

Title: The Influence of Pretask Instructions and Planning on Incidental Focus on Form

Type of grant application: Doctoral Dissertation Grant

Topic of TIRF priority: 2005-2006 (“effective grammar instruction”)

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Detailed proposal

Statement of research issue

In traditional EFL classrooms in Korea, instructors have adopted a focus on forms approach, which views language as an object of study and diminishes the role of meaning/communication. However, this approach has led to EFL learners studying grammar at a discrete level and lacking the ability to use their grammatical knowledge in a communicative context. Thus, the adoption of incidental focus on form in traditional EFL classrooms may be advantageous.

There are pedagogical and theoretical rationales for incorporating the incidental focus on form into a traditional language-learning context. Incidental focus on form, which is a brief spontaneous shift of attention to form, occurs within a communicative context. This leads to ensuring communicative use of grammatical knowledge if the approach is incorporated into an English classroom. The value of implementing incidental focus on form in grammar instruction is also backed up by theoretical perspectives. For example, Pienemann’s Learnability Hypothesis (1984, 1989) and Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (1990) suggest that instruction on a certain form may only be effective if learners are ready to learn it, and whether learners notice it or not depends on their developmental readiness or communicative needs. In the EFL context, pretask planning may help teachers draw learners’ attention to incidental focus on form because it is claimed to reduce learners’ cognitive processing load and free up their attentional resources, thereby allowing them to attend to both meaning and form (Crookes, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Skehan,

1998). In addition, it does not require intensive teacher-to-learner interaction, which is difficult to do in an EFL setting.

However, most previous pretask planning studies to date have not isolated pretask instructions and pretask planning. This leaves room for further investigation as to which one of these two variables draws learner attention to both meaning and form. In addition, the studies have not investigated the learners' online cognitive processes during planning time—whether they indeed focus on form following pretask instructions or while planning. Therefore, the current study investigates these three variables (pretask instructions, planning, and cognitive processes) that may shed light on incidental focus on form in an EFL context. Consequently, this fits the current TIRF 2005-2006 priority, “Integration of Grammar Instruction into Adult ESL/EFL Curricula: Approaches and Their Effectiveness.”

Theoretical background

Over the past decade, several influential second language acquisition (SLA) theories have argued for focus on form. Schmidt, for example, proposed the Noticing Hypothesis, claiming that attending and noticing form in comprehensible input at the level of conscious awareness is crucial for second language (L2) acquisition processes to occur (Schmidt, 1995, 2001; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Swain (1995, 1998) also suggested via the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis that by producing output in the target language, learners notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say and test their hypotheses, which is confirmed or disconfirmed by feedback. In a similar vein, Long (1996) proposed the Interaction Hypothesis, arguing for the value of negotiation for meaning in L2 acquisition. In the process of resolving communicative breakdowns, he asserted that attention to form followed by form-function matching takes place most effectively together.

On the basis of these theoretical claims, a few researchers have shown interest in incidental focus on form in the context of learner-learner interaction. For example, Storch (2002) examined the link between the dynamic of dyadic interaction and its impact on learning by observing ten ESL intermediate dyads over a semester. She found that collaborative and expert/novice dyads engaged in most negotiations, scaffolding, and a transfer of knowledge from pair work to individual task performance, while the dyads involving a dominant learner showed little co-construction and transfer of knowledge, which reflects little amount of uptake, hypothesis testing, and noticing the gap. Similarly, Mackey, Oliver, and Leeman (2003) investigated the effects of interlocutors in ESL learners' incidental focus on form by contrasting non-native speaker (NNS)-native speaker's (NS) as well as NNS and NNS' task-based interaction. They reported that these two different dyad types did not differ in terms of encouraging learners to attend to form. While the NS interlocutors provided significantly more negative feedback than the NNSs, the NNS interlocutors offered significantly more opportunity for modified output. Finally, Williams (1999, 2001) conducted two ESL classroom-based studies in incidental focus on form by employing language-related episodes (LREs). In the earlier study, she reported that the learners did incidentally focus on form, albeit infrequently, and that

proficiency is a moderating factor in the amount of focus on form. In her later study, on the other hand, she explored the effects of who initiated and responded to LREs on accuracy, reporting that the teacher and self-initiated LREs were equally effective in retention rates across all proficiency levels. However, in terms of who provided feedback, more advanced learners equally effectively used feedback both from the teacher and other learners, while lower learners had difficulty incorporating other learners' responses.

The above studies have identified relevant factors involved in learner-generated incidental focus on form in the ESL context. However, little is known about the EFL context. One easy way that may help EFL teachers draw learners' attention to incidental focus on form is to incorporate pretask instructions and pretask planning. These two pretask variables are quite feasible in a large EFL classroom, but more importantly, it is argued that they manipulate learners' attentional focus (Skehan, 1998). In particular with the latter variable, the learners with planning time might move from semantic processing to syntactic processing by planning what to say for the main task while planning, as Swain (1985) claimed that the processing shift might occur with production. Consequently, these learners are likely to have greater opportunity to notice "holes" (Swain, 1998) in the IL than those without planning time, which then leads to increasing learner awareness in the grammatical state of their IL. Planning opportunity can also engage the learners in metalinguistic processes by providing them with time to reflect on their language use, which facilitates form-function connections (Ortega, 1999). In this light, pretask planning can be made best use of in promoting learner awareness in their L2 grammar as well as in other areas in a meaningful context and encouraging them to look for relevant input in subsequent learner-learner interaction to fill their holes.

Despite the potential role of pretask instructions and planning in learner-generated incidental focus on form, there are only a few studies that have examined these variables. For example, Foster and Skehan (1999) employed specific pretask instructions to control learner attention/focus on form and hypothesized that instructions to focus on language during planning time would increase accuracy, while instructions to focus on content would increase complexity. This hypothesis was not supported; however, the result is difficult to accept because there was no measurement as to whether the learners indeed did what they were told to do (i.e., focus on language or content) following the pretask instructions. In contrast, Ortega (1999) reported that, despite her general pretask instructions to the learners that asked them to simply plan, the learners in her study voluntarily focused on form during planning time, producing some improvement in accuracy. Ellis (1987), on the other hand, assuming that planning motivates learners' attention to form, investigated whether planning accounts for L2 learners' accuracy level in the English past tense. He found that, setting aside the modality confound, the writing task which was given the most planning time generated the greatest accuracy in the past tense, while the oral task with the least time produced the least accuracy. Similarly, Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984) examined whether focus of attention and planning time affect correctness of two word orders with learners of Dutch. They reported that the learners who focused on grammar improved consistently, irrespective of planning time. However, the learners who both focused on grammar and had planning time produced the most accurate performance, indicating some role of planning time.

As just reviewed, the pretask planning studies that have incorporated focus on form raise the need for elucidating the role of pretask instructions and planning time as well as the need to further investigate whether learners indeed focus on form during planning time. In this light, the proposed study will investigate three questions:

- (1) Do pretask instructions affect learners' focus on form during planning and task-based oral interaction?
- (2) Does planning affect learners' focus on form during planning and task-based oral interaction?
- (3) To what extent do learners focus on form while planning?

Research methodology

Approximately 146 learners of English will be recruited as volunteers from eight English conversation classes at Keimyung University, Korea. All learner participants are native speakers of Korean whose English proficiency varies from beginning to advanced levels. In terms of the instructors, they are native English speakers except for one native Korean instructor. All participants will sign written consent forms and will be compensated for their participation.

In terms of materials, there are oral tasks and written questionnaires. The oral tasks consist of a practice task and a target task. The practice task will be given in order to make the learners familiar with the target task that will be given the following week. Thus, both the practice and target tasks are of the same type, narrative retelling based on pictures, but they contain different pictures. The oral retelling task was chosen because it is one of the common task types used in both pretask planning and focus on form studies, thus making a comparison with previous studies possible. In addition, it will elicit a genuine engagement in communication during task performance, which will fulfill the requirement of incidental focus on form (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991).

With respect to the written questionnaires, they will be administered for two purposes: a) to supplement a think-aloud protocol that will be used to assess the learners' focus on form during planning time and b) to see if the learners indeed attend to form during the collaborative oral interaction. More specifically, the questionnaires will ask questions such as what aspect of language the learners think about when planning and what they remember from their oral task. The format of the questionnaires consists of open-ended questions as well as questions based on the Likert scale. In short, the questionnaires will comprise 11 questions about pretask planning and learner-learner interaction.

In terms of design, the research will be conducted following a 2-by-2 design, with pretask instructions and planning as two factors, each generating two levels. Two groups will receive general instructions, while the other two groups will receive specific instructions. The general instructions contain statements that explain to learners what to do to complete the tasks, while the specific instructions add to these statements those that encourage them to focus on content, organization, syntax, and lexicon. In addition, two of

these groups will be given 10- minute pretask planning time, while the other two will not be given any time. Consequently, there will be four groups: a) general, non-planning; b) specific non-planning; c) general planning; and d) specific planning.

Each class will be visited two times with a one-week interval, and on each occasion the classes will be recorded doing one of the two communicative tasks. For random assignment, learners within each class will be divided into two groups and one of them will be moved to a nearby classroom. Then, a research assistant who will be trained to administer the same instructions as the researcher will take charge of the other classroom. In addition, two more assistants (observers) will participate in the study, each of whom will be placed in each classroom to record the research procedure for later comparison. This will be done to check the fidelity of the research procedure implemented by different researchers. Everyone in each classroom will be audiotaped doing the tasks and will complete the questionnaires to keep task conditions constant for all learners in the classroom. However, the data gathered from the learners who did not volunteer to participate will be eliminated from the analyses of the study. Finally, the same dyads will work together for the two weeks of the study as much as possible.

Data will be collected by the researcher and her research assistant in intact classrooms during their normally scheduled hours for two consecutive weeks per class. During the first session, the learners who have been assigned to planning groups for the target task will observe the researcher's and her assistant's think-aloud demonstration using a math problem for five minutes. Then, they will be provided with practice task instructions and ten minutes to plan for the task by thinking aloud. To assist them in the planning process as well as to ensure that they are engaged in the planning process as required, they will be given a piece of paper on which they can jot down notes, but will be told that it will be taken away once the planning session is completed. They will also be told to try not to write full sentences in order to prevent a confounding between modality and planning. In terms of the think-aloud instructions, it will be emphasized that the participants will keep talking constantly, clearly, and loudly. The language of the think-aloud protocol will be their own choice, either Korean or English. When the planning period is over, the participants will begin working with their partners for 20 minutes. The nonplanners will start with the oral practice task without the think-aloud demonstration and planning time. Finally, all participants (both planners and nonplanners) will be asked to complete a demographic survey that takes five minutes. In total, this practice session will take about 25-40 minutes.

During the second session, the same procedure as in the first session will be implemented except that the planners will begin carrying out a new oral task without the think-aloud demonstration, and depending on their assigned conditions, all learners (both planners and nonplanners) will be given distinct pretask instructions and asked to complete a 20-minute questionnaire. They will not be informed of the content of the questionnaire until they complete the oral task, to prevent any possibility that it may interfere with their planning processes and the oral interaction. In short, this target session will take about 40-50 minutes.

Given the research questions in the present study, as well as the 2-by-2 research design, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be used. In this way, the effects of pretask instructions and planning as independent variables would each be investigated as main effects, while their combined effects could be examined through the two-way interaction in the analysis. In terms of the dependent variable, the learners' planning data and task interaction will be transcribed and analyzed for the amount and type of LREs (Swain & Lapkin, 1995, 1998; Williams, 1999). Finally, the questionnaire will be qualitatively analyzed as supplementary data to the planning data and task interaction.

Statement of implications of research for practice

As Fotos (1998) points out and the above literature review shows, nearly all of the research in focus on form has been conducted in ESL settings including research in incidental focus on form, whereas little is known about the EFL context. Therefore, the proposed study results will contribute to expanding the literature on focus on form in the EFL context. More specifically, the study results may also provide some pedagogical implications in regards to grammar acquisition. According to Pienemann (1984, 1989) and Schmidt (1990), learners notice a particular form when they are ready to learn it, and noticing is crucial in the acquisitional process. Applying these theories to the incidental focus on form approach, it can be said that when the learners themselves spontaneously choose to focus on a particular form, they are ready to learn the form, and this noticing may facilitate their acquisitional process. Thus, the integration of incidental focus on form into an English classroom may aid the learners' L2 acquisition including grammar. Also, in the EFL context, it may help the learners see links between form and meaning/function because incidental focus on form occurs within a communicative context. This will complement the traditional EFL instructional approach, which is focus on forms.