

# *Encouraging Learners' Autonomy in Focus-on-Form Classrooms*

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**Abstract:** This article contributes to the growing body of discussions concerning focus on form, defined as the incidental attention that teachers and L2 learners pay to form in the context of meaning-focused instruction. Whereas many previous studies concern teacher's role and what teachers can do to implement the focus on form approach, that is, to seek the balance between meaning and language form in language teaching, this paper tends to examine the learners' roles in a focus on form classroom. The discussion consists of three parts: part one of the paper is about the nature, two categories and the two ways of practising Focus on Form in a SLA classroom; in part two learners' roles are examined respectively under each of the two conditions in classroom. And part three is devoted to the discussion of the implication of the present theory under the context of Chinese college English teaching. The discussion provides a new perspective to view the difference between Focus on Forms and Focus on Form and is expected to provide college English teachers in China a new way to improve their teaching in real classroom.

## **1. Introduction**

The current movement in North America to 'focus on form', meaning to provide some type of focus on grammar during communicative language teaching, is becoming an increasingly important factor in ESL syllabus design. The inability of communicative ESL teaching alone to promote high levels of accuracy in learners is now clear (Williams 1995), and cumulated evidence from research in grammar learning and SLA suggests that some conscious attention to form is necessary for language learning to take place (Ellis, 2001).

But there is growing concern that a return to grammar instruction should not lead to a revival of "old ways" of language teaching-traditional grammar-based syllabuses, drills and the like. However, there is usually not a black and white cut between the two approaches when implemented in real classrooms, though they are supposed to be different in nature. Some scholars hold it that the supposed Focus on Form actually entails the contributive use of Focus on Forms, and that it is only theoretically motivated rather than pedagogically driven.

While lots of relevant literature attempts to distinguish the two approaches on theoretical ground, this paper represents an initial attempt to describe learners' role in an ideal Focus on Form classroom, in which the teaching of language meanings and forms are well balanced. The aim is to identify what learners are supposed to do in an ideal Focus on Form classroom. It examines learners'

roles respectively in Form-focused instructions and communicative focused activities, and concludes that learners are supposed to be the real center of a Focus on Form classroom in contrast to a the traditional teacher-centered classroom. This paper provides a new perspective to distinguish Focus on Form and Focus on Forms on a more concrete ground, the implications this may have for success in running a class under the Focus on Form approach, and it is believed that such an approach is especially helpful in China, where we have hardly the ground for the learners to immerse in ideal communication.

## **2. About Focus on Form**

Although communicative language teaching is still the present dominant language teaching approach, findings of a wide range of studies suggest that if second language learning is solely experiential and focused on communicative success, some linguistic features do not develop to target like accuracy (Harley 1992, cited in Williams 2001). Results of recent studies suggest that the incorporation of some degree of form into meaning-centered instruction can lead to improved performance. Long originally defined Focus-on-Form as a brief turning of attention to some degree while the overriding focus of the concentration remains on meaning.

### **2.1 Focus-on-Form and Focus-on-Forms**

Focusing on form in language teaching does not mean to revive the traditional way of teaching grammar and language based on a structural syllabus. There is an important distinction between “Focus-on-Form” (FonF) and “Focus-on-Forms”(FonFS). FonFS refers to the instruction that seeks to isolate linguistic forms in order to teach and test them one at a time. It is the old way of language teaching-traditional grammar based syllabus, pattern drills and the like.(Sandra,1998),while FonF involves alternating in some principle way between a focus on meaning and a focus on forms (Long, 1991). It occurs when teachers follow a task-based syllabus, but focus learners’ attention on specific linguistic properties in the course of carrying communicative activities (Ellis, 1997). The underlying assumption of FonF approach is that all classroom activities need to be based on communicative tasks, and that any treatment of grammar should arise from difficulties in communicating desired meanings.

### **2.2 Preemptive Fonf and Reactive Fonf**

Very lately, some scholars began to make distinctions between reactive FonF and preemptive FonF (Ellis, 2001). Reactive FonF has received much attention; it arises when learners produce an utterance containing an actual or perceived error, which is usually addressed by the teacher. Teachers provide corrective feedback according to the learners’ errors either implicitly or explicitly. Besides, FonF can also be preemptive, that is to say, teachers or learners take time out from a communicative activity to initiate attention to a form that is perceived to be problematic even though no production error in the use of the form or difficulty with message comprehension arises. There are two important differences between preemptive FonF and reactive FonF. The first is that, the forms addressed in the preemptive FonF are all derived from meaning focused activity, which is what distinguishes FonF and FonFS; the second is that they involve the extensive rather than intensive treatment of form (Ellis, Basturkmen & Leomen, 2001).

### **2.3 Classroom Fonf**

According to Ellis (1997), a FonF can be achieved in two principle ways in a SLA classroom.

First, teachers can elect to provide corrective feedback on learners' errors during the course of communicative activities. Second, activities can be designed that require learners to communicate which also focusing their attention on specific formal properties. Obviously, such a proposal was based on Long's early definition of FonF, which suggests that FonF only takes place as a reactive move to learners' errors. Incorporating the preemptive FonF into the suggested approach, we conclude that in a SLA classroom, FonF can be achieved basically through two ways: first, through focus on form instructions between the teachers and the students whether they are reactive to learners actual errors or preemptive to the perceived gap in learners' knowledge; second, communicative tasks are also designed to elicit production of specific target features in the context of performing a communicative task. The two ways suggest different ways patterns of classroom interaction in which learners' roles differ as well.

### 3. Learners' Roles in Classroom Fonf

#### 3.1 Learners' Role in Fonf Instruction between Teachers and Learners

In language classrooms, language teachers often take time and efforts to deal with the formal aspect of language. The advocators of FonF agree that form-focused instruction is necessary when addressing to the problematic language forms that prohibit communication. In the teacher-student interaction in classroom, learners are supposed to play the role of :

(1)Monitor: A large part of the form-focused instructions are initiated by the teachers in response to the learners' performance errors, namely, the reactive FonF. Though initiated by the teachers, it is supposed to address to the learners' difficulties they encounter or the errors made in communicating the desired meanings. Since FonF follows communicative approach as we mentioned in the previous part, the learners have more freedom to use their own language to communicate and express themselves instead of sticking to the preselected structures. Here the "monitor" here is used in contrast to "follower" or "imitator". Thus in a FonF classroom, above all, learners play the role of monitor who have the freedom to employ their own language and are the center of the classrooms.

Many researches are designed to find out what kind of form-focused instruction is more effective, implicit ones or explicit ones. Such a distinction is considered to be essential because it potentially affects noticing and has shown to influence whether learners notice corrected forms and uptake them. Seedhouse found in his research that teachers generally showed a favor of implicit feedback while required more efforts from the learners to perceive their errors, while learners preferred explicit feedback and were more ready to uptake the explicit feedback.

(2)Initiator: Except from being involved in a FonF instruction, language learners, especially motivated learners often look for opportunities to learn about form even in activities that are meaning centered. Williams (1999) examined preemptive FonF in collaborative group work and found that learners did initiate attention to form and that the more proficient learners did so more frequently than the less proficient. And according to the findings of the study, the most likely context for preemptive FonF by students was requests about the vocabulary that were directed at the teacher. Ellis, Bastunkmen and Loewen (2001) examined preemptive FonF and found that the majority were initiated by the students in both the classed investigated. The following episode illustrate a student initiated exchange on language form.

1)S: I have a question. I met one of my friends who WAS or IS from Thailand?

2)T: IS from Thailand.

3)S: ah.

4)T: because it's always true she's always from Thailand.

In Turn 1, the student formulates the problem and triggers the teacher's response which

occurs in Turn 2 and 4, with Turn 2 indicating the correct form and Turn4 providing the explanation. The student's uptake move consists of an acknowledgement of teacher's answer. Student- initiated FonF may be more efficient than that initiated by the teacher as it is likely to lead to a higher level of uptake, in which students would try to incorporate the corrected forms into their utterance.

### 3.2 Learners' Role in Focused Communicative Activities

All the activities in a FonF classroom are supposed to be communicative and task-based in nature. Such activities provide the students with meaning-oriented tasks which demand pair work or group efforts, and in order to complete the tasks, students often need to divert their attention to language form to get meaning across. In the activities performed in a typical FonF classroom, students usually play the role of group participant, negotiator, and tutor.

(1)Group participant: In order to implement the FonF in a language classroom, communicative activities are always designed to elicit specific language forms. Such tasks and activities usually require the learners to cooperate with each other in pairs or within small groups.

(2)Negotiator: The interactionist view of language acquisition suggests that learning occurs in and through participation in speech events, that is, talking to others or making conversation is essential (Van Lier, 1988). The communicative tasks in a FonF classroom are based on a pair/group participation pattern, thus they give learners the opportunity to engage in meaning-oriented interaction. In order to achieve mutual understanding and get meaning across, the participants usually have to pay attention to form. Thus to perform a communicative task is one of the essential ways to practice FonF in language classrooms. The research done by Susan and her colleagues found that when the students encountered formal language problems in the given task, they frequently generated talk in which they produced and assumed possible solutions to the problem. In other words, the learners negotiate with each other for the proper forms when they encounter communication breakdown in the meaning-oriented task. The episode below consists of the learners trying to repair a breakdown caused by nontargetlike pronunciation.

L1: when I met him, he said to me, "da da da" and then...

L2: he dead?

L1: what?

L2: he dead?

L1: No

L2: he died?

L1: Dead? No, I said "and then"

L2: oh, then I thought you said and dead. Sorry.

This episode demonstrates how the two peer learners undergo the process of negotiation until they achieve mutual understanding. Such negotiation is believed to be facilitative to SLA because interactional modification leads to comprehensible input, and that learners are pushed to reformulate their own utterance, which could promote acquisition.

(3)Tutor: Except from working collaborately as negotiators, learners within a pair or a group may tutor the less competent other by offering scaffolding concerning language forms to communicate. As the review of mediated research shows, learners are often able to exploit the affordances (Van, Lier2000) on occasions for learning. In Ohta(2000),she found that students not only bid for, and offer mediation through direct means, but similar to teachers and other experts, they also make strategic use of prolepsis to scaffold each other into an appropriate utterance, and this type of mediation, according to Ohta's research, frequently results in grammatical as well as pragmatic learning. The strategies they employ include comprehension checks, clarification request, confirmation check, recast, etc. The followig example illustrate how the learner tutor his peer using

recast.

L1: I go to cinema at weekend.

L2: you went to the cinema, what did you see?

L1: “Gladiators”. It was great.

#### 4. Conclusions and Implications for College English Teaching in China

This article has explored a neglected aspect of Focus on Form----the learners’ role in classroom FonF. This exploration has been motivated by theories of SLA that emphasize the importance of attention to form in the context of meaning-centered activity and the realistic problems exist in the actual implementation of such an approach in language classrooms. To date, researchers and educators have concentrated on teachers’ roles and what the teachers can do to realize FonF in language teaching, on the basis of the discussion here in this article, we wish to argue that learners should be the center of a FonF classroom and they are supposed to play very important part on this ground, an important difference between a traditional Focus on Forms classrooms and a well-balanced Focus on Form classrooms lies in the different positions learners take during the teaching and learning process, thus in reality, encouraging learners’ autonomy can be regarded as an effective way to implement Focus on Form classrooms. And we believe that such an approach can be especially useful in such countries as China, where English is taught as foreign language rather than second language, and where there are little opportunities for learners to immerse in true communicative environment either inside or outside classrooms.

Implementing Focus on Form approach in China college English classrooms. Though new ideas and concepts of SLA are emerging and flourishing all the time within a world-wide range, English teaching in China is still swinging between the traditional teacher-centered approach in which language forms are the main concern, and the communicative approach which some educators and teachers try hard to implement in the classrooms. Thus, the college English teaching in China today take on a uniquely complex scene under revolution.

On one hand, researchers and educators are arguing strongly to adopt the meaning-focused, task-based way of teaching the language in classrooms. With China’s entrance into WTO, there is a rising voice demanding that the English teaching in China can not really meet the need of the society, and that the college English students, though having learnt English for more than ten years on average, have not really master the language, especially when comes to listening and speaking. A lot of researchers investigate the reasons of the condition. As Professor Wang Qimin has found out in his survey, the deeply rooted traditional approach of teaching English is still in the way. Over 90% of the classrooms under the investigation is still teacher centered, 59% of the teachers in class still take language forms as first concern, and in 90% of the classrooms, the only equipments teachers use are blackboard and chalks. As a result, 90% of the participants described the English class as dull and depressed. Thus he concluded that in classrooms, the teacher should not “teach” the language, but teach to “use” the language in concrete conditions; the grammatical language forms should not be the center of the classrooms, instead, meaning should be concerned when using the language. In a way, the condition in the college in his research mirror a lot others. And Professor Wang’s suggestion represents a lot other same opinions: the teachers are greatly encouraged to dispose the traditional concept of teaching and learning and catch up with the modern tide.

However, some other experts in the field of TEFL are on the totally opposite side. Some researchers and teachers who had tried to practice the new approach in classrooms found that the communicative approach was hardly satisfactory in reality. Thus some educators began to examine more deeply the learning environment in China, and argued that we had not the right ground for the approach. Some experienced teachers have their own understanding of the Communicative

Approach. As Zhang Lixia, an experienced college teacher proposes in her paper, compared to the Traditional Approach, the Communicative Approach actually demands more from the learners: it does not only require the learners to master the basic grammatical forms and skills, but also use them to communicate freely in real conditions. In other words, adopting such an approach, the teachers and learners have in fact more tasks and goals in classrooms, but due to the real condition in China-the college are being enlarged year by year-the teachers and learners in classrooms have not more but less time and opportunities to complete the tasks. As a result, she proposes that teacher presentation, in this way, is still the most efficient and effective way of teaching. Frustrated by the implementation of the ideal meaning-focused Communicative Approach in reality, a lot of other experts have also turned to reconsider the effectiveness of more traditional ways to learn and to teach, for example, reciting and reading is receiving more praises than criticism. ( Dong Wei& Fu Lixu, 2003; Dong Yafen, 2003, Sun Xu&Wang Dawei, 2003).

Thus we can see from the above literature, the disputations are far from settled. While the following two conclusions can be reached: 1) The traditional way of focus on forms, teacher-centered teaching is still taking a overwhelming position in many colleges in China, and such a way can not satisfy the need of the learners nor the requirement of the society. 2) In China, English teaching and learning has its own specific difficulties and situations, thus a complete Communicative, meaning-based Approach is neither practical nor appropriate here. Thus a well balanced midway is to be found, which could well balance the form and meaning, the tradition and modern. And we believe that Focus on Form is just the approach we are after as have argued in part one.

However, It is to be noted that the discussion in this paper is based on an ideal FonF classroom. While in reality, we should act “the other way around”; that is, we do not mean to observe and describe an ideal class in which meanings and forms are well constructed into the language teaching; instead, we look for effective ways to run a class which can well balance the meaning and form of language under the Focus on Form approach. On this ground, the learners’ roles in an perceived ideal FonF classroom provides language teachers with another perspective to distinguish FonF and FonFS: the learners are supposed to perform actively and their initiation and participation is essential in a FonF classroom. With this idea clear in mind, the language teachers may be prevented from falling into FonFS in an attempt to carry out FonF in classroom.

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