

## The Kinds of Forms Learners Attend to During Focus on Form Instruction: A Description of an Advanced ESL Writing Class

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**Keywords:** Focus on form instruction, grammar instruction, group work, English as a second language, English as a foreign language, vocabulary learning

### Abstract

*Many studies have attempted to exam the efficacy of focus on form instruction. However, few studies have described focus on form instruction as defined by Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998). Such a description is necessary in order for EFL/ESL instructors and curriculum designers to discover whether or not focus on form instruction can address the types of forms their students need to learn. Thus, the purpose of the following study was to describe the types of forms that learners attend to when focus on form instruction is used. Participants were 19 international students studying in an advanced ESL writing class in a large United States university. The majority of forms they attended to were lexical in nature, of which most involved the meanings of words. A discussion of the efficacy of focus on form instruction concludes that focus on form instruction may not be valuable for L2 grammatical growth, yet offers opportunities for lexical growth, especially with advanced learners.*

### Focus on Form Instruction

#### Theoretical and Practical Bases

In terms of how to teach grammar, Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) feel that the world of foreign/second language teaching methodology has often found itself endorsing extreme positions. On the one hand, form-centered approaches such as Grammar-Translation and the Audiolingual Method were strictly adhered to until the 1970s. On the other hand, the highly communicative framework seen in instructional innovations such as the Natural Approach (Terrell and Krashen, 1983) dominated textbooks for most of the 1980s. In the 1990s, however, an alternative to both extremes arose in the shape of *focus on form instruction* (Long, 1991; Long and Robinson, 1998).

Long (1991) originally coined focus on form instruction as a term referring to the intermittent, temporary, and explicit oral concentration by teachers and students on problematic grammatical—as well as lexical— items during communicative interaction. The term was later advanced by Long and Robinson (1998) to comprise more specific concepts such as ‘focal attentional resources’ and ‘linguistic code features’: “Focus on form refers to how focal attentional resources are allocated...Focus on form consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features—by the teacher and/or more students—triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production” (p. 23). In focus on form instruction, the syllabus remains communicative, with no preplanned L2 forms to be learned in any specific lesson or in any special order. However, when a form is perceived to be problematic, the teacher and/or other learners may address it explicitly in a variety of ways, such as through direct error correction, rule explanation, modeling, and drilling, to name a few. An example of such a mode of instruction would involve group work by advanced ESL students in a university writing class. While collectively writing a small group essay, one student makes an error with the third-person singular while explaining a concept and/or idea. His/her peer(s) elects to directly correct the error and reminds her of the rule governing subject-verb agreement. The learner who originally made the error may then elect to correctly repeat the recasted form, which is known as *uptake*, (Lyster and Ranta, 1997) or negotiate the form’s meaning and/or use with their interlocutor(s). Alternatively, a teacher may be asking students general comprehension questions to the whole classroom. A student misuses a vocabulary term, and the teacher decides to immediately correct the error, explain why the student made the error, and model its correct usage.

This instructional development--focus on form instruction--has arisen for two principle reasons, as noted by Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001). First of all, there was a need to balance the rote, form-centered, and generally non-communicative type of instruction seen in traditional methods with communicative approaches. While focus on form instruction leans more towards the latter due to its core emphasis on authentic communication, it validates the occasional incorporation of non-communicative elements during instruction due to the fact that teachers’ experiences have revealed that repetition, drilling, and error correction can aid in learning. A second reason why focus on form arose is due to Swain’s (1995) contention that while receiving ‘comprehensible input’ (Krashen, 1985) is beneficial to L2 acquisition, learners also need to use forms correctly—difficult ones, in particular—in order to acquire them. According to Swain (1995), when output is forced, learners must explicitly analyze forms, which will not only expose their errors that others may correct, but will also help them automatize particularly difficult forms. Focus on form instruction encourages students to use language not only in order to practice and automatize structures, but also so that the teacher, as well as other learners, may be able to identify learners’ errors and form-based difficulties in order to help learners overcome them.

### **Conceptual and Classroom Difficulties**

While focus on form instruction has been a much discussed instructional innovation (DeKeyser, 1998; Doughty and Verela, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Lightbown, 1998), it contains

several conceptual and practical constraints (see Sheen 2000, 2003 for more extensive reviews of constraints associated with focus on form instruction). Perhaps the greatest drawback of focus on form instruction is that while it has been extensively studied in experimental and quasi-experimental research, little research has been done in order to describe how learners focus on form using Long (1991) and Long and Robinson's (1998) original conception of the term—i.e., form should be attended to on a need-to-know basis in a spontaneous manner, forms to focus on should not be pre-planned and sequentially presented, and forms should be attended to within meaning-driven situations. As previously noted (Poole, 2004, 2005), curriculum designers and teachers cannot reasonably estimate whether or not focus on form instruction will help their students' L2 grammatical and lexical development without such a description. Williams' (1999) study of focus on form instruction in group work stands out among the few that have attempted to describe Long (1991) and Long and Robinson's (1998) conception of focus on form instruction.

Among other things, Williams' study (1999) illustrated the types of forms to which learners attended. The participants, who were eight ESL students studying at an English language institute housed in a large North American university, were put into one of four pairs depending on their proficiency level, which ranged from upper-level beginners to those almost ready for regular undergraduate academic coursework. Williams (1999) tape-recorded students for 45-minute intervals for an eight-week period during which they engaged in a variety of communicative activities.

Focus on form instruction was conceptualized by Williams (1999) through Swain's (1998) and Swain and Lapkin's (1995) notion of language-related episodes (LREs). Specifically, LREs involve "...discourse in which the learners talk or ask about language, or question, explicitly or implicitly, their own language use or that of others. Language use might include the meaning, spelling, or pronunciation of a word, the choice of grammatical inflection, word order, and so on" (Williams, 1999, p. 595). According to Williams, the emergence of an LRE indicated that learners had focused on form.

Williams (1999) identified five kinds of LREs discovered in learners' discourse: learner-initiated requests to other learners; learner-initiated requests to the teacher; metatalk; negotiation; and other correction. The first, learner-initiated requests to other learners, are direct questions from one learner to another. Learner-initiated questions to the teacher are similar to learner-initiated requests to other learners, yet differ in that questions are directed to teachers instead of peers. The next type of LRE, metatalk, concerns two or more learners focusing on a particular form in order to arrive at a shared understanding of some concept larger than the actual form itself. Negotiation differs from metatalk precisely in that discussion is aimed at clarifying communicative difficulties caused by the misunderstanding of a grammatical or lexical form. Lastly, other correction is a process by which another learner or the teacher perceives an error and proceeds to correct it, yet does so without solicitation from the learner who committed the error.

The results showed that most LREs were concerned with vocabulary (80%) rather than with grammar (20%). Since most LREs were lexically based, most of the content of LREs had to do with the meanings and forms of words. In the advanced group, definitions (62%), pronunciation (26%), word form (8%), and preposition choice (4%) were the foci of lexically based LREs. In grammatically-based LREs, the advanced group most frequently focused on tense choice (37.5%), followed by word order (15.5%), articles (15.5%), tense form (10.5%), agreement (10.5%), and other (10.5%). Similar results choices were seen in the other proficiency levels.

As stated by Poole (2004), Williams' (1999) study offers insight into the content of the forms learners attend to, yet it is limited by the small number of participants in each proficiency level, which prohibits forming general pictures of how focus on form instruction functions at a certain proficiency level. Another limitation is that the study took place in an intensive English language institute in the United States. Such a setting is problematic for two reasons. First, the focus of English language institutes is language. Thus, it is highly doubtful that all activities deemed to be communicative were communicative in the respect that they did not aim to have students focus on particular forms. Williams even concedes that the program contained an element of explicit grammar teaching. In addition, ESL/EFL materials, while claiming to be "communicative" or even "highly communicative," are very frequently designed around the learning of grammatical items, even if such items are contextualized. Such activities, by definition, are not communicative in the spontaneous way that Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) deem that they need to be in order for focus on form instruction to be carried out. If teachers and curriculum designers in both ESL and EFL settings are to endorse and incorporate focus on form instruction into their pedagogical agendas, they should be aware of how it functions as stipulated by Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998), even if the circumstances under which it is described are currently dissimilar to their own.

Thus, the purpose of the study reported here, which was part of a more extensive investigation of focus on form instruction (Poole, 2003, 2004), was to expand on Williams' (1999) original study, yet using learners from one general proficiency level who were engaged in communicative activities. More specifically, the aim of the study was to describe the content of the forms that learners attend to, and by doing so, help ESL/EFL teachers and curriculum designers better determine whether or not focus on form instruction is likely to address their students' form-based needs. The specific question used to investigate this study was as follows:

**What do the forms learners attend to consist of in terms of their content?**

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Setting**

The setting was an advanced college ESL writing class at a large university in the Midwestern United States. The focus of the class was on six major writing assignments. Thus, most instruction was devoted to developing areas such as thesis statements, body paragraphs, topic sentences, conclusions, unity, and coherence. In addition to writing, the

class was also designed to foster vocabulary development, improve reading skills, and familiarize students with cultures other than their own. These goals were met in part by requiring students to engage in group work, which is discussed below.

## Participants

Participants consisted of 19 ESL learners (7 females, 12 males) between the ages of 18 and 33 who had studied English between 1 and 10 years or more, the average being 21.7 years. Most participants were from South and East Asian countries, and had only studied in the United States for less than 1 year, although one had been studying in the United States for 5 years at the time of the study. Participants spoke a large variety of first languages including: Japanese (3), Taiwanese (1), Turkish (1), Korean (3), Nepali (3), Urdu (2), Indian English (1), Mandarin Chinese (1), Hindi (2), Malay (1), and Arabic (1). A questionnaire given out at the beginning of the study revealed that very few learners had experienced communicative teaching during previous English instruction, most of which had been at the high school level. In contrast, most learners reported having learned English through traditional methods such as teacher-led lectures, memorization, and repetition. Thus, the focus on form instruction that they were exposed to in the following study was something they had not experienced, at least during the bulk of their instruction.

Learners were divided into five groups consisting of four members each, the exception being one group that consisted of three participants (See Table 1). The teacher in this class—who held advanced degrees in teaching ESL and several years of teaching experience— put participants into groups of four and three in order to ensure that they would not disperse into smaller groups within groups. In his experience, groups with five or more participants had broken into subgroups because of the difficulty in being heard in large groups. At the same time, he felt that groups consisting of dyads could have resulted in one group member doing most of the work, thus discouraging active participation by all students. Additionally, groups were formed to be linguistically diverse in order to prevent learners from using their first language, instead of English, when encountering form-based difficulties. Finally, the classroom teacher’s role was that of moderator and organizer, and thus he only intervened when he noticed problems concerning directions. However, he helped students with grammatical and lexical forms when requested, although this only happened once. Therefore, focus on form instruction here was largely student-generated.

**Table 1**

Description of Learners

Name	Group	Country	Age	Major	Yrs Study	Yr US
Barb	1	China	33	Accounting	6	5
Yumi	1	Japan	18	Engineering	5	1
Vipul	1	India	25	Computer Science	10	3
Rashid	1	Oman	24	Computer Science	5	1

Yung	2	Korea	25	MIS	8	2
Will	2	Cameron	22	Computer Science	10	1
Alp	2	Turkey	21	Engineering	4	1
Shashi	2	Nepal	19	Engineering	10	1
Yasu	3	Japan	19	Aviation	1	1
Risa	3	Japan	19	Undecided	7	1
Askar	3	Pakistan	19	Computer Science	10	1
Pooya	3	Nepal	19	Biology	10	1
Bruce	4	Taiwan	26	Engineering	3	1
Kim	4	Korea	18	Undecided	6	1.5
Asit	4	Nepal	19	Computer Science	6	1
Adeel	4	India	18	Finance	10	1
Park	5	Korea	26	Aviation	10	1
Daniel	5	Malaysia	23	Computer Science	1	1
Neru	5	Zambia	19	Engineering	10	1

### Materials

The group activities that students engaged in primarily revolved around questions and small essays based on readings from *Applying Cultural Anthropology: An Introductory Reader* (Podolefsky and Brown, 2001), which was the required text. The text is for introductory anthropology courses and is not specifically intended for English language learners. In addition, students constructed short essays based on supplementary materials. Students engaged in a total of eight group activities (See Appendix A for a sample activity).

Students received credit for participation in activities, yet were not specifically graded on their grammatical and lexical performance within them. In fact, no materials were used that were designed to focus on specific L2 grammatical and lexical forms; instead, such forms were to be addressed by learners and their peers when difficulties became apparent, as focus on form instruction calls for (Long, 1991; Long and Robinson, 1998). However, an explicit aim of the group activities was to prepare students for their individual essays by giving them the schematic knowledge necessary for writing them. For example: In activity five (see Appendix A), learners were required to read essays about ritualistic behavior in the United States and China, answer comprehension questions about them, and describe another type of ritualistic behavior they had witnessed in the United States. Students later wrote individual essays describing a ritualistic behavior in their native cultures.

### Data Collection

Data were collected over a period of 10 weeks. Students typically engaged in group activities on a weekly basis, although there were no activities during weeks five and eight because of other class requirements. In total, 9 hours of data were collected from twelve 45-minute sessions, during which time students were tape-recorded.

## Data Treatment and Analysis

Tapes of student interaction were analyzed for LRE categories and content by two readers. In transcribing the LREs, Swain (1998) and Swain and Lapkin's (1995) conception of the term was used to guide the study. More specifically, the five LREs categories established by Williams were used to identify how students attended to form: (1) learner-initiated requests to other learners (2) learner-initiated questions to the teacher; (3) negotiation; (4) metatalk; (5) and other correction. "Content" refers to the specific lexical and grammatical types of LREs. More specifically, lexically-based LREs concerned the meaning, usage, spelling, and pronunciation of individual words. Grammatically-based LREs, on the other hand, involved items whose focus was morphological or syntactical in nature.

In order to identify Williams' (1999) LRE categories, the first reader listened to the tapes and transcribed those sections in which he thought that they had appeared. Students were regarded as participating in an LRE when they overtly exchanged information with one or more interlocutors about an English grammatical or lexical form. LREs were considered to be finished when either the content of specific items were explicitly agreed upon or when the participants ceased to verbally address them. In the example below, Neru is talking to Park about the meaning of the word *ecosystem*; at first, the latter does not understand the term, and thus negotiates with the former. Park signals his comprehension of the term by the use of the word *okay*, and the pair ceases to discuss it.

Neru: Where's the part on the *ecosystem*?

Park: *Ecosystem*?

Neru: Ya, you know what the *ecosystem* is?

Park: No.

Neru: *Ecosystem*. *Ecosystem* is like you know ah, big fish eating small fish, small fish, eating plant, like that, *ecosystem*.

Park: Like plant.

Neru: Ya, for example: When it's hot, then water evaporates from oceans, then clouds are created. That is like an *ecosystem*, okay, where everything is stabilized. The same in water, ocean is an *ecosystem* with big fish, big fish eat small fish, small fish eat plant okay?

Park: Okay.

The tapes were not transcribed from beginning to end; rather, individual LREs were recorded verbatim. Then, two to three days later, the first reader would return to the transcription to confirm that he had correctly identified the categories and content for that particular day. This was done in order to make sure that rater fatigue and lapses in attention did not cause incorrect data analyses, and not because of any fundamental problems in identifying LRE categories and content. If the first reader had incorrectly identified an LRE category the first time, he would try to correctly identify it and then return to it two to three days later. If the identity of the LRE category was still ambiguous, it was eliminated from the data set, yet this happened with less than 5% of the original set of LREs. The content of all LREs was correctly classified during initial identification, and thus subsequent re-identification was not necessary.

After the first reader completed the item-identification, a second reader trained to identify LREs analyzed the first reader's identifications. Those LREs that the second reader deemed to be erroneously identified were debated until agreement about their make-up could be achieved. All disagreements revolved around LRE categories and not their content. There were no LREs that were removed from the data pool because of identification disagreements. Other data that were excluded involved those potential LREs that were marginally intelligible due to excessive background noise, student pronunciation, or recording problems. Frequencies were tallied for LRE categories and content. Since the purpose of this paper is to discuss the content of the forms learners attended to, the categories of LREs they initiated will not be reported here. Those results can be found in Poole (2004).

## Results

### What do the forms learners attend to consist of in terms of their content?

The results indicated that out of 108 individual forms, 97 (89.8%) involved vocabulary, while 11 (10.2%) involved morphosyntax (see Table 2). While there was some variation among groups, the range of the proportion of vocabulary to morphosyntax in groups ranged from 83.3%/16.7% (Group 2) to 94.7%/5.3% (Group 5). Thus, all groups disproportionately focused on vocabulary instead of grammar. Out of 108 individual forms, 64 (59.2%) were concerned with meaning, followed by pronunciation (19-17.6%), spelling (12-11.1%), tense (4-3.7%), noun-plural (3-2.8%), word choice (2-1.9%), adjective form (2-1.9%), agreement (1-.9%), and voice (1-.9%). More specifically, of the 11 LREs that involved grammar, 4 (3.7%) dealt with tense, 3 (2.8%) with plural nouns, 2 (2.8%) with adjective form, 1 (.9%) with subject-verb agreement, and 1 (.9%) with voice. Of those LREs that dealt with vocabulary, 64 (59.2%) dealt with meaning, followed by pronunciation (19-17.6%), spelling (12-11.1%), and word choice (2-1.9%) (see Table 3).

**Table 2**  
**Types of Forms**

Group	Grammar	Vocabulary	Total
1	4 10%	36 90%	40 100%
2	2 16.7%	10 83.3%	12 100%
3	2 14.3%	12 85.7%	14 100%
4	2 8.7%	21 91.3%	23 100%
5	1 5.3%	18 94.7%	19 100%
Total	11	97	108

10.2%                      89.8%                      100%

**Table 3**  
**Content of Forms**

Content	Frequency	Percent
Meaning (V)	64	59.2
Pronunciation (V)	19	17.6
Spelling (V)	12	11.1
Tense (G)	4	3.7
Plural Nouns (G)	3	2.8
Adjective Form (V)	2	1.9
Word Choice (V)	2	1.9
Subject-Verb Agreement  (G)	1	.9
Voice (G)	1	.9
Total	108	100

Key: V=Vocabulary; G=Grammar

As seen in Table 4, at least 45% of the LREs in each group were concerned with meaning. For all groups, no individual grammar-focused LRE was attended to more than any one lexically-oriented LRE.

**Table 4**  
**Content of Forms within Groups**

Group	M	T	P	PN	S	WC	A	V	AF	TO
1	26	2	7	1	3	0	1	0	0	40
% in group	65	5	17.5	2.5	7.5	0	2.5	0	0	100
2	7	1	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	12
% in group	58.4	8.3	16.7	8.3	0	8.3	0	0	0	100
3	8	0	3	1	1	0	0	0	1	14
% in group	57.3	0	21.4	7.1	7.1	0	0	0	7.1	100
4	11	0	4	0	5	1	0	1	1	23
% in group	48	0	17.4	0	21.7	4.3	0	4.3	4.3	100
5	12	1	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	19
% in group	63.1	5.3	15.8	0	15.8	0	0	0	0	100
Total	64	4	19	3	12	2	1	1	2	108
% of total	59.2	3.7	17.6	2.8	11.1	1.9	.9	.9	1.9	100

Key: M=Meaning; T=Tense; P=Pronunciation; PN=Plural Nouns; S=Spelling; WC=Word Choice; A=Subject-Verb Agreement; V=Voice; AF=Adjective Form; TO=Total

## Discussion

While there were some differences between this study and that of Williams (1999) in terms of design and results, both were very similar in that the vast majority of forms learners attended to was lexical in nature. While such a finding is interesting in and of itself, the more important issue regards whether or not focus on form instruction sufficiently exposes students to the forms they need to learn. Even though such determinations should be made by curriculum designers, teachers, and learners themselves, the results in this study suggest that focus on form instruction has the possibility for being most beneficial for learning vocabulary. Grammar, on the other hand, was infrequently focused on, relatively speaking, not only in this study, but also in Williams' (1999). This fact implies that learners are either unable and/or unwilling to explicitly focus on grammar, thereby supporting Sheen's (2003) contention that *focus on forms instruction* (Long and Robinson, 1998), or the intentional and preplanned emphasis on certain forms within a communicative context, offers a better hope for addressing advanced English language learners' grammatical needs in a contextualized fashion than does *focus on form instruction*. Such a conclusion is further warranted by taking into consideration the context in which this study took place. More specifically, the class was relatively small, the teacher was a highly trained ESL practitioner fluent in English, and the students were multilingual and experienced English language learners. In many US-based university ESL classes—e.g., instructional settings in which English is the primary language of the local population and regularly used in all facets of communication (Anderson, 2003)—such characteristics, while by no means universal, are quite common, and are thus, in theory, more likely to provide frequent opportunities for peer/peer-teacher interaction and opportunities for learners to spontaneously attend to form. Moreover, they increase the likelihood that focus on form instruction will be correctly implemented, and diminish

occasions for students to use their L1 while encountering communicative difficulties, since many will not share the same one. However, as witnessed in the present study, students rarely attended to L2 grammatical forms.

However, before wide-reaching conclusions about focus on form instruction can be made, more of such studies need to be done using learners across proficiency levels and in multiple instructional settings. In addition, future studies should investigate the cultural, affective, and proficiency-related factors that contribute to learners' decision to focus or not to focus on form. By doing so, researchers and teachers may be better able to foster conditions under which learners will focus more frequently on form. Lastly, researchers should investigate whether or not more focus on form leads to more acquisition of L2 grammar and vocabulary. This last issue is most critical, for no matter how often it exposes students to forms, the true value of focus on form instruction lies in its ability to increase the quantity and quality of second language acquisition.

Finally, many ESL teachers from the West still stereotype Asian students, regardless of country of origin, as docile, passive, and dependent on the teacher (Kennedy, 2002), and thus may feel that such learners are not capable of using highly communicative approaches such as focus on form instruction. However, in this study, students proved to be comfortable working in groups and reaching out to their peers with their lexical and, to a lesser degree, grammatical concerns. Such results should discourage current and future teachers from withholding focus on form instruction and other innovative techniques because of their supposed cultural incompatibility. Instead, they should serve as evidence that Asian students have the potential to be highly autonomous learners.

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## Appendix A

English 1123  
Question: Ch 10, 37

Instructor:

Task I: Briefly answer the following comprehension questions. As usual, one person should record all answers.

1. What food is the centerpiece of Chinese meals?
2. Is eating alone in Hong Kong good or bad? Explain.
3. How many deaths are annually caused in the United States by postoperative infections?
4. Name two elaborate rituals that take place in the operating room.

Task II: Give a brief answer to the following statement: Eating and surgery are two areas of life that are very ritualistic. Name one American ritual or routine you have observed. Describe it. As usual, another person should record this task.