

## Chapter 72

# Learners of Different Language Proficiency Levels and Incidental Focus on Form in Synchronous Text-Based Discussion

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examined the effectiveness of incidental focus on form in facilitating second language learning for learners of different proficiency levels in a synchronous computer-mediated communication environment. Sixteen native speaker (NS)-nonnative speaker (NNS) dyads and fourteen NNS-NNS dyads were formed. The participants completed two communicative tasks. Language-related episodes (LRE), mini-dialogues in which learners either explicitly or implicitly ask or talk about language or question their own or/and interlocutors' language use, were identified and used as a basis for individualized tailor-made tests to assess the learners' subsequent learning outcome. The results revealed that in the NS-NNS dyads, no significant difference in the frequency of LREs produced was found between the lower- and higher-proficiency learners whereas in the NNS-NNS dyads, the lower-proficiency learners produced significantly more LREs than their higher-proficiency interlocutors. Additionally, the learners of both proficiency groups interacting with NSs produced significantly more LREs than learners interacting with NNSs. However, no significant differences were found in the test performance of learners of different proficiency levels in either dyadic type.*

### INTRODUCTION

Incidental focus on form overtly draws learners' attention to linguistic elements as they occur incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication (Long, 1991). The importance of incidental focus on form is based on three principle claims about second language acquisition (SLA): (a) "learners acquire new linguistic forms as a product of attending to them in contexts where the primary

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concern is with message rather than code”; (b) “learners frequently experience difficulty in attending to and producing linguistic forms in communication because they possess a limited information-processing capacity”; and (c) “learners benefit from the opportunities that arise in communication to give focal attention to form” (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001a, p. 281-282). Although the effectiveness of planned focus on form has been examined in various contexts (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998), studies that have investigated the effects of incidental focus on form are limited (Loewen, 2005; Williams, 2001).

Previous literature has recognized the positive impact of incidental focus on form during learners’ interaction and negotiation of meaning on second language learning in face-to-face contexts (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001b, 2002; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Loewen, 2002; 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005; Loewen & Philp, 2006; Murphy, 2002; Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Williams, 1999, 2001). A limited number of studies have also examined the occurrence and the effects of incidental focus on form on learners in online settings (Loewen & Reissner, 2009; Rouhshad, 2014; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006).

Text-based online chat, a synchronous form of computer-mediated communication (SCMC), involving written oral-like conversation, could have potential for increasing the occurrence of focus on form. The conversation flow, i.e., turning-taking frequency and speed, in SCMC is slower than face-to-face interaction, and therefore learners have a longer thinking time to process the target language that they receive and produce. Additionally, in SCMC users can easily save and access previous messages to engage in self correction, a process that usually increases their language quality during authentic interactions. It is believed that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has the potential to be an intellectual amplifier for language teaching, learning, and research (Smith, 2003a, 2003b; Warschauer, 1997). However, Rouhshad (2014) findings showed that more negotiations for meaning and corrective feedback were found in face-to-face setting, which seems to diminish the effectiveness of SCMC interaction. Therefore, more studies are needed in this area.

Additionally, most of the studies on focus on form are descriptive in nature (e.g., Cross, 2002; Ellis, 2001; Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Gass, 1997; Schmidt, 1990, 2001). Only a few studies have *empirically* examined the effects of incidental focus on form on learners’ subsequent L2 learning in face-to-face (Loewen, 2002, 2005) and CMC contexts (Shekary & Tahririan, 2006). These studies have shown that collaborative tasks that encourage learners to produce language-related episodes (LRE) affect L2 development positively. LREs are mini-dialogues, in which learners, either explicitly or implicitly, ask or talk about language or question their own or/and interlocutors’ language use (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). However, little is known about how the proficiency level of language learners affects the frequency of LREs and LRE characteristics. In addition, even though studies of SLA have suggested that language proficiency is one of the most important individual variables that results in different learning outcomes (Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; Gass, Svetics, & Lemelin, 2003; Takahashi, 2005), research on the effect of learners’ proficiency levels on incidental focus on form is fairly limited (Lesser, 2004; Williams, 1999, 2001). Therefore, the understanding of the effect of incidental focus on form on L2 learning with respect to learners’ proficiency levels remains under-investigated. In addition, the aforementioned studies on incidental focus on form have investigated learners’ interactions either between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) of the target language or between different NNSs. The purpose of this study was to fill these gaps by comparing the impact of incidental focus on form on learners of different proficiency levels between the NS-NNS and NNS-NNS dyads in a SCMC environment.

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