

## **Pondering over Focus on Form and Focus on FormS: Are There “Equivalent and Large Effects”?**

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It is reassuring that Norris and Ortega's (2000) study echoes Long's (1983, as cited in Han, 2004) finding that instruction does positively impact classroom L2 acquisition, provided that appropriate instruction is implemented. This finding serves as a substantial impetus for practitioners and researchers in the field to seek the best possible instructional practices. Norris and Ortega explore Long's assertion by attempting to differentiate the magnitude of effectiveness of various types of instruction, namely, explicit versus implicit, Focus on Form (FonF) versus Focus on FormS (FonFS), and combinations of the two.

Most striking, however, is the finding that "FonF and FonFS interventions result in equivalent and large effects" (Norris & Ortega, 2000, p. 417). Given that learners are equipped with limited cognitive attentional resources, it seems reasonable to expect FonF to be a more efficient and effective type of instruction that maximizes learners' gains in the classroom. Why is it that the relative strength and effects of FonF and FonFS have been found to be almost the same?

To examine this question more closely, it is useful to turn to Long's (1991) original conception of FonF-based instruction. A defining characteristic of this pedagogical approach, according to Long, is that it be incidental (i.e., unplanned). Over the years, however, FonF has undergone a number of significant redefinitions, gradually moving away from just being incidental and output-based (Williams, 1999) to being more student-initiated or preemptive even when no overt errors are made (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001), and finally to a somewhat preplanned phenomenon, where the linguistic items of focus are predetermined by the teacher to discuss as he or she sees fit (Doughty & Varela, 1998). This, along with the varying degrees of explicitness of different types of FonF, has made it difficult to disentangle pure FonF instruction from its FonFS counterpart.

Concerning explicitness versus implicitness, I cannot help but wonder: Has any research been conducted to measure the joint effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction? Explicit instruction, according to some researchers, optimizes gains from learners' limited cognitive resources. On the other hand, implicit exposure, which appeals to the unconscious for continuous restructuring and proceduralization, is purported to eventually result in automaticity. Implicit exposure can be implemented in language classrooms by, for instance, frequently recycling certain linguistic features from a reading and/or listening texts covered in previous episodes of instruction. This way, the learner is more likely to benefit from both explicit and implicit instruction (MacWhinney, 1997, as cited in Han, 2004). Needless to say, more stringent work would be required to understand the impact of numerous confounding variables, such as the degree to which the core relationships of the target structures are salient (Bialystok, 1987, as cited in Han, 2004), the effectiveness of different modes (i.e., written or audio) of implicit input, and/or individual learner differences, such as the capacity of one's working memory. In the end, one key issue emerges: How may findings regarding the combined strength of explicit teaching and implicit learning through robust input exposure impact the choice between FonF instruction

and a FonFs approach? This is no easy question to answer.

Norris and Ortega (2000) highlight the limitations of experimental procedures and the poor reporting of statistical measures in many of the constituent studies. That said, their own meta-analysis is by no means free of bias (Han, 2004). For one, considering that only 49 of the 250 studies originally identified were included in the meta-analysis, Norris and Ortega's own conclusions may be biased. In fact, an analysis of the studies that were excluded from the Norris and Ortega study could yield remarkably different insights. While the dismissal of 201 studies might have been a necessary step for undertaking quantitative analyses, the exclusion of so many studies may have prevented the authors from formulating a comprehensive picture of L2 instruction's effectiveness.

In sum, the finding that both FonF and FonFS techniques result in equivalent and large effects requires further research for verification.

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