

Focus on form: What is it and why is it?

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One of the most pressing issues in foreign language teaching concerns grammar teaching whether and how to teach it to best promote the learners' second language (L2) development. This is also an issue that has received considerable attention in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. This line of research conducted over the past few decades has identified two dominant approaches to language teaching, the so-called traditional approach and the communicative approach, each with its own focus, rationale, and the methodology of implementation. These approaches have been tried in various places in various forms in world educational scenes, and problems with both of these approaches have been discovered.

On the one hand, the traditional approach, which has been termed focus on forms by Long (1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998), sees grammar as the main focus of instruction. Proponents of this approach argue that grammar has to be taught first before students can engage in any meaningful communication. While opinions vary among teachers and learners on the need and efficacy of this approach, years of SLA research have provided strong evidence to indicate that second language acquisition is not a simple matter of "understand it, use it, and practice makes perfect." SLA does not take place in such a straightforward cumulative way. Instead, it involves a gradual process of creating one's unique language system known as 'interlanguage' at each point of its development, with errors being inevitable part of learning and not necessarily reflecting the learner's lack of understanding or practice. As Long (1998) put it, "[t]he idea that what you teach is what they learn, and when you teach it is when they learn it, is not just simplistic, it is wrong" (p.38). Learners trained solely in the traditional approach suffer not just from lack of fluency in the L2, but also from serious problems with accuracy and complexity in communicative language use. In short, despite its prevalence in English language teaching in many classrooms in East Asia, the belief underlying the traditional approach is not supported by what we have learned about SLA through research.

It is partly in reaction to these problems with the traditional approach that a then-revolutionary idea known as communicative approach emerged. In direct contrast to the traditional approach, the communicative approach emphasizes not forms, but the meaning expressed by way of forms. Long (1991) calls this approach focus on meaning. The basic assumption of this approach is that language, either

first or second, is best learned by using it as a medium of communication, not as an object of study as in the traditional approach. Deliberate and explicit grammar teaching, therefore, is avoided in favor of creating a natural condition of language learning. Indeed, research conducted on Canadian immersion programs shows that the communicative approach has produced much better results than has the traditional approach. Learners in immersion programs develop excellent listening comprehension skills, fluency, functional abilities, and confidence in using their L2. Research has also discovered, however, that immersion students often fail to achieve high levels of performance in some aspects of the target language grammar even after several years in these programs. Thus, although immersion research has confirmed the importance of engaging learners in real communication, it seems that meaningful interaction and comprehensible input alone is insufficient and often inefficient for successful second language acquisition.

To rectify the problems in these earlier approaches, Long (1991) introduced the notion of focus on form, which attempts to capture the strengths of the communicative approach while dealing with its limitations. The focus-on-form approach tries to ensure the provision of plenty of comprehensible input and interaction in SLA. At the same time, it tries to incorporate grammar teaching in a supplementary and incidental way. Instead of having an extended separate grammar explanation and exercises in the lesson, focus on form tries to integrate attention to form and meaning by drawing the learner's attention to form in the course of communicative use of language. This can be done explicitly in the class by providing short grammar explanation to help with students' content understanding or task completion, or implicitly by way of negotiation of meaning or by providing recasts. The essential requirement of focus on form is that the main focus of the lesson should be on meaning and form focus should arise in context as needed.

Focus on form does not assume that language acquisition occurs instantaneously after the teaching, nor does it assume that learners can pick up language forms without any external help. The expectation is that if the teaching intervention is done in such a way as to respect the learner's social, psycholinguistic, and emotional/affective needs, it is likely to be more successful even if the immediate outcome is not learner's accurate use of the form. The syllabus types that can be adopted for focus on form are a content-based syllabus or task-based syllabus, not the structural syllabus, because meaning has to come first before form, not vice versa.

While the recent trend in ESL in North America is to add more form focus in the otherwise meaning-focused instruction, the challenges to EFL education in most East Asian classrooms is first to bring more meaning and content in the English lessons and then to add form focus in the lesson in a timely and integrated manner. This indeed poses great challenges to many teachers in EFL contexts. Hopefully, however, coordinated efforts of both teachers and researchers will meet

these challenges for the ultimate benefit of our students.

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Works Cited

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Shinichi Izumi earned his Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Georgetown University, USA. Having spent about 10 years studying and teaching in the United States, he joined the faculty of the Department of the English Language and Studies at Sophia University in the year 2000. At Sophia, he teaches courses in EFL speaking/listening, reading, English Linguistics, EFL methodology, Second Language Acquisition, and Instructed SLA at both undergraduate and graduate levels. His research interests include second/foreign language acquisition and the interface between SLA research and EFL teaching. His previous research appears in international journals including: *Applied Language Learning*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *Language Learning*, *Second Language Research*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. He also serves on the editorial advisory board for *Language Teaching Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*.

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