

# Pre-emptive and reactive FF on intermediate Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning

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**Abstract:** This quasi-experimental study investigated the effect of pre-emptive focus on form (PFF) and reactive focus on form (RFF) on vocabulary learning of Iranian English language learners. Ninety female language learners in three intact classes participated in the study at Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Qazvin, Iran. The groups were randomly assigned as two experimental groups and one control group. For eight weeks, the experimental group 1 was taught using the pre-emptive technique while the experimental group 2 received reactive FF instruction while doing their reading comprehension and vocabulary tasks. The control group did not receive any forms of focus on form techniques on their tasks. The research data obtained from the Preliminary English Test (PET) as a pre-test and post-test were analyzed via a One-Way ANOVA test and T-test. The results from paired samples *t*-test analysis of the pre-test and post-test data revealed that both PFF and RFF techniques improved vocabulary learning of Iranian learners at intermediate level. However, the results of a One-Way ANOVA test indicated that the differences between the two experimental groups were not statistically significant. Based upon the conclusion drawn from the study, FF techniques are recommended to be integrated into English instruction.

**Keywords:** Preemptive FF- Reactive FF-Vocabulary Learning

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## 1. Introduction

There has been prolonged controversy among second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and scholars over the role of formal instruction in second and foreign language learning. To date back, the advocates of the Non-Transfer Hypothesis ruled out the contributions made by formal instruction claiming that learned knowledge never transfers to acquisition (Krashen, 1985). The proponents of the Transfer Hypothesis, on the other hand, highlighted the significance of meaningful practice as a prerequisite for the probable internalization of what is learned through instruction and its transition to acquired knowledge (Bialystock, 1994). Recently, however, it has been proposed that achieving high levels of accuracy based on mere exposure to input in entirely meaning-centered contexts is a daunting challenge for many learners because when second language learning is solely experiential and focused on communicative success, some linguistic features do not develop to target like accuracy. That is to say, neither grammar nor comprehensible input alone is sufficient for achieving high degrees of mastery in a given language.

What learners need is rather a combination of both. What may relieve the burden on the learner, according to many scholars, is, thus, a needs-based, well-planned and interactive pedagogical program that can address various aspects of the complex process of learning making it manageable (Long, 1991; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Doughty & Williams, 1998). The emergent conviction paved the way for what became known as FF, or form-focused instruction (FFI), in which the inclusion of some degree of FF is accentuated during various communicative activities (Long, 1991, Long & Robinson, 1998).

The importance of focusing on form is based on three main principles about second language acquisition: (1) Learners acquire as the result of attending to form in meaning-based context (2) Learners often experience difficulty in attending and producing linguistic forms because they have limited information- processing capacity (3) They benefit from the opportunities that arise in communication to give focal attention to language forms (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

An underlying assumption of FF approach is that

genuine learning activities need to be based on communicative tasks. In a similar vein, task-based instruction has been suggested as a fertile soil for blending communicative activities and FF (Willis, 1996). It should be borne in mind, nonetheless, that the term "form" comprises not only a particular grammatical form but the function that the form performs as Doughty and Williams (1998) recognized. Successful communication is the result of noticing a given grammatical form in the input and the function or meaning it conveys to convert input into intake for learning (Schmidt, 1990, 1994).

Yet, the fundamental question that may strike a teachers' mind is how to design form-focused instruction. According to Mackey, Poole, & McDonough (2004), FF can be either planned or incidental. Within a category of incidental FF, Ellis, (2001) distinguished between pre-emptive and reactive focus on form.

Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) define preemptive FF as occurring when teacher, or learner, initiates attention to form "even though no actual problem in production has arisen" (p.414). Ellis et al. (2001) distinguish between teacher-initiated FF in which the teacher asks questions or gives information about particular linguistic items and student-initiated FF in which students raise questions about linguistic items. In teacher-initiated preemptive FF teachers interrupt the flow of a communicative activity to draw students' attention to a particular form. They do this because they consider it acceptable on the ground that the form in question may be problematic to some students.

Reactive FF has also been referred to as error correction, corrective feedback, or negative evidence/feedback (Long, 1996). Feedback can be positive or negative. Positive feedback affirms that a learner response to an activity is correct. It may signal the veracity of the content of a learner utterance or the linguistic correctness of the utterance. Negative feedback signals, in one way or another, that the learner's utterance lacks veracity or is linguistically deviant. In other words, it is corrective in intent (Ellis, 2001). In reactive FF, the teacher perceives the learners' utterance as inaccurate or inappropriate and draws their attention to the problematic feature through negative feedback.

FF has inspired a respectable number of empirical studies since its emergence. A cursory look through the short history of FFI reveals that it has been well-researched via a variety of research methodologies. A large number of studies have been conducted on form-focused instruction in English (Fotos (1993; Poole & Sheorey, 2002; Park, 2003; & Farrokhi, 2005); So far most of the empirical work on FFI has focused on grammar. However, as Loewen (2010) notes, other aspects of language such as vocabulary, pronunciation or pragmatics can be tackled through FFI as well.

Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen (2001) investigated the effectiveness of preemptive FF in a 12-hour meaning-focused instruction. Results indicated that the majority of

the episodes containing preemptive FF were initiated by students. In the Iranian context, Farrokhi (2005) examined the possibility of integrating form-focused instruction and communicative interaction at the level of error correction. Findings revealed that 'marked recast' was a good corrective feedback that combines FF and focus on meaning at the level of error correction.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, Laufer, (2005) compared the effects of FFI with FFs instruction in vocabulary learning and found that FFs instruction had more facilitative effects on learning vocabulary than FFI. His paper examined different approaches of teaching vocabulary in L2. FFI is considered as insufficient for acquiring vocabulary; whereas, FFs is a necessary and beneficial element of vocabulary learning. FFs approach intervenes in inferring words' meaning from context, developing strategic competence and the use of dictionary. Exclusively communicative context is unacceptable in vocabulary learning.

Poole (2003) in his study described the types of forms learners attend to during FFI. Analysis of the data, gathered from nineteen international students studying in an advanced ESL writing class in a United States university, indicated that the majority of forms they attended to were lexical in nature. It was also found that FFI might not be valuable for second language grammatical learning.

Likewise, De la Fuente, (2006) suggested that a task-based lesson with an explicit focus-on-forms component was more effective in promoting acquisition of word morphological aspects than a task-based lesson that did not incorporate this component. The results also indicate that the explicit FFs component may be more effective when placed at the end of the lesson, when meaning has been acquired.

Alcon, (2007) examined the effectiveness of teachers' incidental FF on vocabulary learning. The results revealed that teachers' pre-emptive FFEs are effective for learners' noticing and subsequent use of vocabulary items. On the other hand, teacher reactive FFEs do not seem to facilitate noticing, as measured by learners' reporting of vocabulary items, but they do facilitate vocabulary learning, as measured by subsequent use of vocabulary items in the post-test and delayed post- tests.

In the context of Iran, Saiedi, Zafarani, & Shatery (2012) investigated three kinds of instructions namely, FF, FFs, and focus on meaning on vocabulary learning in ESP context and found that learners in FF group achieved significantly higher scores than those in focus on meaning and FFs groups. Also learners' scores in focus on meaning group were significantly higher than FFs group.

Pishgadam, Khodadady, & Rad, (2012) investigated the effect of form versus meaning-focused tasks on the development of collocations among Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. The results revealed the fact that FFI group (dictogloss task) significantly outperformed the other two groups on the collocation test.

While these studies and others provide insight into the

efficacy of FFI, they all have taken place in settings that appear to be well-funded, adequately supplied with teaching and learning materials, and generally free of classroom discipline problems. Moreover, most studies of FFI have taken place in a few countries, notably the United States, New Zealand, and Japan (Poole & Sheorey, 2002). In fact, few empirical studies can be found that took place in a setting in which classes were overcrowded with restricted access to up-to-date materials and where teachers received less than adequate training in language skills and pedagogy.

The present study like other studies in this field investigate the effect of two types of form-focused instruction techniques namely pre-emptive and reactive FF, and by comparing the possible effect of above two types of techniques on vocabulary learning at intermediate reading classroom in EFL context.

## 2. Research Questions

1. Does reactive FF improve Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning?
2. Does pre-emptive FF improve Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning?
3. Is there any significant difference between the effectiveness of reactive and pre-emptive FF in enhancing Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning?

## 3. Participants

This study was conducted in Iran Language Institute (ILI), Qazvin branch, Iran. Three intact classes, comprising 90 intermediate participants participated in this study. They were female and their first language was Persian. The initial homogeneity of the participants was further assessed via a Preliminary English Test (PET). Three intact classes were further randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group, each including 30 participants. The first Experimental group (RF) received additional reactive form-focused vocabulary instruction while working on reading comprehension tasks while the second experimental group (PF) received additional preemptive form-focused vocabulary instruction. No additional form-focused instruction was offered in the control group (NF). The treatment lasted for eight sessions. All the groups received 3.5 hours of English language instruction every week through an integrated skills development approach which is the dominant method of teaching at ILI. English was used as the medium of instruction and communication in the classrooms.

## 4. Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental design to examine the effect of the independent variables, reactive and preemptive feedback, on the dependent variable, Iranian learners' vocabulary learning.

## 5. Instrumentations

In this study, Preliminary English Test (PET) was used as a pre-test to get the data of the groups at the beginning of treatment. This test has three sections: grammar, reading and vocabulary, and writing. At the end of the treatment this test again used as a post-test. The scores of 35 vocabulary test items were analyzed in this study.

## 6. Procedure

Having verified the participants' initial homogeneity in English and assigned the groups randomly, the researchers launched the eight-session treatment, which continued for two months. During the treatment, all participants were taught the same teaching materials comprising four reading passages that were presented based on the standard method of pre-reading, reading and post-reading reading tasks. What differentiated the groups was the type of treatment they received while performing the reading.

In the NFF group, the preemptive focus on form (PFF) was carried out during the pre-reading stage. The teacher introduced the topic and presented some new words chosen from the text. Various features of the words were highlighted to raise learners' awareness and to sensitize them to potential problematic areas.

In the RFF group, the participants received reactive focus on form (RFF) after doing their regular reading comprehension tasks at the post-reading stage while the text was being paraphrased. Some words were highlighted more distinctly in terms of meaning, synonyms, antonyms, and looking up the dictionaries and doing some margin glosses. The participants were allowed to use dictionaries to check the meaning of unknown vocabulary.

In the control group, however, the teacher started teaching reading after some warm-ups without any additional form-focused emphasis on vocabulary before or after reading. At the end of the treatment, another PET was administered to all the groups as the post-test.

## 7. Data Analysis

To answer the first two research questions regarding the impact of reactive and pre-emptive focus on form on the participants' vocabulary learning, the researcher ran two paired samples t-test on the pre-test and post-test scores. Further, an Analysis of Variance test (ANOVA) was run on the groups' post-test scores to answer the third research question and compare the effect of the two methods.

## 8. Results

### 8.1. Reactive FF on Vocabulary Learning

The first research question in this study addressed the effect of RFF on vocabulary learning of Iranian intermediate language learners. The scores of pre-test and post-test of English Proficiency Test (PET) were submitted

to a paired samples t-test. Table 1 illustrates the results of the t-test.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Results of Samples T-test of Reactive FF and Control Group (NFF) of Pre-test and Post-test.

	N	Mean	std.	t	df	sig.
Reactive FF						
Pre-test	30	10.63	2.29			
Post-test	30	13.03	2.87	3.55	29	.001
Control Group						
Pre-test	30	9.93	2.03			
Post-test	30	10.70	2.29	1.50	29	.143

As shown in Table 1, reactive focus on form improved the participants' vocabulary learning from pre-test to post-test and the difference is significant ( $t=3.55$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

### 8.2. Pre-emptive FF on Vocabulary Learning

The second research question addressed the effect of PFF on vocabulary learning of Iranian intermediate language learners. The scores of pre-test and post-test of English Proficiency Test (PET) were submitted to a paired samples t-test. Table 2 illustrates the results of the t-test.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Results of Samples T-test of Pre-emptive FF of Pre-test and Post-test and Control Group.

	N	Mean	std.	t	df	sig.
Pre-emptive FF						
Pre-test	30	9.66	1.79			
Post-test	30	11.26	2.24	2.99	29	.006
Control Group						
Pre-test	30	9.93	2.03			
Post-test	30	10.70	2.29	1.50	29	.143

As shown in Table 2, PFF with the mean of (11.26) improved the participants' vocabulary learning from pre-test to post-test and the difference is significant ( $t=2.99$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

### 8.3. Differences between RFF and PFF

The third research question addressed the possibility of differences between the effects of two form-focused instruction techniques on intermediate vocabulary learning. The scores of the post-test from the PET were submitted to One-Way ANOVA to find the differences. Table 3 illustrates the results of the test of RFF, PFF and the control group NFF.

**Table 3.** Results of One -Way ANOVA Based on Post-test Scores of RFF, PFF, and NFF.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
RFF	Between Groups	4.411	8	.551	1.097	.403
	Within Groups	10.556	21	.503		
	Total	14.967	29			
PFF	Between Groups	4.361	8	.545	1.188	.352
	Within Groups	9.639	21	.459		
	Total	14.000	29			
NFF	Between Groups	2.744	8	.343	1.776	.139
	Within Groups	4.056	21	.193		
	Total	6.800	29			

Based on the information from the Table 3, there were no significant differences between the effects of RFF with a significance of (.403) and PFF with a significance of (.352) in terms of improving vocabulary learning at intermediate level. It can be concluded that RFF and PFF techniques improved the participants' vocabulary learning at intermediate level; however, there were not statistically significant differences between the two techniques based on post-test scores.

## 9. Discussion

This study investigated the effectiveness of two kinds of form focused instruction: reactive and pre-emptive FF. The results of this research indicated that both reactive and pre-emptive focus on form improved the intermediate vocabulary learning. However, there were no significant differences between two techniques of form-focused instruction in terms of improving the learners' vocabulary learning. These results support Lightbown and Spada's (1990) claim that "accuracy, fluency, and overall communicative skills are probably best developed through instruction that primarily meaning focused but in which guidance is provided through form focused activities and

correction in context" (p.443).

One of the great challenges for foreign language teaching has been the implementation of procedures that help learners process comprehensible input while at the same time giving them opportunities for language awareness. In other words, effective language teaching needs input processing and acquisition, which has combined with focus on form (Bourke, 2008). Language awareness has to do with the raising of learners' awareness of feature of the target language. Hence, the teacher's role is no longer "all knowing one", but that of the "facilitator of learning".

The results of this study also provide support for previous feedback studies (Doughty & Valera, 1998) which revealed that negative evidence is beneficial to L2 learning when it specifically targets particular forms. They are in agreement with Schmidt's (1990, 2001) noticing hypothesis which hold that noticing, a cognitive process, that involves attending to the input learners receive, is inevitably a conscious process and is a necessary condition for second language learning. They are also in sharp contrast with the proponents of non-interface hypothesis such as Krashen (1982) who referred to "error correction as a serious mistake and argued that it should be limited to rules that

can be learnt" (p.74).

In addition, the results of this study are in accord with Williams and Evans (1998) study who demonstrated that the group with FF tasks showed more achievements.

Also, the results of current study confirms that FFI has much positive effect on vocabulary learning in EFL context and the arguments that both FF and FFs instructions are valuable.

Moreover, the finding is consistent with the finding of Alcon (2007); Farrokhi (2005); Jahangardi (2010) that FFI is one of the good options for English teachers to use in their classrooms.

## 10. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of two kinds of form-focused instruction on vocabulary learning. The results of this research indicated that learners in form-focused instruction groups outperformed control group. These findings were related to main goals and features of FFI including depth of processing hypothesis, discovery learning, pushed output, noticing hypothesis, awareness raising, negotiation, and motivation.

The findings of this study have some implications for second language teachers since they would be aware of which kinds of instruction would be more effective in vocabulary learning in intermediate level. In addition, they will know different techniques for application of these instructions especially in classroom context. Moreover, the results of this research can have implications for material developers help them design tasks to provide opportunities for focus on the most effective approach.

However, there are certain delimitations in this study. First, this study is limited to intermediate level. There can be more in investigations for elementary and advanced levels of proficiency to infer some generalizations. Second, in this study reactive and pre-emptive techniques were used. There are some other types of form-focused instructions that can be considered in such investigations. Third, the participants were Iranian and from Iran Language Institute, so the results cannot be generalized to learners of other nationalities.

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