The Effect of Planned vs. Unplanned Form-Focused Strategies on L2 Learners' Accuracy in Oral Task Performance

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Abstract

One of the most controversial issues in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) for the past two decades concerns the role of conscious and unconscious processes in second language learning. A number of researchers believe that focusing on the target language (TL) system is necessary if learners are to produce language forms. However, what remains missing in the literature of focus on form is the effect of the degree of noticing and attention (planned and unplanned) on EFL learners' oral accuracy. Thus, the main purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of planned and unplanned focus on form on EFL learners' oral performance. To this end, 60 learners of English at pre-intermediate level were chosen randomly as the participants of the study and assigned into three groups of planned, unplanned, and control. They received 20 sessions of treatments on different kinds of instructions. A pictorial narrative task was employed to collect oral data from the participants. The collected oral data was quantified in terms of the accuracy measure. Independent Samples T-test and ANOVA were employed as the statistical means of analysis. The results of the study revealed differences between the performances of three groups in terms of the accuracy in oral narrative task. The study might carry some pedagogical implications for second language teachers, SLA researchers, teacher education, and task designers.

Keywords: Degree of attention and noticing, Planned/intensive focus on form, Unplanned/ extensive focus on form, Focus on forms, Accuracy, Task-based syllabus.

INTRODUCTION

Many SLA researchers (Schmidt, 2001; Rahimpour, 2001; Fahim and Hashemzadeh, 2011; Farahani and Sarkhosh, 2012; Hejazi, 2012; Khatib and Bagherkazemni, 2012) believe that focusing on target language system is necessary if learners are to produce language forms correctly. This area of research has become one of the burgeoning and controversial areas of investigation in SLA. Pour Hosseini and Ahmadi (2011) argue that consciousness and noticing is a core in SLA and its role in SLA is of great importance and should specifically be considered if we are to make progress in understanding how acquisition of second language takes place. Besides, mastering the grammar of SL/FL and being able to correctly implement this knowledge is a challenging and demanding task to do. This issue is the reason for many ESL/EFL students to find it difficult to express themselves accurately in speech and writing. Recently, there has been a call for an integration of focus on forms and focus on meaning in the second language classroom that is focus on form. Long (1991: 45-46) suggested that one way to encourage accuracy is through the concept of focus on form that targets students’ accuracy. Sheen (2007) argued that focus on form and focus on forms revolve around the degree to which teachers need to direct learners' attention to understanding grammar while retaining a focus on the need to communicate.

The effect of the degree of attention to language forms is one of the controversial issues in SLA which according to Ellis (2008) needs further investigations. Thus, the main purpose of the present study is to investigate the on effect of planned and unplanned form-focused strategies
Table 1. Types of form-focused instructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Syllabus</th>
<th>Primary Focus</th>
<th>Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Forms</td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Intensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned FOF</td>
<td>Task-based</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Intensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidental FOF</td>
<td>Task-based</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table2. The result of descriptive statistical for the comparing means of planned and unplanned groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unplanned oral accuracy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.16512</td>
<td>0.03692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>planned oral accuracy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.11743</td>
<td>0.02626</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EFL learners’ oral accuracy.

Literature Review

In recent years Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) has achieved great momentum in SLA literature in the light of classroom research that advocates the need for instructional interventions to help learners gain higher level of proficiency and accuracy in L2 (Doughty and Williams, 1998 a; Doughty, 2001; Long and Robinson, 1998; Norris and Ortega, 2001; Ellis, 2003,2008; Rahimpour and Farrokhi, 2011; Rahimpour and Salimi, 2010; Gu, 2007; Rahimpour, 2001; Rahimpour and Maghsoudpour, 2011; Nassaji and Fotos, 2004; Farrokhi and Sattarpour, 2011; Schmidt, 1991, 2001).

Long (1983) defines focus on form as follows:

Focus on form… actually draws learner’s attention to linguistic elements, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overwriting focus is on meaning or communication (Long, 1983, p.456).

Long and Robinson (1998) defines focus on form in an operational way as follows:

Focus on Form often consists of occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher or one or more students triggered by perceived problem with comprehension or production (Long and Robinson, 1998, P: 23).

Long and Robinson (2000), defined Focus on forms as a traditional approach in which teacher presents learners with pre-selected and sequenced linguistic items. Farrokhi and Rahimpour (2011) categorized Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) into three types of FOFs and FOF which is divided into incidental and planned types. Planned type involves the use of communicative tasks designed to elicit pre-selected forms in a meaning-focused context. In incidental focus on form attention is paid to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in the course of instruction. This type of instruction aims at eliciting greater samples of the language, rather than specific forms. Ellis, Basturkman, and Loewens' study (2002) involves the use of unfocused communicative tasks. This dichotomy according Ellis et al (2002) is presented in table 1

Ellis et al (2002) defines focus on forms as the pre-selection of linguistic features based on structural syllabus in which a primary focus is on language forms and the features are treated in systematic, intensive manner. While, in focus on form the primary focus is on meaning and both types of it share the use of task-based syllabus in which the unit of analysis is task as opposed to language forms and structures in focus on forms. However, the way of distribution and treatment of linguistic features in planned and incidental focus on form is different. Lightbown and Spada (1990) in support of form-focused instruction in task-based syllabus argued:

Accuracy, fluency and overall communicative skills are probably best developed through instruction that is primarily meaning based but in which guidance is provided through timely form-focused activities and correction in context (Lightbown and Spada, 1990 : 443).

Skehan (1996) in support of the relationship between consciousness and form-focused instruction suggests:

Learners benefit from some type of explicit instruction prior to the activity to help them activate their knowledge of TL structures and facilitate awareness of the forms they will encounter. (Skehan, 1996:46).

Skehan (1996) suggests that focus on form activates the learners’ previous knowledge and assists them to link between declarative knowledge and communicative use.
Table 3. Independent Samples T-test for the means of planned and unplanned groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>T-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>1.992</td>
<td>0.166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assumed</td>
<td>-0.883</td>
<td>34.305</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the means of three groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval for Mean</th>
<th>Minimun</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Bound</td>
<td>Upper Bound</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Control Oral Task</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.4150</td>
<td>.15313</td>
<td>.03424</td>
<td>.3433 - .4867</td>
<td>.20 - .70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Unplanned Oral Task</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.4900</td>
<td>.16512</td>
<td>.03692</td>
<td>.4127 - .5673</td>
<td>.20 - .80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Planned Oral Task</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.5300</td>
<td>.11743</td>
<td>.02626</td>
<td>.4750 - .5850</td>
<td>.40 - .80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>.4783</td>
<td>.15193</td>
<td>.01961</td>
<td>.4391 - .5176</td>
<td>.20 - .80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. The results of ANOVA for the means of three groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>3.171</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>1.225</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.362</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Multiple Comparisons (Post Hoc) for the three groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) Grouping</th>
<th>(J) Grouping</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Task</td>
<td>Control Oral</td>
<td>- .07500</td>
<td>.04637</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>-.1679 - .0179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Unplanned Oral Task</td>
<td>Accuracy Planned Oral Task</td>
<td>-.11500*</td>
<td>.04637</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>-.2079 - -.0221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Control Oral Task</td>
<td>Accuracy Planned Oral Task</td>
<td>.07500</td>
<td>.04637</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>-.0179 - .1679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Planned Oral Task</td>
<td>Accuracy Planned Oral Task</td>
<td>-.04000</td>
<td>.04637</td>
<td>.392</td>
<td>-.1329 - .0529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Task</td>
<td>Planned Oral</td>
<td>.11500*</td>
<td>.04637</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.0221 - .2079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy Control Oral Task</td>
<td>Accuracy Planned Oral Task</td>
<td>.04000</td>
<td>.04637</td>
<td>.392</td>
<td>-.0529 - .1329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of the form structure. According to this view, developing prior familiarity with the nature of the structure they are to notice can decrease the diversion of attention resources away from the processing the enhanced input during the activity itself. Furthermore, after awareness of grammatical structures has been developed through
formal instruction, many learners tend to notice the target structures in subsequent communicative input which leads to more accuracy (Fotos, 1993; Schmidt, 1990). There has been a plethora of research investigating the effectiveness of form-focused instruction on L2 development (Doughty and Williams, 1998; Doughty, 2001; Long and Robinson, 1998; Norris and Ortega, 2001; Ellis, 2003, 2008; Rahimpour and Farrokhi, 2011; Rahimpour and Salimi, 2010; Gu, 2007; Rahimpour, 2001; Rahimpour and Maghsoudpour, 2011; Nassaji and Fotos, 2004; Farrokhi and Sattarpour, 2011; Schmidt, 1991, 2001). However, Hyland and Hyland (2006) and Ellis (2008:1) argue that despite all the research, there are still no clear answers to the questions researchers have addressed concerning the role of corrective feedback.

While feedback is a central aspect of L2 program across the world, the research literature has not been equivocally positive about its role in L2 development, and teachers often have a sense they are not making use of its full potentials (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 83).

In a typology offered by Ellis (2008: 2) it seems to be a gap in the literature of SLA regarding the effect of the degree of noticing and attention on foreign language learners' oral and written accuracy. The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of planned and unplanned focus on form strategies on L2 learners' oral accuracy. Thus, on the basis of the above literature review the following research question and hypotheses were addressed:

**Research Question and Hypotheses:**

**RQ:** What are the effects planned and unplanned focuses on form strategies on L2 learners' oral accuracy?

**H0:** There isn't any significant difference between type of focus on form strategies (planned vs. unplanned) and L2 learners' oral accuracy.

**H1:** Learners receiving planned focus on form strategy
will outperform learners receiving unplanned focus on form strategy in terms of accuracy.

**H2:** There are significant differences between the accuracy of planned, unplanned, and control groups.

### Methodology

#### Participants

Sixty pre-intermediate female learners of English affiliated to Iran National Language Institute in West Azerbaijan, Miandoab City, Iran were selected as the participants of the study. They were chosen randomly and divided into three groups of planned, unplanned, and control on the basis of their performance on OPT (2004).

#### Procedure and data collection

The unplanned group of learners received extensive correct feedback in the form recast on their erroneous utterances within communication on range of grammatical, phonological and lexical errors. The planned group received feedback from the teacher for the pre-selected language forms which was past tense. They received instruction for one semester (20 sessions). The control group received no treatment on their erroneous utterances and it was entirely meaning-oriented instruction. A pictorial oral narrative task was used as a means of data collection from the participants and the collected oral data was transcribed and measured in terms of accuracy measure introduced by Ellis (2003) which was error-free T-units per T-unit.

#### Data analysis and results

The quantified data of orally reordered data were fed into SPSS software (Version 16). T-test was employed as the statistical means of analysis for comparing the means of 2 groups in narrative task. Table 2 shows the result of descriptive statistics for the accuracy of planned and unplanned groups in oral task. According to the table, planned group produced more accurate oral language than the unplanned group. Independent Samples T-test was employed as the statistical means of analysis for comparing means of two groups. According to this table, there was no significant difference between the accuracy of two groups on oral task. Table 3 shows the results very vividly (0.38 > 0.05).

In order to compare the means of the three groups ANOVA was employed to test the second hypothesis. Table 4 shows the result of descriptive statistics for comparing means of three groups.

Figure 2 shows the mean differences of the three groups in terms of accuracy. According to the figure, both planned and unplanned groups produced more accurate language than the control group.

Table 5 also presents the result of the ANOVA for comparing means of three groups. The result shows that there is a trend toward significance among the performance of three groups. A Post Hoc LSD test was employed for multiple comparisons of the groups. Table 6 shows the result of analysis. According to table 6, there was significant difference between the performance of planned group and the control one in oral task production.

### Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of planned and unplanned focus on form strategies on L2 learners' oral accuracy. Considering the results of statistical analysis (Table 3) for the effect of planned and unplanned focus on form on L2 learners' oral accuracy in oral narrative task, it was revealed that the two groups' performance was not statistically significant, although the mean of accuracy of planned group was higher than unplanned one. The findings of the study are in line with Fahim and Hashemzadeh (2011) who found that providing feedback on mixed patterns vs. separate patterns is much more effective. However, the findings of the study ran against the studies like Farahani and Sarkhosh (2012), Hejazi (2012), and Khatib and Bagherkazenmi (2012) who found that planned form-focused instruction was more effective than unplanned one. This means that the treatment was effective.

Considering the second hypothesis and the result of ANOVA (Table 6), there was a trend toward significance among the performances of control, planned, and unplanned groups in terms of oral accuracy. The result of Post Hoc LSD test revealed significant statistical differences between the accuracy of planned and control group. Comparing the means of three groups revealed that learners who received planned form-focused instruction outperformed others. It was proved that drawing learners’ attention repeatedly to the same linguistic feature would lead to more accuracy. This high rate in accuracy can be attributed to the fact that the more frequent, repeated, planned, and intensive the focus on form, the deeper the processing of target language feature takes place. According to table 3 and figure 2, regarding the means of three groups, it was revealed that both types of form-focused strategies led to more accurate language than control group. However, the planned type of form-focused strategy was the most effective.
Pedagogical implications

This study has some pedagogical implications for language teachers, educators, SLA researcher, and task and syllabus designers. Accuracy is as important as fluency and complexity for appropriate communication. Therefore, task designers should consider some role for focus on form in designing tasks specifically in EFL contexts. Language teachers and educators also need to consider ways of involving students more fully in the process of using feedback in order to enhance its potential benefits (Hyland, 2010). Consciousness provides an opportunity to unite useful concept from cognitive psychology. This point should be taken into account by SLA researchers to relate feedback to SLA theories. Teacher training programs could also work to account by SLA researchers to relate feedback to SLA theories. Teacher training programs could also work to raise teachers' awareness of the different feedback sources and modes of delivery available to them and possible ways of combining them to make an effective support system.

References