

## **Four key focus on form options**

Javad GHOLAMI, Urmia University, Iran

One of the approaches which is widely used in language classes is form-focused instruction (FFI). Formerly, FFI included two categories of focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs). However, later two other categories were added to this type of instruction, which were named isolated FFI and integrated FFI. In this article, I elaborate on these four categories of FFI and provide the readers with a clear picture of how these FFI options may be applied in class. The similarities and differences among these four FFI options have been highlighted as well with an aim to alleviate the existing ambiguity among some researchers. To this aim, at first, brief but informative accounts of FonF and FonFs are given. This is followed by a description of the dichotomies on FonF and how they may be applied in class. An explanation of isolated and integrated FFI and how they are different from or similar to FonF and FonFs concludes this article.

**Keywords:** Form-Focused Instruction; Focus on Form; Focus on Forms; Integrated Form-Focused Instruction; Isolated Form-Focused Instruction

### **1. Introduction**

One of the areas that researchers have greatly shown interest in is form-focused instruction (FFI). FFI, as defined by Ellis (2001), is an umbrella term which encompasses any attempt to draw the learners' attention to linguistic features of language. Formerly, the most well-known categories of FFI were 'focus on form' (FonF) and 'focus on forms' (FonFs). Two other categories were added to this type of instruction by Spada and Lightbown (2008). These categories are named 'isolated FFI' and 'integrated FFI'. In this article, I try to elaborate on the four categories of FFI proposed so far: FonF, FonFs, isolated FFI, and integrated FFI; my aim is to provide teachers with a clear picture of the options available for them to deal with language form in their classes and possibly make a more informed decision in their dealing with form. The second aim of this article is to alleviate the confusion which, according to Spada, Jessop, Tomita, Suzuki, and Valeo (2014), exists among some researchers, on what isolated and integrated FFI are. This ambiguity, according to Spada et al. (2014), has led to lack of investigation of these types of FFI.

## 2. FonF vs. FonFs

FonF and FonFs as two major options to deal with language were first introduced to the field by Long (1991). Long (1991) defines FonF as an attempt that “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (p. 45-46). To avoid confusion, Long (1991) referred to the former purely form-focused teaching, which paid the only attention to form, as focus on forms (FonFs). Therefore, FonFs is the same approach to teaching practiced in the early days of language teaching as in the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) or the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM).<sup>1</sup> FonF differs from FonFs as it pays the primary attention to meaning and embeds treating the linguistic points incidentally (i.e., when learners commit errors) within communicative activities.

## 3. Categories of FonF

Ellis (2001) and Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002) expanded the earlier definition of FonF proposed by Long (1991) to also include ‘incidental’ and ‘planned’ FonF. Incidental FonF is indeed very similar to the original definition given formerly by Long (1991). Ellis (2001) and Ellis et al. (2002) further divided incidental FonF into two categories of ‘reactive’ and ‘preemptive’. According to Ellis (2001) and Ellis et al. (2002), in reactive incidental FonF, the learner’s attention is drawn to form after a linguistic error occurs on the part of the learner in a meaning-oriented activity. Example 1 above, adopted from the authors’ classes, illustrates a reactive incidental focus on form episode (FFE).

**Example 1:** A sample reactive incidental FFE:

S<sub>1</sub>: We shouldn’t use animals for experiments.

S<sub>2</sub>: But these experiments are important for our health.

S<sub>1</sub>: Yes. I *am agree* with this. But I think eh we should behave [Error  
animals kindly. occurs.]

T: So, you agree with this. [Teacher provides corrective feedback.]

S<sub>1</sub>: I *am agree*. [Student does not notice the feedback; error  
is repeated.]

T: You agree. [Teacher provides corrective feedback once  
more putting more emphasis on the  
corrected form, i.e. *agree*.]

S<sub>1</sub>: Oh! Yes. I agree. [Student notices the correct form and  
integrates it into his speech.]

This shift of attention takes the form of corrective feedback and can range from the most implicit types of corrective feedback, such as recasts, to the

most explicit ones, such as metalinguistic explanation (See also Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a,b; 2010). This category of incidental FonF is indeed the same as the definition of FonF provided by Long (1991).

In the case of preemptive incidental FonF, however, no errors occur on the part of the learner. In other words, in this type of FonF, the learner's attention is drawn to form before any errors are made. In this way, this type of FonF is very similar to what is called preventive medicine. Preemptive incidental FonF can be initiated by both the teacher (teacher-initiated) and the students (student-initiated). Examples 2 and 3 below, adopted from the authors' classes, illustrate teacher- and student-initiated preemptive incidental FonF, respectively.

**Example 2.** A sample teacher-initiated preemptive incidental FFE:

S: I don't like when my girlfriend talks with another boy.

T: Really? Then what would you do if you saw her flirt with others? Do you know the meaning of 'flirt'? [Teacher initiates attention to form by asking the learners if they know the meaning of the word 'flirt'.]

S: (Silence)

T: It means to act in a way like you're attracted to someone. Specially, sexually attracted. Got it? [Teacher continues attention to form by giving the meaning of the target word, i.e. *flirt*.]

S: Yes. [Student gets the meaning of the target word.]

T: So, what would you do if you saw your girlfriend flirt with someone else? [Conversation continues.]

**Example 3:** A sample student-initiated preemptive FFE:

S: Excuse me! Eh... I forgot what *shokoufa shodan* (said in Persian and pronounced as /ʃuku:fa: ʃɔdæn/) means. [Student initiates attention to form by asking the teacher about the meaning of a Persian word in English.]

T: Blossom. It means 'blossom'. [Teacher responds to the learner's query by giving her the meaning of the target word.]

S: If students have eh... more facilities, they blossom. [Student integrates the target word in English into her speech, and conversation continues.]

In the case of teacher-initiated preemptive incidental FonF, the teacher predicts some linguistic niches/holes in the learners' interlanguage drawing upon his/her expertise in the field, familiarity with the learners' built-in syllabus and interlanguage development, and experience-fed hunches on new input which is more likely to lubricate the ongoing meaningful interaction.

Accordingly, s/he decides to take some time out to address presumably inaccessible or noteworthy language points before, during, or after a communicative activity. However, in the case of student-initiated preemptive incidental FonF, it is the learner who feels some gap in his/her interlanguage and raises some queries through asking for linguistic scaffolding and prop before, during, or even after a communicative activity. It goes without saying that both teacher- and student-initiated preemptive incidental FonF are temporary, and brief departures are made from the ongoing meaning-centered activity.

One obvious point in the case of incidental FonF is that there is no thinking procedure or pre-planned decisions as to which linguistic points to tap reactively or preemptively before the start of the class (or instruction). That is to say, in all types of incidental FonF, attention to form is drawn as temporary language-oriented interventionist measures to smoothen the ongoing meaningful interaction and alleviate possible linguistic problems of the learners as they arise in the course of meaningful interaction. Nevertheless, this is not the case in planned FonF. In planned FonF, the teacher selects specific linguistic points in advance and tries to tap them through some focused communicative tasks or enriched input (see Ellis, 2001 for more on what these two options are). These linguistic forms may also come from the textbooks which the teacher and the students use. In fact, the primary weight attributed to meaning is the most distinguishing feature of planned FonF from FonFs. The only similarity between planned FonF and FonFs is that they both try to teach some *preselected* linguistic items. However, the way they approach the presentation of these items is different. In planned FonF, the presentation of the linguistic forms is integrated into meaning-oriented tasks, while, in FonFs, teaching the preselected linguistic forms is done in isolation with no attention to meaning. Indeed, there is no place for meaningful and communicative practice in FonFs.

To provide a clearer picture of how planned FonF differs from FonFs, providing some examples may help. In planned FonF, for teaching a particular grammatical feature, for instance, the teacher may provide the students with a reading passage which encompasses abundant exemplars of the target feature (an example of enriched input). These features may be intentionally highlighted by the teacher in order to grab the students' attention. However, the learners are not asked to process the grammatical features they notice while reading. Rather, they are asked to focus on the meaning of the passage and what message the passage is trying to transfer as they are going to respond to the content of the passage. This way, the learners' primary attention is focused on meaning. However, while reading the passage in order to comprehend it, the highlighted target structures spontaneously grab the learners' attention, and they possibly try to figure out the structure. Hence,

their secondary attention is focused on form. As stated before, the teacher may alternatively make use of focused communicative tasks to practice planned FonF in class. However, for word number limitations, it is not possible to explain how this might be applied in class. Interested readers may see Ellis (2001) for more information about focused communicative tasks.

In FonFs, however, to teach a grammatical structure, for instance, the teacher presents explicit instruction on the form and correct use of the target structure to the learners. The learners, then, are provided with some decontextualized activities, such as fill-in-the-blanks or unscrambling sentences, in order to practice and master the target feature. There is little or no place for meaningful and communicative practice in this type of instruction. Indeed, in FonFs, language is viewed as an object to be learned (as opposed to a tool to communicate as in FonF). What this type of instruction brings to mind is the GTM or the ALM practiced in the early days of language teaching.

Planned FonF has also some similarities and differences with incidental FonF. What this type of FonF shares with incidental FonF is that they both deal with linguistic points in the course of communication and contextualized interaction. What, however, makes it different from incidental FonF, is, as mentioned before, the fact that the teacher in planned FonF chooses some linguistic points (usually one or two) in advance and tries to tap them through meaning-oriented tasks. This is, however, not the case in incidental FonF where, as mentioned earlier, attention to form arises during meaning-oriented activities incidentally, that is, there is no pre-selection of linguistic points in advance.

#### **4. Isolated vs. integrated FFI**

As Spada et al. (2014) state, the concept of isolated FFI has been misinterpreted by some SLA researchers. It has been sometimes mistakenly understood as FonFs. That is to say, the term 'isolated' may bring to mind the mechanical drills and meaningless repetition practiced in the ALM or the decontextualized discrete-point rule explanation and practice in the GTM. For instance, in a study, Songhori (2012) refers to 'isolated FFI' as an FFI option defined and proposed by Spada and Lightbown (2008) in his investigation of learners and teachers' attitudes toward it but seems to associate this FFI option with the GTM. Such misinterpretation of isolated FFI, as Spada et al. (2014) state, even has made some to refrain from investigating this type of FFI as they see no place for such out of vogue instruction in the heyday of communicative language teaching. Indeed, the term 'isolated', as Spada and Lightbown (2008) appreciate, has had a negative connotation in much writing about SLA, and this might have added to the unwillingness of some

researchers to investigate this type of FFI. However, these are all misinterpretations of what isolated FFI is. Therefore, there is a need to further clarify the concept of isolated as well as integrated FFI.

According to Spada and Lightbown (2008) and Spada et al. (2014), both isolated and integrated FFI are practiced in communicative approaches to teaching, such as Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT).<sup>2</sup> The point of departure lies in the time when attention to form is paid (Spada et al., 2014; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). In integrated FFI, attention to form is provided *during* communicative activities. That is to say, dealing with linguistic points is embedded in communicative activities. In this type of FFI, attention to form could be both incidental (i.e. arising incidentally during communicative activities) or planned (i.e. when the teacher selects specific linguistic points to deal with through meaning-oriented tasks). Therefore, as Spada and Lightbown (2008) put, integrated FFI differs from Long's (1991) definition of FonF, in which tapping the linguistic points occurs only reactively. Integrated FFI is indeed similar to what Ellis (2001) and Ellis et al. (2002) define as planned and incidental FonF.

Nevertheless, in isolated FFI, linguistic points are put on the spotlight *separately* from communicative practice (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). This type of attention to form is carried out in preparation for a communicative task or after learners experience some difficulty in using a particular linguistic feature in a communicative task. Therefore, it can occur *before* or *after* a communicative activity. Thus, in this type of instruction, there is some communicative practice. However, this practice is carried out separately from the treatment of linguistic forms.

To further elaborate on how isolated and integrated FFI may be applied in class, providing some examples would be helpful. As stated before, integrated FFI is the same as incidental and planned FonF as defined by Ellis (2001) and Ellis et al. (2002). Therefore, all explanations and examples given to incidental and planned FonF also hold true about integrated FFI.

In isolated FFI, on the other hand, at the stage of carrying out instruction, the primary attention is on form, although there is some communicative practice on the target linguistic feature before or after focusing on it (and hence, focusing on meaning). In this type of instruction, to teach a grammatical structure, for instance, the teacher provides the learners with some explicit instruction on its form and use. This instruction may or may not be followed by some form activities, such as fill-in-the-blanks or unscrambling sentences. However, some communicative practice which requires the learners to use the target feature does follow this instruction. This is how isolated FFI is put into practice *in preparation for* a communicative task. There is, however, another possibility in how isolated FFI may be applied in class, and it is when the

teacher provides the learners with some explicit instruction on the form and use of a linguistic structure after a communicative task. It is not uncommon to observe some learners have difficulty in using some linguistic forms when communicating. In isolated FFI, the teacher spots these problems of the learners, and after the task is over, s/he provides the learners with some explicit instruction on the correct use of these (or some of these) forms. This is how isolated FFI is put into practice *after* learners experience some difficulty in using a particular linguistic feature in a communicative task. It is worth noting that it is also possible to combine the two possibilities of isolated FFI in teaching the target forms. That is to say, the teacher may first teach the target forms explicitly and, then, provide the learners with some communicative tasks on the target features. Later, having observed the learners have difficulty in using the target features while performing the communicative tasks, s/he provides them with some linguistic information on their errors after the tasks are over. What is also important in this type of instruction is that no corrective feedback is provided to learners on their errors in using the target features in the communicative practice phase.

### **5. Isolated FFI vs. FonFs**

There are two similarities between isolated FFI and FonFs. The first similarity is that, in both isolated FFI (the case of focusing on linguistic form in preparation for a communicative task) and FonFs, there is pre-selection of linguistic forms. That is, the teacher selects a linguistic point to teach in advance or this is provided by the textbook. The other similarity is that, in both of these options, the primary focus is on form. That is, in both isolated FFI and FonFs, instruction of the linguistic features is carried out explicitly in separation from meaning-oriented activities when the learners' attention is totally on form and mastering it.

With respect to distinction between isolated FFI and FonFs, however, we should bear in mind that, in isolated FFI, although the primary attention is on form when instruction on the linguistic features is carried out, there are abundant opportunities for learners to practice the target structure in communicative and meaning-oriented tasks. That is, attention to linguistic points occurs *outside* of (not without incorporation of) communicative activities. These communicative activities can precede or proceed the isolated attention to form. Therefore, isolated FFI occurs as a complementary component of communicatively-based language teaching programs. In this way, it differs from FonFs, in which there is no place for communicative tasks. Likewise, in isolated FFI, the view toward language is as a tool to communicate as opposed to an object to learn as in FonFs. This is, indeed, why isolated FFI is not devoid of communicative and meaningful practice.

Table 1  
Features of FFI Options

Aspect	FonF			
	Reactive	Incidental	Preemptive	Planned
Orientation				
Primary focus of attention	Language-as-tool Meaning	S-initiated Language-as-tool Meaning	T-initiated Language-as-tool Meaning	Language-as-tool Meaning
Secondary focus of attention	Form	Form	Form	Form
Target selection	Target forms arise incidentally in the course of interaction. The teacher (or sometimes the peers) provides corrective feedback on learners' errors while their primary focus is on meaning (i.e. in the course of communication).	Target forms arise incidentally in the course of interaction. The learner shifts attention from meaning to form through raising a query about a linguistic point before any errors occur. The teacher (or sometimes the peers) provides information about the target form. This is done in the course of communication.	Target forms arise incidentally in the course of interaction. The teacher shifts attention from meaning to form through providing information about a linguistic form in the learners' interlanguage before any errors occur. This is done in the course of communication.	Target forms are selected in advance.
Instructional processes				The teacher selects a few linguistic items in advance (or these items are provided by the textbooks) and tries to tap them through focused communicative tasks or enriched input. Corrective feedback is provided to learners on their errors in using the target forms while they are performing the tasks.

Table 1 continued

Aspect	FonF's		
	In preparation for a communicative activity	Isolated FFI	After a communicative activity
Orientation			
Primary focus of attention	Language-as-object Form	Language-as-tool Form	Language-as-tool Form
Secondary focus of attention	Meaning	Meaning	Meaning
Target selection	Target forms are selected in advance.	Target forms are selected in advance.	Target forms are selected in response to learners' linguistic problems observed in communicative activities.
Instructional processes	The teacher selects a few linguistic items in advance (or these items are provided by the textbook) and teaches them explicitly. This is followed by form-based activities, such as fill-in-the-blanks or unscrambling sentences. Corrective feedback is provided to learners when they fail to use the target forms correctly while they are doing the decontextualized activities. There is little or no communicative practice on the target features.	The teacher selects a few linguistic items in advance (or these items are provided by the textbooks) and teaches them explicitly. This is usually (but not necessarily always) followed by form-based activities, such as fill-in-the-blanks or unscrambling sentences. The learners, then, are provided with ample communicative activities to practice the target features in a communicative way. No corrective feedback or linguistic information is provided to learners on their errors in using the target features in the communicative practice phase. Rather, corrective feedback is provided to learners on their errors in using the target features while they are doing the form-based activities.	Learners engage in communicative activities during which no corrective feedback is provided to them. The teacher observes the learners' linguistic problems while they are performing the communicative tasks and teaches them (or some of them) explicitly after the task is over.



## **6. FonF, FonFs, isolated FFI, and integrated FFI in a nutshell**

Thorough explanations were given on each type of FFI and its subcategories above. To provide the readers with a schematic/handy guide on what these FFI options have in common and how they differ from one another, these explanations are summarized in Table 1 (above). It should be noted that since integrated FFI is the same as incidental FonF and planned FonF as defined by Ellis (2001) and Ellis et al. (2002), there is no category of integrated FFI in the table below; whatever presented for incidental and planned FonF in the table below also holds true about integrated FFI.

## **7. Conclusion**

Having read about these options, one may question how to choose among these FFI options. Put another way, the question may arise that which one of these FFI options is better to be practiced in class. The point is that choosing an FFI option to be the only way of dealing with form in all classes is indeed a mistake. These FFI options indeed complement each other in a communicative language program. That is to say, depending on factors such as L1 influence, the learners' age, salience of the form in the input, input frequency, the communicative value of the linguistic form, rule complexity, the learners' learning culture, etc., one should make a decision on how to deal with a particular form. For instance, studies have indicated that 'third person singular -s' is not frequently noticed by the learners in the input due to its low salience in the input, which may stem from its lack of communicative value. In such cases, isolated FFI may be a better choice since it explicitly takes the form out of the flow of communication and puts it on the spotlight. Another example may be for the case of complex rules. It has been suggested that integrated FFI may be a better option to deal with complex/abstract features of language, such as the article system, and isolated FFI may be a more suitable option to deal with easy forms. Studies have also indicated that explicit rule explanation is not beneficial for young learners, particularly children, and may even add to their confusion due to their lack of cognitive development. Thus, choosing integrated FFI over isolated FFI would be more plausible in these classes. All these indicate that FFI options should be viewed as complementary parts of a communicative class rather than opposing options in competition with each other. FonFs, in this regard, however, is an exception since it best fits into language programs which pay little or no attention to meaning and communication. As so, teachers may make use of this type of instruction in classes which are devoid of a communicative approach to teaching.

To sum up, in this article, I tried to provide brief but informative accounts of some key concepts on FFI and what options are available to deal with form in

class. Through simple but informative explanations and providing examples wherever possible, I aimed at providing teachers with a clearer picture of how to put the FFI options into practice in their classes. In this article, I also aimed at alleviating the ambiguities which, according to Spada et al. (2014), exist among some researchers on what isolated FFI is. This way, I aimed at generating interest in delving more into the nature and effectiveness of isolated FFI through further studies. Interested researchers may also choose to investigate whether each type of FFI would lead to acquiring different types of knowledge (e.g. explicit and implicit) and to explore the factors, such as individual differences, influencing acquiring that type of knowledge. This particularly would be of interest in the case of isolated and integrated FFI as the former has not been much investigated.

It is hoped that this article will provide readers with a clearer picture of what FonFs, FonF including both incidental and planned types, isolated, and integrated FFI are, how they may be practiced in class, and how they differ from one another.

#### Notes:

1. For a brief discussion of these methods, please see Salmani Nodoushan (2006).
2. For a brief discussion of TBLT, please see Salmani Nodoushan (2008).

#### The Author

Javad Gholami (Email: [j.gholami@urmia.ac.ir](mailto:j.gholami@urmia.ac.ir)) is an assistant professor in TEFL from Urmia University, Iran. His main publications have been on incidental focus on form, task-based language teaching, teacher education, convenience editing, and academic writing. He is also interested in professional development of Iranian EFL teachers through conducting teacher training courses and theme-based workshops.

#### References

- Ellis, R. (2001). Introduction: Investigating form-focused instruction. *Language Learning, 51*, 1-46.
- Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H., & Loewen, S. (2002). Doing focus on form. *System, 30*, 419-432.
- Long, M. H. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In: K. De Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.) *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 39-52). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

- Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2006). Language teaching: State of the art. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(1), 169-193.
- Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2007a). Thinking on the write path. *Training Journal*, May 2007, 37-40.
- Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2007b). On adopting a cognitive orientation in EFL writing classroom. *Journal on Educational Psychology*, 1(1), 15-18.
- Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2008). A Framework for Task-Oriented Language Instruction. *Journal on School Educational Technology*, 3(3), 5-16.
- Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2010). The Interface between interim assessment and feedback: An opinion paper. *Journal on Educational Psychology*, 4(3), 1-8.
- Songhori, M. H. (2012). Exploring the congruence between teachers' and students' preferences for form-focused instruction: Isolated or integrated? *Asian EFL Journal*, 61, 4-23.
- Spada, N., Jessop, L., Tomita, Y., Suzuki, W., & Valeo, A. (2014). Isolated and integrated form-focused instruction: Effects on different types of L2 Knowledge. *Language Teaching Research*, 18, 453-473.
- Spada, N., & Lightbown, P. (2008). Form-focused instruction: Isolated or integrated? *TESOL Quarterly*, 42, 181-207.