

Incidental Focus on Form: Does Proficiency Matter?

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Abstract

This study examines how five experienced EFL teachers spontaneously initiated preemptive focus on form episodes (FFE) to draw attention to form in elementary and advanced levels. In addition, the study also investigates the frequency and type of FFEs, i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation used by five teachers in ten intact communicatively-oriented EFL classes. To this end, seventy hours of meaningful interaction between five teachers and their students in five elementary and five advanced EFL classes were observed and audio-recorded. Then, the frequency of preemptive and reactive FFEs were identified, coded, and categorized. The findings revealed that the proficiency of the students did not affect the rate of teacher-initiated focus on form in the observed classes. However, it did affect the general distribution of the linguistic focus of FFEs across proficiencies. The study demonstrates the importance of taking teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form into account in EFL studies.

Keywords: incidental focus on form, preemptive, reactive, proficiency

1. Introduction

Recently, the amount of attention on focus on form (FonF) has increased (see, e.g., Doughty, 2001; Doughty and Williams, 1998b; Ellis et al., 2001a, 2001b; Long and Robinson, 1998; Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Lyster and Ranta, 1997), as researchers have highlighted the need for both meaning-focused and form-focused instruction in the L2 classroom (Ellis, 2001; Hulstijn, 1995; Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1993; Skehan, 1998). Long (1998) defines focus on form as “briefly drawing students’ attention to linguistic elements (words, collocations, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns, and so on), in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication” (Long, 1998: 40). In line with Long’s focus on form, Ellis (2001) provides a more general definition of form-focused instruction. He describes form-focused instruction as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form” (Ellis, 2001: 1-2). That is, while meaning-focused instruction includes tasks and activities in which participants are mainly dealing with message exchange (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2000), form-focused instruction includes “any pedagogical effort to draw learners’ attention to language either implicitly or explicitly” (Spada, 1997: 73).

There are two types of form-focused instruction, namely focus on formS and focus on form (Long, 1991, 1996). Focus on formS is defined as instruction in which syllabi and lessons are based on linguistic items, and the main aim is to teach those items (Long, 1991). However, in focus on form, learners’ attention is drawn to linguistic items only when required and not in predetermined ways (Spada, 1997). That is, learner’s awareness of form is the result of meaning-oriented activity based on when a communicative task takes place (Long and Robinson, 1998; Doughty and Williams, 1998b; Ellis, 2001).

The reason why focus on form is pedagogically important is that it paves the way for learners to pay attention to linguistic elements in a meaningful context as they occur within a wider

framework of communication or meaning (Long, 2000; Long and Robinson, 1998). On encountering problems with comprehension or production, learners may switch attention from meaning to form. This switch may induce noticing of linguistic forms, which Schmidt (2001) and Robinson (2003) have contended is essential for learning to take place. This claim is generally known as the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1995). Noticing, however, is not considered as guaranteeing acquisition. Schmidt (2001) considers noticing to be the necessary and sufficient requirement for the conversion of input to intake. Moreover, Schmidt (1990, 1995, 2001) considers pushed output (Swain, 1995, 1998, 2005) to be an indication of noticing, which is necessary for L2 acquisition. Pushed output permits learners to “reanalyze and modify their non-target output as they test new hypotheses about the target language” (Lyster, 1998: 191).

2. Review of the Related Literature

Over the past decades, language acquisition researchers have been trying to discover what is required for a language student to be successful in the acquisition of the target language. Recently, attention has been drawn to the integration of message-focused and form-focused instruction. The following sections provide some of the major categorizations made on focus on form and its relationship with learner proficiency in the literature.

2.1 Planned vs. Incidental Focus on Form

In line with Long’s (1991) original definition of focus on form in which he claimed that attention was incidental, subsequent studies widened the definition to include attention to form that was preplanned. As a result, Ellis (2005) made a distinction between planned and incidental focus on form. In planned focus on form, pre-selected linguistic items are targeted during a meaning-focused activity, either through input or output. On the other hand, the linguistic items highlighted in incidental focus on form occur spontaneously during meaning-focused activities.

Even though both types of focus on form might be useful for learners (Doughty and Williams, 1998b), their impact may vary.

Planned focus on form has the advantage of providing the opportunity for intensive coverage of one particular linguistic item, while incidental focus on form offers extensive coverage, addressing a wide variety of linguistic items (Ellis et al., 2001a). Incidental focus on form can offer a short time-out from focusing on meaning in order to help learners notice linguistic items in the input that might otherwise go unnoticed in purely meaning-focused lessons (Ellis et al., 2001a; Schmidt, 2001; Skehan, 1998). Although planned focus on form has been investigated in various contexts (e.g., Doughty and Williams 1998b; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998), incidental focus on form has been under-researched in the literature (Williams, 2001).

2.2 Reactive vs. Preemptive Focus on Form

A considerable number of studies on planned focus on form have investigated reactive focus on form, which occurs in reaction to learner errors. Reactive focus on form has also been named error correction, corrective feedback, or negative evidence/feedback (Long 1996). Many studies have explored the impact of corrective feedback on short term and long term second language development (Doughty and Williams, 1998a; Lyster, 2004; Radwan, 2005), the corrective feedback that results in successful uptake as an immediate response to feedback (Panova and Lyster, 2002; Farrokhi, 2003; Tsang, 2004; Loewen, 2004; Sheen, 2004; Farrokhi and Gholami, 2007), how learners perceive negative feedback (Mackey et al., 2000) and the relationship between input and interaction (Oliver, 1995, 2000; Gass, 2003; Mackey et al., 2003; Mackey and Silver, 2005).

Contrary to reactive focus on form, which has received a fairly significant amount of attention from researchers, preemptive focus on form has been relatively overlooked. Ellis et al. (2001b: 414) identified preemptive focus on form, which occurs when either the teacher or a learner initiates attention to form, usually by raising a question, “even though no actual problem in production has arisen”. Although both reactive and preemptive focus on form might be useful, learner topicalization of linguistic items in student-initiated focus on form might be especially useful, because

learners are able to recognize and draw attention to linguistic items that are problematic for them (Ellis et al. 2001b; Slimani, 1989).

With regard to student-initiated preemptive focus on form, Williams (1999) found that learners occasionally did initiate focus on form. A similar finding is reported by Poole (2005) in his study of forms learners attend to during focus on form instruction in an advanced ESL writing class with international students. A drawback of student-initiated attention to form, however, is that it can distract students' attention away from the communicative activity. Ellis et al. (2002) contend that a more important disadvantage is that one student's gap may not be the same as another's. Therefore, the teacher's dealing with the problem may not be effective for others.

In order to draw attention to form, teachers also interrupt the flow of a communicative activity. Borg (1998) discovered that the experienced teacher he studied often preempted language problems. Teachers differ considerably in the extent to which they utilize teacher initiated focus on form, based on their orientation to a communicative task. While some of them rarely intervene, others interrupt frequently, presumably because they feel the need to create explicit learning opportunities out of the communication occurring in class.

2.3 L2 Proficiency and Focus on Form

In general, research has proven that learners do better in classroom tasks in pairs rather than by themselves (Storch, 1999). Having said that, it remains to be seen whether the advantage for learners of varying proficiencies is the same. Hadley (2001) defines the notion of proficiency as a learner's general language ability in speaking, listening, reading and/or writing based on some sort of criteria. That is, proficiency in an L2 necessitates that learners acquire a variety of formulaic expressions, which promote fluency, and a rule-based competence comprised of awareness of particular grammatical rules, which promote complexity and accuracy (Skehan, 1998).

Leeser (2004) asserts that the literature on developmental readiness suggests that learners can process and use certain

grammatical forms only when they have acquired less complicated structures (see, e.g., Lightbown, 1998; Mackey and Philp, 1998; Spada and Lightbown, 1993, 1999; Williams and Evans, 1998). This means that during communicative tasks, learners that are more proficient should be developmentally more advanced to notice and produce certain forms.

The research on input processing and interaction reveals that proficiency can affect learners' processing of form in the input and the emergence of forms and structures in communicative exchanges. However, the manner in which proficiency effects those instances in which they explicitly talk about form (i.e., produce FFEs), and sometimes in the L1 (e.g., Swain and Lapkin, 2000) remains to be seen. As Swain (1998: 73) mentions, "learners talk about what they need to talk about, that is, those aspects of language about which they are not sure. And that, in turn, will depend on their own current, internalized state of knowledge about language and its use". If FFEs really focus on 'gaps' or 'holes' in a learner's interlanguage, it can be concluded that a learner's proficiency will affect the types of FFEs that occur while taking part in a communicative task.

3. Significance of the Study

It has been suggested that it would be better if teachers limited themselves to providing corrective feedback (i.e. to reactive focus on form), where the need for their assistance is obvious (Ellis et al. 2002). This perspective seems to undermine the value of experienced teachers' judgment on recognizing if and when to draw attention to a particular form which may prove problematic for learners. Questioning the teachers' recognition of perceived gaps in students' knowledge has been assumed rather than proven. Therefore, it can be argued that teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form is worthy of examination before such generalizations can be made. The present study complements previous research by examining how five experienced EFL teachers spontaneously initiated preemptive FFEs to raise attention to form across two proficiencies, namely elementary and advanced levels. For the sake

of practicality, intermediate level was not considered. The research questions in this study are as follows:

1. How frequently do types of incidental focus on form episodes (FFE) occur in meaning-oriented EFL classes across proficiencies?
2. To what extent does teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form differ in meaning-oriented EFL classes across proficiencies and teachers?
3. What is the linguistic focus of reactive and preemptive FFEs within and across proficiencies?

4. Method

To address these questions, interactions between five teachers and EFL learners were audio-recorded, transcribed, categorized and compared in terms of the frequency and type of incidental FFEs in two different proficiencies.

4.1 Participants

There were two groups of participants in this study namely EFL teachers and learners. The researcher's criteria for choosing teachers were based on their years of experience, professional degree, familiarity with theoretical and empirical developments in the field and willingness to participate. The teacher participants were all female, non-native speakers of English with an MA degree in TEFL. All five teachers (hereby referred to as teacher 1 to 5) had between 3 and 6 years of EFL teaching experience at different proficiency levels. No effort was made by the researcher to guide the teachers in their choice of lesson plan. They were merely informed that the objective of the research was to investigate classroom interactions. Over one semester (6 weeks), seven hours of data from each teacher's elementary and advanced class was selected and their teaching practices in these classes were observed, recorded and compared in terms of their use of incidental focus on form.

In the ten intact EFL classes which were observed, there were 120 participating female language learners, who were studying English for a variety of reasons, including preparation for

academic study, professional development or immigration, and their ages varied from 18 to 25 years. The classes ranged in size from 10 to 14 students, so there were plenty of opportunities for interaction in all classes. The learners paid tuition and were generally highly motivated. The English language proficiency of the learners, as measured by an in-house placement test, was either elementary or advanced.

4.2 Context of the Study

The private language institute in which the study was carried out is located in Tabriz, Iran and adheres to a meaning-driven syllabus that stimulates students to talk about a variety of thought-provoking topics. In the institute, there was a set of in-house placement tests and also interviews that learners are required to take before being placed in classes of various levels. The ten classes under observation met three times a week and every session lasted 90 minutes.

Based on a multi-skills syllabus, the course books covered in elementary and advanced levels were *Interchange 1* and *Passages 2* (Richards et al., 2005; Richards and Sandy, 2000) respectively. *Interchange 1* takes learners from false-beginner to low-intermediate level, presenting and practicing basic language items with opportunities for personalization from the start. *Passages* is a sequel to *Interchange 1* and brings learners to an advanced level. These books contain 16 units, 4 of which were to be covered in 20 sessions. Each unit contains both focused and open-ended communicative practice of language, vocabulary-building activities, systematic presentation of grammar in a meaning-oriented context, and engaging recordings to stimulate discussion.

4.3 Data Collection Procedure

The study involved observation of the teachers' lessons. The analysis of the classroom data involved identifying focus on form episodes in each teacher's lessons and coding the linguistic characteristics of each episode. From each class, a range of 8 to 9 hours of meaning-focused classroom interaction were observed and recorded. This initial collection of data was reduced to 7 hours

per class due to excluding parts in which the focus was on forms. Based on the nature of the study, pair-work activities and checking workbook assignments were not taken into consideration. Moreover, unintelligible recordings were discarded from the analysis. The classroom interactions were audio-recorded using an MP3 recorder, which was placed on the teacher's table. This arrangement recorded all teacher-learner interaction, whether as a whole class, in small groups, or one-to-one.

4.4 Data Coding

Following the observations, the FFEs were identified. Ellis et al. (2001a: 294) define a focus on form episode (FFE) as consisting of "the discourse from the point where the attention to linguistic form starts to the point where it ends, due to a change in topic back to message or sometimes another focus on form". Therefore, an FFE starts either when a student produces a linguistic error that is addressed by the teacher (reactive FFEs) or when a student/teacher queried a linguistic item (student/teacher-initiated FFEs). To determine reliability of FFE identification, a second rater coded a sample of about 15% of the data (about six lessons totaling 630 minutes), with a resulting agreement of 89%.

After FFEs were identified, they were transcribed in detail and coded. In terms of proficiency, each FFE was first categorized as having occurred in elementary or advanced levels. The FFEs were then classified according to their type (reactive, student-initiated or teacher-initiated preemptive). After that, their linguistic focus (vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation) was identified. If the identity of the FFE category was ambiguous, it was eliminated from the data set, yet this happened with less than 3% of the FFEs. The categorization of the FFEs into various types of linguistic focus was based on these operational definitions:

Grammar: This category includes determiners, prepositions, pronouns, word order, tense, auxiliaries, subject-verb agreement, plurals, negation, question formation.

Vocabulary: This category includes the meaning of open-class lexical items, including single words and idioms.

Pronunciation: This category includes suprasegmental and segmental aspects of the phonological system.

An example of each type of linguistic focus (capitalized) taken from the data is given below:

Extract 1: Reactive FFE dealing with pronunciation

S: Collide (kolid)

T: CoLLIDE (k□lad)

S: Ok

As the above extract illustrates, the teacher responds to the learner's erroneous pronunciation of the word "collide" in the form of a reactive FFE.

Extract 2: Student-initiated preemptive FFE dealing with grammar

S: Can we use WITH with GET MARRIED?

T: No. In English we say, get married TO.

In extract 2, the student predicts a problem in the use of the correct preposition for "get married" and therefore chooses to ask rather than make a mistake.

Extract 3: Teacher-initiated preemptive FFE dealing with vocabulary

T: He EMBRACES danger means he welcomes danger.

In extract 3, the teacher predicts that the students won't know the meaning of "embrace" in this context and preemptively draws attention to it. (The appendix provides further examples of preemptive and reactive FFEs dealing with vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation).

Raw frequencies and percentages were calculated. Since the data consisted of frequency counts of categorical data, Pearson's chi-square analysis was performed on the raw frequencies. An alpha level of $p < .05$ was set for all chi-squares.

5. Results

In the following section, the teachers' classroom practices in terms of frequency and percentage of incidental FFEs are demonstrated in tables.

5.1 Incidental FFEs across Proficiencies

The first research question dealt with the frequency of types of incidental FFEs occurring in meaning-oriented EFL classes across proficiencies. A total of 1780 FFEs were identified in the 70 hours of meaning-focused lessons, 796 and 984 FFEs in elementary and advanced levels, respectively. In general, this means that an average of one instance of FFE took place every 2.3 minutes. The data in Table 1 shows the frequency and percentages of incidental FFEs occurring in the two proficiencies.

Table 1: Incidental FFE Types across Proficiencies

FFE Types Proficiency	Reactive	SIP	TIP	Grand Total
Elementary	194 (24.4%)	72 (9%)	530 (66.6%)	796
Advanced	328 (33.3%)	102 (10.4%)	554 (56.3%)	984
Total FFEs	522 (29.4%)	174 (9.8%)	1084 (60.8%)	1780

SIP = Student-initiated preemptive, TIP = Teacher-initiated preemptive

As far as the percentage of FFE types across two proficiencies is concerned, this study found a substantial discrepancy in the frequency of reactive, SIP and TIPFFE. A chi square analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between FFE types across proficiencies, $X^2 = 20.47$ ($df = 2$, $p < .05$)

5.2 Teachers' Use of Preemptive FFEs in Two Proficiencies

The second research was concerned with the extent teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form differs in meaning-oriented EFL classes across two proficiencies and five teachers. The results

on the frequency of teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachers' Use of Preemptive FFEs in Two Proficiencies

TIPFFEs Teacher	TIPFFEs in Elementary	TIPFFEs in Advanced
Teacher 1	108 (48.6%)	114 (51.4%)
Teacher 2	122 (46.6%)	140 (53.4%)
Teacher 3	102 (44.7%)	126 (55.3%)
Teacher 4	82 (51.3%)	78 (48.7%)
Teacher 5	116 (54.7%)	96 (45.3%)

One of the most interesting things to note is the small variation among 5 teachers in their use of TIPFFEs across proficiencies. Based on the findings in table 2, teachers 1, 2, and 3 had a slightly higher percentage of TIPFFEs in the advanced levels while the converse was observed for teachers 4 and 5. Despite these variations, Chi-square analysis did not show any significant difference between TIPFFEs across teachers in elementary and advanced levels, $X^2 = 5.38$ ($df = 4$, $p < .05$).

5.3 Linguistic Focus of FFEs at Elementary and Advanced levels

The final research question dealt with the linguistic focus of FFEs within and across proficiencies. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the linguistic focus within each proficiency whereas tables 5, 6 and 7 illustrate the linguistic focus of FFEs on vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation across proficiencies separately.

5.3.1 Linguistic Focus of FFEs within Proficiencies

Table 3 presents the linguistic focus of reactive and preemptive FFEs in elementary level. The frequency of reactive and preemptive FFEs dealing with vocabulary was found to be 42 and 411 respectively. However, in terms of pronunciation, there is a negligible difference between reactive and preemptive FFEs.

Table 3: The Linguistic Focus of Reactive and Preemptive FFEs in Elementary Level

Proficiency	Linguistic Focus	Reactive	Preemptive
Elementary	Vocabulary	42 (9.3%)	411 (90.7%)
	Grammar	110 (59.8%)	74 (40.2%)
	Pronunciation	42 (48.3%)	45 (51.7%)

The chi-square analysis on the relationship between the linguistic focus of reactive and preemptive FFEs in elementary level revealed a significant difference, $X^2 = 193.46$ ($df = 2$, $p < .05$).

Table 4 represents the linguistic focus of reactive and preemptive FFEs in advanced level. Similar to the elementary level, the results here suggest that there were far more TIPFFEes dealing with vocabulary than reactive FFEs on vocabulary, 474 vs. 90.

Table 4: The Linguistic Focus of Reactive and Preemptive FFEs in Advanced Level

Proficiency	Linguistic Focus	Reactive	Preemptive
Advanced	Vocabulary	90 (15.9%)	474 (84.1%)
	Grammar	126 (70.8%)	52 (29.2%)
	Pronunciation	112 (80.0%)	28 (20.0%)

As was the case in elementary level, the chi-square analysis on the relationship between the linguistic focus of reactive and preemptive FFEs in advanced level showed a significant difference, $X^2 = 304.71$ ($df = 2$, $p < .05$)

5.3.2 Linguistic Focus of FFEs across Proficiencies

Table 5 demonstrates the linguistic focus on vocabulary in reactive and preemptive FFEs across proficiencies. In the elementary level, the percentage of TIPFFEes dealing with vocabulary (90.7%) is nearly ten times that of reactive FFEs dealing with vocabulary and a similar trend can be observed in the advanced level.

Table 5: The Linguistic Focus on Vocabulary in Reactive and Preemptive FFEs across Proficiencies

Vocabulary	Reactive	Preemptive
Proficiency		
Elementary	42 (9.3%)	411(90.7%)
Advanced	90 (15.9%)	474 (84.1%)

The chi-square analysis on the relationship between the linguistic focus on vocabulary in reactive and preemptive FFEs across proficiencies found a significant difference, $X^2= 9.36$ (df = 1, $p<.05$)

Table 6 depicts the linguistic focus on grammar in reactive and preemptive FFEs across proficiencies. Based on the findings, in the advanced level the frequency of reactive FFEs dealing with grammar is more than two times that of TIPFFEes dealing with grammar.

Table 6: The Linguistic Focus on Grammar in Reactive and Preemptive FFEs across Proficiencies

Grammar	Reactive	Preemptive
Proficiency		
Elementary	110 (59.8%)	74 (40.2%)
Advanced	126 (70.8%)	52 (29.2%)

The chi-square analysis on the relationship between the linguistic focus on grammar in reactive and preemptive FFEs

across proficiencies showed a significant difference, $X^2=4.36$ ($df = 1, p<.05$)

Finally, table 7 illustrates the linguistic focus on pronunciation in reactive and preemptive FFEs across proficiencies. In the elementary level, there is a slight variation in the rate of reactive FFEs and TIPFFEes dealing with pronunciation. However, in the advanced level, the frequency of reactive FFEs dealing with pronunciation (112) is exactly four times that of TIPFFEes dealing with pronunciation (28).

Table 7: The Linguistic Focus on Pronunciation in Reactive and Preemptive FFEs across Proficiencies

Pronunciation Proficiency	Reactive	Preemptive
Elementary	42 (48.3%)	45 (51.7%)
Advanced	112 (80.0%)	28 (20.0%)

The chi-square analysis on the relationship between the linguistic focus on pronunciation in reactive and preemptive FFEs across proficiencies showed a significant difference, $X^2= 23.32$ ($df = 1, p<.05$)

6. Discussion

Since all the data for the present research came from natural occurring classes, and no effort was made to manipulate the frequency or characteristics of incidental focus on form, the observations can be considered representative of what usually takes place in these classes. The findings revealed that an average of one instance of FFE took place every 2.3 minutes. By way of comparison, this rate is lower than that of Ellis et al.'s (2001) study that found one FFE every 1.6 minutes or Lyster's (1998a) study that found a rate of one FFE every 1.97 minutes. These differences may be related to the Asian context of the study which is completely different.

6.1 Focus on Form: Teachers' Preemptive Voice

The first research question focused on the frequency of types of incidental FFEs occurring in meaning-oriented EFL classes across proficiencies. Overall, the results showed that in both elementary and advanced levels, TIPFFE were overwhelmingly used. These findings are in sharp contrast to Basturkmen et al.'s (2004), which found TIPFFE to be so low that they chose not to include them in their chi-square analysis. The low rate of TIPFFE in ESL settings can be due to the fact that ESL teachers did not wish to preemptively draw attention to linguistic forms unless they felt obliged to. However, in EFL settings, it may be the case that teachers feel the need to focus on gaps before an error is made. In other words, the teacher might anticipate that learners are grasping for a form or word that they do not know and provide it at an appropriate juncture. It could be concluded that these teachers believed it was appropriate to preemptively focus on linguistic items to foster accuracy, even if no misunderstanding had occurred. Furthermore, it may be argued that learners are perhaps more willing to let the teachers intervene. Learners' expectations from their teachers may have prompted the teachers to make abundant use of TIPFFE as the researcher believes is the case in the Iranian EFL context.

It is interesting to note that the proportion of reactive FFEs was much higher than that of SIPFFE which seems to reveal a negative correlation between the two. In other words, the more instances teachers reacted to learners' errors, the less likely learners were to preemptively draw attention to their gaps. Perhaps it can be argued that SIPFFE are more likely to occur in classes where learners are not constantly corrected and therefore implicitly are more encouraged to ask questions about problematic areas. For SIPFFE, it is possible that cultural differences in the norms of classroom interaction in general and in the predisposition to ask questions in particular could affect the number of FFEs. For example, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) discuss Chinese students' negative perceptions of asking questions in class. However, further investigation into other individual factors such as personality types

may provide further insight into the unequal levels of classroom participation.

6.2 Does Proficiency Matter for Teachers?

The second research question addressed the extent to which TIPFFEs differed in meaning-oriented EFL classes across two proficiencies and five teachers. Surprisingly, it was found that there was no major difference in the use of TIPFFEs between elementary and advanced levels. Unlike the first three teachers, the fourth and fifth ones had higher amounts of TIPFFEs in their elementary as opposed to their advanced levels. It is possible that the first three teachers felt that advanced learners were more developmentally ready to focus on TIPFFES while the other two believed that elementary learners could benefit more from TIPFFES than advanced ones. Overall, the fact that there was a roughly equal proportion of TIPFFEs in both proficiencies seems to suggest that when it comes to preemptive attention to a linguistic item, teachers don't appear to differentiate between levels of proficiency.

6.3 What Linguistic Forms Receive more Attention from Teachers?

The third research question was concerned with the linguistic focus of reactive and preemptive FFEs within and across proficiencies. Like Williams (1999), Loewen (2003), Basturkmen et al. (2004), and Poole (2005), this research found vocabulary to be the predominant linguistic feature preemptively addressed in the observed classes. In other words, within each proficiency, vocabulary had the highest percentage.

Following vocabulary, grammar was the second most highlighted feature in preemptive FFEs. Harley (1994) noted that learners tend to be lexically oriented and often fail to notice syntactic features which are not vital for comprehending or making meaning. The fact that grammar was less frequently focused on in this study as well as in Williams (1999), Loewen (2003), Basturkmen et al. (2004), and Poole (2005), implies that teachers are less willing to preemptively focus on grammar. This supports Sheen's (2003) view that focus on forms instruction (Long and

Robinson, 1998), or the preplanned emphasis on certain forms within a communicative context, offers a better hope for addressing learner needs in terms of grammar in a contextualized manner than does focus on form instruction. Since learners at all levels are more concerned with sorting out lexical meaning than grammatical form, the responsibility for calling attention to grammar and pronunciation appears to remain with the teacher, especially at the early stages of acquisition.

Interestingly, the frequency of each linguistic focus (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) increased with the advancement of the proficiency level. This finding supports those of Williams (1999, 2001) and Leiser (2004) who also found a similar trend that learners in higher proficiency levels produced more FFEs than those at lower levels. In support of the findings of this study, Williams (1999) found that lower proficiency learners did not focus on form frequently because they could not and only began to pay attention to form when they became more proficient. In other words, at higher levels of proficiency, learners are more able to notice formal features whereas at earlier stages of acquisition their attention was absorbed in processing meaning (Van Patten, 1990, 1996, 2003). At the higher levels of proficiency, the gap between their interlanguage and the target may have become sufficiently narrow that they are able to notice it.

7. Implications & Conclusion

In spite of the conclusions drawn here regarding the potential value of TIPFFE, more research is needed before a generalization can be made about its efficacy on both theoretical and pedagogical planes. The finding that the occurrence of TIPFFE did not significantly differ across proficiencies raises questions about whether the preemptive role of teachers in various levels should change. Currently, there is little guidance for teachers regarding the optimal number of TIPFFE in a meaning-focused lesson in various proficiencies. Therefore, decisions about applying TIPFFE across proficiencies may be based upon how comfortable and/or beneficial the teachers and students find the frequency of it

to be. Further research investigating the effectiveness of various rates of TIPFFE occurrence may provide insight into its optimal amount across proficiencies.

The findings of this study indicate that the linguistic focus of elementary and advanced classes was overwhelmingly on vocabulary, which seems to imply that focus on form is not adequate in drawing learners' attention to grammar and pronunciation as it is for vocabulary. Utilizing focus on forms or intentionally spending more time on vocabulary and pronunciation could prove fruitful. The fact that lower proficiency classes had fewer instances of FFEs leads to the question of whether it is possible for elementary classes to focus on grammar and pronunciation given that they often struggle with lexical items during the task. It remains to be seen whether TIPFFEs can increase the rate of acquisition for these learners.

To sum up, this study found that TIPFFEs occurred frequently in teacher-learner interactions, irrespective of the proficiency, with the major linguistic focus on vocabulary. The present study has highlighted the significance of preemptive FFEs in general and teacher-initiated preemptive FFEs in particular. It may be concluded that teachers, based on their previous teaching experience, are better able to create opportunities for accessing target language data in order to address language difficulties as well as L2 learning and acquisition. The low variations of TIPFFEs across teachers and proficiencies pointed to the need for further research into the relationship of proficiency and TIPFFEs.

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Appendix

Extract 1: TIPFFE dealing with grammar

T: What's the noun of apologize? APOLOGY

In extract 1, the teacher predicts a gap in the learners' knowledge concerning the noun form of "apologize" and briefly draws attention to it.

Extract 2: TIPFFE dealing with pronunciation

T: DEBT /dɒt/, not debt /dɒbt/

In the above example, the teacher preemptively highlights the common mistake made in pronouncing the word "debt".

Extract 3: SIPFFE dealing with vocabulary

S: What is PIONEER?

T: Somebody who does something for the first time.

In extract 3 the student preemptively asks the meaning of "pioneer" from the teacher.

Extract 4: SIPFFE dealing with pronunciation

S: WIRELESS /'wɪrlɪs/ or WIRELESS /'wɪrlɪs/?

T: WIRELESS /'wɪrlɪs/

In extract 4 the student draws attention to her inability to correctly pronounce the word "wireless" and the teacher guides her.

Extract 5: Reactive FFE dealing with vocabulary

S: Our relative is eye doctor

T: OPTICIAN

S: Ok

In extract 5 the teacher uses a more appropriate term for "eye doctor".

Extract 6: Reactive FFE dealing with grammar

S: In the other hand

T: ON the other hand

S: Yeah

In extract 6 the student uses an incorrect preposition and is corrected by the teacher.