

# FOCUS ON FORM IN A MEANING-FOCUSED FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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**ABSTRACT.** *Recent research has suggested that the incorporation of some attention to form in meaning-centered classroom instruction can lead to improved performance. However, little research has been carried out on incidental attention to form by the learners themselves and, more specifically, by young learners in a classroom context. This study examines the oral production of 12 low-intermediate EFL learners to determine to what extent they spontaneously attend to form in their interaction with the teacher and other learners. Results suggest that both reactive and pro-emptive focus on form episodes occur in meaning-focused activities and, in line with previous research conducted in second language contexts, the linguistic items participants paid more attention to in their interaction were lexical. Although exploratory in nature, this study shows the need for more classroom research is necessary in order to provide a wider picture of L2 acquisitional processes in young learners within an interactionist framework*

**KEY WORDS:** *focus on form, young learners, interaction, EFL context*

**RESUMEN.** *Trabajos de investigación recientes sugieren que es necesario prestar atención a la forma del lenguaje en la instrucción en el aula que se centra sobre todo en el significado para así poder mejorar la producción del aprendiz. Sin embargo, hasta el momento se han realizado muy pocos estudios sobre la atención a la forma que prestan los propios alumnos de manera accidental y, más en concreto, la atención a la forma por parte de alumnos jóvenes en un contexto de aula. Este trabajo analiza la producción oral de doce aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera (nivel intermedio-bajo) para determinar hasta qué punto prestan atención a los aspectos formales de manera espontánea en su interacción con el profesor o con otros compañeros. Los resultados apuntan a que sí aparecen episodios de atención a la forma (tantos reactivos como proactivos) en actividades centradas en el contenido y, al igual que en trabajos realizados en contextos de lenguas segundas, se presta más atención a los elementos léxicos. Aunque este es un estudio de tipo exploratorio, se aprecia la necesidad de realizar más investigación en el aula para así proporcionar una perspectiva más amplia de los procesos de adquisición de una segunda lengua desde la perspectiva interaccionista en aprendices jóvenes.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *atención a la forma, aprendices jóvenes, interacción, contexto de ILE*

## 1. BACKGROUND

Second language acquisition (SLA) provides evidence that interaction facilitates language learning (García Mayo and Alcón 2002; Gass, Mackey and Pica 1998) and has sought to explain the process involved. Most of the earlier research on interaction was descriptive in nature aiming to illustrate the ways in which conversations with learners differed from conversations with native speakers (Pica 1991).

However, findings from a wide range of immersion acquisition studies suggest that when second language learning is solely based on communicative success, some linguistic features do not develop to target like accuracy (Harley 1992). This occurs in spite of years of meaningful, comprehensible input and opportunities for interaction. Recent studies point to the inclusion of some degree of focus on form in classes that are primarily focused on meaning and communication. Long (1996) defined focus on form (henceforth, FonF) as interactional moves directed at raising learners' awareness of form and takes the view that instruction that includes FonF has at least two advantages over purely meaning-focused instruction: (i) it can increase salience of positive evidence and (ii) it can provide essential

negative evidence in the form of direct or indirect negative feedback. Ellis (2001) provides a more inclusive definition of form-focused instruction, incorporating both planned and incidental FonF. The former involves the use of communicative tasks designed to elicit forms which have been preselected by the teacher, while in the latter tasks are designed to elicit and use language without any specific attention to form –although the role of participants in performing the task will determine the accomplishing of a reactive or pre-emptive FonF-.

In spite of the insights from descriptive and empirical research on FonF, there seems to be a need for data driven studies which might provide us with information about the role of interaction among learners in the classroom context (Mackey and Silver, 2005). From this perspective, the present paper is descriptive (no control group has been included) and it must be viewed as a preliminary investigation of the degree of incidental or unplanned attention to form found among learners in a foreign language classroom context. The study addresses the following specific research question: Does unplanned FonF occur in a meaning-focused foreign language classroom?

## 2. THE PRESENT STUDY

The context in which this research was carried out is an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in Spain. Although the need for positive and negative input, as well as the need for learner production of meaningful L2 output are shared by learners in both EFL and ESL settings, there are differences in these contexts that might affect the ways in which these needs are addressed. Unlike ESL learners, EFL learners often lack access to native speaker models for their linguistic information and to actual samples from everyday social interaction. In the Spanish EFL context, Alcón (1994) reported that high-school learners' attention to language during meaning negotiation provided conditions for language learning. Similarly, García Mayo and Pica (2000) showed that the interaction among advanced EFL learners appeared to be a suitable resource for learning, although a definite need for more attention to form was observed (cf. also Alegría and García Mayo (2006) for the importance of FonF for low proficiency learners). For the current study, one intact class in a Spanish high-school was selected as the site for data collection during a whole academic year.

### 2.1. *Participants*

The participants included 12 Spanish speakers (7 female and 5 male) learning English as a compulsory subject. All participants had Spanish or Catalan (some of them were bilingual) as their mother tongue, their age ranged from 14 to 15 and their proficiency level, measured by an in-house placement test, was low-intermediate. They were told that the aim of the study was describing interaction in a foreign language classroom, but no information was provided about the research questions or the specific issues the researchers were interested in.

### 2.2. *Data collection and analysis*

The database for this study consisted of 17 45-minute lessons of audio-recorded teacher-led conversations. The learners performed different types of communicative activities, such as one-way opinion tasks (in which they provided their opinion about a specific topic they had just read in a newspaper article), two-way opinion tasks (where they had to negotiate a solution for a problematic situation) and debates. Two non-native English language teachers helped in transcribing the data. Both of them had a university degree in English and an MA in Applied Linguistics and had been teaching English for eight years. The data were then coded

by the researchers. Whole class interaction as well as teacher interaction with individuals was recorded using a wireless microphone. As the study is basically descriptive, a data driven approach to identify the structure of focus on meaning and FonF episodes was followed. However, for the present study focus on meaning episodes were excluded and our analysis was carried out on focus on form episodes (FFE), defined as “the discourse from the point where the attention to linguistic form starts to the point where it ends, due to a change in topic back to message or sometimes another focus on form” (Ellis et al., 2001: 294).

Before data-coding, researchers first practised together on similar data not used in this study to ensure consistency. Then, twenty per cent of the data of the present study was coded and rates of agreement were established. The linguistic focus in each episode could be on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation or spelling. Coding between the two researchers resulted in agreement of 96% with respect to the identification of FFEs and of 94% when determining their linguistic focus. In addition, FonF episodes were coded as reactive or pre-emptive. Within reactive episodes we included negotiation sequences in which there seems to be some language problem and the teacher either provides the information by means of a recast or forces learners to establish the correct form by means of elicitation techniques (repetition of the word, pausing, using clarification questions, or asking students to reformulate the utterance). We eliminated reactive FFEs where an explicit correction was provided because they were very few (10%).

On the contrary, within pre-emptive FFE we considered negotiation sequences in which there seems to be no communication problem, but they are teacher- or learner-initiated with a clear focus on language. Negotiation sequences often appear in embedded sequences but, when coding type of FFE, we considered who among the participants initiated an observable episode. Thus, each FFE could be classified as follows:

- (i) Reactive FFE: correct form supplied by the teacher, as in (1), or by the learners with the help of the teacher, as in (2):
  - (1) S4. The boy do not have an alibi. He wasn't in class  
T. *Right. He does not have an alibi and then*  
S3. *And he does not have an alibi and is guilty.*
  - (2) S1. Yesterday we go to the cinema, but..  
T. *Yesterday you go?*  
S2. *Yes I went to the cinema but it was closed*
- (ii) Pre-emptive FFE, which could be teacher-initiated, as in (3), or learner-initiated, as in (4):
  - (3) T. Today we are going to talk about custom officers. *Do you know what a custom officer means?*  
S1. *Frontera? (border)*
  - (4) T. So, all of us want a new way of testing, so let's create it. We are going to find the characteristics of a good way of testing. So you start saying things and Marta will write them on the blackboard. Finally we will present an alternative to the headmaster  
S12. *Headmaster?*

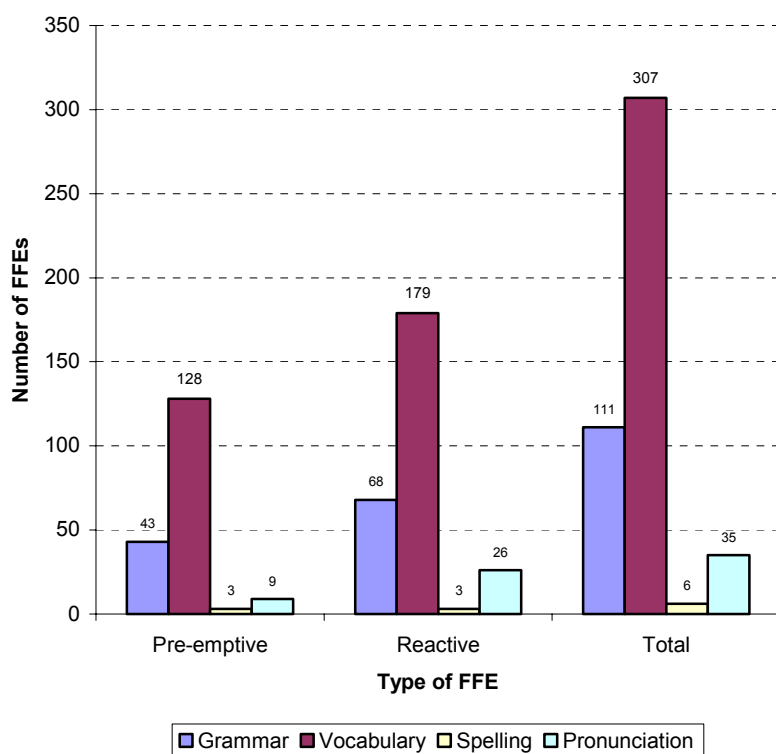
The following rates of agreement were established for each FFE type: teacher supplier in reactive FFEs, 91%, student supplier in reactive FFEs, 84%, pre-emptive teacher initiated, 97%, and pre-emptive student initiated, 96%.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 features a total of 459 FFEs occurring in the 17 45 minute-lessons that make up the database of this study. This means that there was one episode every 0.6 minutes. Ellis et al. (2001) report that FFEs in second language classrooms with adult learners occur at a rate of 1 FFE every 1.6 minutes. In the instructed foreign language context of this study with young learners, FonF occurs even more frequently. Our data also indicate that reactive and pre-emptive FonF also occur in the foreign language classroom but the difference between the two types is not statistically significant (Fisher' test resulted in  $p = .335$ ; 1df,  $n = 459$ ).

In addition, out of the total FFEs, 24.2% addressed grammar, 66.9% vocabulary, 1.3% spelling and 7.6% pronunciation. Likewise, both in pre-emptive and reactive FonF the aspects that receive more attention are vocabulary (27.9% in pre-emptive and 39.0% in reactive FFE) and grammar (9.4% in pre-emptive and 14.8% in reactive). Thus, in line with research conducted in second language contexts (Williams 1999), in this particular foreign language setting the majority of linguistic items that participants pay attention to in FFEs are largely lexical. As already pointed out by Pica (1994), this can be explained because negotiation, by its very nature, is bound to revolve around lexical meaning in response to its focus on comprehensibility of message. Figure 1 also seems to indicate that, in spite of the importance that the Spanish primary and secondary education reform (1993) allocates to communicative language teaching, English classes in Spanish secondary schools focus mainly on vocabulary and grammar.

Figure 1. Types of FFEs and their linguistic focus



As mentioned above, we also considered whether pre-emptive FonF was initiated by teacher or students. Thus, reactive FFE were classified taking into account if the correct form was established by students or it was supplied by the teacher. As illustrated in Table 1, teachers' initiation (pre-emptive FFEs) and provision of the correct form (reactive-FFE) is higher than learners', probably because of the teacher's power and the asymmetric relationship found in several studies on classroom interaction (Alcón, 2001). However, the higher percentage of recasts in teacher reactive FFEs seems to indicate that attention to form is paid within the context of meaningful interaction. The percentage of students' initiated FFEs also indicates that learners seem to move from meaning to form by initiating a FFE whenever they perceive a linguistic gap. This result contradicts the findings reported by Williams (1999) in which learners initiated FFEs but neither frequently nor extensively, especially at lower proficiency levels. However, Williams (1999) also shows clear differences in frequency of FFEs across activity types and mentions that if learners perceive the activity to be a language lesson the number of FFEs goes up. This could be the reason why both in Ellis et al. (2001) and in our study, conducted in language classrooms, learners perceive the need to focus on language and the number of FFEs increases. As for students' involvement in establishing the correct form, the percentage of instances where the teacher guides students to be suppliers shows that a dual focus on meaning and form can be achieved in communicative language classrooms.

Supplier	Type FFE		Type FFE		Total	%
	Pre-emptive	%	Reactive	%		
Teacher	101	22,0%	192	41,8%	293	63,8%
Students	82	17,9%	84	18,3%	166	36,2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>39,9%</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>60,1%</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>100,0%</b>

Table 1. *Type of Focus on Form episode and participants' involvement*

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Relatively little research has been carried out to this date empirically addressing the connection between young learners' FFEs in a foreign language context and their linguistic outcomes. In that sense, the current study has hopefully contributed to a better understanding of the type and nature of FonF in an intact Spanish EFL classroom. The study has showed that both reactive and pre-emptive FFEs occur in meaning-focused activities and, in line with previous work on the topic (Williams, 1999), the linguistic items participants paid more attention to in their interaction were lexical. Although the teacher's intervention in both reactive and pre-emptive FFEs has more weight than that of the learners', the latter seem to move from a focus on meaning to a focus on form whenever they perceive a linguistic gap in their interlanguage.

This study has been exploratory and descriptive in nature and, therefore, its results should not be assumed to be generalized beyond this context. More classroom research is necessary in order to provide a wider picture of child L2 acquisitional processes within an interactionist framework (Mackey & Oliver, 2005: 254) and to achieve ecological validity (Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006: 365). Specifically in our case, we should aim at exploring similar issues with the younger population of primary school children in the Spanish EFL context, as no research has been done yet within an interactionist approach.

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