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Focussing on form in the classroom[1]

ABSTRACT

Current theories of second language acquisition emphasise the importance of learners' attending consciously to form. Similarly, current discussions of communicative language pedagogy stress the need for classroom language learners to focus on form as well as meaning. The study reported in this article is intended to contribute to both theory and practice. It examines the different ways in which teachers and students achieve a 'focus-on-form' (i.e. attend to linguistic form in the context of activity that is primarily message-oriented). Based on an analysis of 12 hours of teaching English in a private language school, a coding system is developed to account for the general characteristics of 'focus-on-form episodes' (FFEs). The system is then used to provide an account of focus-on-form in the classrooms studied, revealing that nearly half of the total FFEs were proactive rather than reactive and that more than half involved negotiating form rather than negotiating meaning (i.e. they were not triggered by any communicative problem). The paper concludes with proposals for future research.

Key words: communicative pedagogy, focus-on-form, uptake

Figure 1 displays the pedagogical options that gave shape to our study. Language pedagogy can be accomplished by means of meaning-focussed instruction or form-focussed instruction. The latter can in turn consist of a focus-on-forms or a focus-on-form.
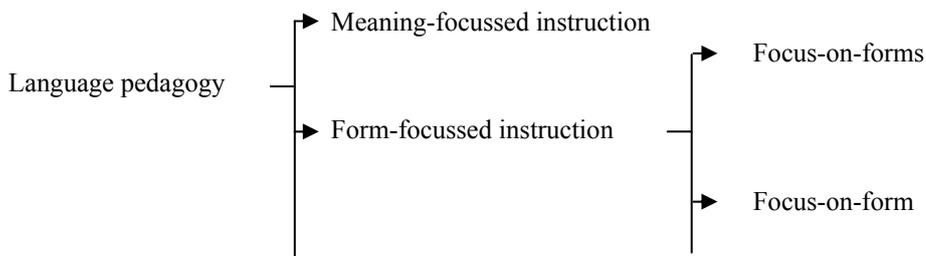

Figure 1: Some basic pedagogical options

It is common in both the pedagogic and the second language acquisition (SLA) literature to distinguish meaning-focussed and form-focussed instruction (Harmer 1982; Doughty and Williams 1998). The former refers to instruction directed at engaging learners in acts of communication where their attention is primarily directed at understanding and/or conveying message content. The latter refers to instruction where the learner's attention is focussed on linguistic forms and the meanings these convey.

Form-focussed instruction is of two basic types; (1) a planned attempt to intervene in interlanguage development and (2) incidental attempts to focus learners' attention onto forms in the course of instruction that is not explicitly designed to teach the forms. Somewhat confusingly, Long (1988: 1991) has labelled these two types of form-focussed instruction 'focus on form<u>s</u>' and 'focus on form'. Focus on forms, according to Long (1988) consists of the teaching of discrete grammar points in accordance with a synthetic syllabus, such as a structural syllabus. Krashen (1982) refers to this as 'the structure-of-the-day' approach. The criterial features of focus-on-forms are (1) the pre-selection of a linguistic target for a lesson and (2) awareness on the part of teacher and students of what the linguistic target for the lesson is.

Focus on form is defined by Long (1991: 45–46) as follows:
> Focus on form … overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they rise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication.

For the purposes of the study reported in this article we consider focus-on-form to have four criterial features:

1. it is observable (i.e. occurs interactionally),
2. it arises incidentally,
3. it occurs in discourse that is primarily meaning-centred and
4. it is transitory.

The psycholinguistic rationale for focus-on-form

The psycholinguistic rationale for a focus-on-form draws on a number of claims:

1. Meaning-focussed instruction, while effective in developing fluent oral communication skills, does not result in a high level of linguistic or sociolinguistic competence.
2. Form-focussed instruction consisting of a focus-on-forms may not result in learners being able to restructure their interlanguages.
3. Form-focussed instruction consisting of a focus-on-form can enable learners to develop fluency with accuracy because it creates the conditions for interlanguage restructuring to take place.

We will examine each of these claims.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that learners are successful in learning how to communicate fluently and confidently as a result of content-based instruction (see, for example, reviews of the Canadian immersion studies in Genesee (1987) and Swain (1985)). Even in less favourable ESL or EFL learning contexts, instructional programmes designed to expose learners to the target language through communication of one kind or another have produced very favourable results. Lightbown (1992), for example, reports that eight-year old children in New Brunswick, who participated in an experimental programme in which they worked entirely on their own for thirty minutes each day with various reading and listening materials designed to provide them with

comprehensible input, demonstrated considerable oral ability at the end of the first year, greater in fact than that achieved by students taught through a traditional, focus-on-forms approach. Clearly, meaning-focussed instruction that supplies learners with plentiful input that they can understand is effective in developing oral skills. However, there is also evidence to suggest that such instruction is not successful in enabling learners to achieve high levels of linguistic and sociolinguistic accuracy, suggesting, as claimed by Higgs and Clifford (1982), that there are limits to what can be achieved through 'natural' learning. French immersion students, for example, typically fail to learn marked verb forms. For example, they do not acquire the distinction between passe compose and imparfait (Harley 1989) or conditional forms (Day and Shapson 1991). They also fail to master sociolinguistic distinctions, such as that between *tu* and *vous* (Lyster 1994).

Why do learners fail to learn basic tense and sociolinguistic distinctions even after hundreds of hours of meaning-focussed instruction? One possibility is that they develop a high level of strategic competence that enables them process input and output in the L2 without the need to attend closely to linguistic form. Indeed, the very nature of the instruction they experience, with its emphasis on processing language for meaning, may encourage the use of top-down strategies based on schematic knowledge and context at the expense of bottom-up strategies directed at decoding and encoding linguistic form. Schmidt (1990: 1994) has argued that acquisition cannot take place unless learners actually 'notice' linguistic forms in the input, a process that he suggests is necessarily conscious. Meaning-focussed instruction does not encourage such noticing. Furthermore, it may actually inhibit it. VanPatten (1990) has suggested that learners, especially those with a low level of proficiency in the L2, have limited processing capacities, such that they cannot easily attend to both meaning and form at the same time and thus opt for whichever pays them the greater dividends. In the case of meaning-focussed instruction this is obviously meaning. In short, what is good for developing the ability to process language for meaning in context may not be effective in developing an advanced linguistic competence.

This has led researchers to look for ways of complementing meaning-focussed instruction with some kind of form-focussed instruction. One possibility is a focus-on-forms – to complement content-based or task-based instruction with planned form-focussed lessons designed to address the particular linguistic features that have been found to problematic to learners. The studies referred to above by Harley (1989), Day and Shapson (1991) and Lyster (1994) all testify to this possibility. These studies provide evidence to show that teaching learners forms (and, of course, the semantic and pragmatic meanings they realise) is, to some extent at least, successful, especially if the approach adopted is a 'functional' one (i.e. involves activities that teach form in relation to communicative activity).

Nevertheless, there are strong theoretical reasons, grounded on empirical studies (e.g. Pienemann 1989), to suggest that focussing on forms is problematic because learners follow their own built-in syllabus which only allows them to benefit from form-focussed instruction directed at a specific form if they have established the prerequisite processing operations needed to acquire it. Several studies (e.g., Pica 1983; Ellis 1989) have shown that classroom learners follow the same order and sequence of acquisition as naturalistic learners, suggesting that interlanguage development may be impervious to direct intervention through instruction. These studies, however, have also shown that learners who have received form-focussed instruction learn more rapidly and generally advance further along the interlanguage continuum than naturalistic learners. It would seem then that where rate and ultimate level of learning are concerned, a focus-on-forms may be of some benefit. Nevertheless, whether a particular group of learners is ready to acquire a particular feature is bound to be a hit-or-miss affair. Also, focus-on-forms seems to work best when the instruction is intensive, involving repeated activities performed over a period of time,

several weeks in the case of the studies referred to above. This necessarily limits the number of features that can be effectively treated. For these reasons, the other form-focussed teaching option is worthy of consideration.

Focus-on-form is compatible with an information-processing theoretical view of L2 acquisition. As we have already noted, L2 learners experience problems in directing their attention simultaneously at meaning and form, opting for whatever focus is compatible with their immediate goals. A focus-on-form provides learners with the opportunity to take 'time-out' from focussing on message construction to pay attention to specific forms and the meanings they realise. It thus helps to alleviate the processing problems they experience. It also provides an antidote to the kind of top-down processing that L2 learners adopt to cope with communicative demands by forcing learners, from time to time, to engage in bottom-up processing. Furthermore, such an approach enables teacher and students to attend to problems that are demonstrably problematic to learners (i.e. focus-on-form episodes are triggered either by something problematic in a learner utterance or by the learner's or teacher's wish to clarify understanding of a linguistic feature). In this way, focus-on-form is inherently *remedial* and, for that reason, pedagogically efficient.

A further rationale for focus-on-form can be found in the kind of skill-building theory advanced by Johnson (1988; 1996). Johnson argues that skill-development occurs when learners obtain feedback. He suggests, however, that feedback is most effectively utilized by learners when it is provided under 'real operating conditions' (i.e. in natural contexts in which learners are trying to actually perform the skill). Such feedback enables learners to carry out a cognitive comparison between their own output, which reflects their current interlanguage system, and the negative evidence and models of target language forms provided through the feedback. In this way, learners are have the opportunity to 'notice-the-gap' (Schimdt and Frota 1986). Long (1996), drawing on Pinker (1989), however, argues that it is not sufficient to argue that negative evidence is a remedy to learners' linguistic problems but that it must be shown to (1) exist, (2) exist in a usable form, (3) be used by learners and (4) be necessary for successful acquisition. He presents theoretical and empirical reasons for believing that all these conditions can be met. Together, Johnson and Long offer a clear psycholinguistic rationale for focus-on-form; it provides learners with the negative evidence they need to develop their interlanguages in a manner that is usable.

Focus-on-form can also contribute to acquisition in another way – it provides the impetus for what Swain (1985; 1995) has termed 'pushed output', i.e. output that stretches the learner's competence through the need to express an idea in language that is accurate and appropriate. When teachers respond to student errors through corrective feedback they potentially create conditions for students to attempt to produce the correct forms themselves. Doing so may help to foster the acquisition of these forms so that on subsequent occasions the students are able to use the correct forms without prompting.

Classroom studies of focus-on-form

Studies of error treatment (see Chaudron (1987) for a review) indicate that it is an enormously complex process – a point evident in the elaborativeness of the discourse and category systems that have been developed to account for it. The research shows that some errors are more likely to be treated than others (e.g. lexical errors receive more attention than grammatical errors), although, of course, this is likely to vary considerably from teacher to teacher. The research also shows that there is considerable variation among teachers regarding the frequency with which errors are corrected and the preferred manner in which they are corrected. Teachers often simultaneously provide more than one kind of feedback on the same error. However, they do not correct all errors

and are less likely to correct an error if it occurs frequently. Also on occasions teachers have been observed to correct 'errors' that have not in fact been made (Edmundson 1985). Two general characteristics of teachers' error correction practices have been noted; imprecision and inconsistency. Imprecision is evident in the fact that teachers use the same overt behaviour (e.g. 'repetition') to both indicate that an error has been made and to reinforce a correct response. Nystrom (1983) has commented: 'teachers typically are unable to sort though the feedback options available to them and arrive at an appropriate response'. Inconsistency arises when teachers respond variably to the same error made by different students in the same class, correcting some students and ignoring others. Such inconsistency is not necessarily detrimental, for, as Allwright (1975) has pointed out, it may reflect teachers' attempts to cater for individual differences among the students.

Recent studies of corrective feedback have sought to identify the frequency with which specific corrective categories are used. Lyster and Ranta (1997), in the study of immersion classrooms referred to above, found that of the various feedback types, 'recasts' were the most common, accounting for some 55% of the total. The other types occurred with roughly equal frequency (i.e. between 14% for 'elicitation' and 5% for 'repetition'). They also examined student uptake in relation to the different types of teacher feedback. Interestingly, 'recasts', the most frequent type of feedback, resulted in the least amount of uptake (only 31%). 'Explicit correction' was also not very effective in this respect, leading to only 50% uptake. The most effective feedback types were 'elicitation' and 'clarification request', which resulted in 100% and 91% uptake respectively. When Lyster and Ranta looked at the kind of uptake (i.e. whether it was of the 'repair' or 'needs repair' type), they found that 'elicitation' was again the most effective, with 46% of uptake manifesting correction of the error, and 'clarification request' relatively ineffective, with only 28% of uptake in the 'repair' category. Lyster and Ranta conclude that 'the feedback-uptake sequence engages students more actively when … the correct form is not provided to the students … and when signals are provided to the learner that assist the reformulation of the erroneous utterance' (p. 58).

Very little research has examined the effects of focus-on-form on acquisition in natural classrooms, Lightbown and Spada (1990) and Spada and Lightbown (1993) being notable exceptions. These studies examined intensive communicative ESL classes in Canada. The earlier study compared the accuracy with students in four different classes performed several grammatical structures in an oral-communication task. Lightbown and Spada note that their teachers did not teach grammar lessons but rather reacted to errors as they occurred (i.e. practised focus-on-form). They show that several of the structures (e.g. introducer forms with 'be', progressive *–ing* and possessive determiners) were performed more accurately by students in one of the classes than the others and suggest that this might have been because the teacher of this class gave more attention to form, although always in the context of the same communicative activities completed by the other classes. The second study reports an experimental investigation of form-focussed instruction of the focus-on-forms kind (as we have defined it earlier). However, the results of interest here concern the control group, which experienced instruction that was primarily meaning-focussed. Spada and Lightbown report that this group outperformed the experimental groups on the target structure (interrogatives). In order to explain this surprising finding they examined the actual interactions that took place in the experimental and control classrooms and found that the teacher in the control classroom asked many more questions than the teachers in the experimental classrooms. This teacher also corrected her students' errors in question formation far more frequently than one of the teachers of the experimental treatment, despite the fact that she was not trying to teach questions. The students in the control group also produced more spontaneous

questions, although, as might be expected they asked fewer task-related questions. Spada and Lightbown conclude that the success of the control group students in acquiring question forms derived from the focus-on-form that occurred over a period of several months. In effect, this study suggests that a focus-on-form can work as well, if not better, than a focus-on-forms.

There have been a number of non-classroom experimental studies that claim to have investigated the effects of focus-on-form on acquisition. For example, Carroll and Swain (1993) examined the effects of different kinds of feedback on learners' learning of dative alternation. In English, some verbs like 'give' permit dative alternation (e.g. 'She gave Dave a present' and 'She gave a present to Dave') while other verbs like 'explain' do not (e.g. '* She explained Dave the problem'). The study showed that the group receiving explicit feedback involving metalinguistic comment outperformed both a control group and the other groups receiving different kinds of feedback (e.g. implicit correction in the form of recasts). Implicit correction also worked better than no correction. However, this study did not obtain measures of the students' ability to use the target structure in oral communication, arguably the best measure of acquisition. Carroll, Swain and Roberge (1992) investigated the effects of corrective feedback on learners' ability to distinguish French nouns ending in *–age* and *–ment*. They found that the treatment was effective with regard to the nouns actually taught but that it did not result in the learners' ability to generalize to new nouns. However, these studies, like more recent studies that have sought to teach specific grammatical features in a communicative context (e.g. Doughty and Varela 1998; Williams and Evans 1998), all involved planned form-focussed instruction that was intensive rather than incidental focus-on-form that is extensive.

It is, in fact, very difficult to investigate the effects of incidental focus-on-form on L2 as it is not possible to predict in advance which forms a teacher will focus on and thus impossible to establish whether students 'know' the forms prior to the lesson. A pre-test/ post-test study, then, is not feasible. Furthermore, focus-on-form is also necessarily *transitory,* so it cannot be expected that a brief (and probably single) focussing on a specific form will have any immediate effect. Of course, acquisition may be fostered by repeated focussing on a specific form over several lessons. The effects of incidental focus-on-form on acquisition are likely to be accumulative and gradual. Indeed, such is the theoretical rationale for focus-on-form. It is unlikely, then, that any measurable 'effect' will be evident from a single lesson while it will also be very difficult to obtain reliable data regarding which forms are focussed on over time. Lightbown and Spada's research, which involves post-hoc analyses of classroom process data over time, affords the most obvious way of studying the effects of focus-on-form but is necessarily time-consuming and laborious.

The Study

Research questions

The study addressed the following general research question:

> How did the participants focus on form during message-oriented
> exchanges in the communicative classroom?

Method

Teaching context

Two classes in a private English language school in Auckland were selected as the site for data collection. One of these classes was an intermediate class (Class One) and the other a pre-intermediate class (Class Two). Each class had a different teacher and 12 students, although not all the students were present in every lesson observed.

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The instruction was in two separate parts, divided by a break. In the first part, the teacher focused primarily on grammatical forms. The instruction in this part, therefore, centred on a focus on forms. In the second part, after the break, the instruction was primarily communicative in that there was no pre-determined linguistic focus, although there was a general concern to provide opportunities for the students to practice the structure taught in the first part of the lesson. The FFEs that were the focus of our study occurred in this second part of the lesson.

Participants

Each class consisted of 12 students, although attendance varied from day to day. In addition, the classes had open enrolment so some students left and new ones arrived during the course of the observations; however, the L1 composition of each class remained the same. In addition, the nationalities represented in the two classes were very similar with Class One consisting of 6 Japanese, 2 Koreans, 2 Swiss, 1 Thai and 1 Brazilian and Class Two consisting of 4 Japanese, 3 Koreans, 3 Swiss, 1 Taiwanese, and 1 Brazilian.

Teacher One had taught full-time at the language school for four and a half years. She had completed the CELTA course at the school and had started teaching upon passing the course. She was concurrently finishing a Diploma course offered by the school, and saw herself pursuing a career in ESL. Teacher Two had also completed the CELTA course and had been teaching part time at the language school for two years. Initially, she had seen teaching as a means of supporting other interests, but she had come to enjoy her work at the school and planned to remain indefinitely.

Data

The data comprised 14 hours of audio-recorded classroom talk from 10 ESL lessons (5 for each teacher). As previously noted, the recordings were all of lessons that occurred in the second part of a day's instruction (i.e. where the interaction was primarily message-focused). However, within these primarily communicative lessons, there was some explicit focus on forms. As a result, two hours of data were excluded from the analysis, leaving a total of 12 hours of message-oriented classroom discourse for analysis. (The remaining 12 hours were still evenly divided between the two classrooms.) In order to record whole class interaction as well as teacher interaction with individuals and small groups, a wireless, clip-on microphone was attached to the teacher in each class.

Identification of FF Es

The researcher who observed the lessons listened to the recordings in order to identify occasions where there was attention to linguistic form, i.e., grammar, vocabulary, spelling, discourse or pronunciation. Some of these sequences arose when one of the participants drew attention to a specific form (e.g. by asking a question about it) even though no linguistic problem had arisen in the discourse. Other sequences consisted of the participants attempts to address an actual or perceived linguistic problem. It should be noted that occasions where a problem arose that was not related to linguistic form, occasions where there was a linguistic error with no attempt to address it, and occasions where an individual self-corrected an error were not considered. The researcher established each point in the recording where the attention to linguistic form started and the point where it ended. The end point occurred when either the topic changed back to a focus on meaning or to a focus on a different linguistic form.

Each FFE was then transcribed. The researcher subsequently listened to the recordings on several further occasions to check that (1) all FFEs had been identified, (2) the beginnings and

endings of the FFEs had been correctly identified and (3) each FFE had been accurately transcribed. A broad transcription was used but pauses of any length were noted.

Analysis

Following identification and transcription of the FFEs, each FFE was repeatedly examined by a team of three researchers to establish a set of descriptive characteristics and categories to account for salient features. The main categories identified are described below.

Approach

In terms of the overall approach to focusing on form, the FFEs differed according to whether they were *responding FFEs* (RFFEs) or *initiating FFEs* (IFFEs). RFFEs are sequences which occur when a participant responds to an utterance produced by another participant that is perceived as problematic, either because its meaning is not clear or because it is seen as containing a linguistic error. RFFEs are therefore reactive. The research to date has addressed reactive focus on form and has paid little attention to proactive focus on form. The distinction is of potential importance for future research. Both approaches constitute ways of addressing gaps in the learners' knowledge system. However, they differ with regard to how this achieved. IFFEs typically supply learners with declarative and illustrative information about form. RFFEs have the potential to facilitate the kind of 'cognitive comparison' which some researchers have argued underlies the process of interlanguage restructuring (Tomosello and Herron 1988; Ellis 1994). There is an obvious need to establish the relative effects of these two approaches on acquisition.

Instigator

This refers to the person responsible for bringing about a focus on form. In the case of RFFEs, the person who responds to the utterance containing a perceived problem is the instigator. In the case of IFFEs, the person who initiates the focus on form by raising a linguistic topic is the instigator. In both IFFEs and RFFEs the instigator may be a student or the teacher. There is a sound psycholinguistic reason for examining who is responsible for instigating a focus on form. A number of studies (see Ellis 1998b) have suggested that when learners have the opportunity to initiate discourse, opportunities for acquisition may be enhanced. Slimani (1989, 1992) has shown that learners are more likely to report learning new items from a lesson if the items occurred in sequences involving student topicalisation.

Linguistic Focus

The FFEs varied according to the linguistic focus. The following aspects of language received attention:

1. *grammar* – e.g. determiners, prepositions and pronouns, word order, tense, verb morphology, auxiliaries and subject-verb agreement, plurals, negation, question formation.
2. *vocabulary* – the meaning of open class lexical items including single word items and idioms.
3. *spelling* – the orthographic form of words.
4. *discourse* – textual relations, such as text cohesion and coherence, and pragmatics such as the appropriate use of specific forms according to social context.
5. *pronunciation* – supra-segmental and segmental aspects of the phonological system.

Timing

This characteristic refers to when the participants start attending discoursally to the linguistic form. When the participants start attending in the discourse adjacent to production (e.g. following on

from production of an error in speaking) this is coded as 'immediate'. When the participants start attending after some intervening discourse (e.g. when an error is produced in writing and is only addressed subsequently) this is coded as 'delayed'. The distinction between immediate and delayed feedback is also of psycholinguistic interest. A recent review of the effects of corrective feedback on L2 learners' written compositions (Truscott 1996) indicated that there is little effect on learners' acquisition of the forms corrected (i.e., learners subsequent use of these forms remains unchanged). In contrast, a number of studies of immediate corrective feedback in the context of classroom interaction (e.g. Lightbown and Spada 1990) suggest that such feedback can lead to improved accuracy. Coding FFEs for whether the feedback is immediate or delayed allows for this potential differential effect to be investigated.

Source

The problem source can be of two kinds, both triggering a focus on form. In some cases, the problem arises because a participant fails to comprehend something that another participant has said. In such cases, the source is coded as 'message'. Long (1983) has coined the term 'negotiation of meaning' to refer to attempts by interlocutors to achieve understanding after a breakdown in understanding. It should be noted that such negotiation often arises because of some linguistic problem. However, this need not be the case, as on some occasions, negotiation of meaning occurs when the problem is one of content rather than language. In other cases, a focus on form arises when there is no problem in understanding what has been said. That is a participant (usually the teacher) chooses to pay attention to a linguistic error in another participant's utterance even if he/she has understood the utterance. In such cases, the problem source is 'code'. The term 'negotiation of form' can be used to describe such episodes.

   The distinction between FFEs involving the negotiation of meaning and the negotiation of form is of considerable theoretical importance. Long's Interaction Hypothesis, in both its original and more recent formulation (see Long 1983 and 1996), is predicated on the claim that attention to form promotes acquisition when it arises in the negotiation of meaning. However, recent work by Swain (2000) provides a theoretical case for attention to form in the context of language related episodes which are triggered by a concern for form. In other words, Swain claims that negotiation of form can also benefit acquisition. Clearly, there is a need to distinguish between interactions involving negotiating meaning and form in order to investigate their relative impact on acquisition.

   In many instances, the source of an FFE is clear, as the discoursal context makes it clear whether a participant is negotiating meaning or form. However, FFEs involving lexical problems are more ambiguous. It is often not clear whether a teacher, for example, has elected to focus on a specific word because she failed to understand the student's message or because she wishes to take the opportunity to teach that word. This is because the treatment of lexical items in FFEs typically involves addressing their meaning. In the present study, we adopted the 'negotiation of meaning' as the default position. That is, an FFE was coded as 'code' only when the discourse context made it clear that a participant had understood the problem utterance.

The Reliability of the System

In order to determine the reliability of the descriptive system, two of the researchers independently coded a subset of the data. Initially 67 episodes (15%) were chosen randomly from the entire data set. In the case of differences, the two researchers discussed the coding discrepancies in order to reach agreement. A further 57 episodes were then recoded by both researchers. Inter-rater reliability was .89 or higher for all the categories.

Results

Overall there were 448 FFEs in the 12 hours of lessons that we observed. This gives a rate of one FFE every 1.6 minutes. By way of comparison it can be noted that Lyster (1998) reports 558 responding FFEs in 1,100 minutes of immersion instruction, a rate of one FFE every 1.97 minutes. Lyster did not examine initiating FFEs. The rate observed in this study, then, can be considered comparable to that reported by Lyster. In both cases, the rate seems quite high. There were more FFEs in Class 2 (241) than in Class 1 (207).

Approach

Figures 2 and 3 below shows the proportion of responding and initiating FFEs overall and in the two classes separately. Overall, there was an almost equal number of both types (223 responding and 225 initiating). However, some differences were evident in the two classes, with Class 1 manifesting a majority of responding FFEs (52.2%) and Class 2 a majority of initiating FFEs (52.3%). It is notable however, that a substantial proportion of the FFEs were initiating. This suggests a notable lacuna in the research to date, as this has examined reactive focus on form almost exclusively. The results of this study suggest the need to attend more carefully to proactive focus on form.

Figure 2: Approach Overall

Figure 3: Approach by Class
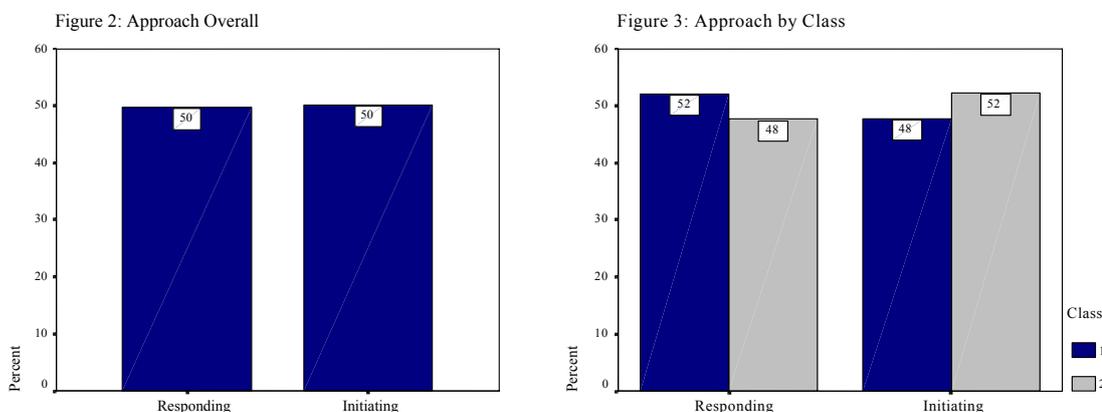
Instigator

It might be expected that the vast majority of proactive FFEs were teacher initiated. In fact, in the classrooms we investigated, this proved not to be the case (see Figure 4). Overall, the teacher initiated 268 FFEs and the students 180. Some differences were evident in the two classes (see Figure 5). In Class 1 the teacher initiated 62.3% whereas in Class 2 the teacher initiated somewhat less (57.7%). However, it is clear that in both classrooms the students were active in initiating FFEs.

Figure 4: Instigator Overall

Figure 5: Instigator by Class
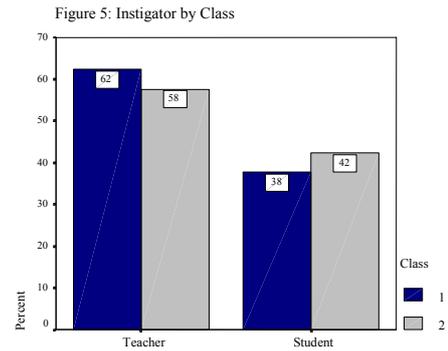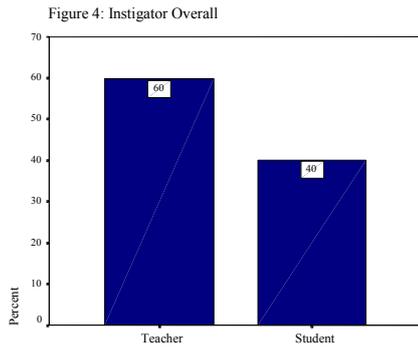
Linguistic Focus

The vast majority of the FFEs concerned grammar and vocabulary (see Figures 6 and 7). There was little difference between these two linguistic foci (Grammar 166 FFEs; Vocabulary 172 FFEs). The only other aspect of language to receive much attention was pronunication (77 FFEs). Spelling and discourse were largely ignored. There were some differences between the two classes. For example Class 1 attended more to grammar (40.6% of FFEs) and correspondingly less to vocabulary (36.2%) while Class 2 attended more to vocabulary (40.2%) and less to grammar (34%).

Figure 6: Linguistic Focus Overall

Figure 7: Linguistic Focus by Class
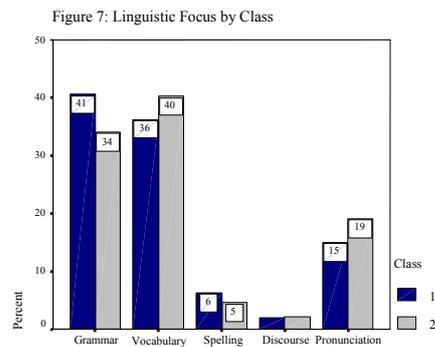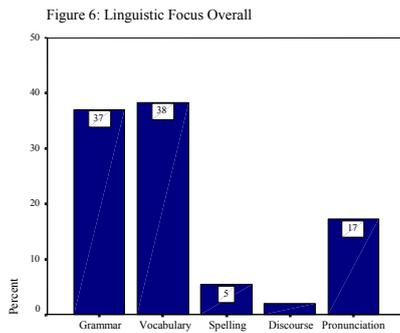
Timing

As might be expected given that 'focus on form' is a phenomenon of real-time teaching, nearly all the FFEs involved an immediate as opposed to a delayed treatment of focus on form (411 FFEs versus 37) – Figure 8. However, the two classes differed somewhat, with Class 1 accounting for 31 of the delayed FFEs (see Figure 9)

Figure 8: Timing Overall

Figure 9: Timing by Class
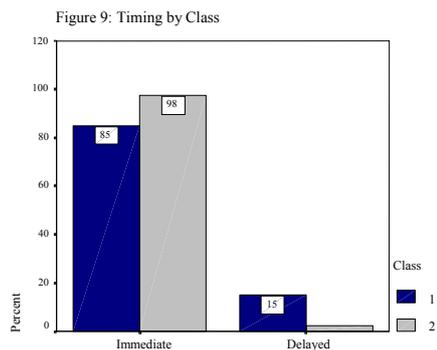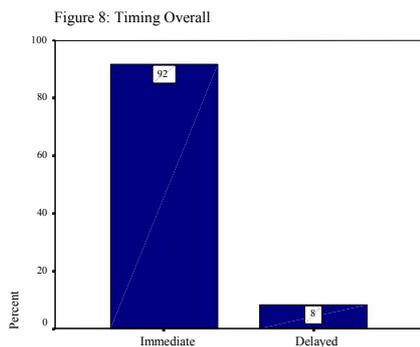
Source

A finding of considerable interest is that most of the FFEs were code- rather than message-oriented (see Figure 10). Only 113 (25.2%) of the FFEs were directed at attention to form in the context of negotiating meaning; 335 (74.8%) occurred when the participants were negotiating form. In other words, even though the classes were primarily concerned with a focus on meaning, the participants were happy to take 'time out' to focus quite explicitly on form, even when no problem of understanding had occurred. In this respect, the differences between the two classes were relatively small (see Figure 11).

Figure 10: Source Overall

Figure 11: Source by Class
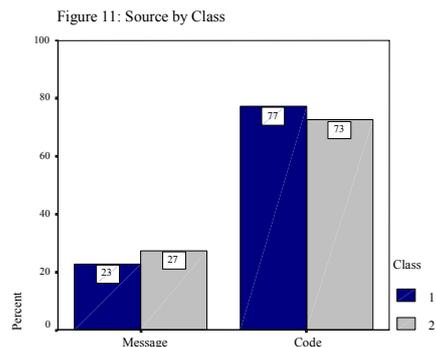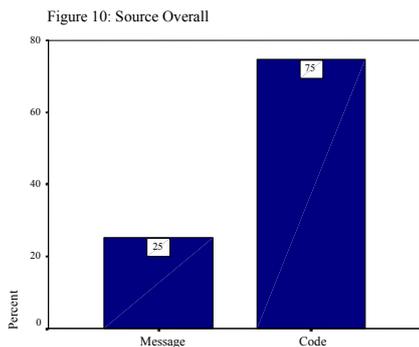
Types of FFE

We have already noted that there was a balance between responding and initiating FFEs. Figure 12 below shows the breakdown for the Responding FFEs, Student Initiated FFEs and Teacher-Initiated FFEs. Interesting, it reveals that of the initiating FFEs, most were student rather than teacher initiated (166 or 37.1 of total FFEs as opposed to 59 or 13.2%). These results bear out the observation made earlier than in these particular classrooms, the students were not hesitant to raise linguistic problems. The teachers' contribution to focus on form, in contrast, was primarily through Responding FFEs. Again, the differences between the two classes with regard to Types of FFEs were small (see Figure 13).

Figure 12: FFE Type Overall

Figure 13: FFE Type by Class
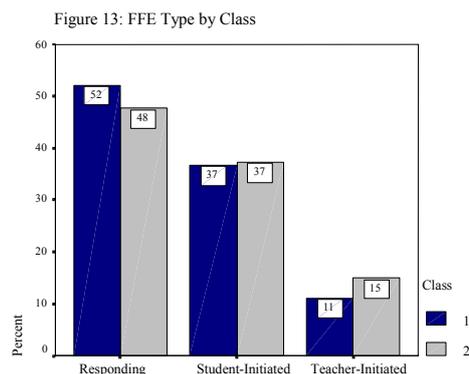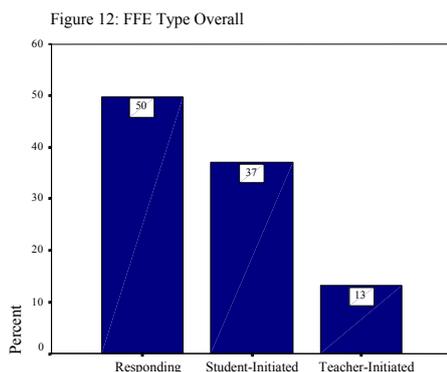
Summary

What general picture of how focus on form was accomplished in the two classrooms we studied do these results provide? First, we are struck by the sheer amount of attention to form that occurred in lessons that purported to be 'communicative' and, from our observations, were so. Second, it is clear that in these classes, a focus on form was not just a reactive phenomenon; it was also notably proactive. Third, it is clear that the students played a significant role in initiating a focus on form, with the teacher more evident in Responding FFEs. Fourth, in these classes, 'form' meant primarily 'grammar' and 'vocabulary'; other aspects of language did not get much of a look in. Fifth, much of the focus on form that arose was not triggered by a problem in communication but rather by a problem in using English correctly. That is to say, although the lessons were 'communicative', this did not prevent the participants paying regular attention to language for its own sake.

Future research

Future research can usefully address these questions:

1. To what extent do teachers' beliefs about language, language learning and language teaching impact on the quantity and quality of the focus on form that occurs in their classrooms?
2. To what extent do learners differ in their preparedness to initiate and to respond to a focus on form and what can explain the differences?
3. To what extent does the composition of a class affect focus on form? For example, in mixed classes of language learners and native speakers, is a focus on form more likely to occur in classes with larger numbers of learners?
4. What affect does the nature of the communicative activity (i.e. the kind of task) have on opportunities to engage in focus on form?
5. What effect does the stage of a lesson have on opportunities for a focus on form?
6. What factors influence students' successful uptake of a focus on form?
7. What effect does teacher training/education have on teachers' preparedness and ability to provide a focus on form?

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