The Effectiveness of Focus on Form on Learning English

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Abstract. The teaching method “focus on form” has become a hot topic in recent years. There are lots of related researches abroad, but in China most researches are about the introduction to the theories. This empirical study is to check the effectiveness of focus on form on learning English simple past tense in primary school. The data analyzed by SPSS 14.0 show that focus on form is feasible in Chinese EFL context, which conclude pedagogical implications for the practice of this approach in China and shed light on the future studies.

Introduction

Long(1991) proposed “focus on form” approach (FonF), which means that “ overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication”. According to Long, the main benefit of such an instruction option is that it still maintains communication as the centre of the class, at the same time it also addresses grammar, but on a need-to-know basis. That is to say, students do receive formal instruction, but this kind of instruction is learner-based and spontaneous not planned. Obviously, the “incidental focus on form” is not practical in real classroom teaching. Other researchers (Doughty & Williams 1998; Ellis 2001) point out that focus on form can be predetermined, and teachers can use some techniques (for example, input flooding) to attract learners’ attention in meaning-focused class, thus the concept of focus on form has been expanded.

Ever since 1990s, this new type of “focus on form instruction” which seeks to integrate form instruction in meaning-focused classroom teaching has received considerable amount of attention. A number of experiments are carried out to test the effect of “focus on form”, most of which deal with phonological, lexical and grammatical forms of different target languages. There is now convincing evidence that “focus on form” which is meaning-centered without ignoring language forms aids acquisition. In China, however, the theory and practice of “focus on form” is just introduced by SLA and foreign language researchers (Qiang Gao, 2006; Qiong Lin, 2008), and the empirical studies on the effect of focus on form are only reported in several unpublished postgraduate papers. The current study aims to enrich quasi-experimental studies of “focus on form” in Chinese EFL context, and to find out how SLA research could inform foreign language teaching in China.

The present study adopts learners of primary six as subjects, and English simple past as target form in order to test the immediate effect of focus on form on the learning of English simple past, which have pedagogical implications for English learning in Chinese EFL context.

Research Design

Researchers (Long &Robinson, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1999, Ellis, 2001) think the ideal way to perform focus on form in classroom setting is the implementation of form-focused communicative task and negative feedback. Following the construct of focus on form and SLA research, four criteria are put forward for the design of form-focused communicative task: 1) Learners can notice the target form
when perform the tasks; 2) Attention to the target form should take place within a meaningful context; 3) The task (activity) should activate learners’ interaction; 4) The task should be easy to carry out in the actual classroom setting. Following the four criteria, the present study mainly adopts the form-focused task (activity), which provides a context in which learners’ grammatical competence is developed through the productive use of grammar. In the activity, the teacher reads a short text twice at normal speed to learners. When the text is read the second time, the learners jot down as much information as they can and afterwards they pool their resources to reconstruct the text in collaboration. Then learners compare the reconstructed text with the original version to notice the differences between their output and the target language. Swain (1985, 145) observes that “students gain insights into their own linguistic shortcomings and develop strategies for solving them by working through them with a partner.”

The present study focuses its investigation on the effect of focus on form in learning English simple past tense in primary school, and tries to find some implications for EFL in classroom teaching in China. The study poses the following research questions: 1) Do learners receiving focus on form outperform learners receiving focus on meaning in the production of English simple past of regular verbs? 2) Do learners receiving focus on form outperform learners receiving focus on meaning in the production of English simple past of irregular verbs? In order to test the effect of focus on form in Chinese classroom setting, a pretest-posttest control group design was conducted in this study. Data collected from all the tests are analyzed by SPSS 14.0.

**Pretest** Prior to the instructional treatment, pretests were used to both experiment group (40 students) and control group (40 students) to fix the research problem and to make sure there were no obvious differences between their proficiency in using English simple past tense.

In the pretest, all subjects were required to complete a grammar judgment test with 25 sentences. 2 points went to every sentence and total score was 50 points. The scores of the two groups obtained in the test were compared with Independent-Samples t-test and the results are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EG</td>
<td>24.79</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>3.323</td>
<td>.417</td>
<td>.326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>25.31</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: EG=experiment of group; CG=control group

Table 1 shows that Sig. is .326 which is much greater than 0.05. It is indicated that there is no significant difference of proficiency between EG and CG on the pretest. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that the two groups are at a similar level in terms of their proficiency of using the target forms before the instructional treatment. From Table 1 we can get the mean scores of EG and CG with 24.79 and 25.31 respectively. The result suggests that the subjects have no clear understanding of the use of the target form. Thus it is necessary to select English Simple Past Tense as target forms for this study.

**Writing Posttests** Writing posttests were implemented after 5 weeks’ instructional treatment. The data of EG and CG obtained in the test are compared with x² test and the results are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Right Production</th>
<th>Wrong Production</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EG</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>1078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>1062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1408</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>2140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Table 2, it clearly can be seen that the total written production of English simple past of verbs of EG is 1078, among which the right production is 768 and the wrong production is 310. The total written production of English simple past of verbs of CG is 1062, in which the right production is 640, and the wrong production is 422. It also shows that $x^2$ is 28.36, which is much larger than critical value 3.84. Therefore, the result indicates that there is a significant difference of the written production of English simple past of verbs between EG and CG. This result means that students who receive focus on form instruction have greater gains in accurate written production than those who receive focus on meaning instruction.

The conclusion drawn from the above table demonstrates the advantage of focus on form instruction over focus on meaning instruction from a broad perspective, the following two parts will deal with the written production of English simple past of regular verbs and irregular verbs respectively.

**Written Production of English Simple Past of Regular Verbs.** The results of written production of English simple past of regular verbs are shown in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Right Production</th>
<th>Wrong Production</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EG</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>1010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance=0.05 $x^2=37.41$

Table 3 shows the total written production of English simple past of regular verbs of EG is 476, among which the right production is 366, and the wrong production is 110. The total written production of English simple past of regular verbs of CG is 534, in which the right production is 304, and the wrong production is 230. It also shows $x^2$ is 37.41, which is much larger than the critical value 3.84. This figure indicates that there is a significant difference between EG and CG in the written production of English simple past of regular verbs. The results of Table 3 also suggests that students receiving focus on form instruction outperform students receiving focus on meaning instruction with respect to the accurate written production of English simple past of regular verbs.

**Written Production of English Simple Past of Irregular Verbs.** The above section shows the effectiveness of focus on form instruction in terms of written production of regular verbs. The following table will present the result of written production of English simple past of irregular verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Right Production</th>
<th>Wrong Production</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EG</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>1130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance=0.05 $x^2=2.46$

From the above table, it can be obtained that the total written production of English simple past of irregular verbs of EG is 602, among which the wrong production is 200. The total written production of English simple past of irregular verbs of CG is 528, in which the wrong production is 192. $x^2$ is smaller than the critical value 3.84($x^2=2.46$), which indicates that there is no significant difference between the two groups in the written production of English simple past of irregular verbs. The result suggests students who receive focus on form instruction don’t show their advantage over those who receive focus on meaning instruction in the accurate written production of irregular verbs.
Discussion As the experiment results are presented, the explanations of the performance of participants will be discussed in the following.

Firstly, from Table 2, it can be seen that students receiving focus on form instruction outperform students receiving focus on meaning instruction in a whole, and the accuracy of EG is greater than that of CG. Before the instructional treatment, the pretest showed there was no significant proficient difference between two groups. Obviously, students’ outperformance is realized by focus on form instruction. During instructional treatment, students of EG are asked to take form-focused communicative tasks, which can raise students’ awareness of the target form. Besides, explicit or implicit corrective feedback is also provided, which help students notice and understand the target structure and assimilate it into their interlanguage system. Therefore, during the written output, students can notice the target form instantly, and trigger the simple past of verbs in time. However, focus on meaning ignore error correction in the output, which doesn’t provide the conditions for students of CG to notice the target forms, not mention process and intake, thus the written and oral production of CG is less accurate than that of EG.

Secondly, with regard to the learning of English simple past of regular verbs, students receiving focus on form instruction results in greater success than students receiving focus on meaning instruction in written production. The explanations for the superior performance of the participants in EG are: they are able to notice the target form in the input via the practice of focus on form (form-focused communicative tasks and corrective feedback (especially explicit corrective feedback), then they process the target form and convert it into intake. It should be noticed that the rules of regular verbs are very simple, which can be easily understand. The simplicity of the inflection of the target forms makes learners think out the correct forms in a short time during the meaning expression.

Thirdly, with respect to the learning of English simple past of irregular verbs, an unexpected finding emerged in the result. There is no significant difference between EG and CG in written production of simple past of irregular verbs, which indicates that focus on form instruction didn’t show its advantage over focus on meaning instruction. The reason for the result is due to the complexity of rules of simple past of irregular verbs. The rules of simple past of irregular verbs are different one by one, which is very difficult for learners to process and assimilate them into their interlanguage system even though they can notice the target form in the input. However, although focus on form doesn’t provide positive results in the respect of production of simple past of irregular verbs, that doesn’t mean focus on form doesn’t function at all. The researcher investigated the errors made by the students of EG, there is still an extra finding. Students of EG sometimes made errors like the following: “I readed books yesterday”, “I eated hamburgers last Sunday”, and “I dranked orange juice.” This kind of errors indicates that students of EG have the awareness that they should use simple past of verbs to describe actions happening in the past, but because of the complexity of simple past of irregular verbs, students of EG fail to use the correct forms. This kind of errors doesn’t emerge in the production of students of CG. Most of errors made by students of CG are using present simple verbs when the simple past of verbs are necessary, such as “I eat hamburgers yesterday”. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn: notice can’t guarantee intake the target structure, especially the complex ones.

Finally, from Table 3 we can see that students of EG outperform students of CG in the production of simple past of regular verbs. But students of EG don’t perform perfectly, they also make some errors. The explanations for the imperfect performance of EG are: (1) they were not ready to learn the target structure, so they failed to notice the target form in the input; (2) they really noticed the target structure in the input, but failed to integrate it into their interlanguage system because noticing in itself is not a sufficient condition for input to become intake; (3) they partially noticed the target structure and assimilated it into their interlanguage system before fully understanding its semantic/discoursal and syntactic features. This partial noticing of one mental representation of a particular structure does not lead to full integration.
Based on the results of the experiment and the discussion of them, the present study gains the following major findings:

(1) Students receiving Focus on form outperform students receiving focus on meaning with respect to the immediate production of English simple past of regular verbs, demonstrating focus on form instruction contributes to promoting language accuracy.

(2) The performance of students receiving Focus on form doesn’t have significant difference with students receiving focus on meaning with regard to the immediate production of English simple past of regular verbs, indicating that focus on form is more beneficial to the learning of simple target structure.

Summary

Although the input which is exposed to learners in EFL context is limited, and learners mainly receive comprehensible input from classroom, the form-focused communicative tasks and corrective feedback can help learners in EFL context raise consciousness of target form, make students process and assimilate it into their interlanguage system. Thus, focus on form is feasible in EFL context in China. For focus on meaning instruction, teachers usually avoid correcting students’ errors for fear that they interrupt meaning expression. For focus on form instruction, corrective feedback happens if necessary. But the teacher needs to notice what kind of errors should be corrected, and how to correct them (explicitly or implicitly). This depends on many variables such as the age of students, the proficiency level of learners, and complexity of the target form. According to the result of the present study, for the production of irregular verbs, there is no significant difference between EG and CG, but for the production of regular verbs, focus on form instruction shows its great advantage over focus on meaning instruction.

While the overall instructional approach was effective in this study, there are still some limitations. Future studies need to test the effectiveness of focus on form with subjects of different ages and proficient levels, and larger sample should be involved; moreover, other linguistic features should be selected as target form to see if focus on form has an equal positive impact in EFL context in China.

Besides, as the development of linguistics, psychology and cognitive linguistics, more and more researchers begin to probe into other respects of focus on form in EFL context, such as the effectiveness of incidental focus on form, its frequency in EFL class, and who initiate more in EFL class (the teacher or students).

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References


