

**The Impacts of Planned Preemptive FonF on EFL Learners' Lexical Resource****VahidPanahzade***Urmia University*[panahzade.vahid@gmail.com](mailto:panahzade.vahid@gmail.com)**JavadGholami***Urmia University*[j.gholami@urmia.ac.ir](mailto:j.gholami@urmia.ac.ir)

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**Abstract**

SLA researchers contend that focus on form (FonF) instruction plays a pivotal role in L2 acquisition. Focus on form (FonF) instruction is learner-centered and is consistent with the learner's internal syllabus. There has been an ongoing query in the literature as to whether focus on form should occur prior to error commitment or be reactive to the actual errors of the learners during the task. In this regard, this study tried to explore the effectiveness as well as the relative impacts of planned preemptive vs. delayed reactive focus on form on lexical resource of EFL learners' oral production in meaning-oriented interviews. The study adopted a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design including two experimental groups, each receiving a distinct treatment during the whole semester. The participants of the study were a total of 19 upper-intermediate adult all-female students. Paired-samples *t*-test and independent-samples *t*-test were utilized to evaluate and compare the differing effects of two treatments respectively. The findings of the study demonstrated that both types of form-focused instructions are conducive to learners' oral production lexical resource. One of the interesting findings of the present study was that preemptive focus on form can be planned in advance on the basis of teachers' experience, which can lead to a blurred dichotomy between planned and incidental focus on form.

*Keywords:* Focus on form; meaning-oriented lessons; planned preemptive FonF; delayed reactive FonF; lexical resource



## 1. Introduction

SLA studies have long surveyed learning a second or foreign language and communicating successfully in that language. Most of these studies have been conducted inside the language classrooms, called instructed SLA, as opposed to naturalistic SLA which deals with learners' every day journey of L2 contact and interaction. Instructed SLA has been defined as "any systematic attempt to enable or facilitate language learning by manipulating the mechanisms of learning and/or the conditions under which these occur" (Housen&Pierrard, 2005, p. 3).

Traditionally, course design started with the language components and was presented to the learners, one item at a time, in a sequence determined by notions of frequency and difficulty (Long, 1997). Such an approach was named as 'focus on forms' by Long (1988), since it consists of the teaching of discrete grammar points in accordance with a synthetic syllabus. It was learners' task to put those chunks together to use them in communication.

Focus on forms, however, was subjected to much criticism. It was called a one-size-fits-all approach. An alternative was proposed which is named as 'focus on meaning' with a focus on the learner and learning processes. Proponents of focus on meaning believed that first and second language learning are not intentional, but incidental and implicit. Consequently, learners are provided with great amounts of comprehensible input (Long, 1997). However, it suffered from many problems. As long as learners' erroneous language usage caused no communication breakdown, learners' errors were not attended to. Therefore, another approach was sought. Long (1991) put forward the third option, that is, 'focus on form'. He defined it as follows: 'Focus on form... overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication' (p. 45- 46). Hence, both teacher and learners are engaged in language use communicatively. However, occasions arise when the learners choose to focus on form.

Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2002) distinguished two types of focus on form: Planned focus on form and incidental focus on form. The linguistic elements to be focused are pre-determined



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in planned focus on form. It is not unlike focus on forms instruction inasmuch as a specific form is pre-selected for treatment. However, in incidental focus on form no specific forms are pre-selected and learners or the teacher can opt to attend to various forms while performing the task. Incidental focus on form has been further divided into pre-emptive and reactive focus on form. In pre-emptive focus on form the teacher or learners draw attention to form even though no actual problem in production has arisen (Ellis, Basturkmen&Loewen, 2001). As stated by Loewen (2011), in teacher-initiated preemptive focus on form teacher draws learners' attention to a language item, even though no error in production has occurred. He further adds that teachers may not be highly accurate in predicting which forms learners will have difficulty with and that they may be relying on their intuitions in trying to predict problematic items for the learners. Nevertheless, the main advantage of student-initiated preemptive focus on form is that it attends to the gaps in the students' linguistic knowledge. Reactive focus on form, on the other hand, follows learners' produced utterances containing an actual or perceived error. Accordingly, it provides learners with negative evidence which is called corrective feedback (Ellis et al., 2002). Lyster and Ranta (1997) categorized feedback into the following six different types: (1) Explicit correction, (2) Recasts, (3) Clarification requests, (4) Metalinguistic feedback, (5) Elicitation, and (6) Repetition.

Focus on form (FonF) is a particularly effective teaching approach and should be introduced to the classroom syllabi. Most of the research on FonF instruction carried out so far centers mainly around reactive focus on form and only a few studies have addressed planned focus on form (e.g. DabaghiVarnosfadrani&Basturkmen, 2009). Also, most of these studies have sought overall gains of the learners following form-focused treatment. The present study, however, tried to explore the effectiveness planned preemptive focus on form on lexical resource of EFL learners' oral production in meaning-oriented interviews. Furthermore, almost all of the studies in the literature have tried to verify the merits of various form-focused approaches adhering to Ellis et al.'s (2002) dichotomy of focus on form, i.e. planned vs. incidental focus on form. The present study, however, was aimed at obscuring this dichotomy. In other words, it was to reveal that pre-emptive focus on form can be planned in advance on the basis of teachers' experience. Thus, it



can lead to a blurred dichotomy between planned and incidental focus on form by proposing that even preemptive focus on form can be planned beforehand by experienced teachers. In order to respond to above-mentioned query, the present study was aimed at exploring the most advantageous focus on form approach by addressing following research question:

1. Does providing planned preemptive focus on form have any significant impact on upper-intermediate Iranian female learners' lexical resource in meaning-oriented interviews?

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

Planning which is conceptualized as the opportunity to work out task performance before the actual performance, has evolved into an area of inquiry in its own right and “has become a burgeoning area of investigation within task-based learning” (Ortega, 2005, p. 77). To date, there have been a few studies investigating learners' fluency, accuracy and complexity gains following planning. For instance, Foster and Skehan (1996), for instance, investigated pre-intermediate learners, using personal information exchange, narrative, and decision-making tasks. They found that both complexity and fluency significantly increased but accuracy improved only in two of the tasks. They outlined that planners paused less frequently than non-planners in all three tasks they investigated. In another study, investigating advanced English learners of Spanish, Ortega (1999) asked them to plan what to say in their oral picture-based narrative task. She found that fluency and complexity of learners' oral productions improved significantly, but accuracy improved only in some measures. Similarly, Yuan and Ellis (2003) made learners plan for content, language, and organization for an oral picture-based narrative task and explored the effects of off-line vs. on-line planning. They concluded that the Chinese EFL learners improved significantly in terms of their oral production complexity and accuracy under both pre-task and on-line planning conditions compared to the no-planning condition. It was also found that pre-task planning group was more fluent and used a greater variety of vocabulary. That is, it improved learners' lexical resource.



In a study by Birjandi and Alipour (2010) which was conducted to compare the effect of individual and group pre-task planning on EFL learners' accuracy and complexity in speaking, 60 intermediate female learners at the first grade of high school were divided in two groups and given the same planning time (two, three, and five minutes depending on the task complexity). However, in one group, the participants carried out the task individually and in the other, they performed in groups of five. After the treatment, the two groups were given a posttest on a narrative task. After the planning time, all students were asked to discuss the task and the accuracy and complexity of their speech were measured. The results indicated that whereas the individual planning group outperformed the group planning group in terms of speaking accuracy, the group planning learners performed significantly better than the individual planners in terms of complexity. Ahangari and Abdi (2011) also examined the effect of pre-task on the complexity and accuracy of task-based oral performance 40 Iranian EFL learners. The results demonstrated the positive effect of pre-task planning on complexity whereas no positive effect was found regarding the accuracy of learners' oral performance. They concluded that providing learners with the opportunity to plan before task performance might help learners produce language which is more complex. Tavares (2011), investigating the effects of pre-task planning on fluency, accuracy and complexity of L2 speech performance, found significant differences in fluency and accuracy. However, differences in complexity were far from achieving significance.

Along the same vein, exploring the impact of three levels of task planning on the accuracy of task-based oral performance with narrative task types among sixty Iranian EFL learners, Seifoori and Birjandi (2008) found no significant effect on accuracy as a result of pre-task and on-line planning. However, meaningful gains were observed among pre/online planners. Thus, the authors underscored the benefits of mixed planning condition in enhancing accurate oral performance. Along the same vein, investigating the effect of planned and unplanned focus on form on EFL learners' oral performance, Rahimpour, Salimi, and Farrokhi (2012) reported the



mean of accuracy of planned group to be higher than unplanned one. However, their results did not reveal a statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Altogether, pre-task planning seems to create a context for learners to have the opportunity to map form onto meaning through available linguistic knowledge that is not yet automatized. As Skehan (1996) stated, since pre-task planning reduces the cognitive demand of a task and enables learners to concentrate on the language during the task, it can be effective.

Having reviewed the literature on pre-task planning, it becomes clear that fluency, accuracy, and complexity are important dimensions of second language performance; however, they need to be supplemented by measures of lexical performance. That is, as Skehan (2009) argues, one needs to include lexical performance in measuring learners' oral production. Therefore, in the present study it was tried to take learners' lexical performance and resource into consideration.

### 3. Method

The present study aimed at finding out the effectiveness of advance planning on Iranian female learners' oral production lexical resource in meaning-oriented interviews. To meet the objectives of this study and to answer the research question reviewed above, a pre-test post-test quasi-experimental design was adopted.

#### 3.1. *Participants*

The participants consisted of EFL upper-intermediate female learners whose age range was 16 to 40 years. The main reason for selecting an all-female class was that opting for one male and one female class would require taking the sex of the learners into account as another variable to be analyzed. As a result, the researcher decided to carry out the present research study in a single-sex all-female classroom. The learners were more or less at the same level of language proficiency in terms of their oral proficiency as demonstrated in the oral interview administered at the beginning of the study.



### 3.2. Instrument

In order to arrive at the effectiveness of the treatment, all learners took part in an oral interview before and after the treatment. The interview was based on IELTS (the International English Language Testing System) speaking practice tests published by University of Cambridge (1996-2011). The content validity of the tests was approved by two experts holding PhD in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). The speaking section of the IELTS Test comprises three parts. Part 1 includes some simple warm-up questions. Individual long turn, which is descriptive in nature, appears in part 2. Finally, two-way discussion questions follow in part 3 of the speaking test.

Both pre-test and post-test interviews were recorded using a mini-size wireless MP3 recorder. Later, they were scored based on IELTS *speaking band descriptors*- public version (n.d.) published by University of Cambridge. The scoring band ranged from 0 to 9. There were four main constituents of the speaking proficiency as described in IELTS *speaking band descriptors*, namely fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. IELTS Speaking Overview- teacher's notes (n.d.) defined lexical resource, which was the focus of the present study, as the range of vocabulary the candidate can use and how clearly meanings and attitudes could be expressed. This included the variety of words used and the ability to get round a vocabulary gap by expressing the idea in a different way.

### 3.3. Procedure

In order to find out the effectiveness of the treatment on the oral proficiency of the participants, each learner took part in an oral interview at the beginning of the study. Each interview lasted about 10 minutes. The findings of the interviews acted as their pre-test of the study. The pre-test interviews were recorded and were subsequently scored based on IELTS *speaking band descriptors*- public version explained above.





After taking the pre-test, the participants received *planned pre-emptive focus on form* for 10 sessions during the regular 18-session semester of the institute, which lasted for about two and half months. The treatments took about 20-30 minutes during each session.

Planned pre-emptive focus on form entailed distribution of a hand-out to the class each session. Each hand-out contained an IELTS Test Speaking section along with an accompanying page comprising some useful vocabulary, idioms, pronunciation and grammatical hints, and illustrated examples corresponding to each part of the Speaking test. As a pre-interview language scaffolding activity, learners got the chance to review the hand-out, get their meaning and practice using them in context. Following that, they took turns interviewing each other in pairs while teacher was monitoring their interviews. Afterwards, the teacher interviewed some of the learners randomly.

Following the completion of the aforementioned treatment, a post-test was administered at the end of the semester to evaluate the effectiveness of planned preemptive focus on form in terms of learners' oral production lexical resource. The post-test questions were parallel with the pre-test ones utilizing IELTS speaking practice tests. They were recorded and were subsequently scored based on IELTS *speaking band descriptors*- public version explained above.

#### 3.4. Data Analysis

In order to find out the effectiveness of the planned preemptive focus on form on learners' oral production, paired-samples *t*-test was utilized. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for the data analysis.

Furthermore, to make sure whether scoring procedure was reliable enough to be coded just by a single researcher, another MA candidate, who was already briefed on the study, its objectives, and data analysis procedure, scored 10 percent of the data to establish inter-rater reliability. A correlation coefficient of .97 was found between the two raters, which indicated the reliability of the scoring procedure.





Lexical	-2.0556	.6346	.2115	-2.5434	-1.5677	-9.717	8	.000
Resource								
Pretest -								
Lexical								
Resource								
Posttest								

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As Table 2 shows, providing upper-intermediate female learners with planned preemptive focus on form proved to be beneficial in terms of their oral production lexical resource.

## 5. Discussion

The objective of the research question of the current study was to explore the effectiveness of providing upper-intermediate female learners with planned preemptive focus on form on their lexical resource. The results revealed a significant difference between the means of pre-test and post-test. That is to say, providing upper-intermediate female learners with planned preemptive focus on form proved to be beneficial in terms of their oral production lexical resource. The effectiveness of planned preemptive focus on form on improving upper-intermediate female learners' lexical resource was also found in the study by Sangarun (2005). Sangarun found that form-focused instructions namely focus on vocabulary, transitional words or phrases, and grammar, led to significantly more lexical form planning than the other types of pre-task instruction.

This finding of the present study, however, runs counter to the finding of Nakakubo (2011). In a study of Japanese intermediate and high-intermediate university learners, Nakakubo



demonstrated that the participants without a pre-task planning opportunity produced narrative stories with a greater variety of vocabulary than those who planned before the task. One explanation for such discrepancy can be the tradeoff effect between lexical complexity and accuracy. That is, finding statistically significant negative correlation between lexical complexity and global accuracy regarding pre-task planning, Nakakubo suggested that L2 learners tend to pay attention to either lexical complexity or accuracy. The tradeoff effect between lexical complexity and accuracy was also claimed by Yuan and Ellis (2003). They found that the while pre-task planners had high lexical complexity, their grammatical accuracy was lower. On the other hand, on-line planners showed more accurate production, but less lexical complexity.

Giving learners the opportunity to rehearse their oral performance in dyadic interactions with their pairs prior to the main task seems to be beneficial to their oral production. In other words, 'linguistic scaffolding' prior to engaging in the main task, which triggers a range of strategic, metalinguistic, and metacognitive behaviors (Ortega, 2005), may be advantageous for EFL learners. In the researcher's view, preemptive focus on form planning is, in fact, beneficial to language teachers as well. Teachers are often at pains to help their students speak at length without undue hesitation and interruption. That is, due to their limited working memory capacity (VanPatten, 1990), learners experience difficulty in attending to meaning and form at the same time during meaning-focused activities. Planned preemptive focus on form, however, by offering the opportunity to practice the forms beforehand, provides learners with appropriate linguistic support to speak interminably and focus on communicating meaning. Thus, as discussed above, by equipping their learners with necessary linguistic support planned prior to task based on their experience, teachers can grasp the chance to become involved in the interaction with the learners.

Overall, most of the studies in the literature have tried to verify the merits of various form-focused approaches adhering to Ellis et al.'s (2002) dichotomy of focus on form, namely planned vs. incidental focus on form. The findings of the present study, however, demonstrated that even preemptive focus on form can be planned in advance on the basis of teachers' experience. That is



to say, Ellis et al.'s dichotomy can get blurred by preemptive focus on form planning prior to task performance by experienced teachers.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the effectiveness of planned preemptive focus on form in an EFL upper-intermediate female class. It was found that planned preemptive FonF is conducive to learners' oral production lexical resource. It is worth mentioning that although preemptive focus on form is an under-researched area in ESL contexts; its accounts are almost missing in EFL settings. So it is hoped that this study might contribute to the existing body, as well as pave the way for further research in this area.

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