

Focus on form (FonF) in conversational interaction

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Second language acquisition (SLA) research has provided ample evidence that conversational interaction creates opportunities for language learning. Learners' participation in conversation can draw their attention to form-meaning relationships and help them to notice mismatches between the input they receive and their own interlanguage (Alcón Soler and García Mayo, 2009; García Mayo and Alcón Soler, 2002; Gass, 1997; Mackey, 2007; Pica 1994). But research has also shown that communicative activities with an exclusive focus on meaning are not adequate for language learning (Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo, 2007; García Mayo and Pica 2000a, 2000b). Underlying most current SLA research is the assumption that some level of attention to form is needed for language acquisition to take place (Doughty and Williams, 1998). In recent years focus on form (FonF) has gained considerable ground in the SLA literature in the light of laboratory and classroom research that supports the need for pedagogical interventions that could potentially lead learners towards higher levels of proficiency in their second language (Doughty and Williams, 1998; Norris and Ortega, 2000; Williams, 2005). The main claim of FonF is that second language learners cannot achieve high levels of grammatical competence from entirely meaning-centered instruction and, therefore, there is a need to attend to form during communicative interaction (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991; Norris and Ortega, 2000).

In this talk I will present the theoretical motivation for this pedagogical approach, some definitions of the term 'focus on form' and some of the principal options available nowadays (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2002). After highlighting the pedagogical relevance of a FonF approach, I will outline task-design features shown to have an impact on the nature of the learner language resulting from interaction using FonF tasks and on the processing and learning of the second language. I will conclude by briefly reviewing empirical studies carried out in an ESL/EFL setting and making a call for more research in foreign language settings, as FonF has proved to be effective in that setting as well (Alcón and García Mayo, 2008; García Mayo 2002a, 2002b).