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Form-Focused Attention in Communicative EFL Instruction: A Taxonomic and Distributional Analysis of Focus on Form Episodes in Iranian Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates how attention to linguistic form arises and is distributed across communicative English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Iran, examining the typological properties, categorical features, and frequency patterns of Focus on Form Episodes (FFEs).

Methods: Audio recordings of eight lessons conducted across four classroom settings were analyzed. FFEs were identified and coded along multiple dimensions, including source (preemptive vs. reactive), initiation (teacher- vs. student-initiated), linguistic focus (syntax, morphology, phonology, dictation), and four additional episode characteristics.

Results: A total of 328 FFEs were documented. Analysis revealed systematic distributional patterns across the coded dimensions that differed notably from those reported in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts.

Conclusions: These findings underscore the need for EFL-specific pedagogical frameworks that account for the distinct patterns of form-focused attention observed in structurally transitioning EFL environments. Implications for teacher training and classroom practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1 EFL Learning Contexts and Their Pedagogical Challenges

The pedagogical handling of linguistic structures in EFL settings presents recurrent challenges for language teachers, who have been variously encouraged and discouraged from providing explicit formal instruction as part of their classroom practice. In countries where English is encountered almost exclusively inside educational institutions, researchers and teachers continually seek ways to optimize second language (L2) approaches and foster more durable learning outcomes. Although L2 development shares certain features with first language (L1) acquisition, fundamental pedagogical differences compel methodologists, researchers, and practitioners to pursue ongoing refinement of instructional approaches (Loewen & Sato, 2018; Nassaji & Kartchava, 2014).

In Iran, English functions as a foreign language, taught within schools, universities, and private language institutes, while remaining largely absent from broader communicative contexts. EFL instruction faces challenges that set it apart from ESL and immersion environments. In ESL settings, English serves as the primary medium of daily communication, affording learners far greater exposure to the target language than is typical in EFL contexts. Understanding how learners develop oral and written proficiency in a foreign language is therefore important, and the two learning environments cannot be treated as equivalent. Accordingly, Focus on Form (FoF) is expected to exhibit distinctive typological and distributional properties within EFL classrooms (Spada & Lightbown, 2019; Loewen, 2020).

1.2 Study Purpose and Research Question

The present study examines the various manifestations of FoF that arise in intermediate and advanced communicative EFL classrooms at an Iranian private language institute. FoF is operationalized through the analysis of Focus on Form Episodes (FFEs), which are systematically classified, categorized, and analyzed in response to the following research question:

What typological features and distributional patterns characterize different FoF types in intermediate and advanced EFL classes in Iran?

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Background of Form-Focused Instruction

The theoretical origins of FoF lie in the longstanding tension between meaning-oriented and form-oriented approaches in language pedagogy. Meaning-focused methodologies emerged partly as a reaction against structurally driven methods such as Grammar-Translation and Audiolingual teaching; yet those methods' limitations in developing communicative competence reinforced the belief that learners acquire an L2 more effectively when instruction prioritizes meaning (Ellis, 2016; Nassaji, 2017). Krashen and Terrell's (1983) Natural Approach sought to build a methodology around meaningful communication, proposing that comprehensible input and communicative opportunity are sufficient for L2 development.

Similarly, the task-based framework advanced by Prabhu (1987) minimized attention to form, arguing that learners acquire the L2 more effectively through meaning-centered activities (Sato & Loewen, 2019). Over time, however, concerns emerged about the limitations of purely meaning-focused instruction: learners often failed to reach advanced proficiency, persistent errors remained unaddressed, and native-like productive ability proved elusive. These findings prompted renewed scholarly interest in the formal dimensions of L2 learning (Long & Robinson, 2013; Shintani, 2015). More recent empirical work continues to affirm that some attention to form benefits communicative competence even within principally meaning-oriented classrooms (Lee & Lyster, 2016; Kartchava & Ammar, 2014; Toth & Davin, 2016).

2.2 Conceptual Foundations of Focus on Form

Several converging perspectives have shaped FoF as a prominent area of inquiry. Long (1991) distinguished between focus on formS, which targets isolated grammatical structures in the traditional sense, and focus on form, which integrates attention to linguistic features within primarily meaning-based communicative activity (Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013; Gholami, 2024). The FFEs examined in this study were classified using frameworks derived from this distinction, adapted to account for phenomena characteristic of EFL rather than ESL settings (Gurzynski-Weiss & Revesz, 2012; Roothooft, 2014).

Yilmaz (2008) proposed a taxonomy of Language Related Episodes (LREs) comprising five dimensions: Focus (Lexical, Grammatical, Orthographic), Outcome (Correctly Solved, Unresolved, Incorrectly Solved), Verbalization (Production-based, Error-based), Collaboration

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(One-way, Two-way), and Source (Explicit, Implicit). More recent work has refined these distinctions further (Pouresmaeil & Gholami, 2019; Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014; Sato & Ballinger, 2016).

Loewen (2003) characterized FFEs along multiple dimensions: Type (Reactive, Student-initiated Query), Linguistic Focus (Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation), Source (Code, Message), Complexity (Simple, Complex), Explicitness (Implicit, Explicit), Response (Provide, Elicit), Uptake, and Successful Uptake. Subsequent research has validated and extended this framework (Lyster & Ranta, 2013; Zhang, Bowen, & Thomas, 2025). Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002) categorized FFEs as Reactive (Negotiation: conversational and didactic; Feedback: implicit and explicit) and Preemptive (Student-initiated and Teacher-initiated).

The analytical framework adopted here draws on Loewen (2003, 2005) and Ellis et al. (1999, 2002), characterizing each FFE according to Source (Reactive or Preemptive), Initiation (Teacher or Student), and Linguistic Focus (Syntax, Morphology, Phonology, or Dictation). Episodes are further described in terms of Duration (Short or Long), Simplicity (Simple or Hybrid), Language of interaction (L1 or L2), and Metalanguage use (Linguistic or Meta-linguistic). These dimensions are elaborated in the Method section. Recent scholarship has also foregrounded individual differences, dynamic interaction effects, and peer-mediated form attention as important considerations within this framework (Imran & Wyatt, 2024; Loewen & Sato, 2018; Toth & Davin, 2016).

3. Material and Mrthods

3.1 Participants

Data were collected at a private English language institute in Iran that employs communicative and meaning-centered pedagogical frameworks. Because the study focuses on FoF within interactive instructional settings, participants were drawn exclusively from this context.

The teaching staff comprised three male and one female instructor whose ages ranged from 25 to 47 years. All held bachelor's or master's degrees in TESL and had between 3 and 20 years of classroom experience. For the purposes of the study, they were asked to incorporate FoF techniques into their regular communicative lessons.

Student participants were between 17 and 25 years of age, including senior secondary school students and university undergraduates enrolled at either intermediate (Classes A and B) or

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advanced (Classes C and D) proficiency levels. Enrollment figures were as follows: Class A = 14, Class B = 15, Class C = 18, and Class D = 17. Their voluntary attendance reflected strong motivation to develop English proficiency through communicative instruction beyond what formal schooling could provide.

3.2 Data Collection

Audio recordings of eight classroom sessions — two per class — served as the primary data source. Each session lasted between 80 and 90 minutes, yielding approximately 600 minutes of recorded interaction in total. Recordings were made with a Sony professional voice recorder and organized using Sony Sound Organizer software. Transcription was completed within a few days of each session to preserve contextual accuracy and facilitate resolution of ambiguous segments.

Prior to data collection, instructors received guidance to: (a) introduce target linguistic forms through FoF techniques such as input enhancement or focused tasks; (b) respond to student errors concerning linguistic form either implicitly or explicitly; and (c) proactively address forms anticipated to be problematic, documenting these preemptive instances for analysis. Recording was suspended during any in-class examinations or quizzes.

3.3 Coding Framework and Procedures

Transcripts were coded by the lead researcher and independently verified by a second coder holding a PhD in TESL from an Iranian university. Inter-coder agreement reached 87%, consistent with reliability standards established in comparable studies (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2002; Loewen, 2003).

The coding scheme distinguished two primary FFE types. Preemptive FFEs involve spontaneous questions or information requests in the absence of an error, whereas Reactive FFEs follow an error and typically involve corrective treatment by the instructor. Both types can be teacher- or student-initiated (coded T and S respectively; P and R for Preemptive/Reactive). Linguistic focus was coded as Syntax (S), Morphology (M), Phonology (P), or Dictation (D). For example, RTS denotes a Reactive, Teacher-initiated FFE addressing a Syntactic error.

Four additional FFE characteristics were coded: Duration (Short = two turns or fewer; Long = more than two turns); Simplicity (Simple = one episode; Hybrid = two or more simultaneous episodes); Language (L1 or L2); and Metalanguage (Meta-linguistic = explicit grammatical terminology; Linguistic = illustrated through exemplification).

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4. Results

4.1 Overview of FFE Frequency and Distribution

A total of 328 FFEs were identified across the eight recorded sessions. Of these, 192 (58.5%) occurred in the intermediate classes (A and B), while the remaining 136 (41.5%) were recorded in the advanced classes (C and D). In terms of the primary categorical dimensions, 188 FFEs (57%) were Preemptive and 140 (43%) were Reactive; 219 (67%) were teacher-initiated and 109 (33%) student-initiated. Regarding linguistic focus, 71 FFEs addressed Syntax, 157 Morphology, 77 Phonology, and 23 Dictation.

Although intermediate classes generated the majority of FFEs overall, certain categories were more frequent at the advanced level, notably PTD (6 intermediate vs. 14 advanced), PSP (3 vs. 9), and PSM (proportionally higher at advanced level). Table 1 presents the full distributional breakdown organized by initiation type and proficiency level.

Table 1. FFE Category Distribution by Class and Proficiency Level

FFE Category	Class A (n=104)	Class B (n=88)	Intermediate Subtotal	Class C (n=66)	Class D (n=70)	Advanced Subtotal	Total (N=328)
	Intermediate Level			Advanced Level			
	Preemptive — Teacher-Initiated (PT)						
PTS	2	0	2	0	2	2	4
PTM	21	13	34	11	17	28	62
PTP	2	0	2	2	1	3	5
PTD	4	2	6	11	3	14	20
Preemptive — Student-Initiated (PS)							
PSS	2	1	3	1	0	1	4
PSM	35	14	49	16	13	29	78
PSP	2	1	3	6	3	9	12
PSD	1	0	1	1	1	2	3
Reactive — Teacher-Initiated (RT)							
RTS	9	33	42	1	10	11	53
RTM	9	6	15	0	1	1	16
RTP	12	18	30	17	12	29	59
RTD	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reactive — Student-Initiated (RS)							
RSS	4	0	4	0	6	6	10
RSM	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
RSP	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
RSD	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CLASS TOTAL	104	88	192	66	70		328

Note. P = Preemptive; R = Reactive; T = Teacher-initiated; S = Student-initiated; S = Syntax; M = Morphology; P = Phonology; D = Dictation. Intermediate Subtotal = Classes A + B; Advanced totals = Classes C + D.

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4.2 Linguistic Focus Across Initiation Types

Within student-initiated categories, Preemptive episodes (n = 97) were dominated by Morphology (78 instances, 80.5%), followed by Phonology (12, 12.3%), Syntax (4, 4%), and Dictation (3, 3%). By contrast, Reactive student-initiated episodes (n = 12) showed a markedly different profile: Syntax accounted for 83% of cases (10 instances), with Morphology and Phonology each appearing only once.

These contrasting patterns indicate that students spontaneously seek clarification most often regarding morphological features, whereas their self-correction behavior is predominantly triggered by syntactic errors. Table 2 summarizes linguistic focus frequencies across all four initiation types.

Table 2. Linguistic Focus Distribution by Initiation Type

Initiation Type	Syntax	Morphology	Phonology	Dictation	Total
Preemptive Teacher (PT)	4	62	5	20	91
Preemptive Student (PS)	4	78	12	3	97
Reactive Teacher (RT)	53	16	59	0	128
Reactive Student (RS)	10	1	1	0	12
TOTAL	71	157	77	23	328

4.3 Episode Characteristics: Duration, Simplicity, Language, and Metalanguage

Table 3 presents the distribution of FFEs by characteristic across all four classrooms. The vast majority of FFEs were Short (290/328), Simple (309/328), conducted in L2 (282/328), and framed in non-technical Linguistic terminology (322/328). These patterns suggest a consistent pedagogical preference for brief, focused, single-episode form treatment — an observation aligned with prior classroom-based research (Williams, 2001; Fernandez Dobao, 2012).

Table 3
FFE Characteristic Distribution by Class and Proficiency Level

	Characteristics			Duration		Simplicity		Language		Meta/Linguistic	
	Class	Session	FFEs	Long	Short	Hybrid	Simple	L1	L2	Meta	Lin
INTERMEDIATE	A	1	33	3	30	3	30	9	24	3	30
		2	71	13	58	4	67	10	61	0	71
		1+2	104	16	88	7	97	19	85	3	101
	B	1	55	6	49	3	52	3	52	2	53
		2	33	4	29	3	30	6	27	0	33
		1+2	88	10	78	6	82	9	79	2	86
DVANCED	C	1	39	2	37	0	39	4	35	0	39
		2	27	1	26	2	25	3	24	0	27

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	1+2	66	3	63	2	64	7	59	0	66
D	1	38	6	32	4	34	5	33	1	37
	2	32	3	29	0	32	6	26	0	32
	1+2	70	9	61	4	66	11	59	1	69
	+	328	38	290	19	309	46	282	6	322

Morphology was the most frequent focus in both Preemptive initiations and Reactive corrections overall, yet its predominance was especially marked within Preemptive FFEs. Syntax and Phonology, by contrast, appeared more frequently within Reactive episodes, pointing to divergent pedagogical treatment across linguistic domains. The scarcity of student self-correction (RSS, RSM, RSP, RSD) across all classes signals a potential area for future pedagogical intervention aimed at fostering learner autonomy (Benson, 2011; Saito & Lyster, 2012; Toth & Davin, 2016).

L1 use, while relatively uncommon, was more frequent in intermediate classes than advanced ones, consistent with lower target-language fluency at that level. Meta-linguistic terminology was extremely rare (6 instances total), reflecting teachers' general preference for demonstrating form through examples rather than grammatical labels (Elder & Ellis, 2009; Pouresmaeil & Vali, 2023). Across all four characteristics, frequencies for Long, Hybrid, L1, and Metalinguistic FFEs decreased as proficiency level increased — suggesting an inverse relationship between these feature types and learner proficiency (Lasagabaster & Garcia Mayo, 2014; Toth, 2011).

These findings are consistent with more recent research on form-focused attention in interactive contexts. Loewen and Sato (2018) underscore that the management of form attention in communicative classrooms is inherently dynamic and sensitive to proficiency-level variables, a pattern clearly reflected in the present data. Similarly, work by Toth and Davin (2016) suggests that shorter, less metalinguistically loaded episodes are characteristic of classrooms where meaning-based communication remains the primary instructional goal.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study examined the typology, categorical features, and distributional patterns of FFEs in a communicative Iranian EFL context. Three principal conclusions emerge from the analysis.

First, form-focused instruction — and FoF in particular — fulfills an important pedagogical function alongside meaning-focused and communicative approaches to language teaching (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). Second, FoF holds considerable promise in EFL contexts such as Iran, which are transitioning from structurally oriented methodologies toward more interactive and communicative approaches (Littlewood, 2014; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Third, notwithstanding parallels between ESL and EFL settings, the latter exhibit distinctive patterns regarding the type, initiation, and frequency of formal instruction,

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necessitating context-sensitive pedagogical adaptations (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Brown, 2016).

The prevalence of Preemptive, Morphology-focused, Short, Simple, and L2-medium FFEs suggests that communicative EFL teachers naturally gravitate toward minimally disruptive form treatment. Teacher education programs should build on these tendencies while also cultivating strategies for extending FFE depth where appropriate and for encouraging greater student self-correction. Recent frameworks for evidence-based pedagogy (Sato & Loewen, 2019; Li & Vuono, 2019; Loewen & Sato, 2018) offer productive directions for translating the present findings into concrete professional development activities that are responsive to both proficiency-level differences and the specific structural features of Iranian EFL classrooms.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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