

## The occurrence and characteristics of student-initiated focus on form

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### Introduction

The concepts of autonomy and independence in second language (L2) learning are often associated with learner actions outside the classroom. However, it is also possible to examine learner actions inside the classroom, through student-initiated focus on form in meaning-focused L2 lessons. Focus on form occurs when participants pay attention briefly to linguistic items arising spontaneously in meaning-focused activities. It may occur either in response to learner errors or it may be initiated by a student. Student-initiated focus on form is of particular interest because student topicalisation of linguistic items may be beneficial since students may best be able to recognise and draw attention to linguistic items that are problematic specifically to themselves. Student-initiated focus on form allows students to seek information about linguistic items as the need arises during meaning-focused activities.

This paper presents a study examining the occurrence and characteristics of student-initiated focus on form episodes (FFE) in 32 hours of communicative activities in 12 ESL classes in a private language school in New Zealand. Student-Initiated FFEs accounted for 26.6% of the FFEs, and the characteristics investigated included linguistic focus, complexity and response. Implications for autonomous language learning in the L2 classroom are discussed.

Much has been written recently about learner autonomy and second language (L2) learning (Benson 2001, Dam 2001). In part the concept of autonomous language learning involves learners in self-study or accessing language resources, such as self-access centres (Reinders, Anderson and Jones-Parry 2001) or in learner advisory sessions (Crabbe, Hoffmann and Cotterall 2001, Pemberton, Toogood, Ho and Lam 2001), outside of the classroom. However, Reinders's (2000: 25) definition of autonomous language learning as *an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decisions about that learning* does not limit the context of such learning and some research has investigated autonomy inside the classroom (Cotterall 2000, Crabbe 1993). The present study extends the investigation of autonomy in the classroom by considering the role of student initiated questions about linguistic forms in the context of meaning-focused L2 classroom activities.

Such student-initiated focus on form has not traditionally been associated with independent learning, but it can be usefully examined from such a perspective. Cotterall (2000: 110) argues that the goal of promoting learner autonomy within the classroom should include *transferring responsibility for aspects of the language learning process ... from the teacher to the learner* and she suggests that areas in which learners may exert more responsibility include setting goals, using learning strategies and evaluating progress. In addition, learners' beliefs about such issues as the role of the teacher and learner independence can reflect varying degrees of autonomy (Cotterall 1995). It is possible, then, to examine specific classroom behaviours, such as student-initiated focus on form, which may reflect an autonomous orientation and which may allow learners to take more responsibility for their learning. An essential feature of student-initiated focus on form relates to learner topicalisation, in which the learner, rather than the teacher, instigates a specific topic for attention (Slimani 1989). Such student topicalization or initiation of focus on form can be one way in which learners take more responsibility for their own learning. Rather than waiting for the teacher to identify problematic linguistic forms, either reactively through error correction or pre-emptively through models and reminders, learners can initiate their own queries about linguistic items that they have identified as being problematic for themselves. Research suggests that learners' topicalisation of linguistic items may be beneficial for L2 learning (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2001a, Slimani 1989). For example, Slimani (1989) reported a higher level of learning for linguistic items which were initiated by students, while Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001a) found higher levels of uptake (ie: student responses to feedback) when the focus on form was student-initiated rather than teacher-initiated.

In order to further investigate student-initiated focus on form and its relationship to autonomous language learning, it is necessary to briefly consider the interactionist perspective on language learning in which focus on form is situated. The Interaction Hypothesis holds that negotiation of meaning is particularly beneficial for learning a second language because it involves learners in having to pay closer attention to linguistic forms when there is a breakdown in communication (Long 1991 and 1996). While such negotiation of meaning occurs in natural everyday communication, Long argues that

it can also occur in the language classroom, and he identifies this as focus on form. Long (1991: 45-46) defines focus on form as *overtly draw[ing] students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication*. This focus on form is contrasted with a focus on forms, which consists of pre-planned presentations of discrete linguistic items e.g.: in a traditional grammar lesson.

Various studies have examined focus on form and several distinctions have been made. One is between planned and incidental focus on form (Ellis 2001). In planned focus on form, there is an *a priori* decision made on the part of the researcher or teacher to target specific linguistic items during meaning-focused activities. This targeting may take the form of enhanced input, targeted output or both. However, in incidental focus on form, linguistic structures are not pre-targeted. Instead, they are dealt with as they arise spontaneously in meaning-focused classroom discourse. It is incidental focus on form that is considered in the present study.

It should be noted that the distinction between planned and incidental focus on form has traditionally been based on the teacher's decision to target specific structures. However, there has generally not been a consideration of the student's role in this. For example, students may have their own agenda and decide before class that there are specific structures that they wish to inquire about. Some of these, at least, could be raised during meaning-focused activities. Thus, while this paper purports to be looking at a type of incidental focus on form, it is acknowledged that student-initiated FFEs, while most probably occurring spontaneously during meaning-focused tasks, may in fact be pre-targeted by the student. Such a distinction may be difficult to ascertain, however, unless the students are asked to comment on the FFEs they initiate.

Another distinction that has been made is between reactive and pre-emptive focus on form (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2001b, Long and Robinson 1998). Reactive focus on form has also been known as error correction or negative evidence/feedback (Long 1996), and occurs when, in the context of meaning-focused activities, learners' attention is drawn to errors in their production. Thus the error is the trigger which begins the discourse targeting a specific linguistic item (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2001b). While reactive focus on form has been investigated fairly extensively (eg: Doughty and Williams 1998), pre-emptive focus on form has received much less attention. For example, although Long and Robinson (1998) include pre-emptive negative evidence in their taxonomy of input, they do not discuss it in detail, and only recently have studies begun to examine pre-emptive focus on form more closely (Ellis Basturkmen and Loewen 2001b, Williams 1999). Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001b: 414) define pre-emptive focus on form as occurring when either the teacher or a learner initiates attention to form *even though no actual problem in production has arisen*. As such, Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001b: 414) argue that pre-emptive focus on form addresses *an actual or perceived gap in the students' knowledge*, and in their study of two ESL classes in New Zealand they found that pre-emptive focus on form constituted 52% of the focus on form that occurred in 12 hours of meaning-focused instruction. Furthermore, they distinguished between student-initiated focus on form in which learners raised questions about linguistic items and teacher-initiated focus on form in which the teacher either asked questions or provided unsolicited information about specific linguistic items. Student-initiated focus on form accounted for just over 38% of the episodes while teacher-initiated episodes were just over 9%.

The present study, which is part of a larger study (Loewen 2002), aims to explore further the occurrence and characteristics of student-initiated focus on form in the L2 classroom. The following research questions are proposed:

- 1 Do young adult students in a private language school in New Zealand initiate queries about linguistic items during meaning-focused L2 lessons?
- 2 If so, what are the characteristics of these student-initiated focus on form episodes?

## Method

The overall design of the study involved the observation of meaning-focused classroom activities and the identification and analysis of incidental focus on form episodes in teacher-student interaction.

The research was conducted at a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand with a total of 12 classes with 12 different teachers and 118 students participating. The teachers, 8 male and 4 female, were all native speakers of English and ranged in teaching experience from 1 to 16 years. Their ESL qualifications ranged from the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults to a Masters of Arts in Applied Linguistics. The students came from a variety of countries with the majority (over 75%) from Korea, China, Japan and Taiwan. Female students accounted for 56% of the students and males 44%. The classes ranged in size from 6 to 14 students. The proficiency level of the classes, as determined by an in-house placement test, ranged from low intermediate to upper intermediate.

The researcher was present during all observations as a non-participant observer (van Lier 1988), and a wireless cassette recorder with a clip-on microphone, attached to the teacher, was used to audio-record all teacher-student interactions, whether these occurred as a whole class, in small groups or individually. However, the recording arrangement did not capture student-student interaction when the teacher was not present. For each class, the aim was to observe four lessons of roughly 45 minutes each.

The purpose of the observations was to examine the occurrence of incidental focus on form. However, the teachers and students were only informed that the researcher wanted to observe teacher/student interaction in meaning-focused activities. Furthermore, the teachers were given minimal guidance as to the types of activities to engage in during the observations. One of the benefits of such an approach was the opportunity to observe and investigate naturally occurring classroom interaction that was not specifically designed for research purposes (van Lier 1988). One drawback, however, was that some activities, such as pattern drills and various grammatical worksheets and discussions, did not have a primary focus on meaning exchange and these activities were excluded from the analysis. Thus 226 minutes of observations were excluded, leaving 1 917 minutes (32 hours) of observations in the study.

After each observation, the focus on form episodes (FFE) were identified and transcribed. A FFE was defined 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* (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2001a). Thus, for this study, a FFE started when a student queried a linguistic item. An example of a student-initiated FFE is shown in Episode 124 in which the participants are discussing a current news story. B is searching for the word *except* which he knows in his native Portuguese but apparently not in English. B asks the teacher, and after some negotiation, the teacher provides the linguistic form. After this FFE, the participants continue their discussion of the news story. In order to determine reliability in the identification of FFEs, a sample of 10.3% of the data was coded by a second rater with a resulting agreement rate of 90%.

*Example 1: Student-initiated FFE (Episode 124 C2)*

- B: I want to say for example the police uh didn't have any other option
- T: yes
- B: uh=
- T: =fine
- B: the police didn't have any other option uh <ano said> invade the bus (.) the problem for me is this part that I know only in Portuguese
- T: the police didn't have
- B: another
- T: any choice except
- B: ah yes thank you [very much
- T: [to okay that's alright, except to=
- B: =except=
- T: =to st- and the best word be there would be to storm the bus
- B: to storm the bus [thank you very much
- T: [yes, okay (laughs)

After the FFEs were identified, they were coded for the characteristics presented and defined in Table 1. These characteristics were based on Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001b).

| Characteristic   | Definition                             | Categories            |
|------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Linguistic focus | Aspect of language targeted in the FFE | Grammar<br>Vocabulary |

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|                   |  |  |
|-------------------|--|--|
|                   |  | <i>Pronunciation</i><br><i>Spelling</i>  |
| Complexity        | Length of the FFE                        | <i>Simple: shorter, up to 3-turn exchange</i><br><i>Complex: longer, 4+ turn exchange</i>  |
| Response          | Type of feedback provided by the teacher | <i>Provide: T gives information about a language form</i><br><br><i>Elicit:</i><br>T attempts to draw out a language form or information about a language form from student(s)         |
| Uptake            | Student response to feedback             | <i>Uptake: S produces response</i><br><i>No uptake: S does not respond</i><br><i>No opportunity:</i><br>S does not have a chance to respond because the discourse moves on             |
| Successful uptake | Quality of student response              | <i>Successful uptake:</i><br>S incorporates linguistic information into production<br><br><i>Unsuccessful uptake:</i><br>S does not incorporate linguistic information into production |

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**Table 1: FFE Characteristics**

Examples of the coding system are given in Table 2 where two episodes are coded. In Episode 416 C6 the students are involved in a story-retelling task and E has a question about a vocabulary item. The teacher provides *revolving door* for the student, who then produces successful uptake by incorporating the item into his own production. In Episode 1532 C12, F is involved in a discussion about beliefs and values, and she raises a question about the grammatical form of *values*. The teacher provides the answer, and F responds with the acknowledgement token *mhm*, which constitutes uptake. However, such acknowledgement tokens are ambiguous and consequently F's uptake was coded as unsuccessful.

### **Results**

A total of 1 373 FFEs were identified in the data. Of these, 365 (26.5%) were student-initiated FFEs. The results reveal that 88 of the 118 students initiated at least one student-initiated FFE. The average number of student-initiated FFEs per student was 3 with a range from 0 to 23. Additional analysis revealed that 7 students asked 10 or more questions and that these 7 students (or 6% of the students in the observations) accounted for 28% of the total student-initiated FFEs. Raw frequencies as well as percentages were calculated for the characteristics.

| <b>Episode</b>  | <b>Characteristic</b> | <b>Coding</b> |
|---|-----------------------|---------------|
| <b>Episode 416 C6</b>   | Linguistic Focus      | Vocabulary    |
| E: I have a question  | Complexity            | Complex       |
| T: yeah   | Response              | Provide       |
| E: how do you say this <door> how can I say, like this door (draws picture) | Uptake                | Uptake        |
| T: revolving  | Successful Uptake     | Successful    |
| E: revolving  |                       |               |
| T: revolving yeah   |                       |               |
| E: yeah   |                       |               |
| (2.5)   |                       |               |
| E: oh revolving   |                       |               |
| T: mhm, it's a beautiful picture, revolving door                            |                       |               |
| E: she said soccer door   |                       |               |
| T: soccer door, oh like at football matches                                 |                       |               |
| F: revolving door   |                       |               |
| E: revolving door revolving door  |                       |               |
| <b>Episode 1532 C12</b>   | Linguistic Focus      | Grammar       |
| F: so values are plural?  | Complexity            | Simple        |
| (2.5)   | Response              | Provide       |
| T: yeah   | Uptake                | Uptake        |
| F: mhm  | Successful Uptake     | Unsuccessful  |

**Table 2: Coding examples**

Table 3 reveals the analysis of the coding categories. It shows that the most frequent Linguistic Focus of student queries, over 75% of the FFEs, was vocabulary. Grammar was a distant second at 13%. More of the FFEs were complex (60%), and almost all of the responses (96%) involved the provision of information. Students generally produced uptake (74%) and more often than not, that uptake was successful (58%).

| <b>Characteristic</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Linguistic Focus      |                  |                   |
| Vocabulary            | 277              | 75.9              |
| Grammar               | 49               | 13.4              |
| Pronunciation         | 21               | 5.8               |
| Spelling              | 18               | 4.9               |
| Complexity            |                  |                   |
| Simple                | 144              | 39.5              |
| Complex               | 221              | 60.5              |
| Response              |                  |                   |
| Provide               | 350              | 95.9              |
| Elicit                | 15               | 4.1               |
| Uptake                |                  |                   |
| Uptake                | 269              | 73.7              |
| No Uptake             | 74               | 20.3              |
| No Opportunity        | 22               | 6.0               |
| Successful Uptake     |                  |                   |
| Successful            | 155              | 58.3              |
| Unsuccessful          | 114              | 42.4              |

**Table 3: Analysis of coding categories**

## Discussion

The results indicate that students did initiate attention to form during meaning-focused activities, although at a somewhat lower rate than the 38% in Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001b). However, the results of the present study displayed a wide disparity in the number of queries initiated by learners, with 30 students not initiating any at all. This disparity raises the question as to why there is such

considerable difference among students in the amount of initiation. The issue of variation in focus on form is discussed more thoroughly in Loewen (2003) where it is suggested that cultural background, classroom atmosphere and personality factors all may play a part in influencing how focus on form occurs in the classroom. For example, Loewen found that European background students had higher frequencies of student-initiated FFEs than did East Asian learners.

While such differences may be explained in part by learners' previous educational experiences (Cortazzi and Jin 1996), this is not an adequate explanation when many of the students came from similar cultural backgrounds. Another possible explanation could relate to students' perceptions of their role in the classroom (Cotterall 1995). It may be that students who felt that it was the teacher's role to highlight linguistic forms may not have initiated many FFEs, while students who were more autonomous, and took more responsibility for their learning, initiated more FFEs. However, the present data does not address this possibility and further research investigating learners' reasons for initiating attention to form would be useful.

When investigating the characteristics of student-initiated FFEs, this study found that vocabulary was the most common linguistic focus (76%), comparable to the 66% level in the Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2000b) study. In both studies, grammar was the next most frequent linguistic focus, although it was a distant second. Thus, it seems that learners' main concern in these meaning-focused activities, as reflected in their questions about language items, relates to the expression of meaning. The overwhelming majority of responses to these questions included the provision of linguistic information, which is not surprising considering that the students specifically asked for this.

There was a relatively high level of uptake (73%) and a somewhat lower level of successful uptake (58%). While the production of successful uptake is argued to be potentially beneficial for learners (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2001a, Lightbown 1998), it may be that the discourse patterns of student-initiated FFEs may make students less inclined to produce successful uptake. By definition, successful uptake was an indication of understanding, and thus an acknowledgement token or a simple repetition of a teacher's feedback did not count as success. However, it may be that when students receive information it is not usual for them to repeat the information, and they may simply respond with an acknowledgment token.

### Conclusion

This research corroborates other studies that show that learners can and do initiate attention to linguistic items within meaning-focused language lessons. The question remains, however, as to whether such initiation is characteristic of autonomous language learners. Reinders's (2000) definition of autonomous language learning stipulates that *motivated learners* are *consciously making* informed decisions about their learning. The current study has not addressed issues of motivation or learner cognition and thus cannot directly address the question. In order to do so, learners would need to be interviewed and involved in stimulated recalls in which they could comment on their actual classroom behaviours. If however, we take Cotterall's (2000) idea of autonomy as involving learners in taking more responsibility for their learning, then student-initiated focus on form is one way in which this is possible. Students in this study were shown to raise questions about language items which were important to them, as they endeavoured to participate in meaning-focused activities. Clearly, not all students initiated equally, and given the proposed benefits of such initiation, teachers may wish to consider how they might encourage more learner initiation in meaning-focused activities, perhaps by raising learner awareness of its potential benefits.

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