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## Proactive/Reactive Focus on Form and Immediate/Delayed Writing Production

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### Abstract

Over the past decades, grammar teaching has been one of the most contentious issues in English language teaching. The present study aimed to compare proactive and reactive focus on form (FoF) on grammar improvement of 25 Iranian EFL learners at upper-intermediate level of language proficiency with an age range of 17 to 27. In order to determine the efficacy of grammar instruction, learners were asked to write two compositions both at the end of the course and four months later. The results indicated that learners who received proactive FoF outperformed those who received reactive FoF in both immediate and delayed productions.

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### 1. Introduction

There have been unanimous disagreements about grammar instruction. Discussions on how to teach grammar indicated that grammar instruction is the essential issue in language instruction. Richards and Renandya (2002) believed that “in recent years, grammar teaching has regained its rightful place in language curriculum; people now agree that grammar is too important to be ignored, and without a good knowledge of grammar, learner’s language development will be severely constrained” (p. 145). In the same line, Ellis (2005) warned that acquiring a language

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naturally without any form-focused instruction (FFI) would not allow adult L2 learners to achieve full target language competence, especially because there seem to be some linguistic properties that cannot be acquired without instruction and assistance. It has been also argued that “learners do not always acquire what they have been taught and that for grammar instruction to be effective it needs to take account of how learners develop their interlanguage” (Ellis, 2006, p. 86).

Spada (2010) claimed that “there is increasing evidence that instruction, including explicit FFI, can positively contribute to unanalyzed spontaneous production, its benefits not being restricted to controlled/analyzed L2 knowledge” (p. 9). Recently, FFI is considered more effective than the instruction that only focuses on meaning (Fotos & Nassaji, 2007). There are various taxonomies regarding grammar instruction; one of the most important ones is the distinction between focus on forms (FoFs) and focus on form (FoF). Ellis, Leowen, and Basturkmen (2006) explained that “focus on form is evident in the talk arising from communicative tasks in sequences where there is some kind of communication breakdown and in sequences where there is no communication problem but nevertheless the participants choose to engage in attention to form” (p. 135). Thus, a FoF approach is valid as long as it includes an opportunity for learners to practice behavior in communicative tasks (Ellis, 2006). Ellis (2006) mentioned that there is growing evidence that focus-on-form instruction facilitates acquisition, though it is not possible to prove the superiority of one over the other. Doughty and Williams (1998), in their extensive discussion of FoF, made a distinction between *proactive* and *reactive* focus on form. Both approaches seek to focus on language forms in a communicative context.

In Spada’s review (2010) of research on FFI, she identified many studies which compared groups of learners with and without FFI. In these experiments, all groups did receive communicative instruction but some with exclusively meaning-based teaching and others with some attention to language forms. While Language teachers are encouraged to adopt the principles and procedures of FFI to bring saliency to the presented form in the class (e.g. Lyster, 1994; Mohammadi, 2009), there are still arguments regarding the application of FFI in class (e.g. White, 1998) and its short-term effectiveness (e.g. White, 1991). Moreover, any investigation of proactive and reactive focus on form, as new interpretations of FFI, seems to be necessary to shed light on the resilient problem of grammar teaching, especially in EFL settings like Iran. Arguably, there is a need to conduct some studies to discover what kinds of skills (focusing intensively on few problematic forms as communication problem occurring *after* the event or the teacher’s planning to introduce a number of forms *prior* to the communicative event) teachers should be equipped with in order to be able to use the two approaches depending on the situation and delayed production of the learners.

#### *Focus-On Form (FoF) vs. Focus-On forms (FoFs)*

In FoF, learners are involved in meaning-based activities before any attention is paid to specific linguistic features during an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson. FoF consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher and/or one or more students, triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production (Long & Robinson, 1998). Ellis, Leowen, and Basturkmen (2006) speculated that FoF is the incidental attention to a form that occurs when learners experience problems of communication. Thus, a FoFs approach can also be valid if it can create the opportunity for learners to practice behavior in communicative tasks (Ellis, 2006). Long and Robinson (1998) stated that FoFs is characterized by a structural or synthetic approach to language where the primary focus of classroom activity is on language forms rather than on meaning whereas FoF consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features, by the teacher or one or more students. To support Long and Robinson (1998), Kappler and Rees (2003) mentioned that FoFs involves taking individual linguistic items out of context and isolating them for separate study as part of an a priori synthetic syllabus. They added that in a FoF approach it is a primary communicative need, identified as part of meaning-based interaction.

In contrast, Doughty and Williams (1998) indicated that FoF has an advantage over FoFs through demanding some extra cognitive processing as the result of the overriding focus on meaning or communication. In simple terms, they claimed that “learners’ attention is drawn precisely to a linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand” (p. 3).

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