Focus on form—a myth in the making?

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This article addresses a developing myth in language teaching based on Long’s (1988) focus on form. Long’s approach assumes that form-focused instruction is best provided during communicative activity, and is justified only by difficulties in communication. It also casts form-focused instruction in separate sessions—otherwise known as focus on formS—in a negative light. This article argues that the advocacy of focus on form as the most effective teaching strategy is only theoretically motivated, and lacks credibility in terms of the empirical evidence available. To demonstrate this, it takes oft-cited research used to support a focus on form, and demonstrates that the supposed focus on form instruction actually entailed the contributive use of a focus on formS. Further, it shows that comparative research reveals that a focus on formS is consistently just as effective, or more, than other options. The article concludes with suggestions as to how we might prevent the creation of myths.

Introduction

The developing myth in question derives indirectly from the less-than-impressive results achieved by the non-interventionist version of communicative language teaching in the 80s, which refused to give a systematic role to grammar instruction, and instead gave priority to the exposure to comprehensible input (CI). Since then, a number of applied linguists led by Long (1988) have proposed an approach they termed a ‘focus on form’. This assumes that CI is best experienced through classroom interaction, which is supported by attention to form provided incidentally when justified by communicative need. This is contrasted with a focus on formS, which is equated with the traditional teaching of discrete points of grammar in separate lessons. The developing myth has it that a focus on form is the most effective teaching option.

Focus on form in practice

Before pursuing the implications of the Long dichotomy and the developing myth, it will prove useful to couch this choice in practical terms. An underlying assumption of a focus on form approach is that all classroom activity needs to be based on communicative tasks, and that any treatment of grammar should arise from difficulties in communicating any desired meaning. Further, that treatment preferably takes the form of quick corrective feedback allowing for minimal interruption in communicative activity. However, if on occasion there is a need for more extended grammar instruction, it is considered...
preferable to base it on grammar-problem-solving tasks, and not on explicit language instruction. It is important to understand the implications of these features in terms of the overall syllabus. It means that a central planning feature is its task structure, designed to answer the needs of the students. As the treatment of grammar depends on unplanned problems in communication arising during communicative activities, there is no grammar syllabus.

Further, the only grammar to be dealt with is that which causes a problem of communication, and not with a problem of form. If a student were to say, for example, ‘Your wife, where she go tomorrow?’ this would not justify interrupting the on-going activity because the meaning is unambiguous. On the other hand, if a francophone student were to say ‘She gave me his book’, it is feasible that the student actually meant to say ‘her book’, and that the mistake arose from the difference between possessive determiners in English and French. As this error can cause a breakdown in meaning, the teacher would be justified in devoting time to bringing the students to an understanding of this difference, by means of problem-solving tasks. (See White 1998 for an example of a focus on form using such tasks, and for her conclusion that a more explicit teaching of the contrastive problems involved would have been preferable.)

**Focus on formS in practice**

A focus on formS approach shares with that of a focus on form the assumption that communicative activity is the underlying priority of the classroom. However, it assumes that given the great difficulty of learning the grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language, these cannot be learnt effectively as a by-product of communicative activity, or simply by carrying out problem-solving activities. It proposes rather a skills-learning approach, and comprises three stages: (1) providing understanding of the grammar by a variety of means, including explanation in the L1, pointing out differences between the L1 and the L2, and aural comprehension activities intended to focus students’ attention on the forms being used; (2) written and oral exercises that entail using the grammar in both non-communicative and communicative activities; (3) providing frequent opportunities for communicative use of the grammar to promote automatic and accurate use. Though it assumes that this is the most effective means of teaching grammar, it does not preclude any of the techniques used in a focus on form, as it adopts an eclectic approach to classroom activities.

We now return to the issue of the choice between a focus on form and a focus on formS as presented in the literature by applied linguists. However, we shall return later to more practical considerations in reviewing relevant comparative research, and in describing an on-going comparative study entailing the two options.

**The polarization of the dichotomy**

In the ensuing discussion, it is crucial to understand that the dichotomy proposed by Long is theoretical in nature. A focus on form is perceived as being compatible with currently-accepted theories of SLA, whilst a focus on formS is perceived as being incompatible with these. In fact, it is viewed as being so ill-adapted to learning needs that it is characterized as ‘Neanderthal’ (Long 1988: 136).
It is unfortunate that the dichotomy has been characterized in this way, for it has created an unnecessary polarization which has resulted in one of them—a focus on form being stigmatized as unworthy of consideration, whilst the other, a focus on form, is being accepted a priori as the preferred option. However, this results purely from theorizing on the nature of SLA, and not on the rigorous and reliable long-term trialling of these options in the classroom. Such trialling is necessary because our knowledge of the nature of the process of classroom SLA is so limited that theoretically-driven advocacies are not sufficient to justify unquestioned acceptance. They can only be justified if extended trialling provides reliable and supportive empirical evidence. If such evidence is not forthcoming, the greater effectiveness of a focus on form will remain hypothetical. If applied linguists continue to claim it to be the most effective option, in spite of this lack, they will be in the process of creating a myth. It will be contended here that this is what is taking place at the moment.

The developing myth

The myth that a focus on form is more effective than a focus on formS is gaining credibility because a number of applied linguists have tended to accept the assumption underpinning Long’s dichotomy, seemingly assigning a focus on formS to the limbo of applied linguistics. They have thus largely confined their concerns and their research to various exponents of a focus on form (see Doughty and Varela 1998; Lightbown 1998; White 1998), ignoring the claims that a focus on formS has to serious consideration. Two examples—those of Doughty and Varela (1998), and Lightbown (1998)—are of particular interest, for they purport to provide empirical evidence in support of the greater effectiveness of focus on form, and are often cited in that vein. Doughty and Varela (1998) recommend that grammar should only be the object of some sort of intervention when it is the cause of a breakdown in communication, and then, only by means of feedback in the form of recasts or other means of correction. They state: ‘Therefore, in our view, a quintessential element of the theoretical construct of focus on form is its dual requirement that the focus must occur in conjunction with—but must not interrupt—communicative interaction.’ Lightbown (1998: 193), whilst supporting this approach, does allow for very brief (no more than a minute) grammatical explanations. Separate grammar lessons tend, however, to be viewed in a negative light because of the above-mentioned incompatibility with the underlying theory of SLA. None the less, the occasional use of separate grammar lessons is allowed for, but in ‘as-yet-unspecified’ situations. (ibid.: 194). Nor, however, does the empirical evidence provided by these two examples of focus on form withstand scrutiny. In the first place, the students in both studies benefited from an additional focus on formS in separate lessons; in the second place, the instructional effects were not compared with the effects achieved by a focus on formS option and cannot, therefore, be considered a valid argument in favour of a focus on form. (See Sheen 2000, for further analyses of these two studies and others.)

A survey of a variety of relevant studies

Further evidence of the unjustified bolstering of the claims of a focus on form at the expense of a focus on formS is provided in Norris and Ortega (2000), and in the way in which it is cited. Lightbown (2000: 445) cites it
as providing evidence of the positive value of a focus on form, whilst Long (2000: 189) goes even further, contending that it ‘... finds a focus on form superior to a focus on formS ...’. However, they both fail to mention the authors’ positive findings in favour of a focus on formS, and to point out that the article does not use Long’s criteria to differentiate a focus on form from a focus on formS. For example, it classifies Van Patten and Sanz (1995) as an example of a focus on form, though an essential feature of that study entails an explanation of discrete items of grammar unconnected to a need created by an immediate communicative activity, thus disqualifying it, in Long’s terms, as focus on form. Moreover, the Norris and Ortega meta-analysis utilizes criteria which entail the exclusion of all pre-1980 comparative studies, and a number of puzzling omissions among those published after that date. Their conclusion (p. 501) that ‘... a focus on form and focus on formS are equally effective’ should therefore be treated with scepticism. If Norris and Ortega had used Long’s criteria to decide what does and what does not constitute a focus on form, and had they included all relevant studies, their conclusion would have been in favour of a focus on formS. It is, therefore, both unfortunate and misleading that Lightbown (2000) and Long (2000) provide such an unrepresentative and misleading characterization of the conclusion of this work.

### The unjustified bias in favour of a focus on form

This less-than-complete and sometimes misleading representation in the literature of findings relating to the value of a focus on formS adds to the gathering momentum of the focus on form bandwagon. Recent publications accept it as the preferred option, ignoring the evidence in favour of a focus on formS and concentrating their endeavours on various means of implementing a focus on form (see, among others, Nassaji 1999, Ellis et al. 2001). This is particularly regrettable in the case of Ellis et al. (2001), since in Ellis (1994), the author argues that ‘... it may be premature to reject a focus on formS approach.’ (p. 641). Since then there has been no published comparative study demonstrating that a focus on form is more effective than a focus on formS (in fact, the reverse is the case)—so there appears to be no reason for Ellis to have modified that stance. Yet Ellis et al. accept without question a focus on form approach.

There is, then, a tendency on the part of researchers to ignore the claims of a focus on formS, and a corresponding tendency to promote a focus on form. However, given the fact that many teachers do, in fact, practise some sort of a focus on formS, there is an urgent need to publish critical reviews of the findings of method comparison research both past and present, and to carry out further research studies on the relative effectiveness of these two approaches. It is also essential that teachers be provided with reliable comparative findings to counter-balance the largely unsupported theoretical arguments advanced by applied linguists in support of a focus on form.

### Comparative studies

Space limitations prevent an extensive review of such research here. However, there are certain salient features of such comparative studies which need to be emphasized:
They have largely focused on two types of teaching strategies: implicit (also called inductive) and explicit (also called deductive). Examples of the implicit are: the direct method, the natural method, audiolingualism, strong CLT, and various aspects of focus on form strategies. Examples of the explicit are: grammar translation, cognitive code-learning, and focus on form as in a skills-learning approach.

In the late 60s and 70s much comparative research was carried out. Von Elek and Oskarsson (1973) did a thorough review of this, and concluded that:

‘The only safe conclusion one can draw is that, in the teaching of foreign grammar to adults, such techniques as grammatical explanations, deductive presentations of the subject matter, translation, the use of the native language, and contrastive analysis’, are jointly superior to the combination of techniques constituting the implicit method.’ (p. 201)

Though the implicit method referred to here was often the audiolingual method, the findings still impose on those who advocate other implicit strategies the obligation to first compare their effectiveness with a focus on form approach. This obligation has been largely ignored by advocates of a focus on form.

Applied linguists reacted negatively to these comparative research findings, contending that they were unreliable because a number of extraneous variables had not been controlled. Though this is true, there is one undeniable fact, which is that in many comparative studies carried out since then, explicit strategies have consistently proven to be either the most effective, or the equal of other options, depending on the skill being evaluated. Though advocates of a focus on form might argue that the bulk of the comparative research did not involve an exponent of a focus on form, what that research does do is to demonstrate that a focus on form has a legitimate claim to serious consideration in future comparative research. This is a realization manifest in White’s 2001 conference presentation in Quebec, in which she admitted, to her credit, that she had been naive in ignoring an explicit approach in her 1998 article. In her 2001 paper, she compared the relative effectiveness of a focus on form with a focus on form, with the latter proving to be significantly more effective.

An ongoing comparative study of a focus on form and a focus on form

A similar interim finding has resulted from on-going comparative research I have been conducting for the last school year in an elementary school in Quebec (see Sheen 2001). In this school, two sixth grade classes have been taught since their fourth grade by a focus on form approach employed by a teacher thoroughly dedicated to a classroom characterized by a task-dominated syllabus, an insistence on ‘English only’ at all times, and an absence of any systematic teaching of grammar. In the study, the teacher has continued to teach one of the classes (the control group—CG) as he has always done, adding, however, corrective feedback on erroneous interrogative forms. As to the other group (i.e. the experimental group, also known as ‘EG’) the teacher has also continued as usual except for allowing the researcher (myself) to provide a focus on
formS for approximately one hour a week. Of course, this is not ideal in terms of putting a focus on formS to the test, since the other English classes of the EG took place as a three-hour block during which the grammar taught in the study was not touched upon. The EG students, therefore, had been given ample time to forget what they had been taught, and what they had practised in teacher-fronted and pair-work exercises for one hour each week.

Pre-testing of the two groups

In a pre-test involving an aural comprehension test and an oral interview, both groups achieved very similar results, with the CG proving to be marginally stronger than the EG. They both showed good comprehension skills, but proved weak in producing correct question forms, the average success rate being 10%. Further, where the students did produce correct forms, it sounded suspiciously like ‘chunking’ rather than the product of an internalized underlying rule. Thus, of the 50% of students who were able to say ‘Do you like ...?’, none could produce a correct form when a different verb and person was involved.

Interim results of the study

For the following two months, a focus on formS approach was used to teach question forms in a variety of tenses to the EG. After two months, both groups were subjected once again to a post-test in the form of oral interviews (recorded on tape, as were all interviews in this study) which were broadly similar to the first. The CG showed no change in their use of question forms, whereas the EG improved its average success rate to 75%, with three students achieving 100% and the two weakest students achieving 40%. This entailed producing ten questions such as ‘Do you speak French?’, ‘What did your wife do last night?’, ‘Where were you born?’, ‘How long has your father lived here?’, ‘What is he going to do tonight?’, and ‘What do you do every Saturday?’ The use of such questions was provoked by giving instructions in both English and French to find out specific information concerning the interviewer (myself).

Further results

There then followed a six-week break during Christmas 2001 when I had no access to the students. On my return to teaching the EG, both groups took a further post-test on question forms and a pre-test on a new area of grammar—the position of adverbs such as sometimes, frequently, rarely, often, always, and never. This presented a difficult problem for francophones, because of the position of such adverbs in French.

In the post-test, the CG performed as before whilst the EG’s performance dropped to an average of 50% success rate, with the strongest and the weakest achieving 70% and 25%, respectively. In the pre-test on adverbs, both groups achieved an average of 5% success rate.

During the following seven weeks, the EG benefited from revision of the question forms and teaching of the use of the adverbs in English, as opposed to use in French. Both groups again took oral interviews testing both question forms and adverb position. Once again, the CG showed no difference in the results of their other tests. The EG again increased its performance on question forms to an average 77%, and on adverb position to an average of 74%.
I am not suggesting here that the oral interviews permitted a reliable evaluation of the spontaneous use of question forms and adverb placement. In fact, in subsequent task-work requiring students to ask questions under time-pressure of their fellow students, appreciably fewer correctly-formed questions were asked. However, what is of significance is that a good proportion of the students, who in their pre-test produced no correct questions, were able to produce some quite difficult questions correctly under time pressure. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that a focus on formS approach allowed the students to understand the underlying grammar, and then use it in producing accurate language orally. Further, it enabled some of them to produce the forms taught correctly in near-spontaneous conditions. However, at the same time, it needs to be made clear that the weaker students had great difficulty in such situations, manifested in the occasional combining of two auxiliary verbs in the same question, such as ‘What do you will do ...?’, thus providing substance to the both persuasive and rather obvious argument that different types of students fare best with different types of teaching and learning strategies.

Whatever the success rate of the students, as all teachers know, this passage from declarative knowledge and use under controlled-exercise conditions to truly spontaneous use in natural communicative situations is a giant step. Following a skills-learning approach, this step entails providing the students with frequent opportunities to practise these forms in communicative situations in order to render them automatic.

Given these results, this on-going research constitutes a qualified endorsement of a focus on formS approach. It helped the students in the EG to make solid progress in the two targeted grammatical areas, whilst the CG, benefiting only from a focus on form, continued producing largely incorrect forms, thus allowing fossilization to continue to develop. However, to be fair to the CG, the testing did not involve global ability, which is the target of the task-based approach used by the class teacher. But then again, as the initial pre-tests demonstrated that the teaching approach had not, after over two years of learning, enabled the students to produce accurate language orally, this effect of a focus on formS approach is of some significance. Further, both groups were given an aural comprehension test at the same time as the latest oral interviews. Even though the CG were considered by the teacher to be the stronger of the two groups, the EG proved stronger in this particular test with a success rate of 78% compared to the 65% of the CG.

All this said, however, and given the tentativeness of the findings of any single study in terms of external validity, there needs to be multiple replication of studies comparing the effectiveness of a focus on formS and a focus on form. What these findings, and those of other studies involving a focus on formS do, is to demonstrate the justification of the essential inclusion of a focus on formS in future comparative studies.
Developing myths are often used as arguments to support new teaching practices and subsequent unjustified reforms. Since they often originate in the research and writing of applied linguists, the remedy to the problem lies largely with them. The following proposals suggest how this may be achieved.

First, applied linguists need to be aware of any developing myth, and to avoid the mindset engendered by it. In this specific case, that mindset resulted in researchers carrying out comparative research, yet often failing to include in their research designs a treatment involving a focus on form. As such an option has consistently proved to be either the most effective, or among the most effective, it simply does not make sense to carry out comparative research and not include it. Instead, it should be considered as the yardstick by which the results achieved by other treatments are judged.

Second, anonymous reviewers and editors of journals need to adopt more stringent standards in accepting manuscripts advocating some new teaching practice, since such advocacy needs to be supported by empirical evidence derived from long-term trialling in normal classrooms. Furthermore, that empirical evidence needs to be derived from studies of a comparative nature to ensure that the option advocated has been demonstrated to be the most effective.

Third, applied linguists need to devote their energies to the observation, description, and analysis of what occurs in real classrooms, in order to attempt to correlate teaching and learning practices with successful learning outcomes in the long term. More specifically, what is needed is a return to the long-term comparative studies of the 60s and 70s (see Von Elek and Oskarsson 1973). Though such studies pose problems in terms of reliability (see, for example, the criticisms made of The Pennsylvania Foreign Language Project discussed in Smith 1970), comparative findings remain the most valid means of evaluating the relative effectiveness of different options. As the future debate on grammar instruction will almost certainly revolve around a choice between exponents of a focus on form and a focus on form, we shall need multiple, extended, comparative, and replication studies in order to allow us to make informed choices, and to nip developing myths in the bud.

Fourth, in the area of reforms, teachers need to play a more active role. In order to do so, they should become aware of the background to controversies in applied linguistics, such as the present one on focus on form. They need to do so in order to be sufficiently well-informed to hold up to scrutiny proposed reforms putatively justified by research findings. If that scrutiny reveals major weaknesses, and an absence of positive long-term trialling, they need to express their collective opposition to them. In particular, they need to beware of applied linguists bearing gifts supported by theoretical argument, but bereft of empirical evidence derived from extended comparative studies.

Finally, some might feel that I have presented a less-than-completely-neutral argument here. This may have some substance. However, I
would argue that as the majority of applied linguists have largely argued in favour of a focus on form, and have repeated, mantra-like, the putative ills of a focus on form, there is a need to redress the balance. This, I hope, I have gone some way to doing.

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