

## **Focus on form and its effect on Taiwanese EFL college students' learning of past tense verbs**

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### **Abstract**

This quasi-experimental study investigated and compared the effects of focus on form (FonF) and formS-focused instructions on the learning of past tense verbs by Taiwanese EFL college students. The participants, 95 first-year junior college students from two intact classes, enrolled in the daytime program of the nursing department at an institute of technology in Taiwan. The participants were divided into the control (formS-focused) and experimental (FonF) groups by the class. After a one-month instruction period, mean scores of their pretests and posttests were calculated by the independent *t*-test and paired-samples *t*-tests to see whether there were any significant differences between the performances of the two groups. The results revealed that both instruction techniques had positive effects at a similar level. Despite insignificant differences between the two groups' mean scores of the posttest, it was determined that the participants in the experimental group improved their scores, compared to only some of the participants in the other group. Presumably, the improvement was a result of the attention given to the target form. Therefore, this study has found that focus on form instruction has a better effect on drawing students' attention to the specific feature than the formS-focused instruction does.

Keywords: focus on form, EFL, past tense verbs

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## I. Introduction

A perspective on grammar instruction which emerged during the 1990s has reversed the peripheral role of grammar in language teaching and learning. Under Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), too much emphasis on communicative competence and too little attention to linguistic knowledge has led to dissatisfaction with language teaching results. As a consequence, the pendulum has shifted back towards combining focus on meaning and form. The idea has led to the method of focus on form (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). This instructional method provides an alternative way for language teachers to reconsider the teaching priority between fluency and accuracy. Instead of inclining to the extremes, focus on form (FonF) advocators suggest balancing the development of both fluency and accuracy to promote successful language learning. As Long (1991:45-46) stated, “focus on form...overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication.” According to Long’s statement, the primary goal of focus on form is on meaning or communication, and it also embraces attention to linguistic forms.

Empirical studies have provided ample evidence of the effectiveness of FonF, suggesting that turning some attention to form within a meaningful and communicative context can lead to improvement of learners’ language competence and performance. Research shows positive results that both ESL and EFL learners can benefit from simple FonF instructions, such as typographical input enhancement (Doughty, 1991; Lee, 2007; Shook, 1994; Yang, 2008; White, 1998), as well as FonF instruction in combination with other techniques, such as rule instruction (Alanen, 1995) or output task (Izumi, 2002). The results of these studies were slightly different from Krashen’s (1985) “Input Hypothesis”, which claimed that comprehensible input is necessary and sufficient for successful second language learning acquisition. Instead, the findings of these FonF studies demonstrated that successful acquisition calls for certain level of notice or attention to forms while receiving “comprehensible input”. Furthermore, FonF advocators believed that incorporating grammar instruction into language classrooms is beneficial, while Krashen firmly asserted that grammar can be acquired in a natural way.

Not surprisingly, some second language acquisition theorists hold divergent views on language teaching and learning. Opinions on whether to incorporate grammar instruction into the classroom still vary greatly. Nevertheless, choosing a pedagogical methodology to achieve successful teaching and learning is even more complicated. It involves multiple considerations and is eventually determined by

various factors, such as national language policy, teachers' beliefs or students' needs and expectations. Observing English education in Taiwan, contradiction between real classroom practices and the official language policy is easily recognized. Although the Ministry of Education in Taiwan issued a new curriculum standard in 2001 to encourage the CLT, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) remains the predominant method of teaching in many English classrooms. Even though rote learning and repetition drills may not now be used as frequently, there has been no dramatic change in real practices. The most important explanation to account for grammar being regarded as necessary knowledge to acquire is the expectations and needs of students in Taiwan. As students face the challenges of various exams, such as university entrance and graduation exams, which are mostly discrete-point tests and have few components dealing with communicative competence, it seems there is no reason to discard grammar from language classroom.

Accordingly, neither traditional GTM nor pure CLT, which emphasizes a single goal, may be the best approach to apply to Taiwanese EFL students because neither method prepares them for deal with global challenges or the constraints of the education system in Taiwan. Hence, FonF instruction, which pursues fluency and accuracy, can be an effective teaching method in Taiwan, so it warrants further discussion and empirical studies.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **1. The paradigm shift in language pedagogy**

In the domain of second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) methodology, GTM and CLT are the two predominant methodologies. Both are criticized over their divide between explicit and implicit learning and uncompromising implementation.

Before 1970, GTM was a popular method. Underlying this approach is the belief that grammar serves as the basis for translating from the second to the native language; therefore, students learn through the explicit teaching of grammar rules and repeated drills. In GTM classrooms, it is easy to observe that vocabulary is taught in the form of isolation, explicit and elaborate explanation of grammar rules are provided, but little attention is paid to the content of the texts themselves. Following this principle, teachers make the effort to correct students' errors because reaching accuracy is the supreme goal. GTM is still common as the means of language instruction in much of the world, partly because it requires few specialized skills on the part of teachers, and partly because it is easier to construct tests to assess knowledge of grammar rules and skills of translation. Many tests of FL do not even attempt to evaluate communicative abilities so that students have little motivation to go beyond grammar rules (Brown,

2001).

On the other end of the continuum, CLT advocates purely implicit teaching. Based on this approach, language is a system for expression of meaning, and its primary function is interaction and communication. In a typical CLT classroom, the goal is to enhance students' communicative competence and equip them with tools for unrehearsed language use outside the classroom. Therefore, techniques and tasks are designed to engage students in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language for meaningful purposes to achieve fluency. In this way, the role of accuracy is down-played so that the explicit explanation of grammar rules and error correction are not as important as they were under GTM. During CLT's heyday, language teachers and students experienced dramatic change of their roles in classrooms. Students are no longer passive recipients of rules, receiving knowledge transformed by teachers; instead, they act as communicators, actively engaging in negotiation with other speakers. Nor do teachers serve as knowledge-deliverers as they were before, rather as facilitators or advisers who provide support and assistance as necessary. Compared to GTM, the role of teacher is less dominant and threatening than in teacher-centered classrooms; students are seen to be more responsible for their own learning in CLT.

However, both GTM and CLT have their own respective drawbacks. GTM used to be called the Classical Method during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and before. At that time, it was a means of teaching students to read literature in Latin or Greek. By this method, students learned grammar rules and vocabulary through rote learning and repetition drills. Later in the 1970s, this fairly explicit and deductive method was criticized on the grounds that language educators and practitioners found that this method provided no opportunities for students to practice oral skills to meet the communicative requirements. On the other hand, CLT advocates, motivated by the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), suggested that the grammar instruction should be dispersed with in the classroom so that more time could be spent on communicative activities in classrooms. Nevertheless, too much emphasis on students' oral fluency leads to limited attention to accuracy in language. Adopting this "zero grammar" (Ellis, 2005) approach eventually results in the failure of acquiring rule-based competence.

Eventually, more researchers and practitioners (e.g. Long, 1991; Ellis, 2005) had reached consensus that a complete language curriculum needs to ensure students' development of communicative competence and linguistic knowledge. This evolution has contributed to the development of FonF instruction.

## 2. A new emerging methodology – FonF

FonF (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998) was developed in the hope of compensating for deficiencies of GTM and CLT. Since excessive emphasis on only one aspect in language could result in unbalanced development, focus on form advocates intend to combine the advantages of CLT with grammar instruction. To reach the dual goals of fluency and accuracy, it is proposed to draw learners' attention to linguistic forms while engaging in communicative activities. As Long (1991) stated, "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). Long and Robinson (1998) further defined this method in practice "focus on form often consists of 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" (p. 23).

Obviously, the prerequisite for this instructional method is a common with meaning and communication, followed by the development of linguistic knowledge. Accordingly, FonF can be distinguished from another term, focus on form $S$ . The former refers to teaching linguistic features within communication activities, while the latter term refers to treating these linguistic items in isolation. As Doughty and Williams (1998a) explained, "focus on form *entails* a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on form $S$  is *limited* to such a focus, and focus on meaning *excludes* it" (p. 4). Similarly, Doughty and Varela (1998) stated that FonF is to "add attention to form to a primarily communicative task rather than to depart from an already communicative goal in order to discuss a linguistic feature" (p.114).

Long's concept was further expanded by other researchers, such as Spada (1987), Doughty and Williams (1998a), and Wong (2005). As Long (1991) insisted that focus on form should be implemented in a reactive way when the problems are perceived, rather than any advance preparation. Other researchers, (Spada, 1987; Doughty & Williams, 1998a) tended to interpret it in a broader way to include both proactive and reactive ways. In addition, Wong (2005) defined FonF as an instructional way "to draw learners' attention to form in classrooms within meaning-based approach and it may occur either spontaneously or in predetermined ways" (p. 9).

To sum up, FonF entails two requirements: an overriding focus on meaning or communication and occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features. These two principles were motivated by the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1980, 1983), under which is the belief that language development can be achieved through negotiation for meaning, and the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990). What follows is a brief introduction of these two hypotheses and how they have been utilized as a basis to support FonF instruction.

### 3. Noticing, interaction and FonF

Theoretically, the effectiveness of FonF (Long, 1991; Long & Robison, 1998) was supported by “Noticing Hypothesis” (Schmidt, 1990). As opposed to Krashen’s (1981, 1985, 1995) claim of subconscious learning, Schmidt (1990) argued that noticing of L2 forms is the causal and obligatory action for L2 learning to occur. Furthermore, Schmidt (1995) claimed that “what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning” (p. 20) and “awareness at the point of learning (Time 1) is required for all learning” (p. 27). Following Schmidt’s works, some researchers, (e.g. Long, 1991; Ellis, 1993; Long & Robinson, 1998; Tomlin & Villa, 1994) believe that language learners must attend to specific forms while receiving “comprehensible input” to achieve successful learning, even though opinions vary as to the amounts and types of attention necessary for language learning. For example, Schmidt (1994) stated that “noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input to intake for learning” (p. 17) and entails conscious registration of the contents of focal attention. Tomlin and Villa (1994), however, proposed that detection is the minimally necessary process of acquisition instead of conscious registration.

According to Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, learners can attend to forms through a high degree of metacognitive planning and intention, or their attention can be drawn to forms during interaction with speakers or texts. Underpinning this approach is the idea that language learners process target language input in ways that are determined by various factors, such as perceptual salience, frequency, the continuity of elements. In addition, learners can attend to a mismatch or gap between what they can produce and what they want to produce, as well as between what they produce and what proficient speakers produce. Similarly, Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (1980, 1983, 1996) outlined the important role of interaction for language development, suggesting that interaction serves as an environment for attention to occur. As Long (1996) stated acquisition is “mediated by selective attention and the learner’s developing L2 processing capacity, and ... these resources are brought together...during negotiation for meaning” (p. 414). According to the Interaction Hypothesis, interaction involves negotiation for meaning, especially when communicative difficulties are perceived. To achieve successful communication, speakers have to make the input more comprehensible and accessible to learners by modification, such as clarification requests and recasts, or by simplification. This can draw learners’ attention to the deficiencies of their own interlanguage. In addition, such negotiation works also elicit negative feedback, which draws learners’ attention to mismatches between their own interlanguage and the target language.

Generally speaking, the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) provides a theoretical basis, while the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1980, 1983, 1996) offers a

practical direction for pedagogical implementation. Following these, Long (1991) proposed FonF and further inspired other advocates (e.g. Doughty & Williams, 1998b) to explore how focal attention can be allocated through learning materials and activities and examine its effect on ESL/EFL students.

#### 4. FonF techniques

With regard to FonF techniques, a variety of possibilities are adopted in classrooms. Long and Robinson (1998) suggested the use of input enhancement (Sharwood Smith, 1981) and negative feedback, which are the two most frequently used techniques in FonF classrooms. In addition, Doughty and Williams (1998b) compiled a list, including various techniques which can encourage learners to focus on the form (see Table 1). Furthermore, they analyzed the obtrusiveness of these techniques, which means the degree to which the FonF interrupts the flow of communication.

Table 1. Degree of obtrusiveness of FonF  
(Excerpts from Doughty & Williams 1998b, p. 258)

	Unobtrusive -----	Obtrusive
Input flood	x	
Input enhancement	x	
Negotiation	x	
Recast		x
Interaction enhancement		x
Dictogloss		x
Consciousness-raising tasks		x
Input processing		x

Among these techniques, input flood and input enhancement occupy the two least obtrusive positions, implying that they may interrupt the communicative flow of activities at a comparably low level. Therefore, these were utilized as FonF techniques in this study.

Input flood refers to the increasing number of the times of encountering the target feature, while input enhancement means using typographic or oral tactics to make the target feature more salient. Mostly, the input flood is employed simultaneously with typographical enhancement, such as *italics*, **boldface**, **enlargement**, underlining, or oral enhancement, such as raising the intonation of the specific feature. Researchers and practitioners tended to use these techniques to

increase the opportunities for learners to attend to the feature. This deliberate attempt to make the specific feature more salient and to draw learners' attention to the feature is called "input enhancement" (Sharwood Smith, 1981). Long and Robinson (1998) described this attempt as "observable external behavior" (p. 24). At times, input enhancement is the same as FonF technique because both refer to external efforts to draw learners' attention to linguistic form.

## 5. Empirical studies of FonF instruction

Previous studies have proved that manipulating input enhancement can draw learners' attention to specific form successfully (e.g. Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson & Doughty, 1995). However, such devices have their limitations. As Sharwood Smith (1991) stressed, the external manipulation may not guarantee learners' internal learning mechanism because learners may notice the forms perceptually, but not linguistically. Therefore, he rephrased "consciousness-raising" into "input enhancement", claiming that the use of the latter term is safer because it does not relate to learners' internal learning mechanism. The other concern is learners' linguistic developmental stage, which may affect their ability to notice the form artificially embedded in the inputs. Accordingly, the study by Jourdenais *et al.* (1995) showed that their learners were more likely to notice visually enhanced linguistic material, while White (1998) obtained a contradictory result. The failure may be attributed to the fact that White's subjects were children who were still developing their reading ability and had encountered a cognitive overload.

In addition, FonF has been proved to facilitate language learners' linguistic performance, in accuracy, production, or both (e.g. Alanen, 1995; Doughty & Williams, 1998b; Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson & Doughty, 1995; Hanaoka, 2007; Lee, 2007; Mennin, 2007; Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008; Quin, 2008; White, 1998; Wong, 2001; Yang, 2008). These studies certainly contradicted Krashen's (1981) non-interface position, which argues that grammar instruction plays no role in the development of language acquisition.

Among these studies, Alanen (1995), Doughty (1991), Jourdenais *et al.* (1995), White (1998), Wong (2001), and Yang (2008) employed input enhancement, such as typographical enhancement and input flood, as FonF techniques. Even though the results yielded positive effects, input enhancement alone seems to be insufficient because such techniques only provide samples of "positive evidence," rather than "negative feedback." This means that learners do not have the opportunities to notice their linguistic mismatches between their interlanguage and target language – which refers to noticing a gap (Schmidt & Frota, 1986), or deficiencies of their interlanguage – which means noticing a hole (Swain, 1998). Therefore, it is suggested



that FonF can be achieved in combination with other instructional elements, such as explicit information (e.g. White, 1998), and output activities (e.g. Izumi, 2002) to maximize its effectiveness.

### **III. The present study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the possibility of teaching the grammar point within, instead of departing from, meaning-oriented activities. This study employed input enhancement, which involved typographical enhancement and input flood, to enhance the perceptual saliency of the target form, in combination with rule explanation, as the instructional method for the experimental group. On the other hand, the control group received a traditional formS-focused instruction, which included explicit rule presentation and analysis, in combination with de-contextualized word lists. The research questions were as follows:

1. What is the effect of FonF instruction, compared with formS-focused instruction, on the EFL college students' learning of past tense verbs?
2. Are there any advantages of FonF instruction over formS-focused instruction on the EFL college students' learning of past tense verbs?

### **IV. Methodology**

In the following section, the participants, instruments, assessment measures and procedures were elaborated.

#### **1. Subjects**

The participants in this quasi-experimental study were 95 EFL junior college students from two intact classes at an institute of technology in the southern part of Taiwan. They were enrolled in a 3-credit general English course, as one of their required courses, and the first researcher was their instructor in charge of course instructional procedures. The study was taken place during the spring semester of 2008 when the participants were first-year students in the daytime five-year program of the nursing department. Based on the education system in Taiwan, they had presumably received at least three years of English learning during their junior high years. Some of them may have had more English learning experiences at cram schools or other language institutions.

To ensure that there was no significant difference between the two groups of participants in terms of their English proficiency, an English proficiency pretest was conducted before the instruction procedures. The test (Li, Chen, Chuang & Fan, 2003)

was developed by a group of EFL college teachers. It contains 40 items in total, including 20 multiple choices and 20 error corrections. Each correct answer was worth one point; therefore, the possible score range was from 0 to 40 points.

The results (see Table 2) indicated that the two groups were at comparable level in terms of their English proficiency,  $t(93) = 1.48, p > .05$ , as the first group ( $N = 47$ ) acquired a mean score of 19.38,  $SD = 6.15$ , and the second group ( $N = 48$ ) gained a mean score of 17.63,  $SD = 5.43$ .

Table 2. Summary for the English proficiency pretest scores of the two groups

Groups	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	Min.	Max.	<i>SD</i>
Control	47	19.38	5	31	6.15
Experimental	48	17.63	6	31	5.43

## 2. Instruments

Besides of English proficiency test, the participants took the pretest and posttest (See Appendix A and B) to measure their acquisition of the target form before and after the instructional procedures. The tools used in the pretest and posttest were developed by the researchers and their reliability and validity were evaluated through the following steps.

First, the contents of the two tests were reviewed by three experts (See Appendix C) in the field. These experts, as well as the researchers, all had at least 8 years of teaching experiences at the institute that the participants attended, and were acquainted with the approximate English proficiency level the participants have reached. The experts ranked each question with a 5-Likert scale (from 1 = very appropriate to 5 = very inappropriate). As the item was found inappropriate or very inappropriate, specific explanations or suggestions should be provided for future improvement. The results collected indicated that about 95 percent of the items in the pretest were ranked very appropriate or appropriate, as 92 percent of the items in the posttest were ranked very appropriate or appropriate, as they were used to test the participants' knowledge on the past tense verb. Therefore, the content validity of the pretest and the posttest were both accepted.

Second, the researchers modified the pretest and the posttest based on the comments from the experts and established the final version of the tests. Each of the tests consisted of 20 fill-in-the-blank items. The participants were given one point for each correct answer. The researchers decided to use the fill-in-the-blank task because the opportunity of random guessing is relatively lower than for tests such as multiple choice questions.

Finally, the researchers recruited 100 students to take the tests for a purpose to evaluate the reliability of the tests. These participants shared a similar background to

the participants in this study: they were all first-year junior college students from the same department and college with the participants in this study. The researchers invited them to take the pretest and posttest during their English class session. Afterward, their scores were collected and analyzed for internal consistency. The results showed that internal consistency of the pretest and the posttest was 0.87 and 0.85 respectively (See Appendix D), proving that those two tests were reliable tools.

### 3. Procedures

The procedures of the study took three weeks (see Table 3), during which the participants attended three English class sessions every week. Each class session lasted for 50 minutes. One of the researchers was also the one who was in charge of the instruction for both of the groups to avoid a teacher effect. The curriculum goal was prepared in advance; therefore, both of the groups had to learn the past tense verb at the onset of the study. Both of the groups received the same learning materials, including readings related to autobiography, diary, history and so on. Each of the texts contained a variety of embedded past tense verbs. However, the experimental group received FonF instruction, while the control group experienced traditional formS-focused instruction to compare the effects of the two instructions on the learning of the past tense verb.

During the first week, both groups spent the first two sessions taking the English proficiency test and the pretest to ensure that there were no significant differences in terms of English proficiency and knowledge of the target form. After these procedures, the instructor spent another session providing an explicit rule presentation of past tense verbs. For instances, the instructor taught students how to change present tense verbs into the past tense by altering the ending to *-ed*, *-d*, *-ied*, double final consonant then adding *-ed*, or through irregular forms. The role of this explicit instruction was that it was expected to help the participants understand and notice the form appearing in the subsequent readings, as suggested by researchers (e.g. Schmidt, 1990; Sharwood Smith, 1991).

Table 3. Overview of the procedures

Week	Session	Control group ( <i>N</i> = 47)	Experimental group ( <i>N</i> = 48)
1	1	English Proficiency Pretest	English Proficiency Pretest
	2	Pretest	Pretest
	3	Rule presentation	Rule presentation
2	4	FormS-focused instruction (-)	FonF instruction (+)

	5	FormS-focused instruction (-)	FonF instruction (+)
	6	FormS-focused instruction (-)	FonF instruction (+)
5	7	Posttest	Posttest

#### **a. The experimental group – FonF instruction**

With the experimental group, the instructor had to keep in mind that the primary goal of the instruction was to convey the meaning, followed by linguistic features to ensure the implementation of FonF instruction. Therefore, the instructor should first utilize various techniques, such as explanation, simplification or modification to make the texts more comprehensible, thus enabled students to understand the meanings conveyed. In addition, the instructor had to teach when to use the past tense verb and explain how the use of this form makes differences in meaning. The role of this explanation was to help the students recognize the “form-meaning” relationship. Then the instructor could ask the students to recognize and circle the past tense verbs in the texts and encourage them to spell these verbs in their present tense. Subsequently, the instructor read the texts aloud to the students. To draw students’ attention to the past tense verb, the instructor stressed the intonation of these verbs, as well as raising her eyebrows. The next stage included students listening to their instructor say verbs and then highlighting these verbs with fluorescent markers or other colorful inking. This process was expected not only to enhance the external perceptual salience of the verbs, but also to trigger the internal learning mechanism of the students. In addition, students had the opportunities to compare their own recognition with the instructor’s feedback. This is known as the advantages of noticing a gap (Schmidt & Frota, 1986) or noticing a hole (Swain, 1998). After each reading, the instructor could either conduct reading comprehension exercises or ask simple questions to ensure that the students focused on meaning as well as the form.

#### **b. The control group – formS-focused instruction**

The control group received the same reading materials as the experimental group. However, communicative or meaningful activities were not conducted as required, since the traditional formS-focused instruction emphasizes linguistic features as against communicative activities. Accordingly, the instructor explained vocabulary and translated the texts into the students’ native language. The instructor did not draw the students’ attention to the past tense verbs contextualized in the texts; instead, a handout in which all past tense verbs appearing in the reading materials were presented. The instructor led students to look at these verbs, and analyzed the

differences between their past tense and present tense forms. For example, “opened” falls into the category of adding “-ed” as the ending. Students were encouraged to memorize these verbs, both in present and past tense and then perform a fill-in-the-blank exercise.

After receiving instructions for three sessions, the two groups took the posttest to measure their knowledge of past tense verbs. The posttest was held two weeks after the instruction to avoid the effect of short-term memory and the learning effect of the pretest knowing the results.

To sum up, the instructor tended to draw the attention of the participants in the experimental group towards the target form contextualized in the reading texts by using various focus-on-form techniques; therefore, the participants in the experimental group had the opportunity to recognize the form-meaning relationship. On the other hand, the control group received formS-focused teaching, in which the target form was treated in an isolated way. Furthermore, the experimental group received both “positive evidence” and “negative evidence” in the inputs, while the control group only received “positive evidence” in the inputs.

#### **4. The target form – the past tense verb**

English past tense verbs can typically be ignored by the Taiwanese EFL students because there is no difference of the present tense and past tense verbs in their native language. However, misuse or ignorance of this form may result in misunderstanding or failure of interaction with English speakers or written texts. In other words, the past tense must be acquired for successful communication. Accordingly, the past tense verb is regarded as an appropriate form in FonF instruction, because it meets two criteria suggested by Harley (1993), as it is different in non-obvious ways from the learners' first language and it is likely to be misinterpreted or misanalyzed by learners.

## **V. Data Analysis and Results**

### **1. Pretest**

As presented in Table 4, the result of an independent *t*-test showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of their pretest scores,  $t(93) = .79, p > .05$ , even though the control group ( $M = 6.06, SD = 4.82$ ) scored higher than the experimental group ( $M = 5.31, SD = 4.49$ ). Therefore, the two groups' knowledge of the past tense verb was at equivalent level before receiving instructions.

Table 4. Summary for the pretest scores of the two groups

Groups	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	Min.	Max.	<i>SD</i>
Control	47	6.06	0	20	4.82
Experimental	48	5.31	0	19	4.49

## 2. Posttest

The result of the posttest scores analyzed by an independent *t*-test (see Table 5) showed that the control and experimental group gained a mean score of 13.40, *SD* = 5.71 and 14.31, *SD* = 4.31 respectively. The finding suggested that the two groups were not statistically different from one another in terms of their scores gained from the posttest task,  $t(93) = -.88$ ,  $p > .05$ , even though the mean score of the experimental group ( $M = 14.31$ ,  $SD = 4.31$ ) was slightly higher than the control group ( $M = 13.40$ ,  $SD = 5.71$ ).

Table 5. Summary for the posttest scores of the two groups

Groups	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	Min.	Max.	<i>SD</i>	Std. Error Mean
Control	47	13.40	0	10	5.71	0.83
Experimental	48	14.31	1	20	4.31	0.62

## 3. Comparison of the pretest-posttest change

At last, the results of the pretest and the posttest were compared to see if the participants' scores were improved after they received the different kinds of input. As shown in Table 6, the experimental group's pretest and posttest mean scores were 6.06 and 13.40 respectively. On the other hand, the mean scores of the control groups' pretest and posttest were 5.31 and 14.31 respectively.

Table 6. Summary for the pretest-posttest scores of the two groups

Group	Tests	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Control	pretest	47	6.06	4.82
	posttest	47	13.40	5.71
Experimental	pretest	48	5.31	4.49
	posttest	48	14.31	4.31

Table 7 showed the correlation between the two variables. It demonstrated that there was a positive correlation between the pretest and the posttest in the

experimental group, but not in the control group. In other words, In other words, in both of the two groups, the participants who performed well on the pretest also did well on the posttest.

Table 7. Summary for paired samples correlations of the pretest-posttest scores

Group	Tests	<i>N</i>	Correlation	Sig.
Control	Pretest-posttest	47	.36	.01**
Experimental	Pretest-posttest	48	.59	.00**

Note: \*\*  $p < .05$

As shown in Table 8, both of the two groups improved significantly from the pretest to the posttest, with a mean difference of 7.34,  $SD = 6.00$ , and 9,  $SD = 3.95$  respectively. However, the experimental group gained to a greater extent.

Table 8. Summary for Paired Samples Test of the Pretest-posttest Scores

Group	Tests	Score improved	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
Experimental	Pretest-posttest	7.34	6.00	-8.38	46	.00**
Control	Pretest-posttest	9	3.95	-15.78	47	.00*

Note: \*\*  $p < .05$ ,

To further explore whether FonF instruction has advantages over the formS-focused instruction, the researcher conducted the following analysis.

First, when the pretest to the posttest changes for the two groups were compared visually, as shown in Figure 1, the line of the experimental group is noticeably steeper than that of the control group. It is clearly recognizable that the experimental group improved their mean score more (+9) than did the control group (+7.34). Moreover, the experimental group started from a lower point at the pretest ( $M = 5.31$ ), compared to the control group ( $M = 6.06$ ), but ended at a higher point level ( $M = 14.31$ ), compared to the control group ( $M = 13.40$ ). Even though there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups' performances, there is an opportunity that FonF instruction enabled the experimental group, which showed relatively lower level of knowledge on the target form at beginning of the experimental, to outperform the control group after instruction.

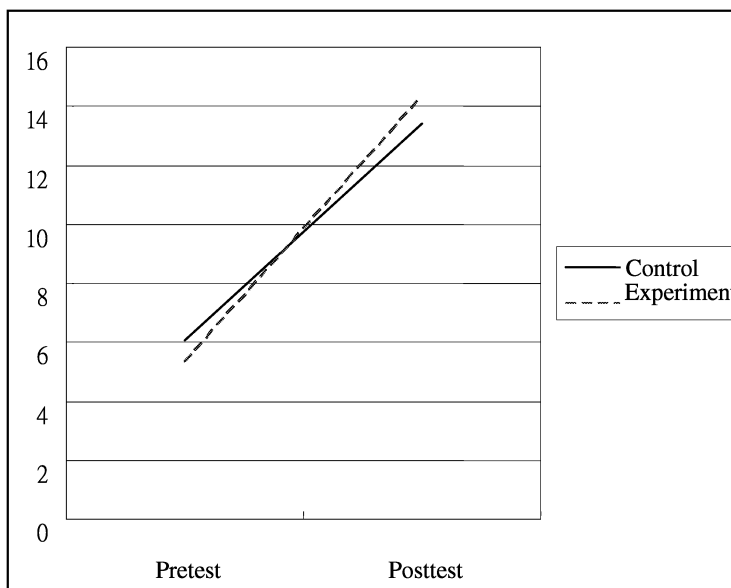


Figure 1. Pretest and posttest scores of the two groups

In addition, in the individual score change shown in Table 9, it was observed that all of the 48 participants (100 %) in the experimental group improved their scores from the pretest to the posttest. On the other hand, 39 of the participants (approximately 83 %) in the control group improved, three (approximately 6%) remained the same and five (approximately 11%) decreased their scores. This suggested that FonF instruction may have a positive effect on the overall group, including high, intermediate and low proficiency groups. On the other hand, formS-focused instruction may merely be facilitative to some participants. One possibility is that it may not work for those who lagged behind or who were with a other-directed style. In other words, when faced with large mixed-ability class, in which individual factors vary, adopting FonF instruction has advantages over the traditional formS-focused instruction.

Table 9. Nature of score change of the control and experimental group

Score change	Control <i>N</i> (%)	Experimental <i>N</i> (%)
Improve	39 (83)	48 (100)
Remain	3 (6)	-
Decrease	5 (11)	-
Total	47 (100)	48 (100)



## VI. Discussion

The first question posed in this study was about the effects of FonF and formS-focused instructions on the participants' learning of the past tense verb. The results revealed that both instruction methods had positive effects on the participants' learning of past tense verbs because the control and the experimental groups significantly improved their mean scores from the pretest to the posttest significantly,  $t(46) = -8.38, p < .05$ , and  $t(47) = -15.78, p < .05$  respectively. This finding was consistent with previous studies (e.g. Yang, 2008), suggesting that drawing learners' attention occasionally towards linguistic features can be successful in linguistic development. This has strong implications for EFL education: as grammar instruction is expected in the classroom and seems to be an essential part of teaching, FonF instruction, which emphasizes fluency and accuracy as well, is a feasible and successful method.

One drawback was that the result did not show significant differences between the control and experimental groups' mean scores at the posttest,  $t(93) = -.88, p > .05$ . This meant that FonF and formS-focused instructions had positive effects at a similar level on the participant's learning of the past tense verbs. Three explanations for this are possible. First, the participants were more accustomed to traditional formS-focused instruction so it took time for the participants in the experimental group to acquaint themselves with the new instructional method. Second, the issue of developmental stage may need to be taken into account because some of the participants in the experimental group could have experienced cognitive overload due to their stage. They possibly had difficulties in dealing with meaning and forms at the same time, as some studies (e.g. Foster & Skehan, 1996; Leeman, Arteagoitia, Fridman & Doughty, 1995; VanPattern, 1990) assume a limited-capacity model of the learner. In addition, the past tense verb was supposedly not a new linguistic feature to most participants. As they received instruction, some of them may be able to retrieve their memory or integrate new information with prior knowledge.

With respect to the second question which intended to examine whether FonF has advantages over the formS-focused instruction, there were several indications to support the value of FonF. First, FonF embraces the dual aspects of meanings and linguistic features, as their advocates suggested (e.g. Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). This provides students with the opportunity to engage in meaning contexts, as opposed to discrete linguistic items, enabling students to discern the 'form-meaning' relationship by themselves. Secondly, there is a possibility that students who received FonF instruction may have better linguistic performance than those receiving

traditional formS-focused instruction if the duration of the instruction is prolonged. In this study, the experimental group ( $M = 5.31$ ) started from a relatively lower score compared to the control group ( $M = 6.06$ ), but ended with a relatively higher score ( $M = 14.31$ ) than the control group ( $M = 13.40$ ). The insignificant difference,  $t(93) = -.88$ ,  $p > .05$ , may have resulted from the insufficient duration of learning. If the experimental group continued to receive FonF instruction for a longer time, a significant result could have achieved. In addition, FonF instruction seems to trigger learners' perceptual attention and internal learning mechanism better than formS-focused instruction. While all of the participants in the experimental group improved their scores, some of the participants in the control group failed to improve their scores. This failure could be in accordance with Sharwood Smith's (1991, 1993) claim that students may not follow teachers' pedagogical attempts because of various factors, such as proficiency level, personality and their L1 culture. In this study, the participants in the experimental group played an active role because they had to enhance the target form by themselves; in addition, they were provided with opportunities to trace the "holes" and "gaps" in their interlanguage. This approach seemed to bring about the positive effect to the overall group. Therefore, FonF instruction could lead to success in learning within a large mixed-ability group.

## VII. Conclusion

Research on language learning and teaching has been intensely interested in matching the learners' needs to the best teaching method. As the roles of grammar and direct instruction in the process of learning are revisited, this study sought to find out how a newly-developed methodology can be applied into real classroom practices and provide more understanding of FonF as a means to improve EFL college students' linguistic competence.

The results showed that integration of FonF instruction can result in increasing accuracy of use of the past tense verb by EFL college students. Despite shortcomings, including the small sample size and insufficient teaching duration time, this study is still worthwhile in providing teachers with useful tools. First, grammar teaching and learning can be fun and creative and is not limited to rule explanation and rote memory. There are many alternatives from which to choose, including integration of grammar components into communicative or meaning-based activities. As proved in this study, FonF instruction, which prioritizes meaning and embraces form as well, can be successful in EFL classrooms, even for learners whose proficiency level is intermediate or below. Therefore, teachers can integrate a variety of authentic materials, such as news reports, into grammar lessons. What has to be cautioned is

that the learning materials must be comprehensible, so teachers may need to make some modifications, if necessary, to match learners' current levels. This avoids unnecessary frustration interfering with comprehension and attention on the target form.

Despite a low amount of FonF instruction, there is still much worthy discussion and many empirical studies. The concern with improving EFL students' learning of complicated forms has led to an interest for future studies in this field. Recruiting more participants from different backgrounds, choosing more difficult linguistic features, and adjusting teaching methods will be necessary to support the findings more convincingly.

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## Appendix A

### Pretest

#### Test 1 for Past Tense Verbs

第一部分：句子填空 (請填入正確的過去式動詞)

\*\*請同學每一題都作答；利用提示字寫出過去式動詞

1. I \_\_\_\_\_ (try) to call you last night, but you didn't answer the phone.
2. He is the man you \_\_\_\_\_ (speak) to at the airport last month.
3. I \_\_\_\_\_ (use) to drink a lot of coffee before.
4. My brother bought a new house two years ago. It \_\_\_\_\_ (cost) him five million dollars.
5. I \_\_\_\_\_ (stop) by your house this morning, but you were not home.
6. I am not hungry at all because I \_\_\_\_\_ (eat) a piece of cake at Mary's birthday party 10 minutes ago.
7. Last Sunday I \_\_\_\_\_ (apply) for a new library card.
8. My sister \_\_\_\_\_ (hurt) her ankle when she was hit by a car one year ago.
9. I \_\_\_\_\_ (watch) TV with my parents last night so I went to bed late.
10. His father \_\_\_\_\_ (pay) the bill for us last night.
11. I \_\_\_\_\_ (choose) to stay home with you 10 minutes ago, but now I change my mind.
12. John \_\_\_\_\_ (cry) a lot when he broke up with his girlfriend.
13. He \_\_\_\_\_ (fall) in love with his wife when he was a college student.
14. My cousin \_\_\_\_\_ (shop) with his girlfriend last Wednesday.
  
15. I \_\_\_\_\_ (find) a new apartment when I moved to Taiwan.
16. She \_\_\_\_\_ (begin) her career as an actor 20 years ago.
17. I \_\_\_\_\_ (do) my homework with my classmate last night.
18. I \_\_\_\_\_ (open) the door when you came.
19. My brother \_\_\_\_\_ (prepare) for the oral presentation until 11:00 last night.
20. He \_\_\_\_\_ (drop) off some film at the camera store yesterday afternoon.



## Appendix B

### Posttest

#### Test 2 for Past Tense Verbs

第一部分：句子填空 (請填入正確的過去式動詞)

\*\*請同學每一題都作答；利用提示字寫出過去式動詞

1. He \_\_\_\_\_ (deposit) his paycheck in the bank this morning.
2. Amy said she \_\_\_\_\_ (close) the door before she left school yesterday.
3. Maria \_\_\_\_\_ (study) hard for the English test last night, so she fell asleep this morning.
4. I only \_\_\_\_\_ (drink) a cup of milk for breakfast this morning, so I am a little hungry now.
5. My brother found a job in Taipei, so he \_\_\_\_\_ (leave) home for the big city last week.
6. John didn't feel well on Thursday, so he \_\_\_\_\_ (take) a day off.
7. The baseball game \_\_\_\_\_ (be) exciting last night.  
The Yankees beat the Red Sox 2-0.
8. The police officer \_\_\_\_\_ (give) her directions when she got lost.
9. Cathy \_\_\_\_\_ (meet) her husband when she was a freshman in college.
10. Joe \_\_\_\_\_ (experience) 911 attack in New York in 2001.
11. I don't like the girl who \_\_\_\_\_ (sit) next to me when we were waiting for Bob.
12. Last summer vacation I \_\_\_\_\_ (read) several novels.
13. Gill \_\_\_\_\_ (forget) to close windows when she left home.
14. Kenny \_\_\_\_\_ (clean) his apartment the day before yesterday.
15. The teacher \_\_\_\_\_ (skip) this lesson because she said she wanted to catch up with the schedule.
16. My mother \_\_\_\_\_ (hug) me tight when we said goodbye at the airport.
17. Kenny's mother-in-law visited him this afternoon, so he \_\_\_\_\_ (mop) the floor before she came.
18. The weather was terrible when I \_\_\_\_\_ (fly) from Denver to Dallas.
19. She \_\_\_\_\_ (hurry) home to tell her family members the good news after school.
20. The class \_\_\_\_\_ (begin) ten minutes ago.

**Appendix C**

**Background Information of the Experts**

**Expert 1**

**Title : Associate professor**

1. Educational Background	Ph.D. in Education at National Pingtung University of Education
2. Specialty	TESOL; Curriculum design
3. Courses	e-learning English course Internship on English teaching General English course English reading and vocabulary

**Expert 2**

**Title : Assistant professor**

1. Educational Background	Ph.D. in Linguistics at School of German Language
2. Specialty	Linguistics
3. Courses	Applied linguistics Business English News English English conversation

**Expert 3**

**Title : Assistant professor**

1. Educational Background	Ed. D. at The University of Montana
2. Specialty	English teaching and learning Project writing Educational leadership Spanish
3. Courses	Advanced reading skills English teaching strategies Vocabulary and reading Listening Project Writing GEPT

## Appendix D

### I. Results of the Content Validity for the Pretest and the Posttest

#### Pretest

Experts	Very Appropriate	Appropriate	No Comment	Inappropriate	Very Inappropriate	Total Items
P 1	20	0	0	0	0	20
P 2	14	4	1	1	0	20
P 3	12	7	0	1	0	20
Total	46	11	1	2	0	60
Percentage	77	18	1	4	0	100

#### Posttest

Experts	Very Appropriate	Appropriate	No Comment	Inappropriate	Very Inappropriate	Total Items
P 1	20	0	0	0	0	20
P 2	13	3	3	1	0	20
P 3	18	1	0	0	1	20
Total	51	4	3	1	1	30
Percentage	85	7	5	1	1	100

### II. Results of the Reliability Statistics for the Pretest and the Posttest

#### Reliability Statistics for Pretest and the Posttest

Tests	Items	Cronbach $\alpha$
Pretest	20	0.87
Posttest	20	0.85

## Focus on form 教學法對台灣五專生英文過去式動詞

### 學習成效之研究

楊致慧\*、何聖欣\*\*、黎瓊麗\*\*\*

#### 摘要

此研究目的在比較著重形式教學法(focus on form instructiton; FonF)和以形式為主教學法(formS-focused instruction)對台灣大專生英文過去式動詞學習成效的影響。參與研究者來自於兩個班級，共 95 位學生，她們為某技術學院五專一年級護理科之學生。兩個不同班級分別被指定為控制組及實驗組，分別接受著重形式教學法(focus on form instruction)以及以形式為主教學法(formS-focused instruction)。在為期一個月的指導前後，參與研究者分別接受前後兩次測驗來比較他們在英文過去式動詞的學習成效，兩次成績分別經過 independent *t*-test 及 paired-samples *t*-test 進行比較。結果顯示，分別接受不同教學法的兩組學生在經過教學後成績都有進步，顯示兩種教學法對英文過去式動詞有相似的正面效應。然而，結果也發現，接受著重形式教學法(focus on form instruction)的全數實驗組學生，在後測時成績都有進步，原因可能是透過著重形式教學法(focus on form instruction)較能吸引所有學生將注意力集中在特定的文法上，而這也是本研究所發現著重形式教學法(focus on form instruction)的優點。

關鍵字：著重形式教學法、以英語作為外語、過去式動詞

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