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The Investigation of Teachers' and Students' Attitudes toward Form-Focused Instruction

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Abstract

The present study benefited from a mixed- method design. It was both a quantitative and a qualitative study with the superiority of the quantitative phase. This study was an effort to investigate teachers and students attitudes toward form focus instruction and to check if there were any significant differences between their views. One of the salient issues in applied linguistics and EFL/ESL instruction theory is exploring teachers' cognitive aspects regarding how the language learning/teaching process must take place. On the other hand, there is an agreement among SLA researchers that drawing students' attention to form is beneficial in communicative language teaching (CLT) (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 2006). As a result, the current study was conducted to check this belief in the context of Iran secondary schools. The study was conducted with 3 English teachers and 70 secondary students. To collect data, the researcher used a semi-structured interview in addition to: Teachers' and students' attitudes towards form-focused instruction questionnaire by Dornyei and Csizer (2012). After collecting the questionnaires, they were checked for completeness and the data were analyzed. The results showed that all the teachers believed that focus on form instruction is helpful while most of the students did not support form-focused instruction. In addition, some other differences were noticed. The difference in their beliefs existed in the manner of teaching and the activities covered during the process of teaching. Most of the teachers preferred implicit teaching while students preferred explicit teaching.

Keywords: Form-focused instruction, Implicit teaching, Explicit teaching

1. Introduction

One of the controversial issues in applied linguistics and EFL/ESL instruction theory concerns with exploring teachers' cognitive aspects regarding how the language learning/teaching process should happen. According to Thompson (1992), teachers' beliefs about students' learning, teachers' roles, subject-matter knowledge, and curriculum depend somehow on experiences shared within their culture and are not easy to change; however, based on Pajares (1992), some assumptions are basic in studies addressing teachers' beliefs.

There are a number of studies that show the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices (Andrews, 2003; Basturkmen, 2012; & Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2012; Kuzborska, 2012).As Kuzborska (2012) states, "teachers' beliefs are thought to have a profound influence on their classroom practices. An understanding of this relationship is important for the improvement of teachers' professional preparation and the successful implementation of new curricula."(p. 102). According to Kuzborska (2012), it is generally acknowledged that teachers possess theoretical beliefs about language learning and teaching and that such beliefs and theories tend to shape the nature of their instructional practices (Davis & Wilson, 1999).

There is an increasing awareness among instructed SLA researchers that drawing student attention to form is beneficial in communicative language teaching (CLT) (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 2006). One type of grammar instruction in CLT is referred to as form-focused instruction (FFI) (e.g., R. Ellis, 2001; Spada, 1997). Previous learner belief studies have confirmed that learners generally acknowledge the importance of grammar learning for their target language development, although an equally strong support for grammar instruction is not necessarily shared by their teachers. This research has also pointed to the selectiveness of learner beliefs depending on instruction types (i.e., explicit or implicit and deductive or inductive learning) and classroom conditions (e.g., Horwitz, 1999; Savignon, 1983; Schulz, 1996; 2001) and proficiency (Brandi, 1995; Garrett & Shortall, 2002). An emerging area of research interest is related to how and when learners prefer their teachers to focus on grammar in classrooms where the main focus is on learning to use the target language for communicative purposes (Spada & Lightbown, in press).

Generally speaking, one of the major topics in second language acquisition pertains to how language input is required to be presented to the second language learners in the classroom; however, the main concern of applied linguistics is effective use of grammar instruction in the communicative classroom (Doughty & Williams 1998; Norris & Ortega 2000). To this respect, form-focused instruction encourages learners to concentrate on forms used for language production. In other words, formal aspects of language need to be taken into account.

Accordingly, it is suggested that focusing on form during language teaching is considered as one of the issues in both language teaching and learning. To this respect, Spada (1997) defines form-focused instruction as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (p. 73). However, Long (1991, pp. 45-46) believes that form-focused instruction refers to "drawing students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication".

Therefore, focus on form relies on inviting learners to pay attention to grammatical instructions as a part of communicative language practice. As a matter of fact, two main types of FFI including Focus on Form (FonF), where linguistic elements of language is usually part of a communicative activity, and Focus on FormS (FonFs), where discrete linguistic structures are taught separate from communication (Ellis, 2001; Laufer, 2006) are specified.

Regarding form-focused instruction, Spada and Lightbown (2008, pp. 185-187) rely on integrated and isolated form-focused instruction. Likely, they point out that both "isolated and integrated FFI can include explicit feedback on error, meta-linguistic terminology, the statement of rules, and explanations" (p. 187).

Critically speaking, for many years, form-focused instruction has been the main concern of applied linguistic researchers. Accordingly, they debate on the issue related to the use of formal and informal instruction at the same time. Therefore, some linguists like Doughty and Varela (1998) believe in no interruption in communication, however, some others like Dekeyser (1998) advocates the integration of the knowledge in developing communicative activities.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study is conducted to examine the effectiveness of the form-focused instruction. Thus, the salient objectives of the study are as follows: the first aim of the study is to explore secondary school teachers' attitudes toward form-focused instruction. It is intended to find out whether teachers have a positive attitude toward form-focused instruction or not. The second goal of the study is to explore secondary school learners' ideas about form-focused instruction. In fact, the study attempts to discover students' opinions about this specific instructional style. Finally, it is intended to find out the differences between teachers and students' attitudes toward form-focused instruction.

1.2. Research Questions

The current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Iranian English teachers' attitudes in secondary schools towards form-focused instruction in SLA?
2. What are the students' attitudes in secondary schools towards form-focused instruction in SLA?
3. Are there any significant differences between teachers' and students' attitudes in secondary schools in terms of form-focused instruction in SLA?

2. Literature Review

As the ultimate goal of language teaching is to encourage learners to acquire "target-like" proficiency in second/foreign languages, some SLA researchers are interested in the relationship between learner beliefs and learner proficiency in the target language. A few researchers have identified some learner belief differences depending on the target language proficiency; one study is a learner belief study about language learning in general (Mori, 1999) and the other two studies explore learner beliefs specifically about grammar instruction (Brandi, 1995; Garrett & Shortall, 2002).

For example, Mori (1999) explored the relationship between beliefs and strategies that second language learners used to interpret familiar words in their target language (i.e., Japanese) in a U.S. university. Two types of beliefs investigated were learner beliefs about the nature of knowledge and beliefs specifically about language learning. By administering a belief questionnaire and a 72-item multiple-choice kanji compounds test to 47 English-speaking college students, Mori found statistically significant correlations at three levels: 1) "beliefs in the simplicity of knowledge and a tendency to over-rely on a single source of information"; 2) "avoidance of ambiguity and over-reliance on kanji clues"; and 3) "perception of the difficulty of kanji learning and greater use of contextual clues" (Mori, 1999, p.534).

She interpreted the results that low-proficiency students' are unable to use contextual clues as seemingly associated with inadequate beliefs about the nature of language learning, specifically concerning the avoidance of ambiguity. Garrett and Shortall (2002) examined the relationship between grammar instruction and classroom organizations specifically. The authors administered a five point Likert scale questionnaire to 103 English as a foreign language (EFL) students in Brazil so as to explore their evaluation of teacher-fronted and student-centered grammar activities. Beginner level students preferred teacher-fronted to student-centered grammar activities, while intermediate students did not value the teacher-fronted activities. Garett and Shortall interpret the result as "different types of activity organization may serve different needs for learners at different stages of their learning careers" (p. 47).

Brandi (1995) examined learner beliefs about preferred types of error correction among 21 German as a foreign language learners in a U.S. university. The learners were divided in to two proficiency levels (i.e., high-achievement students and low achievement students). Learners received different types of feedback (right or wrong message, error location, grammatical description of correct response and correct answer) on their grammatical errors in a computer-assisted language-learning (CALL) program.

Proficient learners were more willing to engage in grammar instruction by making use of both explicit and implicit error corrections compared to weaker learners who preferred to obtain more explicit error correction. Brandi explains that language skills of weaker learners "may contribute to lowering their engagement in cognitive and motivational processing" (p.79). He also recommends that lower proficiency learners should be accommodated with "a variety of predestined and pre-structured learning strategies that allow for self-controlled and learner-initiated strategy use, thus engaging them in the learning process" (p.79).

Findings from these studies indicate several specific aspects of communicative language classrooms that may relate to learner beliefs and their proficiency levels. These aspects include the tolerance/avoidance of ambiguity, classroom organizational structure such as student-centered activities/teacher-fronted lectures, and feedback types such as implicit/explicit corrections. High-proficiency learners are likely to prefer contextualized, student-centered and implicit learning, while low-proficiency learners tend to prefer unambiguous, teacher-fronted and explicit patterns of language teaching.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

The present study is a mixed method one. That is, it benefited from both a quantitative and a qualitative design. The study is quantitative since it benefited from numerical data collection and analysis. In fact, it is a type of survey which attempted to explore the participants' ideas about form-focused instruction. On the other hand, it is qualitative since it also benefited from descriptive data collection and analysis. The participants were also interviewed and then their interviews were coded, categorized and analyzed in a full descriptive manner.

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 3 secondary school teachers and 70 students of Ghods guidance school in Marvdasht, Iran. Given that in this case, gender, age, and socio-economic conditions of the sample were not considered. The researcher made use of convenience sampling in the selection of the participants. That is, Ghods was the only school which let her select the participants. However, she randomly selected 70 students from different grades to participate in the study. In addition, the school had only three English teachers who participated in the study. The researcher also invited 2 teachers and 11 students to participate in the pilot study. They were also from secondary school and were chosen conveniently.

3.3. Instruments

In this study the qualitative data (interview) was conducted so that the researcher could find out teachers' and students' attitudes towards form-focused instruction at secondary level based on the participants' responses. The next step was to collect quantitative data through a questionnaire related to teachers' and students' attitudes. Thus, the following instruments were used to collect data:

- Semi-structured interview (to prepare the questions for the interview the researcher made use of an interview form which was prepared by Erham and Oxford, (1995) in which they had interviewed language learners about form-focused instruction of grammar. The researcher made some changes to the questions through consulting with two experienced language teachers).

- Teachers' and students' attitudes towards form-focused instruction questionnaire (Dornyei & Csizer, 2012, p. 78).

The researcher in the current study was required to develop the questions for interview, thus, different processes were passed to create desirable interview questions. To this respect, at the beginning of the study, the teacher' and students' attitudes were investigated through a semi-structured interview informally and consequently, some questions were written. However, before starting both quantitative data (interview) and qualitative data (questionnaire), the participants were provided with a short explanation of the study. The researcher let the interviewees bring their reasons in both in English and Persian in which the Persian statements were translated into English.

Finally, to prevent any misunderstanding by the respondents, both the interview questions and the questionnaire were translated into Persian and were checked by a professional language teacher to comment on the appropriateness and clarity of the translation. Then, the researcher made use of them.

3.4. Procedures

3.4.1. Data Collection procedure

The current study includes two parts consisting of the pilot study and the main study. The number of respondents in the pilot study was 2 English teacher and 11 secondary students. The aim of the pilot study was to check the appropriateness of the questionnaire, appropriateness of the interview questions, the design of the study and the procedure. The pilot study took place a week before the main study. All the stages of the administration of the pilot study were similar to the main study. The participants of the pilot study attended the interview first and they filled out the questionnaires next. Then, the data from the interviews and the questionnaires were analyzed. The administration of the pilot study proved that the design and the procedures of the study were appropriate. Dornyei (2003) mentions that "it needs not to be very large; the typical sample size at this stage is around 50 (+/- 20)" (p. 68). However, the main study was handled with the population of 3 English teachers and 70 secondary students. After collecting the questionnaires, they were checked for completeness and the data were sent for an analyzer to report reliability of questionnaire in the pilot study and find the results through factor analysis in the main study. The primary data for this study were collected through interview with a qualitative approach taken to the research. This qualitative approach research was chosen to create understanding of the teachers' and students' attitudes towards teaching form-focused instruction. Regarding data collection procedure, at the beginning of the study permission was gained from the principal of Ghods guidance-school in Marvdasht. To this respect, the participants were ensured that their responses were confidential and the aim was just doing a study in EFL domain, hence, they were informed that writing their names at any stage of the study was not obligatory. The researcher let the interviewees bring their reasons in both in English and Persian in which the Persian statements were translated into English.

3.4.2. Data Analysis procedure

The present study relies on two types of data collection procedure including quantitative and qualitative. The qualitative part of data analysis was done through content analysis method, and the quantitative part was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. To answer the first question, the data collected through questionnaires were analyzed and the results were shown via a graph. To answer the second question the researcher made use of Chi squire test and to answer the third question the researcher made use of Independent sample test.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Quantitative Results

The first research question of the study explored teachers' ideas about form-focused instruction to find out if they support form-focused instruction or not. Since the number of the teachers who participated in the study was low it was impossible to run a Chi squire test. However, Table 1 showed that all three teachers' were in agreement with form focused instruction.

Table 1. teachers' frequency with respect to their ideas about form-focused instruction

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Agree	3	3.0	.0
Total	3[a]		

a. This variable is constant.

b. job = teacher

The second research question asked for students' attitudes about form-focused instruction. To reach this aim, firstly Chi squire test was run. Table 2 showed that significance level was .000 and since it is less than .01 so the difference within the students' group is significant. That is, there is a significant difference between the number of the students who are in favor of form-focused instruction and the number of the students who are against form-focused instruction.

Table 2.Chi squire for the students' group

	t.t
Chi-Square	18.514[a]
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

The third research question of the study intended to investigate differences between teachers' and students ideas about form-focused instruction. To accomplish this goal, Independent Samples Test was used. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Inter Difference

								Lower	
iances	.794	.376	4.507	71	.000	9.53333	2.11526	5.31562	
iances not			6.289	2.369	.016	9.53333	1.51581	3.89361	

The data showed that there was not any significant difference between the variance of teachers' and students' groups based on Levene's test, since p(3760) > (0.05). Moreover, with respect to T-test results which show p.000<a 0/05, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the scores of teachers and students attitudes about form-focused instruction. These mean scores showed that teachers have a more positive view toward form-focused instruction than students. Table 4.7 shows teachers' and students' means scores on the total scale's items.

4.2. Qualitative results

4.2.1. Teachers' attitude toward form-focused instruction

This phase of the results is devoted to the analyses of the interviews of students and teachers. In order to answer the first research question 3 teachers were interviewed. Teacher 1 was holding B.A. degree of English literature. She believed that "when you plan for the learners to learn grammar it's a form focused instruction. By experience a teacher understands what parts to focus". She referred to explicit, teacher initiated instances of focus on form instruction. According to her a good teacher should be alert to grab students' problems and work on them. Teacher 1 preferred explicit teaching because students don't have to make guesses and they can easily take note and remember it for a later time.

Teacher 2 was holding M.A. degree of English literature. She asserted "form focused instruction is any grammar related practice done by L2 teachers to attract students attention to form". Teacher 2 continued that both implicit and explicit teaching types are useful in teaching forms. She believed that students are too confused and busy with the new materials that they cannot focus on their mistakes. It is teachers' job to alert them. Teacher 2 was in favor of implicit teaching so that students get more involved.

Teacher 3 was holding B.A. of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). According to teacher 3, "in form focused instruction learners become aware of grammar point of language to use in their communication." According to her, teacher is like a leader that shows the students the general idea. Students know themselves better and they can deal with their own form difficulties and mistakes. Teacher 3 also showed interest in form-focused instruction and preferred implicit teaching because grammar points stick in their minds better.

Thus, as it is apparent, all three teachers approved of being in favor of form-focused instruction. So, their ideas gathered through the interview supported their performance on the questionnaire. Therefore, it can be logical to claim that all three teachers with different academic degrees were in favor of form-focused instruction.

4.2.2. Students' attitude toward form-focused instruction

In order to answer the second research questions 70 students were interviewed. 65 % of students were unfamiliar with the notion of focus on form instruction. After providing them with a general definition of the notion they answered the rest of the questions. 75 % of the students preferred teacher initiated activities. 53% of the students preferred conversational activities to didactic ones. Regarding implicit and explicit activities, 67% of students found explicit teaching more useful for improving their learning

process. 47% of students preferred that grammar be taught by their teachers directly. It seems that *teacher initiated* is the most interesting option to the students. Students selected it as the most favorite item in both their interview and through the questionnaire. They also showed interest in *explicit teaching* but it was not one of the most interesting items chosen by them through the questionnaire. In case of *conversational activities,* it may be possible to claim that their attitudes in the interview matched their selection of the item in the questionnaire.

4.2.3. Teachers' and students' attitudes comparison

In order to compare teachers' and students' attitudes data gathered through questionnaires were compared with the data obtained from the interviews. As the two sets of data were not comparable due to their potential difference in case of data gathering manner, qualitative analysis is more logical here.
Most of the teacher preferred implicit teaching, while students preferred explicit teaching. All the teachers found focus on form instruction useful. The same was true for nearly most of the students. Teachers preferred both conversational and didactic activities while most of the students preferred conversational activities. So, the comparison is made as follow:
Almost all the teachers insisted on teaching style which leads to correct pronunciation while most of the students disagreed. Teachers preferred incidental focus on form, while there was no radical difference in the students' choice of planned and incidental instruction.
Generally most of teachers and students beliefs differed to great extents. Although they were both in favor of form focused instruction their beliefs differed in most of their choices. Students mostly preferred to be inactive and wait for the teacher to do the teaching while teachers expected their students to be active and to be creative in the classroom. Students were in favor of teachers' initiated activities while teachers supported students' initiated activities. This difference in viewpoints of teachers and students reveals that teachers prefer students to cooperate in the lessons while students prefer to play the role of the receivers of knowledge. On the whole, the comparison shows that mostly teachers intend to bring up critical students who actively are involved in the instructional activities while students mainly prefer to be the gainer of knowledge without attempting to play any active role in the class.

5. Conclusions

The outcomes of the present study can be stated as following:

First, it was shown that teachers had a positive attitude toward form-focused instruction. The statistical analyses of the numerical data obtained from the questionnaires and the analysis of the descriptive data obtained from the interviews revealed that all three teachers who participated in this study supported form-focused instruction. Contrary to teachers' attitudes about form-focused instruction, the statistical analyses of the questionnaires and the descriptive analysis of the interviews showed that most students rejected form-focused instruction. Most of the students did not support form-focused instruction. The comparison of teachers' and students' attitudes about form-focused instruction proved that there is a significant difference between their ideas.

On the other hand, the findings showed that teachers and students had also different views about each individual item of the questionnaire. Differences were also noticed through the findings of their interviews. It was shown that teachers were mostly in agreement of negotiating activities, conversational activities, didactic activities, student initiated activities and explicit and implicit feedback while students were not in agreement with these activities. On the other hand, in case of teacher initiated activities, students were mostly in agreement with it while teachers did not support this activity. In case of feedback,

there was no significant difference between teachers' and students' ideas. Both teachers and students found it to be effective.

Furthermore, the results showed that most teachers supported implicit teaching while students were not supportive of this type of teaching and were mostly in agreement with explicit teaching. They also supported teacher initiated activities while teachers supported students' initiated activities. Teachers' also supported conversational activities while only half of the students supported these activities. Somehow, it can be concluded that students mostly prefer the activities which do not require them to play an active role in the classroom while teachers want the students to have a critical role in the instruction.

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