

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 What Is This Element About?

This Element will analyse and describe the role, nature, and effects of focus on form in second language acquisition theory and research. Focus on form is a term which has been sometimes used to express different meanings. Long (1991) made a clear distinction between ‘focus on form’ and ‘focus on forms’ in language instruction. Focus on forms is a term used to describe a type of pedagogical intervention that focuses on the explicit teaching of specific linguistic forms (one at the time) in a target language (e.g. discrete-point grammar presentation and practice). Focus on form can be described as involving a focus on meaning and a focus on form. During focus on form, L2 learners’ attention is being focused on specific linguistic properties of the target language in the course of a communicative activity. More broadly ‘focus on form’ can be described as any pedagogical intervention aiming at drawing L2 learners’ attention to the linguistic properties of a language through exposure to meaningful input. In this Element, research, theory, and pedagogy related to different types of ‘focus on form’ will be presented and discussed. Implications of research on ‘focus on form’ will be highlighted at the end of this Element. However, before we begin, a general definition of the nature and role of language and instruction is needed.

### 1.2 What Is the Nature of Language?

There is a considerable debate over the nature and design of the internal mechanisms that create our so-called internal language system (so-called mental representation). There are two competing accounts (domain-general and language-specific) on the nature of language in the field, as highlighted by Keating (2018). One account about the nature of language argues that language is like any other complex mental tasks such as reading, playing chess, and in general solving problems. Like any other complex mental phenomena, it is learned via the same domain-general mechanisms that enable us to learn how to program a computer or solve difficult puzzles. A second account instead, contends that language is special and it is not learned in the same way as other complex mental phenomenon. Their claim is that humans are hardwired to learn language and have cognitive mechanisms specifically designed to deal with language. These are separate mechanisms from the domain-general one.

Regardless of scholars’ approach to language, there is a general agreement that language is complex, abstract, and implicit. Each human being creates an internal language system we call language, no matter whether it is a first, second

or third language. This abstract and complex system is also implicit in nature, as we know we have language in our heads, but we do not really know what the contents of this language system are.

Language can be described as multi-componential as it comprises of a lexicon, syntax, phonology, and other systems (VanPatten, 2016). Much of the grammatical information is stored in lexical entries with embedded features. What every speaker/knower of language creates in the mind/brain is an implicit, abstract representation of language. What we observe as ‘language’ is the result of a complex interaction of principles, constraints, and interfaces that yield utterances/sentences.

Language is implicit in nature and abstract as its features are difficult to describe with exact words. It includes what it is allowed (e.g. *Do you know how to get to the centre?*), but it also includes what it is not allowed in a specific language (e.g. *Know how to get to the centre?*). Language does not consist of rules in the classic sense as argued by VanPatten (2010). However, as argued by VanPatten and Benati (2010), a good deal of second language acquisition research talks about the learning of rules and the testing of rules (e.g. learning the passive rule, learning rules for the subjunctive, etc.). The surface phenomena we talk about as ‘rules’ are real, but what exists in the mental representation are not these rules. What language learners have in their heads are not rules but an abstract system consisting of features and operations plus operations on how those operation can happen.

Language as mental representation is characterized by principles that are universal. These principles constrain the development of language. For example, all languages have a basic structural feature called ‘phrase’. This basic feature consists of two elements: head and compliment. Depending on the specific language, we can have ‘head first’ or ‘head final’. English is head first (head + compliment) whereas Japanese is head final (compliment + head) for instance. These abstract notions interact with input language. In addition, language learners possess a complex network of form–meaning connections which evolves and expands establishing lexical and formal relationships as they are exposed to more meaningful and comprehensible input. Language learners have a vast interconnected network of words which encode both meaning and grammatical information. Connections develop in our head not through practice, but through consistent exposure to input. Language is processed and acquired not through pedagogical rules (shorthand ways to describe things that are generally not describable) but through exposure to meaningful input (language that contains a message and L2 learners must attend to the input to process meaning). There is also an important distinction to make between language as mental representation (the internal, abstract, and implicit language

system) and language as skill (the accuracy and fluency in language use). Skill can be defined as the ability to use language in real time (speaking, writing, listening and reading), and it involves the intersection of accuracy and fluency (speed in using the target language) (DeKeyser, 2015). Language learners normally acquire skills by participating in skill-based activities. Accuracy refers to how language learners can produce language error-free. Fluency instead, refers to how (speed and confidence) language learners can perform an activity (Housen and Kuiken, 2009).

### 1.3 Does Instruction Make a Difference?

This was the question originally raised in Long's (1983) seminal paper. Since then, the debate about the role of instruction has focused on whether instruction makes a difference in the acquisition of morphosyntactic properties. Contemporary theories (see VanPatten and Benati, 2010) have also addressed this question by taking different positions around the nature, role, and effects of instruction, particularly in relation to language as representation.

An overall review of the main contemporary theories and current empirical research on the role of instruction in second language acquisition has led to the following conclusions:

- Instruction does not alter the route of acquisition (i.e. acquisition orders and developmental sequences). There are no empirical studies showing that instruction alters the order/sequence of acquisition (Pienemann and Lenzing, 2015);
- Instruction as input manipulation can facilitate language processing. Input manipulation refers to how language can be restructured so that L2 learners can be exposed to grammatical properties of a target language;
- Instruction may have some beneficial effects – for example, developing procedural knowledge (how to do something in a language) or facilitating noticing and awareness – on second language acquisition. Awareness can be defined as learners' degree of consciousness in learning a language. Noticing refers to the ability for L2 learners to notice certain linguistic elements in the input.

The effects of instruction are limited and constrained by natural orders of acquisition and by L2 learners' readiness to acquire a particular structure (Pienemann and Lenzing, 2015). If, as it seems to be the case, there are no effects on instruction on the route of acquisition, what about its possible effects on the rate of acquisition? Can instruction facilitate and speed-up acquisition of the formal properties of a target language?

The effects of a number of different instructional treatments (e.g. incidental focus on form, input enhancement, processing instruction, interactional and

corrective feedback, output, and collaborative tasks) have been investigated. Overall, the main findings from the empirical research conducted seem to point to two main positions: (i) instruction has a limited and constrained role; and (ii) instruction might have some possible beneficial effects, not on the route but on the rate of acquisition. However, several key questions (VanPatten, Smith and Benati, 2019) have been raised about how the possible effects of instruction are measured in second language research. Does the research on the effects of instruction measure explicit knowledge or implicit knowledge? In other words, the question is whether empirical research on the effects of instruction measure knowledge about language (i.e. textbook rules) or language as a mental representation.

Very often, the effectiveness of a particular instructional treatment has been measured using explicit knowledge tests. These kinds of tests normally measure knowledge and use of rules that we find in textbooks, teacher explanations, and online sites.

Current research on the effects of instruction has mainly focused on measuring its immediate effects using various designs (VanPatten, Smith and Benati, 2019). It is not clear that instruction on formal features of language speeds up the rate of acquisition. However, there is some evidence that instruction as input manipulation can facilitate language processing (VanPatten, Smith and Benati, 2019). In addition, instruction may have some beneficial effects (e.g. developing procedural knowledge, facilitating noticing and awareness) on second language acquisition. Despite this, there is not enough evidence to demonstrate long-term effects for instruction. Meta-analysis studies point to positive short-term effects for instruction on grammatical properties of language (Go et al., 2015; Kang, Sok and ZhaoHong, 2019; Norris and Ortega, 2000; Spada and Tomita, 2010) indicate that there is a possible short-term effect of instruction on L2 learners' rate of acquisition. However, the results from these meta-analysis studies need to be taken with caution for two main reasons:

- The effects of instruction measured on the rate of acquisition is mostly about the development of explicit knowledge;
- Measurements in research on the effects of instruction make use of tests that exclusively measure explicit knowledge.

One key question that needs to be addressed is therefore: Does instruction foster implicit knowledge?

#### 1.4 Does Instruction Foster Implicit Knowledge?

There is agreement in second language acquisition that there are two different types of linguistic knowledge: explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge.

Krashen (1982) distinguished between a learning system (explicit) and an acquiring system (implicit). The existence of a difference between implicit and explicit language knowledge is confirmed by brain science. Paradis (2004) sustains that explicit knowledge (conscious awareness of language data) is qualitatively different from implicit knowledge (unconscious set of computational procedures). According to Paradis (2004), explicit rules in grammar do not correspond to the internal and implicit mental representations our mind/brain relies on for language development.

Explicit knowledge of language is defined as conscious knowledge. It is often verbalizable knowledge about language such as ‘to talk about something in the past, add *-ed* sound to the end of the verb such as *play* versus *played*’. Implicit knowledge is defined as unconscious knowledge and it is not verbalizable. It is the ability to understand or supply *talked* and not *talk* in contexts that require the past tense in English, and to do so without a conscious effort to retrieve the form.

In traditional instruction, language teachers instruct learners about something, L2 learners practice it, and then the teachers assess them using a paper-and-pencil test. There are two problems with this type instruction aiming at developing explicit knowledge: (i) it does not correspond to the way language develops in the mind/brain; (ii) it does not correspond to the way learners process information.

Language acquisition is about the development of implicit knowledge. As highlighted VanPatten and Rothman (2014), language as mental representation is too abstract and complex to be taught and learned explicitly. In short, language is not the rules and paradigms that appear on textbook pages. Explicit rules and paradigm lists cannot become the abstract and complex system because the two things are completely different. This implication stems from the fact that there is no internal mechanism (at least no strong evidence for one) that can convert explicit textbook rules into implicit mental representation (VanPatten, 2016).

Instruction has an effect on fostering explicit knowledge, at least in the short-term. DeKeyser (2015) argues that practice in which learners deliberately focus their attention on particular forms might help the development of a skill. Practice of the kind used in traditional instruction does little to foster the development of mental representation and might help the development of a learning-like behaviour. VanPatten and Benati (2010: 31) have argued that ‘L2 learners clearly create linguistic systems in an organized way that seem[s] little affected by external forces such as instruction and correction’.

The acquisition of the grammatical properties of a target language is mainly implicit. L2 learners create an abstract system (mental representation) similar to the way in which L1 learners do. Therefore, instruction should be devised in

a way that, on one hand, enhances the grammatical features in the input, and on the other hand, provides L2 learners with opportunities to focus on meaning. Scholars in second language acquisition have agreed that L2 learners must be exposed to input and that input must be comprehensible and meaning-bearing in order to facilitate language development. Language that learners hear and see in communicative contexts forms the data on which the internal mechanisms operate. The only effective way to facilitate language development (implicit knowledge) is the provision of good quality input.

This view about language and language development (too abstract and complex to teach and learn explicitly) has clearly profound consequences for how we implement instruction in the language classroom. Explicit rules and paradigm lists can't become the abstract and complex language system because the two things are completely different. As previously stated, this implication stems from the fact that there is no internal mechanism that can convert explicit textbook rules into our implicit mental representation system. Most textbooks and many teachers continue to treat language like any other subject matter. However, what winds up in the human mind has no resemblance to anything on textbook pages or what teachers say.

The main question is: How do we then provide effective instruction?

### 1.5 What Are the Main Takeaways?

Let's briefly review some basic facts about language, language acquisition, and language instruction presented in this introduction. These facts will be key in our discussion on the role and effects of focus on form.

- Language is abstract and complex and should not be taught and learned explicitly. There are no known and proved mechanisms that turn explicit 'rules' into the abstract and complex mental representation we call 'language'.
- There is a qualitative difference between explicit and implicit knowledge of language.
- Acquisition is stage-like and ordered. In the acquisition of any structure there are stages that all learners go through regardless of their L1. There is no evidence that stages can be skipped or orders can be altered. Language instruction might therefore have a constrained and limited role.
- Instruction might help L2 learners to develop a good level of attainment particularly if opportunities to natural exposure are given.
- Instruction has a facilitative role when it is used for linguistic features, which are not too distant from the learner's current level of language development. It might have a facilitative role in helping L2 learners to pay selective attention to form and form-meaning connections in the input.

- Although, the route of acquisition cannot be altered, instruction might in certain conditions speed up the rate of acquisition and develop greater language proficiency. What are the conditions that might facilitate the speed in which languages are learned? A first condition is that L2 learners must be exposed to sufficient input. A second condition is that L2 learners must be developmentally ready for instruction to be effective. A third condition is that instruction must take into consideration how L2 learners process input.
- For the research on the effects of instruction to advance, it needs to consider ways in which to assess implicit knowledge along with a consideration of what implicit knowledge actually is.

## 2 What Are the Key Concepts?

### 2.1 What Is the Nature of Focus on Form?

Despite the current debate about the role of explicit instruction, scholars (VanPatten, 2016) concur that implicit knowledge is acquired unconsciously. Therefore, for instruction to have a beneficial role, it must consider how people acquire languages and process information in the mind/brain. This means for instance, that instruction should consider the use of pedagogical interventions that create conditions where L2 learners are exposed to the language (forms) while focusing on meaning. It must also consider the key role that input plays in the acquisition of a language. Within this context, focus on form is a type of instruction that draws L2 learners' attention to linguistic elements of the target language while the main focus is on meaning or communication.

Long (1991) makes a clear distinction between two types of instructional pedagogical intervention: 'focus on form' and 'focus on forms'. *Focus on forms* refers to a type of instructional intervention that isolates specific linguistic forms, and teaches them one at the time. In the case of traditional instruction, for example, the instruction is often characterized by paradigmatic explanations of specific linguistic forms or structures, followed by pattern practice and substitution/transformation drills practice. The term *focus on form* is instead characterized by pedagogical interventions which essentially provide L2 learners with a combination of focus on form and focus on meaning. Long (1991) describes focus on form as a language teaching approach which should aim at drawing L2 learner's attention to a particular form incidentally during exposure to language. Long and Robinson (1998: 23) further defined focus on form 'as an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production'. More recently, Long

(2015: 317) has described focus on form as a pedagogical procedure that ‘involves reactive use of a wide variety of pedagogic procedures to draw learners’ attention to linguistic problems in context, as they arise during communication’. As explained by Ellis (2016), focus on form has become a set of pedagogical interventions designed to draw L2 learners’ attention to a linguistic form in a communicative context. The focus on form can be either pre-planned focusing on a particular form or it can be incidental as L2 learners engage in meaning-based activities. During a focus-on-form intervention the linguistic elements are dealt with either intensively (systematically) or extensively (incidentally), but the primary focus always lies on communication.

Doughty and Williams (1998) and subsequently Ranta and Lyster (2017: 43) have described two types of focus on form: proactive or reactive. Proactive would involve planned instruction (e.g. textual enhancement, processing instruction) designed to enable L2 learners to notice and eventually use the specific target feature. Reactive occurs in response to L2 learners’ production and interaction with another interlocutor and includes corrective feedback as well as other attempts to draw learners’ attention to the target language.

## 2.2 What Are the Main Types of Focus on Form?

### 2.2.1 *Input Enhancement*

Input enhancement as a type of focus on form was first introduced by Sharwood Smith (1993). It is a pedagogical intervention that aims at helping L2 learners to notice specific forms in the input. In this context, Leow (2001) defines enhanced input as input that has been altered typologically to enhance the saliency of target forms. Input enhancement is an input-based focus on form that exposes L2 learners to comprehensible input and at the same time draws their attention to a specific linguistic property of the target language. Input enhancement varies in terms of explicitness and elaboration. One kind of input-enhancement focus-on-form type consists of modifying a text so that a particular target item appears over and over again. In this way, the text will contain many exemplars of the same feature (i.e. input flood). A different type would consist of underlining, embolding or capitalizing a specific grammatical item (providing typographical cues) in a text (textual enhancement).

Textual enhancement is specifically used to make particular features of written input more salient with the scope to help learners notice these forms and eventually make appropriate form–meaning connections (Benati, 2013). The main characteristic of textual enhancement is to highlight the form in the text (e.g. embolding, underlining) while keeping the learner’s attention on



Lisa **goes** to the cinema every weekend. She **likes** Italian films. Sometimes she **plays** tennis golf with me or **goes** to the gym. During the week, she **works** at the University and at the weekend she **drives** to the countryside.

[Text continues]

Follow-up: What kind of things do you like to do at the weekend?

What type of things do you have to do?

**Figure 1** Textual enhancement activity (sample)

Last week, Richard worked all day at the University. He jumped out of bed at 8 am. He poured himself three strong cups of coffee to wake up fully. He watched TV and slowly felt more awake. He wanted to go back to sleep again, but he remembered that he had work on Saturdays. He worked part-time at Starbucks café and the Manager was very strict. He walked quickly to the bus stop, but unfortunately there was a lot of traffic and so he waited for over an hour. He eventually arrived late and his manager was extremely angry. He shouted at him and said he was a useless employee. Things got worse when Richard spilled a customer's coffee all over floor and his boss got really angry and informed him that he was sacked. Finally, Richard returned home feeling miserable and exhausted. What a horrible Saturday. At least he could sleep in on Sunday!

[Text continues]

Follow-up: After you hear the text, in pairs, give as many details as you can remember about Richard's horrible day. The group with the most details wins. You have three minutes.

**Figure 2** Input Flood activity (sample)

meaning. No metalinguistic explanation is provided during input enhancement (see Figure 1).

Input flood is a type of input enhancement where the input L2 learners receive is saturated with the form that L2 learners should notice. The main characteristic of input flood is that the input L2 learners receive must be modified so that it contains many instances of the same form. The main purpose of this type of focus on form is to help L2 learners notice the form embedded in the input (see Figure 2).

Another type of input enhancement is aural enhancement. This implicit type of focus on form involves the manipulation of listening materials with the aim of making specific linguistic forms more salient in the input. It can include increased volume, slower pace, or short pauses added before and/or after the target items.

*2.2.2 Processing Instruction*

Processing instruction is a type of focus on form used primarily to facilitate, at input-level, the connection of a linguistic feature to its meaning. Form–meaning connections are the relationships learners make between referential meaning and the way it is encoded linguistically. For example, when learners hear the sentence, *I played tennis in the park* and understand that *played* means the action is in the past, a form–meaning connection is made. This pedagogical intervention is predicated on VanPatten’s (1996, 2015a) input processing theory which identifies a number of processing strategies L2 learners use when processing language input.

The first characteristic of processing instruction is to help L2 learners process input more accurately and appropriately. In processing instruction, L2 learners are required to simultaneously focus on form to get meaning so that they improve their ability to process the right information and make the right form–meaning connections during comprehension.

This is a different function from simply noticing a form in the input, as noticing simply means to be consciously aware that the form is there. For example, L2 learners might hear the word *played* and notice that it is different from either *plays* or *playing*. However, they might not immediately connect the ending (e.g. verbal inflection *-ed*) with the concept that the action has already taken place (past event). Processing instruction is fundamentally different from other input-based focus-on-form pedagogical interventions such as input enhancement. This is because enhancing a feature in the input might help L2 learners to notice that feature, but it does not necessarily mean that L2 learners make appropriate form–meaning connections. Processing instruction facilitates both form–meaning connections and accurate processing of sentence structure.

A second characteristic of processing instruction is that it measures the ability of L2 learners to interpret linguistic features contained in the language input. In processing instruction research, rules are not tested (e.g. grammaticality judgment tasks, fill-in-the-gap tasks, etc.), but the ability to process and interpret linguistic features in the input is. A third characteristic is that processing instruction alters the way in which the input is processed by L2 learners, which in turn might have an effect on their language development system. Processing instruction is not intended to assist in skill development, but it might help L2 learners access the right information (form or structure) in order to express meaning.

Processing instruction uses a particular type of input (structured input practice) to push learners away from non-optimal processing strategies so that they