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Focus On Form Vs. Focus On Meaning Regarding Reading Skill: Effectiveness & Feasibility Quandary

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ABSTRACT

As Norris & Ortega (2000) believe, explicit Focus on Form (FOF) methods are more effective than implicit Focus on Meaning (FOM) methods, the reason behind this belief is that in FOF instruction learners' attention is drawn to linguistic form while FOM instruction involves learners' attention to communicate (Ellis, 2001). However, this study focused on both the effectiveness and feasibility study of FOF vs. FOM in reading classes. In this quasi- experimental study, 24 EFL learners ranging 20-28 years old of intermediate level were divided into two experimental groups which received two different types of instruction. During a 14-session treatment, the first group was provided with FOF instruction (Dictogloss task), while the second group was provided with FOM instruction (Discussion task). The results revealed a significant difference between two experimental groups. The FOF group scored significantly higher than the FOM group. Regarding the students and teachers' perspectives towards feasibility of FOF in reading class, the students believed that FOF was feasible in reading classes, while the teachers were not unanimous in this regard, but towards feasibility of FOM both groups held positive attitudes. Generally, the data revealed that both FOF and FOM have feasibility in reading classes. In terms of Practicality, both methods are equally well- operational, but as to developing reading skill FOF proved a bit more effective than FOM.

Keywords: *Focus on Form (FOF), Focus on Meaning (FOM), Usefulness of FOF and FOM*

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1. Introduction

ELT literature is relatively rich in terms of Focus on Form (FOF), focus on meaning (FOM) and focus on forms (FOMs) research mainly applied in teaching structural and communicative aspects, though their effectiveness is still controversial.

FOF instruction, which is connected to the weak interface view, includes strategies that link learners' attention to the form or properties of target structures within a meaningful context. Discussion about the place and type of grammatical instruction within learning and acquisition of language research continues for at least 40 years (Ellis, 2001). During this time, related investigations have been expanded in both their focus and methodologies. Discussion is also done by about similarities and differences between teaching methodologies (e.g. Grammar-Translation vs. Audio-Lingual) and some approaches (e.g. Productive Process teaching as described by Batstone,1994a, b) has been highlighted. However, recent investigations have led to the acceptance of new classification for grammar instruction, based around the distinction, originally made by Long (1991) between Focus on Forms, Focus on Form and Focus on Meaning approaches.

2. Literature Review

According to (Norris and Ortega, 2000) studies, a L2 instructional approach is specified as FOF instruction if a connection of form and meaning was evidenced through any of the following criteria: "(a) designing tasks to promote learners' engagement with meaning prior to form; (b) seeking to attain and document task essentialness or naturalness of the L2 forms; (c) attempting to ensure that instruction was unobtrusive; (d) documenting learner mental processes ("noticing"). In addition, many FOF studies also presented evidence of: (e) selecting target form(s) by analysis of learners' needs; or (f) considering interlanguage constraints when choosing the targets of instruction and

when interpreting the outcomes of instruction" (Norris and Ortega, 2000, p. 438).

As summarized by Norris and Ortega (2001) there are three different positions about the effects of FOF instruction including: non-interface, strong interface, and weak interface positions. On the non-interface position is useful for L2 acquisition in naturally occurring instant of the language (Krashen, 1985; and Schwartz, 1993). Krashen (1985) preserved that there is no interface between learned knowledge and acquired knowledge. In other words, conscious learning is the result of learned knowledge and learners' exposure to comprehensible input is the result of acquired knowledge.

The strong interface position declared that learned knowledge through repeated process can be exchanged to acquired knowledge, which will result in natural L2 use (De Keyser, 1998; Gass & Selinker, 2008). De Keyser (1998) emphasized on the question of how this conversion may take place, and he indicated that L2 learning by using of explicit FOF is significantly easier than by implicit learning.

Some researchers such as Norris and Ortega (2001) who agree with the weak interface stated that if L2 structures are located within a meaningful context, they can draw learners' attention to "notice" the form of the target language. Thus, L2 will be acquired unconsciously (Norris & Ortega, 2001). White (1989) claimed that L2 learners may use positive (some permissible information which are used in the target language) or negative evidence (some impermissible information) in their communication. Therefore, they connect the parameters of their L1 with L2 principles of Universal Grammar (UG); fixing their L1 grammar with that of L2, learners change settings of these parameters by using negative evidence that a certain form does not happen in the target language.

According to Long (1991), FOF "consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the students' teacher and/or one or more students-triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (Long & Robinson, 1998, p. 23). FOFs refer to the linguistic forms such as grammar, lexis, functions, and notions which are taught separately (Long, 1997). FOM pays no attention to grammar and linguistic form which is believed that L2 learning can be acquired as L1 in communication situation (Long &Robinson, 1998).

FOM instruction was first introduced and more favored for teaching grammar (Doughty &d Verela, 1998: Williams & Evans, (1998; and Van Patten & Oikkenon, 1996). However, according to Doughty & Williams (1998), FOM instruction can be used for teaching vocabulary or learning new words instead of using FOFs which consists of a list without involving in a communicative task or learning vocabulary. The FOM approach to L2 instruction is connected to the non-interface view, which prepares exposure to rich input and meaningful use of the L2 in context, which is proposed to lead to incidental acquisition of the L2 Norris and Ortega (2001).

In short, FOM instruction is a type of instruction that on the one hand delays student centeredness, and principles of Communicative Language Teaching like authentic communication, and keep the value of occasional with obvious problematic L2 grammatical forms (Long, 1991) on the other hand. So, FOM instruction is used "as a tool for achieving some nonlinguistic goal rather than as an object to be studied for the purpose of learning the language….it requires the participants to function as users rather than learners" (Ellis et.al, 2001; pp.412-413).

According to Williams (1995) FOM instruction occurs in different forms and versions characterized by:

- Emphasis on authentic language.
- Emphasis on tasks that encourage the negotiation of meaning between students, and between students and teacher.
- Emphasis on successful communication, especially that which involves risk taking.
- Emphasis on minimal focus on form, including: (a) lack of emphasis on error correction, and (b) little explicit instruction on language rules.
- FOM emphasize learner autonomy" (p.12).

2.1 FOFs Techniques

Focus on Forms English teaching methods are characterized by the following features: (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

1. *Input flooding*: preparing a huge number of natural examples in which focuses on the text and imagination that a series of questions are related to formal regularities will entice the learner's attention.

2. *Task-essential language*: finalizing a task by utilizing a special form in the essential requirement situation.
3. *Input enhancement*: leading the learner's attention to a specific style by use of ways such as remarking, underlining, coloring, rule giving…
4. *Negotiation*: debates about how a specific form is able to learn and teach.
5. *Recast*: altering and reformulating of children's utterances that protect the children's mean.
6. *Output enhancement*: encourage learners for creating output from particular new structures.
7. *Interaction enhancement*: increase the learners' attention about disagreement between first and second language's structures by providing interactional modifications.
8. *Dictogloss*: earners invert their own output by rebuilding a text which is read to them.
9. *Consciousness-raising tasks*: some tasks increase the motivation that raises awareness and the result is stored in long term memory.
10. *Input processing*: translating input for connecting people's knowledge with their interlanguage.
11. *Garden path*: is a technique that learners make overgeneralization errors in linguistic system and then, refer to the errors at the moment that are made.

One of the most important points in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the procedure of presenting second language to learners in the classroom. Some SLA researchers' favorite is an approach which focuses more on the grammatical form of L2 (Schmidt, 1993; Sharwood Smith, 1993; Van Patten, 1989). In contrast, others contest that there is no place for a focus on grammar in the SLA classroom, and meaningful communication should be emphasized (Krashen, 1982, 1985). Todays, the word meaning- focused instruction has become widely utilized and heard in the literature of language teaching (Willis & Willis, 2007).

Meaning focused instruction was born to respond to form focused language teaching methods (Hedge, 2000). A Focus on Form (FOF) approach consists of drawing the learner's attention to the linguistic features of the language. A focus on meaning (FOM), on the other hand, excludes attention to the formal elements of the language (Doughty & Williams, 1998). FOF is a design feature in language teaching methodology. Long (1991) imagined FOF as a way to lessen tension "between the desirability of use of the FL in the classroom, on the one hand, and the felt need for a linguistic focus in language learning, on the other hand" (p. 41). FOM advocates referred to purely communicative instruction. For them teaching with FOM is superior to spending little or no time on the distinct parts of language; instead, the interest is on the use of language in real-life situations.

SLA field is characterized by controversy whether formal instruction is effective or not. Some researchers like (Long, 1991; Norris &Ortega, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Doughty & Williams, 1998) claimed that a conscious attention to form is essential. They believed that second language learners could not achieve high levels of linguistic competence (Grammar, vocabulary, phonology) from entirely meaning-centered instruction. Thus, they conclude that instruction makes a difference in SLA and mere exposure to input does not lead to develop into accurate acquisition. So, Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) believed that both FOF and FOM instructions are valuable. FOF, according to them, maintained equivalence between the two by calling on teachers and learners to FOF when essential, even in a communicative classroom environment.

The primary-level EFL learner's understandings of FOF tasks were found to be very positive (Shak& Gardner, 2008). Therefore, recently, the advantages of FOF over other approaches have been widely admitted (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). However, the present discussions are referred to discovering the most effective means to perform this approach in classrooms (Flowerdew, Levis & Davies, 2006; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Nassaji, 1999; Spada&Lightbown, 2008; Uysal, 2010). Moreover, the opinion of FOF instruction was identified for teaching grammar, and there were researchers such as Doughty and Verela (1998), Williams and Evans (1998), and Van Patten and Oikkenon (1996) who favored this kind of instruction in learning grammatical rules.

Then, many research studies done on FOF and FOM separately or integratively have been primarily on grammar. While, applications of them in the acquisition of other skills are in general, and in reading class are inconclusive and rarely addressed. To address the problem stated, one research question addressed through its respective research null hypothesis was posed as follows:

RQ: Is FOF more significantly effective than FOM in developing EFL learners' reading ability?

3. Methodology

To meet the purpose of this study there were two separate groups; EFL learners and teachers. The participants were 24 males Intermediate EFL learners (as a result of administrating a KET), aged 20- 28 randomly selected from Khatam ol-Anbia University in Tehran, Iran. Their text book was Extensive Reading Collection (Mojtaba Aghajani, Abbas Farajpour; 2017). The teachers were 50 male teachers holding MA or Ph.D. degrees in English. They all had some experiences of teaching reading and were familiar with the notions like FOF and FOM. So, the following instruments were used for the purpose of this study:

1. A version of The Key English Test (KET) as a general proficiency test was used for controlling the learners in terms of their language proficiency level prior to the experiment.
2. The test includes grammar and structure, writing, reading, speaking, and vocabulary in 35 multiple choice items.
3. A teacher-made Diagnostic Reading Comprehension Test based on the syllabus. It went under all steps of test construction so that can be valid and reliable in structure. The test includes vocabulary, language focus, true or false, and comprehension sections as a pre-test from (Extensive Reading Collection by Mojtaba Aghajani, Abbas Farajpour; 2017).
4. A questionnaire developed based on the criteria of feasibility of FOM and FOF reported in the respective literature which includes21 Likert- scale items for each groups.
5. A teacher-made Achievement Reading Comprehension Test similar to the Diagnostic Test based on the syllabus. It went under all steps of test construction so that it could be used as post-test.

3.1 Procedure

Learners and teachers were randomly selected. At first, for making sure that the learners are at the same level of proficiency, the KET was used for selecting a homogeneous sample.

The selected 24 learners were divided into two different groups; both experimental groups consisting of 12 learners. Experimental groups received two different kinds of instructions:

Focus on Form Instruction (Dictogloss Task), and Focus on Meaning (Discussion Task) received.

3.2 Diagnostic test construction and administering

The test which was in multiple-choice format composed of twenty -five questions. It was piloted, and then used for the diagnostic purpose. The pretest was given on the first day of the class.

3.3 Treatment

Having selected the sample and dividing them into two experimental groups, the treatment was rendered: one received FOF based instruction of reading, while the other one FOM based instruction. The control group was exposed to the conventional instruction of reading skill. For the FOF group which was involved in dicto-gloss task, the teacher prepared a topic by storytelling. The teacher asked questions about the story in order to awaken the learners' background knowledge. Then, learners were asked to read a text. When reading was completed, teacher went over the learners and, asked questions from the learners about context; then the teacher read a short text twice at normal speed. The learners were asked to listen to the text carefully. At first, the learners were not allowed to take a note, but in the second time of reading, they wrote down information. Then, they were asked to make groups in three participants in order to share their notes, compare, analyze, and reconstruct different version they produced.

Second group received FOM instruction; the first part of this instruction was similar to that of FOF. It means that the teacher talked about the topic for awaking learner's background knowledge. The teacher then asked learners to read a text and explain the main purpose of each paragraph. At the last stage of FOM instruction, the learners started communication and group discussion.

At the end of the treatment, all groups received the achievement test to measure their progress in reading comprehension. The test which was in multiple-choice format was composed of twenty -five items. It was piloted, and then used. Having done with the treatment process, teachers and the students received the Practicality Questionnaire, in order to test practicality in reading class.

4. Results and Analysis

The data were analyzed through independent t-test and chi-square. First, the

data were checked in terms of normality assumptions. As displayed in Table 1, the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors were lower than +/- 1.91.

Table 1: Testing Normality Assumption

	N	Skewness			Kurtosis		
	Statistics	Statistics	Std.Error	Ratio	Statistics	Std.Error	Ratio
KET	24	-.170	.512	-0.37	-.77	.992	-0.59
Pretest	24	.909	.512	171	.65	.992	.069
Posttest	24	-.477	.512	-0.90	.35	.992	0.30

The assumption of homogeneity of variances will be reported within the independent t-test results below.

4.1 Key English Test (KET)

An independent t-test was run in order to compare the Focus on Form (FOF) and Focus on Meaning (FOM) groups' means on the KET in order to prove that they were homogenous in terms of their language proficiency before the administration of the treatment. As displayed in Table 2, the FOF group (M = 15.01, SD = 5.97) showed a slightly higher mean than the FOM group (M = 14.41, SD = 4.53) on the KET.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics, KET by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.Error Mean
KET	FOF	12	15.01	5.975	1.599
	FOM	12	14.41	4.533	1.428

Regardless of this slight difference, the results of the independent t-test (t (18) = .61, P > .05, r = .18, representing a weak effect size) (Table 3), indicate that there was not any significant difference between two groups' means on the KET test. Thus, it can be concluded that the FOF and FOM groups were at the same level of general language proficiency prior to the main study.

Table 3: Independent Samples Test, KET by Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	upper
KET	Equal variances assumed	.11	.730	.6	18	.54	1.333	2.197	-3.9	5.00

It should be noted that a) the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's F = .11, P > .05). That is why the first row of Table 3, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported, and b) the negative lower bound value of 95 % confidence interval indicates that the difference between the two groups' means on the KET can be zero.

4.2 Pretest of Reading Comprehension

In addition to using the KET, the data from the reading comprehension test was also, analyzed. An independent t-test was run in order to compare the FOF and FOM groups' means on the pretest of reading comprehension in order to prove if they enjoyed the same level of reading ability before the administration of the treatment. As displayed in Table 4, the FOF group (M = 11.65, SD = 3.42) showed a slightly higher mean than the FOM group (M = 11.35, SD = 2.13) on the pretest of reading comprehension.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics, Pretest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error
PRETEST	FOF	10	11.60	3.42	1.083
	FOM	10	11.35	2.135	.675

Contrary to this slight difference, the results of the independent t-test (t (18) = .23, P > .05, r = .054 representing a weak effect size) (Table 5), indicate that there was not any significant difference between two groups' means on the pretest of reading comprehension. Thus, it can be concluded that the FOF and FOM groups were at the same level of reading ability prior to the main study.

Table 5: Independent Samples Test, Pretest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	upper
PRE TEST	Equal variances assumed	.90	.35	.23	18	.817	.300	1.276	-2.38	2.98

It should be noted that a) the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's F = .90, P > .05). That is why the first row of Table 5, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported, and b) the negative lower bound value of 95 % confidence interval indicates that the difference between the two groups' means on the KET can be zero.

4.3 Investigation of the Research Question

The first research question addressed if FOF is more significantly effective than FOM in developing EFL learners' reading ability. To this and, an independent t-test was run in order to compare the FOF and FOM groups' means on the posttest of reading comprehension in order to probe the first research question. As displayed in

Table 6, the FOF group (M = 15.40, SD = 3.37) had a higher mean than the FOM group (M = 11.05, SD = 2.93) on the posttest of reading comprehension.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics, Posttest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
POST TEST	FOF	10	15.4	3.37	1.067
	FOM	10	11.00	2.939	.929

The results of the independent t-test (t (18) = 3.07, P < .05, r = .58 representing a large effect size) (Table 7) indicate that there was a significant difference between two groups' means on the posttest of reading comprehension. Thus, it can be concluded that the first null-hypothesis was rejected. The FOF group significantly outperformed the FOM group on the posttest of reading comprehension. The results demonstrated that FOF oriented reading class was more successful than FOM in reading comprehension.

Table 7: Independent Samples Test, Posttest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	upper
POST TEST	Equal variances assumed	.39	.53	3.07	18	.002	4.350	1.415	1.37	7.32

It should be noted that a) the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's F = .39, P > .05). That is why the first row of Table 7, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported, and b) the positive lower bound value of 95 % confidence interval indicates that the difference between the two groups' means on the KET cannot be zero.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

To answer the first three questions which generally aimed at investigating the effectiveness and feasibility of FOF vs. FOM in reading class were made. First, an independent t-test run to compare the FOF and FOM groups' means on KET in order to homogenize them in terms of their general language proficiency. Then, an independent t-test run to compare the FOF and FOM groups' means on pre-test of reading in order to homogenize them in terms of their reading ability prior to the treatment. Next, an independent t-test run to compare the FOF and FOM groups' means on post-test of reading in order to probe the first research questions. After that, analysis of chi-square runs to compare the students FOF and FOM groups' attitude towards these teaching methods. Then, analysis of chi-square run to compare the teachers FOF and FOM groups' attitude towards these teaching methods as measured through the questionnaire.

This study was conducted to the effectiveness and feasibility of two types of instruction, FOF and FOM in reading class. The results indicated that learners in FOF group achieved significantly higher scores than those in FOM, which are in line with Williams and Evan's (1998), study who demonstrated that the group of FOF tasks showed more achievements. To answer the first research question, the effectiveness of two FOF and FOM instructions in developing EFL learners' reading ability was compared. With regard to the results FOF group achieved significantly higher scores in the post-test. It is concluded that the Dictogloss task used in this study had influenced in developing EFL learners' reading ability.

Regarding Table 6, the significant difference between the two groups was in higher mean of FOF (mean= 15.40) in the post-test. As was stated earlier, FOF group reported using clear structures in the posttest. Then, higher mean in the posttest may be due to its members' attending more to structures and as a result becoming aware, and trying to make using obvious structures while doing the task. Thus, the FOF group significantly outperformed the FOM group on the post-test of reading comprehension. These findings are consistent with Doughty and Verelas' (1998) research who discovered that using FOF (Dictogloss task) was effective in language learning. However, their study was related to acquisition of English tense. The superiority of Dictogloss in FOF instruction can also be justified by the discovery nature of such an approach.

Along the same line, Lyste (2004 a) investigated that FOF was more effective when distributed balanced opportunities for noticing, language awareness, and controlled practice with feedback. Moreover, Loewn (2005), probed the effectiveness of incidental FOF in developing second language learning. According to Rod Ellis (2005), discovery activities can help learners to utilize explicit knowledge to make easer the acquisition of implicit knowledge. Based on Fotos and Nassaji (2011), some of the theoretical positions are able to support the

view of discovery learning in FOF. In addition, Gholami and Talebi (2012), found that FOF instruction performed in Iranian EFL context and, the role of implicit and explicit FOF techniques carried out on linguistic accuracy.

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