by the teacher and/or one or more learners - triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production”. To put it in a nutshell, FoF, unlike FoFs, highlights the importance of meaning in instruction and pays occasional attention to linguistic forms when required during communicative activities. In FoF there is a temporary and transitive reference to a particular form while the focus of attention is on meaning and communication. In other words, FoF draws the learners' attention to particular linguistic or grammatical forms within meaning centered communicative activities in order to increase learners’ accuracy.

2.2. Focus on Form vs. Focus on Meaning

FoM is a student-centered instruction in which the students’ attention from focus on the grammatical or linguistic forms is transferred to focus on meaning in output. FoM, based on the notion of communicative competence, asserts that the primary aim of a second or foreign language program should be providing language learners with the experience needed to meet the communication needs in the second or foreign language.

However, in practice, it was found that this kind of instruction did not work as it was predicted, and an efficient instruction requires paying attention to both communication and syntax that is both form and meaning is required in a fluent and accurate communication. As a solution to this problem, FoF enables learners to take time out from a focus on meaning and notice linguistic items in the input, thereby overcoming a potential obstacle of purely meaning-focused lessons in which linguistic forms may go unnoticed (Loewen, 2003).
2.3. Theories behind Focus on Form

There are a number of theories in second language learning that paved the way for the emergence of focus on form. The present section mentions some of the most salient ones.

2.3.1. Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis

Long (2000) believes that focus on form is motivated by Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001, cited in Gu, 2007) which states that noticing as a cognitive process that involves attending to the input is inevitably a conscious process and is vital for second language learning. In his Noticing Hypothesis, Schmidt (2001, cited in Gu, 2007) argued that noticing is requisite for learning, stating that learners must consciously pay attention to or notice input in order for L2 learning to proceed.

2.3.2. Krashen’s Monitor Theory

Krashen distinguishes consciously learned language from unconsciously acquired language in his Monitor Theory of second language acquisition (Doughty & Williams, 1998, cited in Rodriguez, 2009). According to Doughty and Williams (1998, cited in Rodriguez, 2009), Monitor Theory provides no solution for the lack of accuracy in adult L2 learning, because Krashen (1985) considered focus on meaning through incidental L2 learning and exposure to comprehensible input sufficient in L1 acquisition by young children, which should also be used as the basis for L2 or foreign language acquisition.

2.3.3. Long’s Interaction Hypothesis

Long (1991, cited in Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002) in his interaction hypothesis, highlights the vital role of interaction and negotiated input in acquisition. Since it brings about noticing, that is, learners become aware of their grammatical or linguistic shortcomings and gaps in their languages, it is considered to be helpful in language learning.

2.3.4. Swain’s Output hypothesis

Swain (1985, cited in Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002) proposed the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis to complement Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1982, cited in Farrokhi, 2006). Swain (1985, cited in Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002) claimed that production (especially pushed output) may encourage learners to move from semantic (top-down) to syntactic (bottom-up) processing. As Swain (1991, cited in Farrokhi, & Chehrzad, 2012) puts it, “If students are given insufficient feedback or no feedback regarding the extent to which their messages have successfully been conveyed output may not serve these roles” (p. 98).

2.4. Different Types of Focus on Form

FoF instruction with all its effectiveness is classified in various types. While they share the main feature of temporary focusing on form during a meaning-oriented task, they differ in their applications.

2.4.1. Planned FOF

In planned FoF, linguistic items are selected prior to a meaning-focused activity. For this purpose some communicative tasks are designed in order to elicit the application of a specific linguistic form during meaning focused activities but this linguistic form is pre planned and pre-selected. In other words, in this type of focus on form the particular linguistic feature is pre-embedded to the task and during the task there is an intensive and deep treatment of a special language feature.
2.4.2. Incidental FOF

Incidental FoF (Ellis, 2001) occurs spontaneously, without prior intention, during meaning-focused activities and targets a variety of linguistic items. Unlike planned FoF instruction, incidental FoF includes unfocused tasks, which are communicative and are designed not to focus on a particular form but elicit meaning centered and content based language use.

While Long claims that FoF is purely reactive, Ellis (2001) claims that incidental FoF can be of two main types, namely reactive and preemptive FoF (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). Reactive FoF has also been known as error correction, corrective feedback, or negative evidence/feedback (Long, 1996), and occurs when learners’ attention is drawn to errors in their production during meaning-focused activities. The teacher perceives the learners’ utterance as inaccurate or inappropriate and draws their attention to the problematic feature through negative feedback. The second type of incidental focus on form is preemptive which according to Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001, p. 414) occurs when teacher or learner begin attention to form "even though no actual problem in production has arisen”.

Both of these mentioned types of incidental FoF can be of two major types of conversational and didactic. If teacher and learners engage in a dialogue or conversation in order to resolve learners' errors which cause communication problems, this would be an example of a conversational FoF. But sometimes the errors do not cause communication problems, but the teacher chooses a particular form to make the focus of instruction, this is a kind of pedagogic time-out from a meaning centered communicative activity and it can be considered didactic.

2.5. Empirical studies on Focus on Form

Carroll and Swain (1993) studied the effects of feedback on the ability of adult learners to recognize verbs which do or do not alternate in dative sentences. There were four experimental groups, each of which received different feedback conditions, and a fifth group as control group. Group A received explicit metalinguistic information. Group B learners were told explicitly when an utterance was wrong but were given neither explanation nor the correct form. Group C received “a reformulated correct response” or recast. When group D learners made an error, the experimenter asked if they were sure their answer was correct but were not provided with the correct form even if they persisted in their error. The results revealed that students in all the feedback groups outperformed the control group on recall sessions which was administrated immediately after the treatment sessions. In the first recall session, group A (explicit metalinguistic information) performed significantly better than groups B and D but not significantly better than group C, the recast group. However, in the second recall session, group A outperformed all other groups.

Van Patten and Oikkenon (1996) studied the effects of processing instruction on Spanish students at the intermediate level. Processing instruction involved an explicit explanation of a certain grammatical rule, followed by contextualized practice activities. Participants were divided into three groups receiving explicit explanations of rules, contextualized practice activities, and both explicit explanations of rule and contextualized practice activities. They found that those who only received explicit explanations retained the fewest grammatical rules; the other two groups, on the other hand, achieved significantly higher scores on post-treatment tests.

Doughty and Verela (1998) examined the differences in the acquisition of English tense between junior high US ESL science students who received corrective recasts and those who received teacher-led instruction, mostly in the form of lectures. The findings revealed that students who received corrective recasts outperformed those who received teacher-led instruction.

Williams and Evans (1998) studied the precision with which intermediate-level ESL learners used the passive voice and adjectival participles. The experimental group in this study received input flooding, and the second one was a control group. The results revealed that the experimental group showed more accurate use of the
passive than did the control group, yet no significant differences were seen between the groups in terms of their use of adjectival participles.

Long and Robinson (1998, cited in Farrokhi, & Talabari, 2011) also discussed a number of experimental studies that had compared the effectiveness of implicit and explicit teaching-learning conditions. The findings, however, suggested that explicit FoF was better for simple rules than implicit learning was.

Williams (1999) aimed to investigate and compare the effect of activities inducing FoF such as correcting a writing assignment and compare it with activities which prompt attention and focus on meaning rather than form such as the discussion of the news of last week. The results indicated that type and degree of learner generated attention to form is related to proficiency level of the learners and the nature of the activity. They also found that learners overwhelmingly chose to focus on lexical rather than grammatical issues.

Izumi (2002) studied the facilitative effects of internal (visual enhancement) and external (output) attention drawing devices on the acquisition of relative clauses. He used reading comprehension texts with underlined noun phrases and the head noun was bolded or shadowed in order to augment the chance of noticing, he also used external output induced noticing to see whether the act of producing output induces noticing. The findings revealed that visual enhancement failed to bring about measurable gains in learning and those exposed to output-input activities outperformed those exposed to the same input by visual enhancement.

Radwan (2005) studied the effectiveness of noticing on English dative alteration. The datives and their complements were bold typed and underlined in the text but no significant effect of textual enhancement (TE) on the acquisition of datives.

Lee (2007) studied the effects of noticing and acquisition of passive in English; he bolded passive structures in the text to measure its effect on noticing and subsequent learning. The findings revealed that while this technique enhanced the learning of passive, it had deteriorating effects on the comprehension of the participants.

In a more comprehensive study, Simard (2009) also investigated the effects of different TE formats (number and choice of different typographical cues) on the intake of plural markers in English. He studied the following eight versions of TE formats in different versions of the same text: 1) italics, 2) underlining, 3) bold typing, 4) different color, 5) capital letters, 6) plural markers enhanced with the preceding five typographical cues used at the same time, 7) plural markers enhanced with the use of three typographical cues, that is bold, capital and underlined, and 8) plural markers not enhanced (control group). He found that these TE formats had different impacts on learners’ intake.

Révész (2009) in his study examined how the task variable +/- contextual support combined with the focus-on-form technique known as recasting affects L2 morphosyntactic development. He designed four study groups based on whether the participants received recasts while describing photos or not, and whether they could see the photos while describing them or not. He found out that learners who received recasts but did not view photos outperformed learners who received recasts while viewing photos, and participants who viewed photos but did not receive recasts achieved greater L2 gains than the group who neither viewed photos nor received recasts.

Farrokhi, Rahimpour, and Papi (2011) in their study on comparison between novice and experienced teachers in terms of applying incidental focus on form found out that less-experienced teachers used FFEs more frequently than experienced teachers. It was also revealed that more experienced teachers were different in terms of type of FFEs compared with their novice counterparts.

In another study, Farrokhi, and Chehrzad (2012) investigated the effects of focus on form on oral accuracy of EFL learners and concluded that the planned focus on form was an effective tool for the development of oral
accuracy in the EFL situations. It was also mentioned that intensive recasts which were repeatedly focused on a particular structure were not different from explicit types of feedback in terms of their effectiveness.

Marzban and Mokhberi (2012) investigated the effect of reactive and preemptive focus on form instruction on intermediate EFL learners' grammar learning in task-based language teaching. They concluded that reactive FOF in comparison with preemptive FOF was a better means of developing the ability to use the grammatical knowledge in context. They also added that the majority of the preemptive focus on form episodes (FFE) were initiated by the teacher rather than students and dealt with vocabulary whereas the linguistic focus of reactive FFEs was largely on grammar.

Saeidi, Zaferanieh and Shatery (2012) in their study on the effects of focus on form, focus on meaning, and focus on forms on learners’ vocabulary learning in ESP context used three types of tasks, namely dictogloss task, reading and discussion task, and word lists. Their findings reflected that learners in FoF group achieved significantly higher scores than those in FoM and FoFs. Also, learners’ scores in FoM group were significantly higher than FoFs group. The researchers believed that the very nature of the FoF tasks (dictogloss) which include depth of processing hypothesis, discovery learning, pushed output, noticing hypothesis, awareness raising, negotiation, collaboration, and motivation resulted in such findings.

Gholami and Talebi (2012) tried to investigate the role of FoF instruction in Iranian EFL context in general and the role of implicit and explicit FOF techniques on their linguistic accuracy in particular. 45 EFL learners were randomly assigned to two experimental and one control group. The instruction, using dictogloss, was introduced and lasted for three weeks. The findings indicated that the FoF groups outperformed the control group. Further analysis of the scores demonstrated the outperformance of the implicit FoF group using clarification request and recast compared to the group receiving explicit FoF.

All the above mentioned studies considered different aspects of FoF, but none of them focused on teaching a specific grammatical aspect systematically and in detail. In order to fill this gap in the literature, the present study aimed at studying the effect of focus on form instruction on learning the passive voice of 12 English verb tenses. Learning the correct use of each verb tense is a burdensome task for EFL learners specially if there is not a one to one match between the tenses in the foreign language and the mother tongue. Converting these tenses into passive voice for the required uses and reaching both accuracy and fluency in their application is even more problematic and is drudgery for language learners including Iranian EFL learners. Considering all these needs and problems in EFL context of Iran the present study aimed at answering the following research question:

Is there a significant difference in learning passive voices through focus on form and focus on forms instruction?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

56 male and female Iranian EFL learners at intermediate proficiency level participated in this study. Their ages ranged between 19 and 49 and were mainly high school or undergraduate students and there were only a few graduate students among them. Participants were selected according to convenience sampling and based on random assignment they were divided into two groups of 26 in focus on forms group and 30 in focus on form group.

3.2. Instruments

A forty-item multiple choice test of passive voice in different tenses designed by the researchers was given to the participants of the both groups as a pre-test. A parallel test was also designed for the post-test. The reliability of these tests was calculated by Cronbach’s alpha and the results were 0.81, and 0.78 for the pre-test and post-test respectively. After some minor modifications face validity and content validity of both tests were approved by the
3.3. Procedure

The participants of the study were divided into two groups of 30 and 26 based on random assignment. One of the researchers acted as the instructor of both groups. After giving a pre-test and making sure that the two groups were almost equal the instruction started. While one group followed focus on form instruction, the other group was taught the grammar parts deductively based on focus on forms techniques. The main focus of both classes was passive voice of different verb tenses including simple, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous in past, present, and future. The instructions lasted for two months including 20 ninety-minute sessions. Then the participants of both classes were given a post-test to compare the results of instructions.

4. Findings and discussion

First the mean score of the pre-tests for the two groups were compared using an independent samples t-test. The result of this t-test is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Independent Samples t-test for Two Study Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Form</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.75</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>.101</td>
<td>0.920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Forms</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12.32</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 1 the result of independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference between the two study groups and it made a safe ground for making the following comparison between these two groups.

To have an overall comparison between any probable improvement of scores in control and experimental groups an ANCOVA was used to compare the results of mean scores after the post-test. As presented in Table 2 the results reflected a statistically significant difference between the two groups of Focus on forms and focus on form instruction with focus on form group outperforming the other.

Table 2: ANCOVA for comparing the result of instruction in two groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study Groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.14</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on these findings, the null hypothesis indicating that there is no significant difference in learning passive voice through focus on form and focus on forms instruction is rejected and the alternative hypothesis indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between learning passive voice through focus on form and focus on forms instruction is confirmed. It was found that focus on form instruction was much more successful in teaching passive voice in L2 English verb tenses.

Learning passive voice of 12 verb tenses in English in considered as one of the most difficult grammatical issues for EFL learners. Focus on form instruction, however, proved to be helpful in mastering passive voices by learners. Its success can be attributed to the unique nature of FoF instruction. Because while it temporarily draws the learners’ attention to the linguistic features of the passive voice, learners continue using these forms in communication. It leads into both conveying their meaning and practicing using the learnt linguistic features more fluently which can motivate learners to learn grammatical structures. That is both grammar use and usage are aimed at. While this unique opportunity was provided for learners of FoF, learners of the other study group were taught to
focus merely on form and accuracy rather than communication and fluency. In fact only explicit explanation on the linguistic features following explicit examples and mechanical drills and excises were provided for the learners.

Traditional approaches to language testing and assessment in EFL context of Iran require learners to master grammatical points and have accuracy in linguistic structures. Recent approaches to language teaching, on the other hand, force Iranian EFL learners to have fluency in their communications and convey the meaning more easily and freely. Putting together these two opposing views, focus on form instruction seems to bridge the gap between the two poles successfully. It appears to be the most suitable and successful instructional technique in Iran to overcome the mismatch between teaching and testing by intending to cause both accuracy and fluency. Therefore, language teachers can apply focus on form techniques in teaching grammatical points to EFL learners and help them master grammatical points accurately for usage and use them fluently in real communications. This, of course, requires the collaboration of syllabus designers and course book writers for preparing teaching materials which are not focusing merely on accuracy or fluency. Focus on form tasks and activities can provide a balance in syllabus and make a more valid language testing possible. All in all to be successful in EFL teaching the findings of studies including this research should not only be reflected at the level of classroom teaching but be generalized to all layers of education including policy making, curriculum developing, syllabus designing, teaching, testing, and evaluation.

5. Conclusion

This study compared the results of learning passive voices of L2 verb tenses by FoF instruction and communicative language teaching. The findings reflected that FoF was more successful than the FoFs teaching in teaching passive voice of simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous in past, present, and future. These findings can have implications for Iranian EFL syllabus designers, textbook writers, and teachers to take the advantage of FoF in improving both accuracy and fluency, which are equally required by EFL learners.

References


