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TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 35, No. 3. (Autumn, 2001), pp. 407-432.

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Preemptive Focus on Form in the ESL Classroom

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This article contributes to the growing body of descriptive research investigating *focus on form*, defined as the incidental attention that teachers and L2 learners pay to form in the context of meaning-focussed instruction. Whereas previous research addressed reactive focus on form (i.e., corrective feedback), the study reported in this article investigated preemptive focus on form (i.e., occasions when either the teacher or a student chose to make a specific form the topic of the discourse). The study found that in 12 hours of meaning-focussed instruction, there were as many preemptive focus-on-form episodes (FFE) as reactive FFEs. The majority of the preemptive FFEs were initiated by students rather than the teacher and dealt with vocabulary. Students were more likely to *uptake* a form (i.e., incorporate it into an utterance of their own) if the FFE was student initiated. The preemptive FFEs were typically direct, that is, they dealt with form explicitly rather than implicitly. Despite this, they did not appear to interfere unduly with the communicative flow of the teaching. The article concludes by arguing that preemptive focus on form deserves more attention from classroom researchers than it has received to date.

It is now common to distinguish *meaning-focussed* and *form-focussed* approaches to teaching in discussions of language pedagogy (e.g., Ellis, 1997; Nunan, 1993). The former is evident in the *strong version* of communicative language teaching (Howatt, 1984), which is predicated on the assumption that linguistic knowledge is acquired through communication rather than through direct instruction. It is also reflected in the claims advanced for task-based language teaching (Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996); tasks serve as devices for providing opportunities for learners to focus on meaning and, thereby, to acquire the target language. Form-focussed instruction, in contrast, involves attempts to intervene directly in the process of interlanguage construction by drawing learners' attention to or providing opportunities for them to practice specific linguistic features.

An issue of key theoretical and practical import is whether meaning-focussed language pedagogy is sufficient to ensure success in acquiring an L2. Here considerable differences of opinion can be found. Krashen (1981, 1994) argues that the necessary and sufficient conditions for second language acquisition (SLA) are the availability of comprehensible input and a low affective filter in the learner, and he claims that only meaning-focussed instruction can meet these conditions. Similarly, Prabhu (1987) has argued that attempts to focus learners' attention on grammatical form is "unhelpful" and that instruction should instead be concerned with "creating conditions for coping with meaning in the classroom" (p. 2) by following a task-based syllabus.

Though few teacher educators or researchers would currently deny the importance of meaning-focussed instruction, many now recognize that it needs to be complemented with form-focussed instruction of some kind (Lightbown, 1992; Long, 1991). Studies of immersion education (Genesee, 1987; Swain, 1985) have shown that despite plentiful meaning-focussed instruction, learners typically fail to develop high levels of grammatical or sociolinguistic competence, suggesting the need for some attention to linguistic form. Learners who experience only meaning-focussed instruction typically do not achieve high levels of proficiency, as measured by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Test (Higgs & Clifford, 1982). If learners are to benefit from form-focussed instruction, TESOL professionals need to better understand when and how focus on form occurs in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to investigate the amount of preemptive focus on form, as revealed through occasions when either the teacher or a student chose to make a specific form the topic of the discourse during meaning-focused ESL classroom activities. Results add to previous research into reactive focus on form (i.e., corrective feedback) in L2 classrooms.

THE NEED FOR FOCUS ON FORM

Despite relatively broad acceptance of the need for focus on form, theoretical explanations for the value of form-focussed instruction vary. One claim, advanced by Felix (1985) and Schachter (1989), is that L2 learners (especially adults) do not have access (or complete access) to the same acquisitional mechanisms as do children acquiring their L1 (i.e., a specific language faculty), which operate solely on the basis of positive evidence, and thus L2 learners need to call on general inductive learning mechanisms. Such mechanisms make use of negative evidence (e.g., error correction). On the basis of this claim, one can argue that

form-focussed instruction that makes such evidence available is not only helpful but even necessary for adult learners to acquire an L2.

Another explanation draws on information-processing models, which posit that, due to limited processing capacity, learners—especially beginners—have difficulty in attending simultaneously to form and meaning. In contexts that require attention to meaning (as in task-based instruction), learners may find it difficult to give attention to form. Because of the need to process input in real time in such contexts, they may be forced to rely on top-down strategies such as guessing and predicting, which may be cost-effective where communication is concerned but which obviate the need to attend closely to form. VanPatten's (1990) experimental study of low-proficiency learners found clear evidence that "attention to form in the input competes with attention to meaning" (p. 296), suggesting that intake of new forms is possible only when input is easy to understand. Clearly, if learners do not or cannot easily attend to form in meaning-focussed instruction, they need specific activities that draw attention to form.

According to Schmidt's (1990, 1994) Noticing Hypothesis, such attention is necessary for acquisition to take place. Further, Schmidt argues that noticing is a conscious process. It follows that form-focussed instruction that induces learners to pay conscious attention to forms in the input, especially those that they might otherwise ignore (e.g., third-person *-s* in the present simple tense), can assist interlanguage development. This has led to proposals for form-focussed instruction based on input processing (VanPatten, 1996) and the use of interpretation tasks (Ellis, 1995). Taken together, these theoretical explanations provide a compelling rationale for including form-focussed instruction in second/foreign language curricula. The question remains, however, as to how best to achieve this.

ACHIEVING FORM-FOCUSSED INSTRUCTION

Any answer to this question needs to consider that form-focussed instruction cannot work unless the instructional syllabus matches the learner's built-in syllabus. This requirement, first raised by Corder (1967) and subsequently framed as the Teachability Hypothesis by Pienemann (1989), holds that teachers must be familiar with the order and sequence of acquisition that learners in general manifest and the developmental stage that individual learners have reached. Only in this way can teachers be certain that a learner will be ready to acquire the specific linguistic features they are targeting in their teaching. As Long (1985), among others, has pointed out, teachers are unlikely to achieve

this familiarity. One reason is that knowledge of developmental orders and sequences remains sketchy after 30 years of research in SLA. A second reason is the logistic problems teachers will experience in determining the precise stage of development that individual students have reached. Thus, the effective teaching of discrete linguistic forms might not be feasible even if it can be theoretically justified. Drawing on such arguments, Long (1988) comments,

I do not think . . . that there is any evidence that an instructional programme built around a series (or even a sequence) of isolated forms is any more supportable now, either theoretically, empirically or logically, than it was when Krashen and others attacked it several years ago. (p. 136)

Thus Long concludes that there is nothing to be gained by attempting to systematically teach isolated linguistic forms in accordance with a structural syllabus—an approach he characterises as *focus on forms*.

However, unlike Krashen, Long (1991) believes that some attention to form is needed. He argues that attention to form needs to be incorporated into meaning-focussed activity, an approach that he refers to as *focus on form*. He defines this as follows: “Focus on form . . . overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (pp. 45–46). Focus on form is seen as psycholinguistically plausible because it stimulates the kind of attention to form that occurs in natural language acquisition, because it addresses linguistic problems that individual learners are actually experiencing, and because it encourages the kind of noticing that has been hypothesized to aid acquisition. Long suggests that a focus on form occurs when learners participate in interactions in which communication problems arise, leading to attempts to negotiate for meaning, as in this example:¹

1. NS: with a small pat of butter on it
NNS: hm hmm
NS: and above the plate
NNS: what is buvdaplate?
NS: above
NNS: above the plate
NS: yeah (Pica, 1992, p. 225)

¹ Transcription conventions are as follows:

S	student
T	teacher
CAPITALS	emphasis
()	extra information
(1)	timed pause
?	rising intonation
. . .	continuing discourse

Here the learner fails to decode the phrase *above the plate* and seeks clarification, as a result of which she is able to identify the constituents of the phrase and thus understand it. Through negotiation of this kind, learners' attention is drawn temporarily to form in ways that are hypothesized to aid acquisition. In contrast to a focus-on-forms approach, which involves an attempt to preselect specific forms for attention, focus on form occurs incidentally in meaning-centred interaction and is necessarily transitory. Thus, whereas a focus on forms requires a structural syllabus, a focus on form does not; it is achieved through attention to form when learners are performing a communicative task.

(RE)DEFINING FOCUS ON FORM

The term *focus on form* has since been stretched beyond the meaning that Long (1991) originally assigned to it. Doughty and Williams (1998b), for example, point out that "there is considerable variation in how the term 'focus on form' is understood and used" (p. 5). In many of the studies in the book they edited (Doughty & Williams, 1998a), focus on form has been reinterpreted as proactive attention to form (i.e., preselected forms are taught through communicative activities). For example, Doughty and Varela (1998) report a classroom experiment in which a science report task served to create contexts for the use of past tense. Teachers were instructed to provide focus on form by means of confirmation checks and recasts when learners failed to use the target structure. This task constitutes a clear example of what Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) have called a *structure-based communicative task*.² Such tasks constitute a very different kind of focus on form from the one Long initially envisaged in that attention to form is no longer incidental but proactive (i.e., planned), and it is intensive rather extensive (i.e., it involves repetitive exposure to a single preselected linguistic feature rather than nonrepetitive exposure to numerous linguistic features within a single lesson).

In the research reported here, we attempted to adhere closely to Long's (1991) original definition. Thus, in our definition, focus on form

1. occurs in discourse that is primarily meaning centred
2. is observable (i.e., occurs interactionally)
3. is incidental (i.e., is not preplanned)

² Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) suggest that structure-based communicative tasks should meet two criteria: (a) Structural accuracy is essential to meaning in the task, and (b) communicatively oriented feedback on structural accuracy needs to be incorporated into the design of the task. Doughty and Varela's (1998) task clearly meets both criteria.

4. is transitory
5. is extensive (i.e., several different forms are attended to in the context of a single lesson)

Criteria 1 and 4 figure in Doughty and Williams' (1998b) definition. The other three criteria distinguish our definition from their broader definition. In claiming that focus on form is observable, we wish not to intimate that it is not also a psycholinguistic phenomenon, as it clearly is (i.e., learners may notice the forms that are addressed interactionally), but to emphasize that from an instructional point of view focus on form must be defined behaviourally. In recognizing that focus on form is incidental, we are excluding proactive attempts to teach specific linguistic forms communicatively, as in studies by Doughty and Varela (1998) and Williams and Evans (1998). Incidental focus on form cannot be studied experimentally, as such studies necessarily require the preselection of a linguistic feature for investigation. Indeed, we believe that the main reason for the stretching of Long's initial definition was the desire of researchers like Doughty and Williams to conduct experimental studies. Finally, focus on form, as we have defined it, is extensive because it arises out of the various problems that occur in the context of meaning-focussed classroom interaction and not out of some preselected linguistic problem.

We have emphasised the differences between our definition of focus on form and that of Doughty and Williams (1998b) not to dispute the validity of their approach but to clarify the phenomenon we wish to study. Incidental, extensive focus on form is a very different phenomenon from planned, intensive form-focussed instruction, even when the latter occurs through discourse that is primarily meaning centred. The study of incidental focus on form requires an approach to research that is necessarily descriptive (i.e., entailing observation of meaning-focussed instruction to subsequently identify and analyze the focus-on-form episodes that occur) rather than experimental (i.e., constructing conditions in which focus on form is systematically varied across conditions).

Meaning-Focussed Instruction

In one key respect our definition of focus on form corresponds to that of Doughty and Williams (1998b)—like them, we see it as arising in instruction that is primarily meaning focussed. This raises the question of what is meant by meaning-focussed instruction.

To our minds, such instruction has two essential elements (Ellis, 2000a). First, it requires the classroom participants (teacher and students) to treat language as a tool for achieving some nonlinguistic goal

rather than as an object to be studied for the purposes of learning the language. Second, it requires the participants to function as users rather than as learners. We note that this definition of meaning-focussed instruction excludes any consideration of the quality of the instructional discourse. Thus, whether the exchanges that occur are didactic in nature, consisting of initiate-respond-feedback, as described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), or more natural, involving learner-initiated adjacency pairs (e.g., invite-accept), is not itself a criterion for meaning-focussed instruction although, of course, it may be a significant factor where acquisition is concerned (Ellis, 2000b). In meaning-focussed instruction, focus on form may or may not occur. As Seedhouse (1997b) has shown, instruction can lead to discourse that is entirely meaning focussed whereas at other times it can incorporate a dual focus. Our concern is with classroom discourse in which the primary concern is message conveyance but in which, from time to time, attention to form arises.

Reactive Versus Preemptive Focus on Form

Two kinds of focus on form can be identified whether the focus on form is proactive (planned) or incidental: reactive and preemptive (Long & Robinson, 1998). Reactive focus on form arises when learners produce an utterance containing an actual or perceived error, which is then addressed usually by the teacher but sometimes by another learner. Thus, it supplies learners with negative evidence. As Long and Robinson point out, this evidence can be *explicit* (e.g., the learner is told directly what the error is or is given metalingual information relating to the correct form) or *implicit* (e.g., the learner's deviant utterance is recast in the target language form). Doughty and Varela's (1998) study provided reactive focus on form of the implicit kind. There is a considerable literature on teachers' corrective feedback, including a number of recent descriptive studies (Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Oliver, 2000) and a review (Seedhouse, 1997a). These studies show that corrective feedback is common even in meaning-focussed language instruction (such as that found in immersion classrooms); that teachers typically favour indirect, implicit correction rather than direct, explicit correction; and that learners often do not *uptake* correction (i.e., they make no attempt to produce the correct utterance that has been modelled for them).³

³ Uptake is, of course, not the same as acquisition. The fact that a learner responds to a focus on form by producing the form correctly does not mean that the learner has acquired the form. However, it does indicate that the form has been noticed. Furthermore, pushing learners to produce language has been hypothesized to aid acquisition (Swain, 1985).

Reactive focus on form occurs in episodes that involve negotiation. Pica (1992), for example, defines *negotiation* as applying “to those interactions in which learners and their interlocutors adjust their speech phonologically, lexically, and morphosyntactically to resolve difficulties in mutual understanding that impede the course of their communication” (p. 200). In other words, negotiation arises as a response to a communicative problem. Two types of negotiation have been identified. The *negotiation of meaning* is entirely communicative in orientation, as it is directed at enabling the participants to achieve mutual understanding in order for communication to proceed. Example 1 above illustrates this type of negotiation. The *negotiation of form* is didactic in orientation, as it is directed at improving accuracy and precision when no problem of understanding has arisen. As Lyster and Ranta (1997) point out, both types of negotiation occur in meaning-focussed instruction (e.g., immersion classrooms), and both involve corrective feedback and thus are reactive in nature.

Like reactive focus on form, preemptive focus on form is problem oriented. However, the nature of the problem that is addressed is somewhat different. Whereas reactive focus on form involves negotiation and is triggered by something problematic that an interactant has said or written, preemptive focus on form involves the teacher or learner initiating attention to form even though no actual problem in production has arisen. To put it another way, reactive focus on form addresses a performance problem (which may or may not reflect a competence problem) whereas preemptive focus on form addresses an actual or a perceived gap in the students’ knowledge. The type of discourse that arises in preemptive focus on form differs from that found in reactive focus on form. Thus, whereas the latter takes the form of sequences involving a trigger, an indicator of a problem, and a resolution (Varonis & Gass, 1985; see Example 1), the former consists typically of exchanges involving a query and response.

Some examples of preemptive focus on form will make this distinction clear. Teachers sometimes predict a gap in their students’ knowledge and seek to address it, as in Example 2:

- 2. T: what’s the opposite of landing?
- S: take off
- T: take off
- SS: take off

Here the class is talking about a student’s upcoming airplane journey. The teacher takes time out from focussing on meaning to address a perceived gap in the students’ lexical knowledge—the item *take off*. Borg (1998) has shown that the experienced teacher he studied often pre-

empted grammar problems in this way. He notes that this teacher's approach to grammar was largely unplanned and that "he took decisions about what language points to focus on interactively" (p. 23). One of the problems of such teacher-initiated preemption, of course, is that the perceived gap may not be an actual gap. Thus, in the example above, the fact that the student is able to answer the teacher's question suggests that in fact the student already knows the meaning of *take off*. In student-initiated preemptions, however, the gap is presumably real (unless, of course, a student elects to focus on a form that he or she already knows). In the following example from an information-gap activity, it seems reasonable to suppose that the learner really does not know the meaning of *sacked*:

3. S: what's sacked?
 T: sacked is, when you lose your job, you do something wrong
 maybe, you steal something, and your boss says, right, leave the
 job

Williams (1999) examined preemptive focus on form in collaborative group work. She found that learners did not initiate attention to form very often but that the more proficient learners did so more frequently than the less proficient. The most likely context for preemptive focus on form by students was requests about vocabulary that were directed at the teacher.

What Is Form?

These two examples raise the question of what is meant by the term *form*. The term is often taken to refer exclusively to grammar, but in fact it need not and, indeed, in our opinion should not. Focus on form can be directed at phonology, vocabulary, grammar, or discourse. In Example 1 above the focus was on the segmentation of the phrase *above the plate*, a phenomenon that is in part phonological and in part grammatical. In Examples 2 and 3, the focus was on vocabulary—the meanings of the lexical forms *landing* and *sacked*. At first sight, these examples may appear to show a focus on meaning rather than a focus on form. However, this interpretation would be mistaken. The participants are primarily engaged in comprehending and producing messages in which they treat language as a tool and function as language users (i.e., there is a focus on meaning). Temporarily, they step out of this meaning-centred activity in order to treat the lexical forms *landing* and *sacked* as objects whose meanings can be learned. Thus, explicit attention to the meanings of specific lexical forms in the context of meaning-focussed activity

constitutes focus on form. We note that the term *focus on form* has always been used to refer not just to form but also to the meaning(s) that a form realises, in other words, to form-meaning mappings.

The purpose of the study reported below is to examine how preemptive focus on form was accomplished in the meaning-focussed lessons taught by two experienced ESL teachers. We observed ESL lessons that were meaning focussed with a view to gaining insight into whether, to what extent, and how the classroom participants engaged in preemptive focus on form. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How frequently did preemptive focus-on-form episodes (FFE) occur?
2. What did the preemptive FFEs consist of?
3. What aspects of language did the preemptive FFEs address?

METHOD

The research was descriptive in Seliger and Shohamy's (1989) sense of this term. That is, it sought to "describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation" but had a "narrower scope of investigation" (p. 124) than qualitative research. The study consisted of two main stages. The first stage was identification of FFEs in a corpus of audio recordings taken from naturally occurring language lessons. The second stage was a detailed description of the FFEs found in the data, including quantification of aspects of them.

Instructional Setting

Two intact classes in a private English language school in Auckland, New Zealand, were selected as the site for data collection. One of these classes was an intermediate class (Class 1), and the other, a preintermediate class (Class 2). Classes at this language school are divided into eight proficiency levels, with intermediate and preintermediate representing Levels 5 and 4, respectively.

Reflecting the common practice in private language schools in Auckland of structuring class time into two parts, the lessons consisted of 3 hours of instruction divided by a 30-minute break. In the first part, comprising 60 minutes, the teacher focused primarily on grammatical forms. The instruction in this part, therefore, was of the focus-on-forms type. The second part of the lesson, comprising 90 minutes, occurred after the break, and in this part the instruction was primarily meaning focussed in that it had no predetermined linguistic focus, although there was some concern to provide opportunities for the students to practice

the structure taught in the first part of the lesson. The types of activities occurring in the second part of the lessons included role plays (e.g., a policeman interviewing a suspect about a robbery), jigsaw tasks (e.g., solving a murder mystery), general class discussions (e.g., a discussion of movie and story genres), opinion-gap tasks (e.g., making predictions about the future), reading comprehension activities (e.g., using information in a passage to fill in a hotel reservation form), listening activities, and talk about approaches to language learning (e.g., how to learn vocabulary). The data for the present study come entirely from the meaning-focussed activities in the second part of the lessons.

Participants

Each class consisted of 12 students, although attendance varied from day to day. Each class contained 5 male and 7 female students. Additionally, the nationalities represented in the two classes were very similar, with Class 1 consisting of 6 Japanese, 2 Koreans, 2 Swiss, 1 Thai, and 1 Brazilian, and Class 2 consisting of 4 Japanese, 3 Koreans, 3 Swiss, 1 Taiwanese, and 1 Brazilian. The students were fee paying and generally highly motivated. Some of them were studying English with a view to enrolling in English-medium academic programmes whereas others were interested in developing their general English.

Teacher 1 had taught full-time at the language school for 4½ years. She had completed the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) at the school and had started teaching upon passing the course. She was concurrently finishing a diploma course offered by the school. Teacher 2 had also completed the CELTA and had been teaching part-time at the language school for 2 years. The teachers were not made aware that the researchers intended to examine focus on form. They were simply told that the aim of the study was to examine classroom interaction during meaning-centred lessons.

Procedure

Data Collection

A wireless, clip-on microphone was attached to the teacher in each class to record whole-class interaction as well as the teachers' interaction with individuals and small groups. This procedure provided data relating to any interaction involving the teacher but not to interactions between learners when the teacher was not present. This constitutes a limitation of the study but perhaps not a major one, given Williams' (1999) finding

that relatively little focus on form occurs in such interactions. Using this method, we collected 14 hours of classroom instruction, 7 from each of the two teachers' classes.

Data Review

Two researchers reviewed the recordings to determine whether the instruction was in fact meaning focused. This process resulted in the exclusion of 2 hours of recordings of activities explicitly focused on pretargeted forms (e.g., filling in the correct verb forms in a story, choosing between active and passive forms). Thus, the final data for this study comprised 12 hours of meaning-focused classroom instruction.

Identification of FFEs

We then identified episodes in the instruction when participants took time out to deal with issues of linguistic form—termed *focus-on-form episodes*. Because the study was limited to focus on form that was interactionally accomplished, we excluded three types of episodes from the analysis. We did not consider episodes involving a problem related to content rather than to linguistic form (e.g., on one occasion the teacher asked a closed question about a date, and a student responded with the wrong date). Nor did we consider episodes involving a linguistic error with no attempt to address it or episodes in which an individual self-corrected an error.

Once identified, the FFEs were transcribed. A broad transcription was used, but pauses of any length were noted. The researcher subsequently listened to the recordings on several further occasions to check that (a) all FFEs had been identified, (b) the beginnings and endings of the FFEs had been correctly identified, and (c) each FFE had been accurately transcribed. Furthermore, two of the researchers independently coded a lesson sample of 45 minutes, with a resulting 91% agreement rate in the identification of FFEs.

Data Analysis

The FFEs were next subjected to detailed analysis. This led first to the identification of two broad categories of FFEs—reactive and preemptive. Reactive episodes were those that arose as a result of an actual or perceived error in something that a student had said. Thus they involved corrective feedback by means of the negotiation of meaning or form. Negotiation of form refers to attempts to establish a correct form interactionally even though no breakdown in communication has oc-

curred. For the purpose of this study, reactive FFEs were excluded from subsequent analyses. Preemptive episodes were those in which either the teacher or the student drew attention to a linguistic form even though no error in the use of this form had occurred. A further distinction was made between preemptive FFEs initiated by students and preemptive FFEs initiated by teachers.

Example 4 illustrates two student-initiated preemptive FFEs (underlined) in the data. This extract is taken from interaction in an information gap activity in which students had to decide if two people would make suitable partners. First, one student wants to know what *seeking* means. Then another student wants to know what *desperately* means. Having taken time out from the activity to deal with these two language items, the class then returns to discussing the compatibility of the two people.

4. T: just look here (pointing to title) desperately seeking someone,
okay desperately
S: what does seeking mean?
T: anyone? What does seeking mean?
S: seeking, like find?
T: seeking, look for
SS: ahh
T: yep, very good
S2: what desperately?
T: anyone? What's desperately?
S: eh, I know what mean, I don't know
S3: no, don't give up
T: don't give up, yes, but okay, looking for someone (acts it out)
okay looking for someone,
S4: don't give up
T: desperately looking for someone (acts) (gasp, gasp)
S: ah
T: yeah, you're very strong, you must find someone now
S: now, quickly
T: yeah, good

To check the reliability of coding into reactive and student- and teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs, a second researcher coded a random sample of 10% of all episodes, with a reliability level of $\kappa = .97$.

Examination of FFEs

In order to answer Research Questions 2 and 3, we examined the preemptive FFEs in fuller detail to determine the exact discourse moves they consisted of and their linguistic foci (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation). In a data-driven approach, we identified categories,

then validated them by returning to the data again and again to see if the categories could account for all the data. Once we were satisfied that they could, the data set was coded for the categories (described in detail in the Results section, where reliability measures are also reported). In order to determine if there were differences in the distributions of the categories, we subjected the raw frequency data to Pearson's chi-square tests using SPSS (1998). The alpha level was set at $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

RESULTS

How Frequently Did the Preemptive FFEs Occur?

Overall, 448 FFEs were identified in the 12 hours of message-focused teaching. Thus a focus on form occurred at a rate of 1 every 1.6 minutes. The FFEs were evenly divided between reactive and preemptive (223 and 225, respectively; see Table 1). There was a small difference between the two classes. In Class 1 the majority of FFEs were reactive, and in Class 2 the majority were preemptive. However, this difference is not significant, $\chi^2(2 \text{ df}, n = 448) = 1.941, p = .329$. Of the preemptive FFEs, the majority were student initiated in both classes (76 out of 99 in Class 1, and 89 out of 126 in Class 2).

What Did the Preemptive FFEs Consist Of?

We consider student-initiated and teacher-initiated FFEs separately as their interactional structure was quite different.

Student-Initiated FFEs

Preemptive student-initiated FFEs consisted of two obligatory moves, *trigger* and *response*, and one optional move, *uptake* (see Figure 1 for definitions). The trigger move was generally performed by a student,

TABLE 1
Frequency of Reactive and Preemptive FFEs

Category	Class 1	Class 2	Total
Reactive FFEs	108	115	223
Preemptive FFEs	99	126	225
Total	207	241	

Note. $\chi^2(2 \text{ df}, n = 448) = 1.941, p = .329$.

FIGURE 1
Structure of Preemptive Student-Initiated FFEs

1.	Trigger	A student asks a question about a specific linguistic item.
2.	Response	The teacher answers the question.
3.	Uptake	The student acknowledges the response, attempts to use the information provided, or tries to produce the target item.

although sometimes the teacher began the exchange by inviting students to ask about forms they found problematic. The teacher invariably performed the response move. Uptake, when it occurred, was always a student move. The interrater reliability for coding these categories, based on a random sample of 10% of all the FFEs, was trigger (Move 1), $\kappa = .85$; response (Move 2), $\kappa = .84$; and uptake (Move 3), $\kappa = .90$.

Uptake in these preemptive FFEs differs from uptake reported elsewhere (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997) because, to date, it has been studied only in relation to reactive feedback, in which it typically involves a learner's attempt to reformulate an initial utterance (e.g., by means of a recast). Uptake in preemptive FFEs was seen to be different. Minimally, it could consist of an acknowledgment. More substantially, it could involve an attempt to incorporate the information that had been provided (e.g., by summarising or paraphrasing it) or to actually produce the target form. We continue to refer to this as uptake on the grounds that the move (a) is optional and (b) provides evidence of whether the learner has attended to and incorporated information about a target form. In these respects it resembles uptake in reactive FFEs.

Student-initiated exchanges are illustrated in Examples 5 and 6. In Example 5 the participants address a grammatical problem (the choice of the present or past form of copula *be*). In the trigger in Turn 1, the student formulates the problem. The teacher's response occurs in Turns 2 and 4, with Turn 2 indicating the correct form and Turn 4 providing a metalingual explanation. The student's uptake move consists of an acknowledgment of the teacher's answer (i.e., the student makes no attempt within the FFE to incorporate or use the correct form).

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 5. | 1 | S: | I have a question. I met one of my friends who WAS or who IS from Thailand |
| | 2 | T: | IS from Thailand |
| | 3 | S: | ah |
| | 4 | T: | because it's always true she's always from Thailand |

Example 6 illustrates a more extended student-initiated FFE, but the basic structure is the same. The focus this time is on vocabulary (the meaning of the word *spoil*). The trigger is again a student question. Interestingly, even though this move contains an error (i.e., *means* instead of *mean*), the teacher ignores it in favour of addressing the student's question. The teacher's response covers several turns (i.e., Turns 2, 4, and 6). The student's uptake moves occur in Turns 7 and 9, the first consisting of an acknowledgment, and the second, of an attempt to incorporate the information supplied by the teacher.

6. 1 S: excuse me, T, what's spoil means?
2 T: spoil means
3 S: spoil
4 T: if you are my child
5 S: mhm
6 T: and you keep saying give me, give me sweets, give me money, give me football, let me watch TV, and I say yes all the time, yes, I spoil you, I give you too much because you always get what you want
7 S: ah, ah
8 T: so
9 S: they spoil them, mm, they always get whatever

Teacher-Initiated FFEs

Preemptive, teacher-initiated exchanges were found to fall into two patterns. In one, the teacher raised a question about a linguistic item; in the other, the teacher drew attention to a linguistic form by modelling or reminding the students about it. When the teacher initiated a linguistic query, one of two moves followed: (a) A student might answer the question, in which case no gap in the student's knowledge was evident, or (b) students might fail to answer the question. If no student response to the question was forthcoming, the teacher might choose to answer the question herself, or she might choose not to respond. If the teacher provided a response, then students had the option of reacting to that response with an uptake move. Thus, uptake could occur in teacher-initiated queries only if a student's failure to answer the query was followed by the teacher's provision of a response. When the teacher drew attention to a linguistic item through modelling or by reminding students, the students might respond; however, this was not coded as an uptake move because there was no evidence of a gap in the students' knowledge in such FFEs.

Example 7 illustrates the structure of a teacher-initiated query. The teacher begins with a query (Turn 1) to check whether the students know

what an *alibi* is. This is reiterated in Turns 2 and 3 in the form of clues. However, when no student volunteers an answer, the teacher herself provides the response in Turn 4. There is no uptake move in this exchange.

7. 1 T: what's an alibi?
(4)
2 T: S has an alibi
(3)
3 T: another name for a girlfriend?
(4.5) (laughter)
4 T: an alibi is a reason you have for not being at the bank robbery, okay, not being at the bank robbery

Frequency of Uptake Moves

Given the importance that is currently attached to uptake as a potential mechanism of acquisition (see, e.g., Lyster, 1998a; Swain, 1995), we calculated the frequency of the uptake moves in the teacher-initiated and student-initiated exchanges for each class (see Table 2). For this analysis we excluded teacher-initiated FFEs in which students supplied responses, as these episodes provide no opportunity for an uptake move. An uptake move was clearly much more likely to occur in student-initiated exchanges: In Class 1 and in Class 2, more uptake moves occurred in student-initiated FFEs than in teacher-initiated FFEs, and in both classes the difference was statistically significant.

TABLE 2
Frequency of Uptake Moves in Teacher- and Student-Initiated FFEs

Category	Class 1 ^a			Class 2 ^b		
	Teacher-initiated FFEs ^c	Student-initiated FFEs	Total	Teacher-initiated FFEs ^c	Student-initiated FFEs	Total
Uptake move	8	63	71	3	75	78
No uptake move	8	13	21	22	14	36
Total	16	76		25	89	

^aFisher's exact test resulted in $p = .008$ ($df, n = 92$). The robustness of the chi-square with small cell frequencies is questionable, so the Fisher's exact test was used instead of the chi-square. Like the chi-square, it tests the probability of independence among observations but calculates the probability directly rather than returning a statistic whose probability is checked. ^b $\chi^2(1 df, n = 114) = 47.179, p = .001$. ^cExcludes teacher-initiated FFEs in which students supplied response moves.

In looking at the uptake moves, we also noticed that some seemed more successful than others. *Successful uptake* was defined as uptake in which learners clearly demonstrated an ability to incorporate the information provided (e.g., by paraphrasing it) or to use the item correctly in their own utterances. *Unsuccessful uptake* was defined as uptake consisting of just an acknowledgment or a simple repetition of something the teacher had said or of the incorrect use of the item. Although such acknowledgments and repetitions were coded as uptake because they constituted a reaction to the information provided, they were coded as unsuccessful because they did not clearly indicate that students had processed the information. Interrater reliability for identifying uptake was $\kappa = .90$, and for coding successful uptake was $\kappa = .82$. In both classes, uptake in student-initiated FFEs was more successful than in teacher-initiated FFEs (see Table 3). This difference was statistically significant in Class 2 but not in Class 1.

What Aspects of Language Did Preemptive FFEs Address?

From the data, we observed that participants targeted the following types of linguistic items in their FFEs:

- *grammar*: for example, determiners, prepositions, pronouns, word order, tense, verb morphology, auxiliaries, subject-verb agreement, plurals, negation, question formation
- *vocabulary*: the meaning of open-class lexical items, including single words and idioms
- *spelling*: the orthographic form of words
- *discourse*: textual relations, such as text cohesion and coherence, and pragmatics, such as the appropriate use of specific forms according to social context

TABLE 3
Frequency of Successful and Unsuccessful Uptake Moves

Uptake moves	Class 1 ^a			Class 2 ^b		
	Teacher-initiated FFEs ^c	Student-initiated FFEs	Total	Teacher-initiated FFEs ^c	Student-initiated FFEs	Total
Successful	5	50	55	0	48	48
Unsuccessful	3	13	16	3	27	30
Total	8	63		3	75	

^aFisher's exact test resulted in $p = .368$ (1 *df*, $n = 71$). ^bFisher's exact test resulted in $p = .053$ (1 *df*, $n = 78$). ^cSee Table 2, Note c.

- *pronunciation*: suprasegmental and segmental aspects of the phonological system

Interrater reliability for identifying the linguistic focus of the FFEs, based on coding a random 10% of all FFEs, was $\kappa = .90$. The vast majority of preemptive FFEs in the two classes combined focussed on vocabulary (see Table 4). Of the total teacher-initiated FFEs, 60% addressed vocabulary. In the case of student-initiated FFEs, the percentage was even higher—66%. The only other aspect of language to receive much attention was grammar, accounting for nearly 27% of teacher-initiated FFEs and 19% of student-initiated FFEs.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine incidental focus on form as it arose naturally in the course of meaning-focussed ESL lessons involving adult students from mixed language backgrounds. To what extent were the lessons we observed meaning centred? Because the lessons followed on from lessons that involved an explicit focus on forms, they may not have been as meaning centred as they might have been without such a prelude. The initial focus on forms could have influenced the way the subsequent meaning-focussed tasks were conducted by inducing the classroom participants to pay special attention to form. However, we do not believe that this was the case for a number of reasons. First, relatively few (9.4%) of the FFEs in the second part of the lesson concerned the linguistic feature that was the target of the focus-on-forms part. The participants, then, did not seem to treat the second part as an opportunity to practise the structure targeted in the first part. Second, post-observation interviews with the teachers showed that their mind-set was

TABLE 4
Linguistic Focus of Preemptive FFEs

Linguistic focus	Teacher-initiated FFEs		Student-initiated FFEs		All FFEs	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Grammar	16	26.7	31	18.8	47	20.9
Vocabulary	36	60.0	109	66.1	145	64.4
Discourse	0	0.0	8	4.8	8	3.6
Pronunciation	6	10.0	7	4.2	13	5.8
Spelling	2	3.3	10	6.1	12	5.3
Total	60	100.0	165	100.0	225	100.0

on fluency rather than accuracy. For example, they specifically stated that they did not attend to form intentionally in the meaning-focussed activities. Third, the tasks that the teachers used were clearly meaning focussed. Finally, our observations indicated that the activity that arose out of these tasks was indeed predominantly meaning focussed. We are confident, therefore, that the data we collected were representative of instruction that was primarily meaning centred.

Frequency of Preemptive FFEs

The first research question addressed the frequency of occurrence of preemptive FFEs. In the classes investigated in this study, focus on form in general was a common occurrence, there being one FFE every 1.6 minutes. However, this level is similar to that reported in other studies of teacher-centred communicative instruction. Lyster (1998a), for example, reports that FFEs occurred at a rate of one every 1.97 minutes in immersion classrooms. This rate is slightly lower than in this study, but Lyster examined only reactive FFEs. Oliver (2000) reports 614 teacher responses to nontargetlike learner turns (i.e., reactive focus on form) in four meaning-centred ESL lessons (two with adults and two with children). Unfortunately, she does not indicate the length of the lessons, but from the descriptions provided it is unlikely they exceeded 12 hours (the length of the lessons in this study). Williams' (1999) study of learner-generated focus on form in small-group work suggests that the rate may be lower in this kind of instructional context.

A key question that can be asked of this study, and of Lyster's (1998a) and Oliver's (2000) studies, is: To what extent does the relatively high incidence of focus on form interfere with the overall focus on meaning? This question is not easy to answer as it relies on observers' judgments as to whether the interactions were primarily meaning focussed. According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), the kind of reactive feedback they studied "clearly does not break the communicative flow" (p. 57). Oliver (p. 141) also states that the high level of reactive focus on form she found in teacher-centred lessons occurred within the context of ongoing meaning-focussed exchanges. Seedhouse (1997b) illustrates how a teacher can accomplish a "dual focus" (i.e., focussing on meaning and form within a single exchange) without interrupting the "flow of the lesson" (p. 343). We also considered that the FFEs we observed were not unduly obtrusive. Typically, they consisted of very short side sequences in which the participants momentarily abandoned using language as a tool to treat it as an object. We believe that such behaviour is quite normal for adult, motivated learners, who quite naturally look for opportunities to learn about form even in activities that are meaning centred.

Inevitably, though, the question arises as to whether the type of attention to form we found in the preemptive FFEs differs in any real way from form-focussed instruction of the focus-on-forms kind. In fact, there are two important differences. The first is that, as we have already emphasized, the forms addressed in the preemptive FFEs all derived from meaning-focussed activity, which, as noted above, is what distinguishes focus on forms and focus on form. The second is that they involved the extensive rather than intensive treatment of form. That is, in focus on form, many forms are treated briefly within a single lesson whereas in focus on forms a single form is practised on multiple occasions within the same lesson. Both kinds of treatment have potential advantages and disadvantages. Intensive treatment is more likely to result in immediate gains in acquisition, but these gains will be limited to the relatively few forms that there will be time to treat in most courses of study. Extensive treatment provides an opportunity to acquire a large range of forms, but given the superficial and shallow treatment of each item, such an opportunity may not be effective in many cases. The two types of treatment are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

One of the main findings of the study, and one that we wish to emphasize, is that in the classrooms we investigated preemptive focus on form occurred as frequently as reactive focus on form. This finding is important because it suggests that researchers (and teachers) need to pay more attention to preemptive focus on form than has been the case to date. There is not a single study of preemptive focus on form in Doughty and Williams's (1998a) edited volume, although its existence is acknowledged. Likewise, pedagogic discussions of how to incorporate a focus on form into communicative teaching (e.g., Willis, 1996) do not refer to this type of focus on form. Both researchers and teacher educators have given attention almost exclusively to reactive focus on form (and in particular the treatment of error). We wish to argue that the fact that teachers and students deal with form in the context of meaning-focussed lessons by raising them preemptively as topics to be talked about constitutes a phenomenon of considerable significance.

Discourse in Preemptive FFEs

The second research question concerned the nature of the discourse observed in preemptive FFEs. We observed a number of differences between teacher-initiated and student-initiated preemptive focus on form. In initiating a focus on form, teachers need to decide which forms to attend to. Presumably, they use their experience to predict which forms are problematic. However, these forms constitute potential rather than actual gaps in the student's knowledge—the students may already

know the forms. In contrast, as we noted earlier, student-initiated focus on form is likely to involve actual gaps in the students' knowledge. This contrast suggests that student-initiated focus on form may be more efficient than teacher-initiated focus on form.

There are other grounds for preferring student-initiated focus on form. Slimani (1989) found that the students she investigated were more likely to report learning items if the items occurred in exchanges during a lesson in which a student rather than the teacher topicalized. Slimani found that students benefited not just from the exchanges they personally initiated but also from other students' topicalizations. A further advantage of student-initiated focus on form is that it appears to lead to a higher level of uptake than teacher-initiated focus on form does. Thus even though uptake was no more likely to be successful in student-initiated than in teacher-initiated FFEs, the actual number of successful uptake moves was greater because of the greater overall number of FFEs containing uptake. Also, in one of the classes, successful uptake was clearly more likely to occur in student-initiated exchanges.

Linguistic Focus of Preemptive FFEs

The final question addressed the linguistic focus of the preemptive FFEs. As in studies of reactive focus on form (e.g., Chaudron, 1977), the forms attended to are almost entirely lexical or grammatical. Over 60% of both the teacher-initiated and the learner-initiated FFEs addressed vocabulary. Williams' (1999) study of learner-generated focus on form in small groups reports an even higher percentage of lexically oriented FFEs (about 80%). Typically, lexical FFEs involve requests for the meanings of words. Such requests fit easily into meaning-centred activity and account, perhaps, for why we did not feel the focus on form interfered unduly with the communicativeness of the lessons.

Finally, we address a number of general issues. First, we note that the linguistic queries that initiated preemptive focus on form did not typically arise because of a communication breakdown but because the participants wanted to *learn* about a form, in Krashen's (1981) sense. Thus, the preemptive focus on form we observed in this study was generally not an emergent property of the attempt to communicate, as in studies of reactive focus on form (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998), but rather "time-outs" from communicating in which, briefly, the participants engaged in form-focussed instruction by functioning as learners and by treating language as an object. In the case of teacher-initiated FFEs, these time-outs were conducted in much the same way as traditional form-focussed instruction—through the use of display questions. However, in the case of student-initiated FFEs, which were in the

majority, the time-outs involved learners asking referential questions about forms that, presumably, constituted “holes” in their competence. This study did not address the question of whether such attention to form contributes to acquisition. Recent research by Swain and Lapkin (1998), however, suggests that it may do so.

Second, almost invariably, the type of information about form that learners gain from preemptive focus on form is of the explicit rather than the implicit kind. In all the examples of preemptive FFEs we have considered, learners often received metalingual information typically consisting of an explanation of a grammatical point or a definition of a lexical item. If, as Ellis (1993) has argued, explicit knowledge constitutes a valid target for instruction because it helps improve performance through monitoring and facilitate acquisition through noticing, preemptive focus on form may serve as an important source of such knowledge for students. The kind of explicit information provided in preemptive focus on form may be important for another reason—it promotes uptake, which current theories of SLA (e.g., Swain, 1995) hypothesize to be important for acquisition. One of the findings of Lyster’s research into reactive feedback (e.g., Lyster, 1998a; Lyster & Ranta, 1997) is that such feedback is much more likely to lead to learner uptake when it is explicit than when it is implicit. For example, Lyster and Ranta (1997) report that whereas uptake occurred only 31% of the time following recasts (a type of implicit feedback), it occurred 86% of the time following metalinguistic feedback. The provision of explicit information would seem to be more effective in promoting uptake. In this respect, then, preemptive focus on form may be more effective than reactive focus on form, which, as Seedhouse (1997a) has shown, is typically of the indirect, implicit kind.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored a neglected aspect of classroom teaching—preemptive focus on form. This exploration has been motivated by theories of SLA that emphasize the importance of attention to form in the context of meaning-centred activity. To date, researchers and teacher educators have concentrated on reactive focus on form as the main discourse mechanism for achieving such attention during instruction. On the basis of the study reported here, we wish to argue that preemptive focus on form may be just as important.

Clearly, a study of 12 hours of teaching involving two teachers does not permit generalizations about preemptive focus on form. Preemptive focus on form may feature less in other types of classrooms or with other teachers. We wonder, for example, whether immersion teachers and

younger students in a public school context are as likely to raise matters of form quite so frequently as the participants in this study did. Nevertheless, the results of this study indicate a need for researchers and teacher educators to recognize the potential importance of preemptive focus on form.

This study has not attempted to investigate in what ways and to what extent preemptive focus on form contributes to acquisition. In this respect, it is no different from descriptive studies of reactive focus on form (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Oliver, 2000; Williams, 1999). This is an obvious limitation of the research to date. However, before investigating the effects of incidental focus on form, one would need detailed descriptive information about how it is accomplished. This study contributes to that goal by providing information about the nature of preemptive focus on form as it takes place in actual classrooms.

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The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 82, No. 3, Special Issue: The Role of Input and Interaction in Second Language Acquisition. (Autumn, 1998), pp. 320-337.

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