Focus on Form or Focus on FormS: Which Method Is More Effective?

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Norris and Ortega (2000) examined the effectiveness of L2 instruction by conducting a meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental studies. Their study provided some positive evidence for the superiority of explicit instruction over implicit instruction and evidence for the durability of L2 instruction. However, it also indicated that, "a focus on form and a focus on forms are equally effective" (p. 501). This finding is surprising, given that other researchers have suggested that Focus on Form (FonF) fosters L2 learning in comparison with the traditional Focus on FormS (FonFS) instruction.

In the Norris and Ortega (2000) study, an L2 instructional approach qualified as FonF instruction if an integration of form and meaning was evidenced via any of the following criteria:

> (a) designing tasks to promote learner engagement with meaning prior to form; (b) seeking to attain and document task essentialness or naturalness of the L2 forms; (c) attempting to ensure that instruction was unobtrusive; (d) documenting learner mental processes ("noticing"). In addition, many FonF studies also presented evidence of: (e) selecting target form(s) by analysis of learners' needs; or (f) considering interlanguage constraints when choosing the targets of instruction and when interpreting the outcomes of instruction. (p. 438)

L2 instruction was categorized as FonFS under the following two conditions: first, that none of the four criteria, namely, (a)—(d) were met and second, "[that] learner attention was nevertheless focused in some way on the particular structure targeted for learning" (Norris & Ortega, 2000, p. 438). Using these criteria, the researchers arrived at the conclusion that FonF and FonFS are equivalent in L2 instructional efficacy.

Conversely, Long (2000) described FonFS as a traditional teaching approach in which teachers present the learners with preselected and sequenced linguistic items. After delineating the extreme interventionist FonFS approach and its internal inadequacies, Long proposed the FonF method which integrates the strengths of both Focus on FormS and Focus on Meaning approaches. According to Long, FonF is concerned with, "how attentional resources are allocated and involves briefly drawing students' attention to linguistic elements in context as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (p. 185).

VanPatten and Cadierno's (1993) assertions parallel those of Long (2000), stipulating that processing instruction (PI) is superior to traditional instruction (TI). PI integrates focus on L2 meanings and forms, and so it is in effect a FonF method by nature. On the contrary, TI is only concerned with mechanical drills of target forms—a typical FonFS approach. VanPatten (2002) criticized the TI approach for "putting the cart before the horse," (p.795), explaining that TI generally intends to manipulate output as a means of altering the nature of the developmental system.

What can be inferred from the above comparisons between Focus on Form and Focus on FormS? It seems that Norris and Ortega (2000) were unable to be precise about either FonF or FonFS due to the way in which these two instructional approaches were defined and operationalized in their study. To be more specific, any of the six strategies tackling the form-meaning relations would indicate a FonF approach. The authors were even more imprecise about FonFS by excluding certain FonF factors and focusing only on certain target forms.

Indeed, if Norris and Ortega's (2000) constructs were given more precise definitions, their conclusions might have been different. It appears that the researchers were not able to successfully tackle the issue of an exact definition of the research construct in their operationalizations of FonF and FonFS. This shortcoming directly impacts both the internal and external validity of the study.

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