The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

The Typology, Characteristics and Distribution of Focus on Form Episodes (FFEs) in an EFL context

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Abstract

Focus on Form as an attractive approach has been the point of attraction of many studies in teaching English as a foreign and second language. The typology, characteristics and distribution of the instances in which Focus on Form occurs has been termed as Focus on Form Episodes (FFEs). This paper attempts to study the FFEs in an Iranian EFL context. Eight sessions of four classes have been audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed to find the typology, characteristics and distribution of FFEs. As different studies have found various results and ESL findings are not the same as EFL, the results of this study may be useful for scholars and teachers to apply Focus on Form approach more appropriately.

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1. Introduction

In EFL contexts, teaching L2 linguistic forms is a controversial issue for teachers as they have been either encouraged or prohibited to integrate formal instructions in their methodology. In countries where learning takes place just in classrooms, scholars and teachers look for ways to optimize L2 approaches and facilitate learning. In spite of some common points with L1, L2 has different pedagogical differences that cause methodologists and researchers as well as teachers to seek for developments in this regard. In Iran, English is regarded as a foreign

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language as it is taught in the classrooms in formal schools, tertiary levels and private language schools and institutes, and not used in any other context.

Teaching English in EFL contexts faces its own particular difficulties because it is different from other language teaching environments such as ESL and Immersion contexts. ESL happens in a place where English is the medium of communication and instruction in everyday life and the speakers need to communicate more than EFL learners. When studying language learning or teaching in a context, that learners’ exposure to spoken or written forms of a non-mother tongue is important and different contexts cannot be considered identical. Therefore, it is expected that Focus on Form (FoF) approach has got its own characteristics and categorization in an EFL context.

The purpose of this study is to survey the different types of FoF that are used in Intermediate and Advanced communicative EFL contexts. The research is an Iranian EFL context and the data are in the form of recorded interactions between the teacher and the learners in the Intermediate and Advanced classes. FoF approach is applied on the Focus on Form Episodes (FFE) which are classified, categorized and analyzed to answer “What are the characteristics and distribution of different types of FoF in Intermediate and Advanced EFL classes in Iranian context?”

2. Focus on Form

The history behind FoF goes back to the challenge between meaning-focused and form-focused views in previous decades. The starting point of meaning-focused notion was an opposite view toward teaching methods that emphasized on language forms. The practical application of forms in language teaching led to the emergence of methods like Grammar Translation and Audiolingual, though their inadequacy in communication strengthened the belief that learners acquire L2 better if the emphasis is put on meaning in language teaching pedagogy.

Natural Approach of Krashen and Terrell [1] was an attempt to develop a methodology for integration of meaning. According to them, provision of comprehensible input and communication opportunity helps learners to acquire L2.

In task-based approach established by Prabhu [2], the focus was not on language form. According to this approach, learners acquire an L2 better if they are involved in meaning-focused activities and tasks in classroom.

After some years, in spite of the attractiveness of meaning-focused instruction, there existed some doubts about its entire success in acquisition of L2. Problems in meaning-focused instruction was not gaining high levels of proficiency in language by learners and not acquiring native-like productive skills as a result of unresolved errors made by learners in communication in classrooms caused a notice to the formal aspect of language in L2 teaching.

The different perspectives of instruction showed that FoF is one way that has attracted much attention. According to Long [3] there are two kinds of focus concerning the language form: focus on formS and focus on form. While in the former, emphasis is put on discrete grammatical forms like traditional approaches; in focus on form, the objective is to attract the learners’ attention to linguistic forms in meaning-based communicative contexts.

The FFEs in this study were categorized based on the adoption from the above implications. It should be noted that the categorizations are based on the frequency of FFEs or Language Related Episodes (LREs) in class and context of the studies. Most of these studies have been done in ESL context, thus, the typology and categorizations should be modified based on what is happening in EFL context for researches similar to this study.

Ylimaz [4] classified LREs into five main and sub-categories: Focus (Lexical, Grammatical, and Orthographic), Outcome (Correctly Solved, Unresolved and Incorrectly Solved), Verbalization (Production-based and Error-based), Collaboration (One-way and Two-way) and Source (Explicit and Implicit).
Loewen [5] identified FFEs in detailed characteristics and categories as the following: Type (Reactive, Student-initiated Query), Linguistic Focus (Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation), Source (Code, Message), Complexity (Simple, Complex), Directness/Explicitness (Indirect: Implicit, Direct: Explicit), Response (Provide, Elicit), Uptake (Uptake, No Uptake) and Successful Uptake (Successful Uptake, Unsuccessful Uptake). Ellis et al. [6] identified FFEs as Reactive (Negotiation: conversational and didactic and Feedback: implicit and explicit) and Preemptive (Student-initiated and Teacher-initiated). In another study, Ellis et al. [7] categorized FFEs in the categories of Approach (Responding and Initiating), Instigator (Teacher and Student), Linguistic Focus (Grammar, Vocabulary and Spelling), Timing (Immediate, Delayed) and Source (Message, Code).

FoF in this study is based on Loewen [5, 8] and Ellis et al. [6, 7] in one hand and has been characterized in terms of Source (Reactive or Preemptive), Initiation (Teacher or Student) and Linguistic Focus (Syntax, Morphology, Phonology or Dictation). On the other hand, it has been categorized in terms of Duration (Short or Long), Simplicity (Simple or Hybrid), Language (L1 or L2) and Meta-Language (Linguistic or Meta-linguistic). These concepts are developed in the following sections of this research.

3. Methodology

In order to find the distribution and characteristics of different types of FoF instances in this study, a transcription of class recordings with interactions between the teachers and students was collected. FoF distribution and characteristics are found according to the numbers, typology and occurrences of FFEs in class interactions while teaching. Therefore, similar to studies done in ESL contexts, all the class interactions needed to be recorded. To minimize distractions, a professional voice recorder was used to record the teacher’s and the learners’ voices. Every class recording was given a number and date and was transcribed within a few days after the class to recall the details and clear all ambiguous instances.

Four classes were involved in the study and two sessions of every class were audio recorded. The time of every recording was between 80 to 90 minutes. The total time of eight class recordings was about 600 minutes. To include all types of FFEs in the classes for the study, the teachers were asked first to present some of the linguistic forms through FoF such as input enhancement or focused tasks. Second, to correct learners’ errors made on linguistic forms implicitly or explicitly, and lastly to preempt some linguistic forms that they believe might be problematic for the students, and to notice the instances preempted by them.

3.1. Participants

In Iran, there are private language schools and institutions that are engaged in language teaching using communicative and meaning-based approaches. As the purpose of this study is to investigate about FoF studied in interactive contexts, the classes and participants have been chosen from an Iranian private language school.

The teachers included three males and one female. Regarding their age, education and experience, they were between 25 and 47 years old, hold a master or BA in TESL, with 3 to 20 years of teaching experience. They were teaching in an English Language Institute based on the communicative approach and for the purpose of this study were asked to employ FoF in their teaching.

The students were between 17 to 25 years old, a combination of senior high school and university students who were placed in Intermediate (Classes A and B) or Advanced (Classes C and D) classes. They participated in these classes to complete their knowledge and skills in English as it is very difficult or impossible for them to do it in the formal classes of their schools and universities. As they came voluntarily, they have had enough motivation to learn English via communicative approach. The number of students in the classes include: Class A = 14, Class B = 15, Class C = 18 and Class D = 17.
3.2. Data Collection Setting

The setting of the classes that were observed and audio recorded, is part of a private English language teaching institution in Iran. To record the class interaction, the program was checked with the teachers who received detailed explanations of the FoF approach and were advised to apply formal instruction either preemptively or reactively during their class sessions. No recording was done when the teachers wanted to conduct an exam or a quiz during class sessions.

3.3. Class Recordings

In class recordings that were intended to be used to derive instances of FFEs, it was necessary to report what has been produced during teacher-student interactions. The voice recorder was tested before actual recordings were conducted to ensure they are audible. Class recordings were done using a professional Sony Voice Recorder and were filed and monitored in Sony Sound Organizer Software.

3.4. Data Validity

The data needed to answer the research question which aims to investigate the distribution and typology of different kinds of FoF was taken from the class interaction audio recording. The audio recording method was based on the studies on the formal instruction approaches as in the works by Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis [9] and Loewen [5, 8].

The transcription of the class interaction was done by the researcher and checked by another English language instructor. Coding of the transcripts were conducted based on studies on FFE. After the researcher has coded the recorded data for instances of FFEs, a second coder who is a lecturer in one Iranian university with a PhD in TESL, coded the data and 87% similarity was found between their coding.

3.5. Coding

One important step of data development in class transcripts was to code the data to make it available for analysis. As explained earlier, there are two main categories of FoF: Preemptive that is asking questions or queries for information without the occurrence of any errors and Reactive, which is related to the type of FoF followed by errors that are usually corrected by the teacher. The teacher or the students may initiate Preemptive or Reactive FFEs. Regarding the linguistic feature that the focus is made on Preemptive and Reactive FFEs, they may be related to Phonology, Syntax, Morphology or Dictation.

FFEs that are initiated by the Teacher is labelled as “T” and by the Student is labelled as “S”, and if it is Preemptive it is coded as “P” and if Reactive it is coded as “R”. Similarly, “P”, “S”, “M” or “D” in this study have been used respectively for Phonology, Syntax, Morphology or Dictation types of FoF. Hence, for example, when an FFE is coded as “RTS”, it is a Reactive FFE that is initiated by the Teacher on the Syntactic error made by a student. In other word, we may present it as: “RTS= Reactive Teacher Syntax”. Beside the main three categories of Preemptive/Reactive regarding the possibility of occurrence or non occurrence of errors, Teacher/Student relating to the possibility of FFE initiation, and Phonology, Syntax, Morphology, Dictation including the linguistic focus, in this study four FFE characteristics of Duration, Simplicity, Language and Metalanguage have been investigated.

† The terms of FFE characteristics and categories in this study are italized henceforth.
For FFE categorizations and characteristics in this study, the basic notion has been mainly obtained and modified from: Lowen [5, 8] and Ellis et.al. [6, 7] who developed the notion of FFE and partly from Yilmaz [4] who instead, referred to the concept of LREs.

In this study, Duration of FFE refers to the number of turns of utterances between the teacher and the student. If there are more than two turns it is labeled as Long and if there are two or less it will be a Short FFE. In terms of Simplicity, FFEs which include one episode is termed as a Simple FFE but if two or more episodes occur at the same time, the FFE is called Hybrid. In the notion of Language, there are instances in which either native or second language is applied in FFEs which are named as L1 and L2 respectively. Metalanguage is one of the characteristics in which if the FFE contains a grammatical terminology (such as verb or adjective) used for formal discussion, it is a Metalinguistic FFE, and if the FFE utterance occurs by using linguistic terms it is labeled as Linguistic.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of FFEs according to the categories of FoF. Examples for each category are shown in Appendix A.

With regard to the frequency of FFEs in the classes, from 328 FFEs identified, 192 (58.5%) of the occurrences are in Intermediate classes A and B, and the rest, 136 (41.5%) happened in Advanced classes C and D. Although the results show that majority of FFEs occurred at the Intermediate level, some types of FFEs are more frequent at the Advanced level. For example, PTP, 2 at the Intermediate and 3 at Advanced level, PTD, 6 and 14, PSP, 3 and 9, PSD, 1 and 2, RSS, 4 and 6, and RSM, 0 and 1 respectively. Another finding of this study is that the categories of FFEs that have more than 10 occurrences at the Intermediate and Advanced levels are PTM, 62, PTD, 20, PSM 78, PSP, 12, RTS, 53, RTM, 16, RTP, 59, and RSS, 10.

Furthermore, 188 (57%) of the 328 FFEs are Preemptive and the rest, 140 (43%) are Reactive. In the initiation category, 219 (67%) of the FFEs are Teacher initiated and the rest, 109 (33%) are Student initiated. In terms of linguistic focus, from a total of 328 FFEs the following results were reported in Table 1. There were 71 instances of FFEs which focus on Syntax, 157 on Morphology, 77 on Phonology and 23 on Dictation.

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In the Preemptive Student initiated category, from a total of 97 FFEs, 4 FFEs focused on Syntax, 78 on Morphology, 12 on Phonology and 3 on Dictation. In the Reactive Student initiated category, from 12 FFEs, 10 focused on Syntax, 1 on Morphology, 1 on Phonology and 0 on Dictation. Results of the comparison between Preemptive and Reactive Student initiated FFEs in terms of the four linguistics categories according to percentage are Syntax (4%, 83%), Morphology (80.5%, 8.3%), Phonology (12.3%, 8.3%) and Dictation (3%, 0%).

As represented in Table 1, there were more FFEs in the Intermediate classes where Teacher A and B taught, than the Advanced level in classes C and D. Furthermore, the students preempt more FFEs and the teachers react more frequently. In other words, on one hand, the students are more willing to ask for the linguistic forms
especially on Morphology, on the other, the teachers react more to errors produced by the students, specifically on Syntax.

Apart from identifying the categories of each FFE, this study investigated its characteristics in terms of Duration, Simplicity, Language and Metalanguage. The frequency of FFEs which falls under the respective characteristics are presented in Table 2 and the examples are shown in Appendix B.

As can be seen in Table 2, in all classes, most FFEs occurred when the characteristics of FFE are Short, Simple, using L2, and using Linguistic terms, with 290, 309, 282 and 322 occurrences respectively from a total of 328 FFEs. The occurrences of FFEs with the characteristics Long, Hybrid, using L1 and using Metalinguistic terms are 38, 19, 46 and 6 respectively in which FFEs whose attribute is using L1, obtained the highest frequency. Regarding levels, Intermediate classes have higher rates in lower frequency characteristics: 26 of 38 in Long, 13 of 19 in Hybrid, 28 of 48 in using L1 and 5 of 6 in using Metalinguistic terms.

Of the four characteristics of FFEs, two of them namely, Duration and Simplicity deal with the controlled procedure of using forms in formal instructions. Studies done on the management of focusing on forms in FoF approach point out that the easiest and clearest way of using language form are preferred.
5. Discussion

Based on the results, there may be several reasons for the different frequencies of FFEs at the Intermediate and Advanced level:

- Teachers and students at the Intermediate level have preempted more FFEs in Morphology probably because the students have not obtained the necessary vocabulary compared with those at the Advanced level.
- PSM and PTM high frequency at the Intermediate level (39 and 34 respectively) shows both teachers’ and students’ willingness to preempt Morphology than to react towards errors.
- There are more Reactive than Preemptive FFEs for Syntax and Phonology probably because teachers prefer not to preempt grammatical and pronunciation forms until errors are evident. Generally, there is a kind of hesitation for discussing grammar and syntax in communicative classes.
- At the Advanced level, teachers are more willing to preempt FFEs on Dictation and Phonology (14 and 9 respectively compared to 6 and 3 for Intermediate) may be because the students have higher level of vocabulary but are not good at spelling and pronunciation.

With reference to Preemptive and Reactive FFEs, the results which indicate that from a frequency of 328, 188 are Preemptive and the rest, 140, Reactive, reveals teachers' and students' tendency to preempt instead of react in
FFE initiation. While FFE preemption by the teachers shows their attention to the importance of forms in teaching a language that can be done through pre-planned procedures such as focused tasks or incidental and situational focus on form, students’ preemption shows a gap in their knowledge of the forms they have learnt.

Detailed results of the occurrences of FFEs according to categories are PTS=4, PTM=62, PTP=5, PTD=20, PSS=4, PSM=78, PSP=12, PSD=3, RTS=53, RTM=16, RTP=59, RTD=0, RSS=10, RSM=1, RSP=1 and RSD=0. As can be seen, the most frequent category is Preemptive Student initiated form on Morphology followed by Preemptive Teacher initiated form on Morphology. This may be due to the integration of focus on form in the meaning-focused approach implemented in the classes.

Teachers and students equally initiate FFEs. As stated before, in addition to the teachers’ attempt to preempt linguistic forms to facilitate understanding and prevent errors and the students’ endeavor to obtain necessary form for communication, the results of this study suggest the interactive atmosphere of the classes.

Furthermore, Morphology, which is the most frequent category is seen in teachers’ and students’ preemptive reactions; however, it is mostly accumulated in the Preemptive category. Contrastively, Syntax and Phonology are the dominant FFEs in teachers’ reactions towards students’ errors.

The low frequency of FFEs in students’ Reactive FFEs refers to the point in this study in which the interactions between the teacher and the students have been aimed. The few numbers of FFEs in RSS, RSM, RSP, and RSD are related to the student’s reactions to their classmates while communicating with the teacher or their self-corrections (reactions towards themselves).

Based on the distribution of FFE characteristics, there is a common preference to make the context of teaching and learning easier and more facilitative. In terms of Duration, FFEs that are assumed as time-out intervals amongst the class interactions are preferred to be shorter.

This can be better realized when it is seen that there are a few instances of Hybrid FFEs. Supposing that Hybrid FFEs are commonly Long ones, the rates on FFE Duration and Simplicity support each other.

In EFL contexts and communicative classes, using L1 is not advisable for interactions between the teacher and the students. However, it has been a challenging issue among researchers, teachers and scholars. As one of the FFE characteristics, applying L1 and L2 has been investigated in this study. Compared to other characteristics, L1 has the highest frequency, and at the Intermediate level, it is higher than Advanced which may suggest a lower level of fluency and accuracy of the students in the Intermediate classes.

By looking at the results, it can be inferred that the use of Metalinguistic in FFEs, though very rare, does exist in the class interactions of the study. Most teachers hesitate to use Metalinguistic in explaining a form but there are instances that the teachers applied it.

In the distribution of all FFE characteristics, the frequency is lower at the Advanced levels for Long, Hybrid, L1 and Metalinguistic FFEs. It can be concluded that the frequency of these characteristics is indirectly proportional to the class level. In other words, the higher the level of the class, the fewer is the frequency of Long, Hybrid, L1 and Metalinguistic FFEs. Hence, at the Intermediate level, the rate of Long, Hybrid, L1 and Metalinguistic FFEs are clearly higher than the Advanced level.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding FoF approach implementation in an Iranian EFL context.

- Besides meaning-focused and communicative approaches to teach a foreign language, formal instruction in general and FoF in particular play important role.
- The FoF approach has potential in EFL contexts such as Iran that have been applying structural approaches and are moving towards using interactive and communicative ways.
- Despite the fact that there are similarities between ESL and EFL contexts, EFL show its distinguished features in formal instruction and FoF.
References

### Appendix A. FFE Categories Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Interaction Utterance Example from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PTP</td>
<td>T: Eccentric /ek\̱ sen.\̱r/ k/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S: Eccentric /ek\̱ sen.\̱r/ k/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTS</td>
<td>T: It’s insurance real expenses, isn’t it? Isn’t it is question tag or tag question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTM</td>
<td>T: What does disdain mean here in this line? Disdain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S: When you dislike someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTD</td>
<td>T: Deer. D-e-e-r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSP</td>
<td>S: She is ...?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: Bossy /bo.s.i/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSS</td>
<td>S: When her parents died her uncle forced her or she?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: Her, yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSM</td>
<td>S: Entrance, what’s the meaning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: Entrance means to enter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTP</td>
<td>S: Yeah, Going to Germany and the cave /kæv/?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: Cave /kæ v/? Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTS</td>
<td>S: No, I tell it but I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: You told please</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTM</td>
<td>S: And when I have an exam, I have more anxious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: Anxiety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTD</td>
<td>T: I heard that theme park. T.H.E.M.E theme park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS</td>
<td>S: But my father don’t... doesn’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSM</td>
<td>S: She said bit? But hit his mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: What was the sentence?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B. FFE Characteristics Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DURATION</strong></td>
<td>S: What age? T: Orphanage. Orphanage. Age no. Orphanage S: Remember the period of time T: No S: But this place is T: No. no. not always time. Who said you this for time? No. it is the part of the word. It's not ice age. It's orphanage. Heritage. Yes? These are words. Yes? Age is not separated from it but it's a part of it. Ok?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHORT</strong></td>
<td>S: Mat T: Mad? S: Math T: Math. Yes. Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SIMPLICITY</strong></td>
<td>S: And a prisoner…. T: A prisoner lives in a cell, c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HYBRID</strong></td>
<td>S: Cell? T: Cell, means chamber, room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SIMPLE</strong></td>
<td>S: Don’t wear blue it doesn’t suit /swi:t/ you T: Suit /su:t/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LANG</strong></td>
<td>S: Can’t {FARSI: realize} T: Identify, realize S: He come every night T: He comes every night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>META</strong></td>
<td>S: Excuse me condemn? T: Condemn means …. You write and you must know the meaning. We can say sentence. It's used in political sentences. S: It's not passive? T: No. it's a verb. I condemn this. This is condemned by me. It's passive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LINGUISTIC</strong></td>
<td>T: Make worse means? S: Aggravate T: Yes, aggravate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>