

The Effect of Preemptive Focus on Form Instruction on ESP Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge across Different Proficiency Level

Mahbobeh Joghtaii¹, Hamed Barjesteh^{1*}

¹Department of English language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Amol, Iran
Email: m.joghtaie43@yahoo.com

¹Department of English language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Amol, Iran
*Corresponding author's email: ha_bar77@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study embarks upon investigating the probable effect of preemptive focus on form on the ESP learner's vocabulary knowledge. In so doing, 96 EFL students were screened based on their performance in Oxford Placement Test (OPT). They were randomly divided into two groups of pre-emptive focus on form (24 male and 24 female) and two non-preemptive focus on form (24 male and 24 female) as high and low experimental groups (PFF) and high and low control groups (NPF). The participants in high and low PFF groups were subjected to vocabulary instruction through preemptive focus on form. More precisely, they received an explicit attention to the linguistic form. Attempts were made to prevent the occurrence of an erroneous form which addresses an actual or a perceived gap in the students' knowledge. The findings revealed that PFF outperformed than NPF in their ESP learners' vocabulary knowledge. However, the effect of PFF training did not vary across different language proficiency levels. Moreover, it did not vary for male and female students. The findings were related to main goals and features of FFI including depth of processing hypothesis, discovery learning, pushed output, noticing hypothesis, awareness raising, negotiation, and motivation.

KEYWORDS: Pre-Emptive Focus on Form; ESP; Vocabulary; Proficiency Level; Gender

INTRODUCTION

The Scrutinizing the history of second language learning (L2) reveals that there has been a great attention to focus on form instruction (FFI) by emerging audio-lingual method in 1960s. Even though the primary attention was to the oral production but later in 1970s passages of connected discourse began to be used more often as classroom materials in the teaching of writing (Raimes, 1991). Later, in 1980s, content based instruction emerged in which learners are said to get help with "the language of the thinking processes and the structure or shape of content" (Mohan, 1986, p. 18). Teaching vocabulary, as a component of skills, has been the main concerns in the EFL/ESL context. For a long time, explicit instruction drew the attention of the researchers because it was the cornerstone of all L2 learning. However, this view changed to a great extent by the emergence of the new approach in L2 instruction.

In 1981, Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis proposed that comprehensible input is the crucial factor for acquiring a language. His proposal challenged the explicit instruction (EI) because it could not help learners achieve in spontaneous production of language. Krashen considered the role of understanding as an important factor for a language acquisition. However, his proposal has been challenged by the idea that those learners, who do not have the advantage of language instruction, though fluent, developed wild vocabulary and produced untargeted-like output (Poole & Sheorey, 2002). Later, Schmidt (1990) introduced the concept of 'noticing'. He maintains that it is a conscious awareness of a past unlearned L2 vocabulary form. He regarded noticing as a necessary condition for language acquisition to take place. Most of findings in L2 professional literature (Dekeyser, 1998; Ellis, 2002, Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002; Fotos, 1993) also confirm that noticing is necessary for the target form in input. In other words, learners can learn about forms when they attend to. Thus, L2 learners need to attend to form rather than to be simply engage in communicative language use (Farrokhi 2005).

In line with this perspective, Ellis (1990) introduced formal vocabularies as a view of language instruction. He maintains that it aids learners to foster awareness of target language form. Ellis believes that learners remain aware of the target language feature and notice it in subsequent communicative input events when consciousness of a particular feature has been raised through formal instruction. According to Ellis, once consciousness of a particular feature has been raised through formal instruction, learners remain aware of the target language feature and notice it in subsequent communicative input events which are considered to be crucial for further language processing, leading to the acquisition of the feature. Ellis maintain that the role of language instruction in SLA is treated in terms of the route , i.e., the general sequence or specific order of acquisition, and the rate of language acquisition, i.e., the speed at which learning takes place. He enumerates three merits of instruction: (a) it speeds up the rate of learning, (b) it affects acquisition processes, leading to long term accuracy, and (c) it appears to raise the ultimate level of attainment (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

Spada (1997) considered FFI as the main types of formal instruction that aims to draw learners' attention to language form, explicitly or implicitly. One of the pedagogically sound and empirically grounded types of L2 vocabulary instruction was proposed by Long (1991). He made a distinction between focus on forms and focus on form. The former refers to an instruction, that the teacher or syllabus designer is required to analyze or break the L2 into its components, that is, words, collocations, grammar rules, phonemes, intonation and stress patterns, structures, notions, or functions. But it is considered as a non-communicative approach as it doesn't foster L2 development which enables learners to function in real-world. Focus on Form is a kind of instruction, which emphasizes the importance of communicative language teaching such as authentic communication, and puts emphasis on occasional and overt study of L2 grammatical structures (Poole, 2005). According to Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998), it tries to maintain a balance between focus on forms and focus on meaning through motivating teachers and learners to attend to form when necessary, yet within a communicative classroom environment.

Ellis et al. (2002) classified two main types of FFI as planned (proactive) FFI and incidental FFI. The first involves implementing a communicative tasks to extract the use of linguistic structure in meaning-based context. The teacher decided in advance what form should be focused. It is selected based on the teacher's familiarity with the students and their interlanguage needs or based on the problematic area of students knowledge. However, the incidental FFI demands the use of communicative tasks which are aimed to draw general forms rather than specific. The forms are focused on in the process of communication which can be reactive and preemptive. Reactive focus on forms are the treatment of errors in a communicative situation when learners produce utterances containing an actual error. It is addressed by the teacher or a learner. The preemptive focus on form (PFF) is an attempt to make a specific form the topic of conversation even through no error has occurred. It is initiated by a request the learners addressed to the teacher. PFF demands the teacher or the learner initiating attention to form even through no specific problem in production. It addresses an actual gap in learners' knowledge.

To date many studies have been conducted on FFI on EFL learning vocabulary. Reviewing the L2 professional literature revealed that only a few studies have been conducted on learning ESP vocabulary. To bridge the gap, this study tries to find out the incidental FFI on the ESP learners vocabulary knowledge. More specifically, this study aims to probe if preemptive focus on form (PFF) significantly improve ESP learners' vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, this paper endeavors to unveil the effect of PFF across different proficiency level. It also attempts to seek if PFF vary for male and female students.

To survey the probable effect of incidental preemptive focus on form instruction on the ESP learners' vocabulary knowledge, this study employed the following research questions:

1. Does preemptive focus on form significantly improve ESP learners' vocabulary knowledge?
2. Does the effect of preemptive focus on form instruction varies across different proficiency level?
3. Does preemptive focus on form instruction vary for male and female students?

THE PARTICIPANTS

In order to implement the present study, the researcher selected the English students studying for specific purpose (ESP), business class, in a private company, Berion Company in Amol. Ninety-six of the participants (48male and 48 female) were opted for the subject pool due to their performance on Oxford Placement test (OPT) as the participant of the study. The participants were both female and male with the age range of 20 to 25. They were all postgraduate students with the same majors who had 6 years experience of learning English at high school and all passed 3 credits English for general purposes (EGP) in their university. They were elementary level based on the placement test of the Berion company. They were classified at 4 groups each 24 participants.

INSTRUMENTATIONS

In order to conduct the present study, the following instruments were utilized respectively: Oxford Placement test (OPT) and vocabulary test.

OXFORD PLACEMENT TEST (OPT)

In order to probe the participants' homogeneity and their level of proficiency an OPT version 1.1 (2001) was used. It comprised three parts : Part one includes 40 questions which contains five multiple choice items for tapping the students' vocabulary knowledge and three cloze passages with total fifteen questions. This section ends with 20 multiple choice questions which aimed to probe the participants' vocabulary and grammatical competency. Part two composed questions which include 2 cloze passages with total 10 multiple choice questions for probing the students' reading comprehension ability. The last part included a writing section in which it required learners to write a well-organized paragraph of 150-200 words to describe the reasons of choosing a university to fulfill their academic goals by supporting the reasons with specific examples in twenty minutes.

VOCABULARY TEST

The second instrument which used in this study is vocabulary test. This test used as pretest and post test. The necessary of using this test is for evaluating the learners' vocabulary knowledge before and interventions in both experimental and control groups. This test was a teacher made test which designed based on the learners' book, Market Leader. The test includes 30 questions which are in multiple choice formats. (Appendix B). This test was conducted in a similar group at Ayatollah Amoli branch to screen the reliability and validity of test. The test was revised by the supervisor of the study to check the validity. As far as the reliability of the test was concerned, it was administered in a similar group with 30 students. Using the Cronbach alpha, the test enjoyed a high reliability of .78.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The present study aims at investigating the effect of incidental preemptive focus on form instruction on ESP learning vocabulary knowledge. In so doing, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to the available subjects to tap their proficiency level. Those who scored half of standard deviation about and below the mean were considered as the subject pool of the study.

Next, they were randomly divided into two groups of pre-emptive focus on form (24 male and 24 female) and two non-preemptive focus on form(24 male and 24 female) as experimental group (PFF) and control group (NPPF). Then, each group was divided into two subsequent groups based on their proficiency level, high and low proficiency level. So, there were two groups of learners each comprised 24 learners.

The class met two times a week based, each one and half-hour. To find out the current vocabulary test conducted among the four groups, high and low PFF and high and low NPPF groups. In the next step, the participants in high and low PFF group subjected to vocabulary instruction through preemptive focus on form. The intervention lasted 10 sessions. More precisely, in PFF the researcher focused on explicit attention to the linguistic form. Attempt was made to prevent the occurrence of an erroneous form which addresses an actual or a perceived gap in the students' knowledge.

In so doing, the researcher used consciousness raising (CR) tasks, input flooding, and input enhancement to FOF group. More precisely, a number of tasks such as highlighting, margining, and underling the vocabulary were used so as to raise the learners' attention to focus on the new words and to sensitize the problematic area predicted by the teacher. This was done to draw students' attention to the new words. The researcher introduced the topic and presented some new vocabulary selected from the text. The researcher also used both synonyms and antonyms for teaching the vocabularies. In addition, they were allowed to use a dictionary for checking the meaning of unknown words.

On the other hand, the participants in the NFF were not tabulate to the above task intervention. In case of any problems during the reading tasks, the teacher either translated the new words or wrote the synonyms on the board. To screen the probable effect of preemptive focus on form instruction the researcher conduct a teacher –made test vocabulary as the posttest.

RESULTS

This study was exploratory in nature and focused on the effect of incidental preemptive focus on –form instruction on ESP learners' vocabulary knowledge. In order to fulfill the purpose of the study, three tests were administered: The first one was an oxford Placement Test (OPT), the results were used to screen the subjects into two high and low groups on the basis of the dispersion of scores around the mean. The next two tests were vocabulary tests which was validated against the vocabulary test in the pilot study. Initially, descriptive statistics was carried out for vocabulary tests. Based on the research questions and null hypotheses in this study, several statistical analyses were

conducted. At first participants were grouped into two levels (high & low) according to their OPT scores. Each proficiency group was further divided into PFF and NPFF groups.

The study was run into three phases. In the first phase, all subjects in all groups were given the pre-test in order to recognize the subjects' vocabulary ability and also the possible differences among all groups before the treatment. After scoring the pre-test, the scores were tabulated and subjected to statistical analyses of two-way ANOVA.

In the second phase, the subjects in PFF groups had CR training. Subjects in NPFF groups had a more traditional approach for vocabulary training. In the third phase of the study, the subjects were given the post-test in order to recognize the subjects' vocabulary ability and also the possible differences among all groups after the treatment. After scoring the post-test, the scores were tabulated and subjected to statistical analyses of two ways ANOVA.

In order to fulfill the purpose of the study an OPT was administered. The test of general English proficiency, OPT, was administered to 110 ESP students. Based on the mean score ($X=50.56$) and standard deviation of students' scores ($SD=16.60$), 96 subjects were selected. Those scoring between half a standard deviation above and half standard deviation below the mean (42 and 58) were considered as high level and low level respectively. The descriptive statistics of students' score is presented in table 1.

Table 1. *The descriptive statistics of students' score*

N	Valid	110
	Missing	0
Mean		50.5636
Median		49.5000
Mode		43.00
Std. Deviation		16.60194
Variance		275.624
Skewness		.191
Std. Error of Skewness		.230
Kurtosis		-.648
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.457
Range		36.00
Minimum		21.00
Maximum		57.00
Sum		5562.00

Initially, descriptive statistics were carried out for vocabulary test involved in this study. The results are reported in table 4.2 below.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics for vocabulary test*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
PRETES	96	60	30	90	61	19.5	381.
POSTT	96	79	21	100	61	23.1	533.
EST					1.38	.49	04
Valid N (list wise)	96						777

Based on the research questions and null hypotheses of this study, several statistical analyses were conducted, the results of which are presented below. At first participants were grouped into two levels (high & low) according to their OPT scores. Each proficiency group was further divided one PFF and NPFF group. In addition, we had equal number of male and female in each group.

As it was mentioned before, the study was run into three phases. In the first phase all subject in all four groups were given the pre-test in order to recognize the subjects' vocabulary ability and also the possible differences among all the groups before the treatment. A two-way between group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of gender and levels of language proficiency as measured by vocabulary test (Table 4.3).

Table 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Pretest

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	83697.017a	3	27899.006	874.047	.000
Intercept	934752.017	1	934752.017	29284.807	.000
PROFICIE	83477.400	1	83477.400	2615.260	.000
GENDER	198.017	1	198.017	6.204	.513
PROFICIE * GENDER	21.600	1	21.600	.677	.412
Error	7532.967	2	31.919		
Total	1025982.000	36			
Corrected Total	91229.983	40			
		39			

a R Squared = .917(Adjusted R Squared = .916)

Note the sig. (i.e. p-value) for each F ratio. There is a significant main effect for "proficiency", but the main effect for "Gender" is not significant. In other words, there is a significant and meaningful difference between high/low groups, but there is no difference between male/female groups. In addition there is not a significant interaction between "proficiency" and "Gender" meaning that the proficiency factor has the same effects upon male and female groups.

Then, subjects in PFF groups had CR training. Subjects in NPFF groups used a more traditional approach for vocabulary. In the third phase of the study, the subjects were given the post-test in order to recognize the subjects' vocabulary ability and also the possible differences among all four groups after the treatment. After scoring the post-test, the scores were tabulated and subjected to statistical analyses of three ways ANOVA (Table 4.4).

Table 4. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Posttest*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	125667.533	7	17952.505	2186.112	.000
Intercept	904299.267	1	904299.267	110118.32	.000
PROFICIE	24888.067	1	24888.067	3030.669	.000
GENDER	6406.667	1	6406.667	780.153	.000
PFF	94327.350	1	94327.350	11486.429	.000
PROFICIE * GENDER	.600	1	.600	.073	.787
PROFICIE * PFF	12.150	1	12.150	1.480	.225
GENDER * PFF	25.350	1	25.350	3.0873	.080
PROFICIE * GENDER * PFF	7.350	1	7.350	.895	.345
Error	1905.200	2	8.212		
		32			
		2			
		32			
Total	1031872.000	9			
		6			
		9			
		6			
Corrected Total	127572.733				

a R Squared = .985 (Adjusted R Squared =.985)

Note the sig. (i.e. p-value) for each F ratio. There is significant main effect for "PFF", "proficiency", and "gender" factors. All three factors are significant beyond .01 level. Despite the main effects of the factors, there is no significant interaction effect. Clearly, the "PFF" factor has the same effects upon high/low and male/female groups. As table 4.4 illustrates there is a significant difference between PFF and NPFF. These results reject the first null hypothesis and confirm the effect of PFF training on the EFL learners' vocabulary performance. There is also a significant difference between high and low proficiency groups. However, the interaction between "critical" factor and "proficiency" factor was not significant. So the second null hypothesis is supported, i.e. the effect of PFF training does not vary across different language proficiency levels. There was a significant difference between male and female groups, but the interaction between "PFF" factor and "gender" factor was not significant. So, the third null hypothesis is also supported which means that the effect of PFF training does not vary for male and female students.

DISCUSSION

The present study aims at investigating the probable effect of preemptive focus on form on the ESP learner's vocabulary knowledge. More specifically, it sought if preemptive focus on form can influence ESP learners for learning the vocabulary in second language acquisition. Another objective of the present study was to find the effect of PFF instruction across different proficiency levels. The findings indicated a significant effect of PFF training on the ESP learners' vocabulary performance. That is to say, providing ESP learners with PFF proved to be effective in terms of their vocabulary learning. However, this effect does not vary across different language proficiency levels and their gender. More precisely, the effect of instruction is the same at high and low level of language proficiency among male and female learners.

This finding supports Sangarun (2005) who found that FFI on vocabulary led to significantly more lexical form planning than the other types of pre-task instruction. It is also in line with Yuan and Ellis (2003). They found that the while pre-task planners had high lexical complexity, their grammatical accuracy was lower. On the other hand, on-line planners showed more accurate production, but less lexical complexity.

Lightbown (1998) claimed that that incorporating attention to form into communicative activities increases the probability that learners will attend, notice, detect and be able to use the information. The finding of this study support this claim, PFF was found to be effective for vocabulary instruction. The findings also revealed that ESP learners in vocabulary instruction made a considerable

developmental progress over the study period, that is, input enhancement increased the likelihood that learners detect the target lexical and in the input.

It is believed that an input has dual relevance. In the first stage, the learner's main aim is to extract meaning and survive or succeed in given interchange of messages. In this sense, the learner will interpret for meaning. But at the second stage, there will be linguistic input which is relevant to the current state of the learner's competence. It may contribute to the substantiation or reflection of some current hypotheses about the target language system (Sharwood Smith, 1998).

The results also supports Ellis (2002) who claimed that FFI may be more effective if it is directed at morphological features than syntactic structures.

This might be due to the fact that learners have preference for semantic processing over morphological processing; that is, they prefer to extract semantic knowledge from lexical items instead of grammatical one. This could be the reason behind the better performance of vocabulary group in comparison to grammar group (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

The findings of the present study also in line with the previous studies (Doughty & Valera, 1998) who argued that negative evidence is effective to L2 learning when it targets particular forms. They are also in line with Schmidt's (1990, 2001) noticing hypothesis who claimed that noticing involves attending to the input learners receive. He claims that it is inevitably a conscious process and is a necessary condition for L2 learning. They also run counter to the advocate of non-interface hypothesis such as Krashen (1982) who referred to "error correction as a serious mistake and argued that it should be limited to rules that can be learnt" (p.74).

In addition, the findings are in line with Williams and Evans (1998) study who indicated that FFI is more effective than NFF. Moreover, the findings indicated that FFI has much positive effect on vocabulary learning in ESP setting and the arguments that FFI is effective. Moreover, the findings in accord with the results of Alcon (2007); Farrokhi (2005); Jahangardi (2010) that FFI is one of the good options for English teachers to use in their classrooms.

Overall, the finding in L2 professional literature have supported the advantages of different FFI adhering to Ellis et al.'s (2002) dichotomy of FoF, namely planned vs. incidental focus on form. The results of this study, however, indicated that even preemptive focus on form can be planned in advance due to teachers' experience. That is to say, Ellis et al.'s classifications can be questioned by experienced teachers. These results are in line with Panahzade and Gholam (2013) which claimed that Ellis et al.'s dichotomy can get blurred by preemptive focus on form planning prior to task performance by experienced teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study aims at investigating the probable effect of preemptive focus on form on the ESP learner's vocabulary knowledge. Put it in another words, this study attempts to seek the probable effect of strategy base instruction in language teaching. More specifically, it seeks if preemptive focus on form can influence ESP learners for learning the vocabulary in second language acquisition. The findings indicated that learners in PFF groups outperformed than NPFF. These findings were related to main goals and features of FFI including depth of processing hypothesis, discovery learning, pushed output, noticing hypothesis, awareness raising, negotiation, and motivation. It is worth mentioning that although preemptive focus on form is an under-researched area in ESL contexts; its accounts are almost missing in EFL settings. So it is hoped that this study might contribute to the existing body, as well as pave the way for further research in this area. The findings revealed that ESP learners in PFFI outperformed than NPFF. The findings of this study have some implications for ESP teachers since they would be aware of which kinds of instruction would be more effective in vocabulary learning in intermediate level. In addition, they will know different techniques for application of these instructions especially in classroom context. Moreover, the results of this research can have implications for material developers. It helps them design tasks to provide opportunities for focus on the most effective approach. This findings also add literature that the role of meaning is important in learning new vocabulary.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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