Teachers’ Stated Beliefs About Focus on Form and Their Classroom Practice: A Comparison

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Abstract

According to Noticing Hypothesis, focus on form instruction is in nature an efficient approach to redirecting learner attention during input processing to linguistic elements both within and across utterances. This study examined the relationship between three teachers’ stated beliefs about focus on form and their classroom practice in intermediate EFL classes through classroom observations and interviews. The findings suggest that a tenuous relationship between the teachers’ stated beliefs and classroom practice regarding focus on form, which is implicational to EFL teacher professional development.

Key words: focus-on-form instruction; teacher beliefs; classroom practice; EFL teacher professional development

1. Introduction

In accordance with the Noticing Hypothesis (Doughty, 2003), focus on form instruction is in nature an efficient approach to redirecting learner attention during input processing to linguistic elements both within and across utterances in communication. Typical examples are the research on the language competence of Canadian English-French bilinguals who have been immersed in their target language at school for most of their academic careers (Allen, Swain, Harley & Cummins, 1990). Arguably, it can be viewed as the optimal context for language instruction, given the amount of time spent functioning in the second language. After up to twelve years of immersion, the listening, reading and cognitive abilities of bilinguals were on a par with or superior to those of their monolingual counterparts in the two languages. However, their productive abilities
(speaking and writing) were apparently non-native, including grammatical gender agreement errors, absence of tense marking, and lack of politeness markers. Learners may have neglected these aspects since they were not communicatively problematic. Focus-on-form interventions can draw learners’ attention to these persistent problems when they arise incidentally during language use in the classroom that is otherwise meaning focused (Doughty, 2003; Doughty & Williams, 1998a, 1998b; Long, 1988, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). On the basis of these studies, a strong claim has been made that focus on form may be necessary to push learners beyond communicatively effective language use toward target-like language ability. A somewhat weaker claim is that, even if such a focus may not be absolutely necessary, it may be part of more efficient language learning experience in that it can speed up the natural language acquisition process.

Teacher beliefs about language learning process have been resurfaced to be the key to understand teachers’ actions in EFL classrooms (Brown, 2009). Arguing in favor of a social constructivist approach to language learning, Williams and Burden (1997) brought to the forefront the close relationship between beliefs and actions among EFL teachers. They claimed that teachers’ actions are highly affected by their beliefs about language teaching and learning. Barcelos and Kalaja (2003) stated that teachers’ beliefs about language acquisition are not only experiential but also dynamic, socially constructed, changeable and contextually situated.

The question arises, however, as to teachers’ beliefs about the focus on form instruction in EFL settings on the grounds that language teachers need to develop a clear understanding of how the target language is learned. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between three EFL teachers’ stated beliefs about focus on form and their practices, which are of particular relevance to teachers’ professional development, because teachers and their practice cannot be understood without the knowledge about their beliefs that influence what they do.

Teachers’ beliefs, concerning an unobservable mental dimension, to a great extent, can be reflected in their teaching practice. In an early example, Johnson (1992) investigated teachers’ theoretical orientations to reading instruction by comparing these to teachers’ practice in the classroom. The findings indicated that teachers who possessed clearly defined theoretical beliefs about reading taught reading in a way that reflected their beliefs. It was also reported that teachers’ stated beliefs and practices in the classroom did not match (Collie, 1996; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). In order to understand the relationship between what teachers do and what their beliefs underpinning their behavior are, we should have a clear picture of the cognitive underpinning of focus on form.

2. The cognitive underpinning of focus on form

Focus-on-form is proposed as an instructional expedient for addressing pervasive, systematic, remediable or persistent learning problems. For example, pervasiveness and systematicity were evidenced in recurrent interlanguage developmental errors, while persistence was evidenced in less-than-target-like production of advanced immersion
learners (Long & Robinson, 1998), and remediability in the sense of not fundamentally determined by immutable acquisition processes (Long, 1991).

Beyond the general agreement that some degree of focus on form appears to have a facilitating effect on language learning, there is no clear agreement on definitions and procedures. Four general definitions of focus on form are to be examined with a view to identify the cognitive and psychological constructs involved:

Focus on form overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. (Long, 1991: 45-46)

Focus on form involves an occasional shift in attention to linguistic code features—by the teacher and/or one or more students—triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production. (Long & Robinson, 1998: 23)

Form-focused instruction is any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners’ attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly. (Spada, 1997: 73)

Most important, it should be kept in mind that the fundamental assumption of focus-on-form instruction is that meaning and use must already be evident to the learner at the time that attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across. (Doughty & Williams, 1998a: 4)

Taken together, the four definitions propose the importance of what happens uniquely in working memory during focus on form. Put in other words, the factor that consistently distinguishes focus on form from the other pedagogical approaches is the requirement that focus on form concerns the learners’ simultaneously attending to form, meaning, and use during one cognitive event. This kind of joint processing can enhance the cognitive mapping among forms, meaning and use that is fundamentally to interlanguage development.

That is to say, focus on form instruction in the classrooms is generally based on the assumption that the degree of attention given to form is controlled by the teacher in response to learner needs. For instance, the teacher might realize that learners are making systematic errors on a given form and respond accordingly with a recast or a brief explanation. Or, the teacher may surmise that the learners are struggling with a word or phrase they do not know and then provide it at the proper juncture. Explicit and deliberate processing via form-focused instruction, involving semantic and conceptual representations, will later turn into schematic linguistic knowledge and contribute to interlanguage development (Ren, 2007, 2009).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

The study reported in this part took up Borg’s (2003) call for the investigations on specific aspects of language teaching in relation to teacher cognition. Just as Lazaraton and Ishihara
(2005) pointed out that such research, focusing on language teacher knowledge and beliefs, has, until recently, neglected a potentially crucial factor, i.e., the actual discourse produced in these teachers’ classes. A close examination of classroom discourse recorded precisely as it takes place not only allows detailed analyses of classroom practice, but can also provide counterevidence to the teacher’s self-reported beliefs. The study examined the relationship between three teachers’ stated beliefs about focus on form and their classroom practices in three intermediate level EFL classes. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do EFL teachers practice focus on form instruction?
2. What beliefs do EFL teachers hold about focus on form?
3. To what extent are EFL beliefs about focus on form congruent with their observed teaching practices?

3.2 Teaching context and participants
This study focused on the classroom practice of three teachers. All of them were randomly chosen for this investigation from teachers for English majors at the foreign language school of a university in Shandong Province. No effort was made by the researchers to guide the teachers in their choice of lesson plans. They taught the same course, Intensive Reading. This provided the opportunity to investigate the stated beliefs and practice of these three teachers and made it possible to compare their practice while keeping the text material constant. Data collected for the study consisted of one lesson (including two sections, each of which lasted for 50 minutes) for each of the three teachers, using the same material, and in the same teaching context.

The three teachers were all female, non-native speakers of English. Their teaching experience, EFL qualifications, their classes and the numbers of learners in their classes, can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Teacher and class information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
<th>EFL qualifications</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Number of learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Teachers B and C had been studying abroad for more than half a year.

3.3 Data collection
The study involved observation and interviews. The observation was made of the teachers’ lessons. The researchers were present in the classroom as non-participant observers and observed and recorded the focus-on-form activities during the class. The interviews comprised a focus-on-form episode (FFE) and questions concerning beliefs about focus on form for the purpose of eliciting from the three teachers.

In the present study, an ethnomethodological method was adopted in an attempt to understand the participants and to make sense of their everyday world life, their assumptions and conventions. Beliefs can be held unconsciously, and a teacher may not
have the language to express them or may be reluctant to express any unpopular beliefs and prefer to state beliefs viewed as socially desirable. Therefore, a number of open-ended questions based on focus on form episodes were designed to allow for more freedom in response and more opportunities to follow up by the researchers so as to elicit more information from the participants.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 The observational data analysis
This section aims to answer the first research question, that is, how EFL teachers practice focus on form instruction in their classrooms. The analysis of the classroom data consisted of two steps, first, identifying the focus on form episodes (FFE) in each teacher’s lesson; second, coding the particular characteristics of each FFE. According to Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis (2004) and Ellis (2001) and, an FFE is defined as an quoted discourse from the point where the attention to linguistic from starts to the point where it ends, due to a change in topic back to message or sometimes another focus on form. The following example illustrates a reactive FFE in which the teacher briefly focused on a learner’s incorrect pronunciation of the word *pollutes*. Although the teacher appeared to understand the learner, she addressed the error by providing the correct pronunciation.

Teacher: How does the title of the text strike you?
Learner: I don’t believe that that our environment is seriously pu…pulluted so...(hesitating for being not sure of its pronunciation)
Teacher: polluted
Learner: Yeah, polluted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Frequency of focus on form episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the length of time for which each of the three teachers was observed, the number of FFEs that occurred during that period of time, and the ratio of FFEs per minute. The length of observation for the three teachers was the same, i.e., 100 minutes. But the numbers of FFEs were quite different. This led to the different ratios of FFEs per minute.

For the sake of comparison, three aspects concerning focus on form were identified in order to illustrate the characteristics of FFEs in the three teachers’ practice (See Table 3), that is, when to focus on form (i.e., reactive error correction, teacher initiated, or learner initiated focus on form); why to focus on form (i.e., comprehension of the meaning or
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accuracy of the form); what to focus on (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or syntax); and how to best focus on form (i.e., explicit error correction or implicit negative feedback).

### Table 3. Characteristics of FFE in the three teachers’ practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>When to focus on form</th>
<th>Why to focus on form</th>
<th>What to focus on</th>
<th>How to focus on form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reactive = reactive error correction; T-initiated = teacher initiated focus on form; L-initiated = learners initiated focus on form; Meaning = comprehension of the meaning; Form = accuracy of the form; Voc. = vocabulary; Gra. = grammar; Pro. = pronunciation; Ex. = explicit error correction; Im. = implicit error correction

With the four aspects of focus on form as the criteria, characteristics of FFEs in the three teachers’ teaching practice can be illustrated in Table 4.

### Table 4. Characteristics of FFE in the three teachers’ classroom practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When to focus on form</td>
<td>Reactive and learner-initiated</td>
<td>Reactive and learner-initiated</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why to focus on form</td>
<td>Mainly for accuracy</td>
<td>Mainly for accuracy</td>
<td>Mainly for accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also for comprehension</td>
<td>Seldom for comprehension</td>
<td>Also for comprehension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to focus on</td>
<td>Vocabulary and pronunciation</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to focus on form</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>Totally explicit</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes implicit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.2 The self-report data analysis

This section aims to answer the second research question, that is, what beliefs EFL teachers hold about focus on form. The interviews consisted of three sections. Firstly, each teacher was presented a FFE like the following:

Teacher: Have you ever been to Tibet?
Student: No, never.
Teacher: Never?
Student: Yeah, I don’t like travel.
Teacher: traveling.
Student: Yeah, traveling.

Secondly, they were asked if they preferred to adopt the similar teaching strategy to cope with errors which the learners made in the classrooms. If they answered that they tended to adopt different strategies, the researchers would asked them to cite examples of their teaching strategies and to expound the beliefs behind their classroom decisions. Thirdly,
the teachers were asked to explain their beliefs about the relationship between form and meaning in EFL instructions. All the three teachers stated their beliefs in Chinese.

Their answers to the three questions mentioned above were recorded and then analyzed by the researchers. In order to ensure the reliability and validity, this study used a triangular method, that is, the three researchers were present during each interview and their analyses of the data were compared.

The following statements are the summaries of the three teachers stated beliefs about focus on form instructions:

Teacher A believed that she would actually allow the linguistic form to lie dormant but would disrupt if she thinks it is very important to stop to focus on form although this also depends on the learners’ proficiency. She emphasized the importance of vocabulary and syntax by stating that “they are crucial for discourse comprehension and use”. The time to deal with linguistic form should be as short as possible and should be used only when necessary for understanding. She stated that the part played by teacher in EFL learning is not as a director, but as cooperator.

Teacher B believed that communication is more important than error correction. The role of the teacher should not only be to indicate that an error has occurred, but to arouse the learners’ awareness for self-correction. She didn’t stress any particular aspects of language to focus on. However, she claimed that special attention should be paid to language forms exposed for the first time to the learners.

Teacher C believed that linguistic form is particularly important for language learning, so those with errors should be corrected, though such error correction can be unobtrusive. She argued that implicit error correction may be ineffective in helping learners realize where the error occurs and what the correct form is. Thus she emphasized that if learners fails to notice this, explicit correction has to be used. Furthermore, she indicated that errors in learners’ pronunciation should be corrected as soon as possible. Otherwise, it might become fossilized.

With the same four aspects of focus on form as the criterion, the three teachers’ stated beliefs can be illustrated in Table 5.

**Table 5. Characteristics of FFE in the three teachers’ stated beliefs about focus on form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When to focus on form</td>
<td>Learner-initiated</td>
<td>Learner-initiated</td>
<td>No preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why to focus on form</td>
<td>Depends on learner proficiency</td>
<td>To arouse the awareness of learners</td>
<td>To correct linguistic forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to focus on</td>
<td>Vocabulary and syntax</td>
<td>Linguistic forms if necessary</td>
<td>Especially pronunciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to focus on form</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>Sometimes explicit</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Comparisons and implications

This section aims to answer the third research question, that is, to what extent EFL teachers’ stated beliefs about focus on form are congruent with their observed teaching practice. With Tables 4 and 5, the main areas of the three teachers’ beliefs and practice in relation to the main features of focus on form can be compared. Overall, the results showed that similarities could be found in their beliefs and practice. The teachers all expressed clear understanding of when, why, what and how with regard to focus on form in the classroom. In some respects, their beliefs and practice were consistent. For example, Teacher A stated that it was very important for students to know enough vocabulary and syntactical knowledge and in practice she corrected lexical errors frequently. Teacher B stated that language communications was more important than linguistic forms, and in practice, she directed learners’ attention to meaning frequently. Teacher C stated that explicit errors corrections was quite necessary for language learning, and in practice, she mainly adopted the explicit way of focusing on form.

However, in other aspects, there were a number of differences. For example, Teacher A stated that the time to deal with linguistic form should be as short as possible, but in practice she spent a lot of time on correcting errors in linguistic form. In her stated beliefs, Teacher B did not stress any particular aspects of language to focus on, but in her practice, she paid much more attention to the accurate use of form than meaning comprehension. Teacher C indicated that errors in learners’ pronunciation should be corrected as soon as possible, but in her practice, she mainly focused on lexical errors instead of pronunciation. In addition, all the teachers emphasized the need to keep the speech flow by refraining from disruptive error correction, whereas in their practice, there was a high percentage of error correction concerning language forms.

According to Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis (2004), these inconsistencies can find their explanation in the distinction between technical and practical knowledge during the teachers’ professional development. In other words, in the interviews, the teachers organized their answers according to their technical knowledge. When confronted with actual classroom problems, however, the teachers unconsciously drew on their practical knowledge about language teaching. Just as Watzke (2007) has pointed out, classroom decision-making tends to reflect the temporal changes in teachers’ pedagogical knowledge, which is usually caused by the disagreement between realistic teaching contexts and teachers’ beliefs. Possibly, as they accumulate teaching experiences, the teachers can proceduralize their technical knowledge over time, thus making it more accessible in their on-line teaching decision making in their classroom practice.

Classroom language teaching is in nature a kind of practical activity which stresses the importance of developing language skills and other pedagogical issues. However, to overemphasize the importance of teachers’ practical knowledge may be misleading in that it may lead some teachers to believe that explicit knowledge of theoretical expounding of their work is unnecessary for their professional development and that teacher professional development programs at present are too theoretical and are very far from their daily teaching practice. They may view themselves as what Widdowson (1978) described as
humble practitioners who are impatient of theory. Block (2002) and Lawes (2002, 2003) pointed out that practical classroom skills are what matters most is a commonly held view at all levels of the profession, including beginner teachers as well as experienced teachers.

Theory, in fact, should be at the heart of classroom practice because theoretical knowledge can help teachers to elevate their expectations of what it means to be a qualified teacher beyond classroom competence and to engenders a set of aspirations and a sense of professional identity which provides a firmer foundation for their future development (Dai & Ren 2006; Ellis, 2009; Laws, 2003; Wen & Ren, 2010). In turn, teachers with a strong professional identity want to continue to develop their theoretical knowledge and this will ultimately enhance their capabilities as successful classroom practitioners. In a word, what is really needed is to make a balance between technical knowledge and practical knowledge, that is, to integrate theory into practice.

The findings of the present study suggest that interpretations are needed to probe into teachers’ cognition by taking the contextual settings into consideration. The contexts in which teachers work tend to constrain what they actually do in the classroom, which leads to the result that teaching practice does not reflect their teaching beliefs. Firstly, a teacher may hold a complex set of teaching beliefs some of which may be more powerful in influencing their classroom decision makings. Secondly, there may also be some teaching beliefs incompatible with one another and inconsistent from time to time. For these two reasons, teachers’ actions in the classroom are not simply reflections of their beliefs since context is a fundamental variable in understanding EFL instruction.

The authors of this paper, therefore, believe that a lack of congruence between teachers’ beliefs and their practice in the classroom should not be seen as a flaw. From the perspective of teacher professional development, the mismatches between EFL teachers’ beliefs and practice in the classroom should not be regretted or even criticized. Instead, these mismatches can provide exciting opportunities for deeper understanding into the complexity of teachers’ beliefs.

5. Conclusion

The study was conducted on the relationship between three teachers’ stated beliefs about focus on form and their practice in EFL settings. The findings suggested that a tenuous relationship between the teachers’ practice and stated beliefs regarding focus on form. There existed a gap between technical knowledge and practical knowledge, which called for more action research concerning teacher professional development. In-service teachers need to know how to apply the knowledge acquired in professional training courses. This is important since some teachers are unaware of the importance of the use of focus on form instruction and are not sure whether and how to use it in their teaching. Therefore, teacher education programs should be context-bound (Johnson, 2009), that is, more emphasis be placed on the linking between knowledge-inspiring courses and specific classroom practice.
References


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