

Young Learners in EFL Contexts:
Considering a Focus on Forms Visual Curriculum
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Introduction

A focus on forms visual curriculum (FoFsVC) is a structural syllabus in a screen-fronted classroom setting. ([click here](#)) The FoFsVC is a 'micro-curriculum'. There is a specific audience for which it is intended— medium and large (8~40+) young learner (elementary school) classes in EFL (English as a Foreign Language meaning English taught in non-English speaking environments) settings.

The emphasis is on interaction as a means of uptake. The teacher's role as facilitator is meant to engage students in interaction and scaffolding. Meaning is intended to be contained in the images presented on the screen: the message is visible and the related code is the focus. The intention in each lesson is an extensive versus an intensive presentation of grammar— related grammatical forms versus a redundancy of a particular feature.

General area for investigation

This study specifically investigates the interaction involved in a focus on forms visual classroom setting and evaluates this interaction in terms of learning opportunities (Crabbe, 2003). It intends to determine if learning takes place over a period of three months by using oral and written tests. Comparisons are made within the subjects (test results before and after instruction). There is no attempt to measure this curriculum against any other syllabus, approach, method or style of teaching young EFL learners.

Rationale

This study examines a focus on forms approach to teaching English to elementary level EFL learners. Lessons are exclusively driven by listening and speaking exercises as there is a perceived need in EFL contexts to improve oral communication (versus written). I believe attempts should be made to aid young learners in EFL contexts in speech production.

It's worth mentioning that focus on forms pedagogy in EFL environments has traditionally been practiced through writing (matching, fill-in-the-blank and sentence re-formation being the most popular) and audio-lingual methods ('Repeat after me.' or 'Listen and repeat.') without regards to interaction or scaffolding. In contrast, the focus on forms visual curriculum utilizes classroom interaction to promote learning. This approach hasn't seen much (if any) investigation.

Two other reasons support a rationale for this study:

1) Computer screens and projected visual information (images, digital movies and beyond) will most likely replace textbooks in some classroom settings (it seems to be a 'when' not an 'if' question) in the near future. It may also be suggested that images that focus learner attention by meaningful representation and their ability to hold the attention of young learners are images that will remain salient throughout the learning (uptake) and acquisitional (intake) processes. Therefore this type of curriculum merits study.

2) In terms of second language theory, there is a general consensus that meaning-based curricula (for example, communicative or task-based) are optimal in young learner classrooms. This study proposes a possible complement to these useful paradigms. Focus on forms in a new context (interaction

focused and visually oriented) should be examined as an addition to existing syllabi (Is there room for one more?).

Literature Review

In terms of grammar teaching, DeKeyser (1994) explains that '*deductive* means that the rules are given before any examples are seen' and that '*inductive* means that rules are inferred from examples presented (first)' while '*implicit* means that no rules are formulated' and '*explicit* means rules are formulated (either by the teacher or the student, either before or after examples/practice)'.

The case for deductive versus inductive grammar instruction has been made 'from a recent study that isolated grammar instruction that is deductive (i.e., involving rule presentation and metalinguistic information) as a variable and contrasted it with an instructional treatment that is inductive (i.e., focusing on form with no explicit grammar instruction)...the results revealed a significant advantage for the deductive instruction group.' (Erlam, 2003).

In terms of a focus on forms, I am suggesting that explicit knowledge can drive classroom interaction. Ellis (1994) relates the processes by which explicit knowledge may become implicit:

1. Explicit knowledge can be used to monitor output, which, in turn, serves as a source of input.
2. Explicit knowledge can help learners notice features in the input and understand the meanings they realize.
3. Explicit knowledge can help learners compare their existing representation of a grammatical feature with that actually observed in the input.

These processes are what FoFs visual curricula hope to achieve through classroom interaction.

The case for an order of acquisition as a universal process for all L2 learners (considering L1, age, aptitude, learning styles and strategies, culture and other variables) is unlikely to ever be established, though attempts have been made: 'we have seen the morpheme studies, on which great store was once set are of doubtful validity, because their view of acquisition as one of accumulated entities is seriously flawed' (Ellis, 1994, p.111). Ellis is referring to the fact that learners only acquire what they are developmentally ready for, but I would like to add that, though certain grammatical features have been determined to precede others in some L2 contexts, there is no evidence of universality. I am arguing that a focus on forms visual curriculum (which is a structural syllabus) offers a valid approach to young learner instruction in EFL classrooms. I will offer two reasons supporting the idea that a structural syllabus and inbuilt learner syllabi may be compatible in such a classroom setting:

1) Diversity of learner interlanguages and levels in any given classroom: students in medium and large classrooms each have their own developmental patterns. Many factors determine what features of the language any one learner is developmentally ready for at any given time. For example, while one grammatical feature may be accessible to some, another feature may be accessible to others. Utilizing an extensive approach to focus on forms may cast a net that catches the attention (noticing of forms and gaps) of a wider student audience.

2) The nature of interaction in classroom settings (scaffolding): scaffolding here is described in the simplest possible terms, 'the process by which learners utilize discourse to help them construct structures that lie outside their competence' (Ellis, 1997, p.143). Students with diverse levels and transitional competences can collaborate; first, to create learning opportunities and second, to scaffold higher levels of uptake. In effect, the zone of proximal development can be said to cover more territory in classroom settings.

Finally there is the issue of teaching forms to young learners. As the FoFsVC isn't entirely a grammatical approach (indeed, the focus is on interaction) I will only address this controversy with

Ellis' reply to Sheen (Ellis, 2006) in regards to grammatical instruction early in a learner's process:

I do then admit that in my previous publications (e.g., Ellis, 2002) I have favoured a later start but conclude: "However, it is possible that such an approach can be usefully complemented by one that draws beginners' attention to useful grammatical features."

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

- 1) Are there adequate learning opportunities (via Crabbe 2003) in a focus on forms visual curriculum offered to young learners in an Efl context in South Korea?
- 2) What type of learning opportunities (Crabbe 2003) occur with greater frequency in this curriculum and setting?
- 3) How well or poorly do students in this study perform on written and oral (pre and post) tests using this curriculum?

Context and participants

This is an exploratory research design of three months, a limited longitudinal study. The classes are conducted once a week for 40 minutes. The setting is an Efl language learning center in South Korea. The participants aren't novices but are 'mid-level' beginners. There are two classes of 25~30 students in each class. Class one is comprised of 4th and 5th grade students and class two, 5th and 6th graders. This is a convenience sample (my workplace) and the sampling size may be lower than other research on specific curricula; on the other hand, this as an exploratory study and the intent is to generate hypotheses for a case study; therefore, the exploratory design may seem 'general' in nature. The classes

will initially be placed at an 'input + 1' level in the curriculum. The curriculum itself is free and online: [click here for access](#).

Instruments

For research questions one and two, 'opportunity categories' outlined by Crabbe (2003) are used both quantitatively and qualitatively; the categories include: input, output, interaction, feedback, rehearsal, language understanding and learning understanding. Crabbe's opportunity framework has been converted (as accurately and true to the spirit of its intentions as possible) into an opportunity analysis instrument (see appendix 1: Crabbe' table and instrument one).

For the purposes of this study I am using Crabbe's opportunity framework as a measure of the type of interaction that may take place in this specific classroom setting. (see appendix 2: a rationale for converting and using Crabbe's categories as a research instrument).

The second instrument, which addresses research question three, are pre and post tests: one written and one oral.

Prototype for written test:

Q1: What kind of fast food do you eat? and eat fries I burgers

A1: _____ . (sentence)

A2: _____ . (Korean translation)

The student will not have to rely on spelling, only word order. In this way focus is on forms. Korean translation is included to test the student's comprehension of meaning/message.

The oral test will follow the same procedures outlined below. The only difference is that the first answer only will be recorded and analyzed (answer without interaction).

The third instrument is a teacher journal: there are three reasons a journal will benefit this study:

- 1) Qualitative data is necessary for a future case study.
- 2) Only a journal can address the relationship of the FoFsVC in terms of the teacher-student-screen relationship. This relationship is multidimensional and can only be described (at this point in time) in a 'qualitative light'. The screen itself may be seen as an 'assistant' (an entity) rather than assistance.
- 3) Journal entries can record and substantiate an extensive versus an intensive attention to grammatical forms in each interaction sequence.

Procedures

- 1) Show the students a photo with a word scramble:

example: [click here](#) (only one exercise will be employed)

- 2) Call on one student to answer the closed question.
- 3) When the student succeeds with the correct answer, call on another student.
- 4) Pose a grammatically similar OR visually similar open question (information or opinion gap is optimal but not always possible).

As the nature of instruction is deductive, the teacher models the language feature as the need arises; that is, when the teacher perceives a gap in understanding (students look perplexed or uncomfortable).

The form or forms are then represented on a white board near the computer screen.

Two types of motivation for interaction are utilized:

- 1) The exercises are carried out in a game-style format. The students are numbered. Number cards are prepared. Two teams are established (e.g., 1~15 and 16~30). Two cards are selected randomly, one

from each team. Two selected students compete with 'rock, scissors, paper'. The winner answers first (with the scaffolding of teammates). An incorrect answer gives the opposing team a chance, and so on until the correct form is arrived at (for both closed and open question types).

2) The teacher encourages scaffolding with gestures and minimal implicit corrective feedback (recasts are favored). The 'technique' may be described as 'pushed interaction'.

Data Collection

Interaction sequences (10~15 minutes each) presented as an exercise (above) will be videotaped in each class, once a week for three months. The interactions will be transcribed. Written and oral pretests will be given at the outset. The same posttests will be given at the end of the study. The level of the test will be slightly beyond the perceived developmental level of the classes in general at the beginning of the study. The teacher journal will be an ongoing and constant survey of all applicable observations and thoughts.

Analysis

Question one: How many of Crabbe's categories scored above five (in a scale of ten) taking into account the mean of all interaction sequences? Above five will be considered significant. Multiple inter-raters will be employed.

Question two: From the results generated in question one, a frequency analysis will be conducted.

Question three: Mean test scores will be compared and evaluated as whole class sums. The rate of improvement or decline will be assessed for each class.

CONCLUSION

Expected outcome

One can only guess: I suppose input, output, interaction, feedback and rehearsal will be categories that express significant representation in the lessons and that language understanding and learning understanding may fail to see significance. I believe there will be improved test scores.

Pedagogical implications

A closed to open question sequence by a teacher (repeated constantly throughout a lesson) demands spontaneous judgment and creativity. The teacher must intuit the developmental level of the student in question and the likelihood that peers will be able to scaffold a correct or acceptable answer. In effect, the teacher must remain in the zone of proximal development for the duration of the lesson. It is this sort of 'practice' that puts an educator in a position to examine and evaluate any given student's in-built syllabus. This is the aspect of teaching that can be called an art.

Weaknesses

This study cannot determine whether internalization of structure (as accuracy) nor communicative competence (as fluency) exists as a result of instruction.

Appendix 1: Table One (from Crabbe 2003):

TABLE 3
Coverage of the Opportunity Categories

Ingredient	Activity covered by the concept	Example
Input	Listening to and reading monologue or dialogue that can be understood with limited difficulty	Elley (1991); Gass (1997)
Output	Producing meaningful utterances in written or spoken form, either as a monologue or in the context of interaction	Swain (1995), Swain & Lapkin (1995)
Interaction	Speaking and writing with one or more interlocutors in real or simulated communicative situations	Gass (1997); Swain (1999)
Feedback	Receiving information relating to one's own performance as a second language user, which may include indirect feedback (e.g., that one has not been understood) or direct feedback (e.g., that one has made a specific error)	Hyland (2000); Lyster (1998); Mackey & Philp (1998)
Rehearsal	Any activity designed to improve through deliberate repetition specific aspects of performance, including experimentation with pronunciation, memorisation of words or word patterns, and repeated role play of a piece of communication	Nation (2001); Ortega (1999); Willis & Willis (1987)
Language understanding	Any conscious attention to language that is intended to lead to an ability to explain or describe or gloss an aspect of grammar or sociolinguistic conventions	Doughty & Williams (1998); Long & Robinson (1998); Spada (1997)
Learning understanding	Any conscious attention to one's own language learning that is intended to lead to a better metacognitive control over that learning, which would include a detailed representation of the task of language learning, an analysis of the difficulties encountered and an awareness of strategies to overcome the difficulties and achieve the task	Benson (2001); Wenden (1998)

Instrument One: an opportunity analysis instrument based on (Crabbe 2003):

Input	Output	Interaction	Feedback	Rehearsal	Language U	Learning U
Evidence of the optimal use of learning opportunities exist in classroom interaction						
10	10	10	10	10	10	10
9	9	9	9	9	9	9
8	8	8	8	8	8	8
7	7	7	7	7	7	7
6	6	6	6	6	6	6
5	5	5	5	5	5	5
4	4	4	4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1	1	1	1
0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No evidence of opportunities exist in the classroom interaction						

Appendix 2: rationale for using Crabbe's learning opportunity categories as an instrument:

Crabbe's definition of curriculum as 'an organisation of learning opportunities, or means, for achieving certain outcomes, or ends' seems to be a 'nuts and bolts' approach, but he goes on to explain that 'in such an ends-means formulation, quality can be sought both in the product—the achievement of specific objectives—and in the process—the availability and use of learning opportunities'. (Crabbe, 2003).

The idea that a FoFsVC implemented as opportunities for learning in a young learner Efl context suggests that the product (uptake of a grammatical feature) may include a process that initiates meaning (code meets message/message meets code) and possible acquisition (message and code are internalized as one).

Crabbe suggests that 'the effectiveness of a program lies in the quality of the process represented by this opportunity framework'. He gives several reasons to support his suggestion, but there are three that pertain to this study specifically:

- 1) It applies both to 'discrete chunks of performance' and an 'increased language competence'.
- 2) It embraces all types of learning activity.
- 3) The term enables the easy separation of the availability of the opportunities from the take-up of the opportunities.

These parameters make the learning opportunity framework an ideal instrument to examine and measure interaction in a FoFVC for two reasons:

- 1) It gives a comprehensive range of analysis of classroom interaction.
- 2) An opportunity can be available when the uptake is not. In this way we can examine classroom interaction in terms of the learners themselves.

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