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## **Tapping into Learners' Internal Salience: Insights from an Implicit Focus on Form Study**

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Recent research on implicit focus on form (FonF) has yielded insights that externally-created salience (by the teacher or researcher) does not guarantee learners' internally-derived salience. In an attempt to explore ways of promoting salience at both ends, an implicit FonF study was conducted in order to examine if, and how, externally-generated noticing may converge with learners' internally-generated noticing. The results revealed that increasing the salience of the target forms does not automatically result in learners' noticing of these forms. Instead, findings suggest that noticing is largely dependent on learner-internal factors such as their developmental readiness vis-à-vis the target form, as well as other individual variables including their L1 and prior language-learning experience. Based on the results of the study, a number of *a priori* factors that need to be considered in achieving successful focus on form are discussed in order to explore how implicit FonF techniques may ideally tap into learners' internal salience. Findings from the current study underscore the importance of respecting, and catering to learner-internal factors, such as their developmental readiness and their internal agenda for learning.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The recent Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature has witnessed a renewed interest in whether or not grammar should be taught in second language (L2) classes and how this could be incorporated. This stems from an effort to strike a balance between the structuralist approach which emphasizes accurate production of L2 forms, and the communicative approach which focuses on meaningful communication in real contexts. This attempt has culminated in what is now widely known as *focus on form*. A syllabus with a focus on form (FonF) can be broadly defined as attracting learners' attention to linguistic forms during communication, which can be achieved via a variety of pedagogical interventions, ranging from the most explicit metalinguistic rule explanation

to the more implicit technique of textual enhancement (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Many of these studies have employed a *proactive* approach by looking at the effects of enhanced input on “noticing” and acquisition (e.g., Alanen, 1995; Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughty, 1995; Leeman, Artegoitia, Fridman, & Doughty, 1995; White, 1998), while a number of more recent studies have taken a *reactive* approach by exploring the effects of a particular type of feedback, *recasts*, on acquisition (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Han, 2002a; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Philp, 2003). The findings, however, have been mixed. In particular, studies have shown that the linguistic forms targeted in various studies were not always noticed by learners, and that this was more so in cases where implicit FonF was used as the method of pedagogical intervention. Such findings suggest that there are a number of constraining factors at work in achieving a successful focus on form, and that there may be a mismatch between the forms that the teacher intends for the learners to notice (externally-generated noticing), and the forms that learners themselves notice (internally-derived salience). In light of the above, the current study attempts to investigate potential factors at work in achieving effective focus on form, in hopes of exploring ways to “match” learners’ externally-generated salience with their internally-derived salience.

## II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### 1. Focus on Form

Long (1991) made an important distinction between *focus on form* and *focus on forms*. *Focus on forms* refers to the traditional way of teaching linguistic elements, where language is treated primarily as an “object” to be studied. This differs starkly from *focus on form* where the central focus is on meaning. In his initial formulation, Long (1991) articulated that FonF overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons, and identified two essential characteristics: (1) attention to form occurs in lessons whose primary focus is on meaning, and (2) attention to form arises incidentally in response to a communicative need. The term *focus on form*, however, has since been stretched to accommodate more practical needs. In the reconceptualized definition, three characteristics are mentioned: (1) the need for learner engagement with meaning to precede attention to the code; (2) the importance of analyzing learners’ needs to identify the forms that require treatment; and (3) the need for the treatment to be brief and unobtrusive (Doughty & Williams, 1998). While (1) and (3) are in line with Long’s original definition, (2) is not, for it advocates a planned or proactive approach rather than an incidental attention to form (Ellis, 2001). The current study bears more relevance to proactive FonF, in which the linguistic feature is typically selected before the treatment.

Thus, the term *focus on form* as used in this paper will be the broader one formulated by Doughty and Williams (1998).

The essence of FonF can be seen as focusing learners' attention on certain features of the L2. While many researchers agree that some kind of attentional process is required for input to become intake, opinions vary as to the amount and type of attention necessary for SLA. Schmidt (1990, 1993, 2001), for example, has proposed that "noticing" at the level of awareness is necessary for converting input into intake and for subsequent L2 development. He contends that all noticing is conscious, and links it to one's subjective experience and the ordinary ability to articulate such experiences, operationalizing noticing as "availability for self report" at or immediately after the experience (Schmidt, 1990). On the other hand, Tomlin and Villa (1994) argue that although attention to input is necessary, awareness may be dissociated from attention, and that there can be learning *without* awareness. Their view conflicts with that of Schmidt, which advocates the role of conscious awareness in language learning. More recently, Schmidt (2001) discusses attention and its subjective correlate of noticing to awareness at a very low level of abstraction. Here, he equates noticing as a technical term equivalent to "apperception" (Gass, 1988, 1997), to Tomlin and Villa's (1994) "detection within selective attention," and Robinson's (1995) "detection plus rehearsal in short-term memory" (p. 296).<sup>1</sup> Despite the differing positions that different researchers take on the awareness issue, most researchers concur that attention to input plays a crucial role in L2 learning (e.g., Gass, 1988, 1997; Leow, 1998; Robinson, 1995; VanPatten, 1996, 2004).

According to Doughty and Williams (1998), the issue of whether conscious, focal attention is necessary is important because in has "an impact on the degree of overtness or obtrusiveness of the FonF technique" (p. 229). They maintain that learning can involve overt noticing (via explicit FonF) or it can involve more automatic access (via implicit FonF), and discuss various FonF techniques which they arrange on what they call an "explicitness continuum." Along this continuum, the ones placed on the *implicit* end include unobtrusive FonF techniques such as input flood and input enhancement (i.e., textual enhancement),<sup>2</sup> as well as reactive FonF techniques which typically comprise negative feedback provided to learners. On the other hand, those techniques on the *explicit* end employ overt and rule-based types of FonF such as consciousness-raising tasks and garden path techniques (see Doughty & Williams, 1998, for a detailed discussion of different FonF techniques). The current study concerns implicit (and proactive) focus on form, whereby an attempt is made to draw learners' attention to certain forms by increasing the perceptual salience of these forms.

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<sup>1</sup> The current study adopts Schmidt's (2001) most recent view of noticing.

<sup>2</sup> Since most input enhancement studies to date comprise textual enhancement studies, the terms input enhancement and textual enhancement are used interchangeably in this study.

## 2. Textual Enhancement as Focus on Form

Textual enhancement constitutes an implicit and proactive FonF technique which involves increasing the perceptual salience of the target form by using a combination of formatting techniques such as bolding, capitalizing and underlining of the target form(s). This technique is considered to be an *unobtrusive* means of drawing the learner's noticing of forms, and is accordingly placed at the *implicit* end of the "explicitness continuum."

One of the early textual enhancement studies was conducted by Jourdenais et al. (1995) in which students in the Enhanced Group received a sample text with all the Spanish preterit and imperfect forms enhanced, whereas students in the Comparison Group received the same text without any enhancement. Data were collected through a picture-based writing task where learners were asked to supply think-aloud reports of their language behavior while writing the story. Results showed that the Enhanced Group noticed and produced more target forms, suggesting that enhancing the forms in the input increased their likelihood of being noticed. Positive results were also reported by Leeman et al. (1995) who examined the effects of FonF on the learning of Spanish preterit and imperfect forms on two types of content-based instruction: (a) a communicative class that focused on meaning, and (b) a content-based FonF class which received enhanced input as well as corrective feedback on the target forms. The results showed that the FonF Group significantly improved accuracy and supplience of the target forms, indicating that a content-based class with FonF instruction is more effective than a purely communicative class. In their conclusions, Leeman et al. openly attribute the gains for instruction to enhanced learner noticing.

The positive results of the foregoing studies notwithstanding, there have also been cases where the attempted FonF did not seem to promote the noticeability of the target forms. Targeting francophone learners, White (1998) conducted a study where she textually enhanced the target form—English third person singular possessive determiners. Contrary to White's hypothesis, results revealed that the enhanced input did not play a significant role. Meager benefits were also reported by Alanen (1995) whose study targeted the locative suffix and the consonant alternation of semi-artificial Finnish on English speakers. Alanen reports that the enhancement seemed to have a facilitating effect on the learners' recall and use of the locative suffixes, but not on consonant alternations. Thus, these findings indicate that externally increasing the salience of the target forms does not always result in learners' noticing of these forms, and that there may be other unforeseen factors at work in promoting learner noticing. One important factor seems to be the target linguistic form in question. The forms targeted in Jourdenais et al. (1995) and Leeman et al. (1995) were Spanish preterit and imperfect verb forms, which are both frequent and semantically important, and therefore more meaningful than the possessive determiners targeted in

White's (1998) study. Similarly, in Alanen's (1995) study, moderate gains in accuracy were observed for the *locative suffix* which has a "more or less clearly definable semantic content," but not for the *consonant alternation*, which is "semantically empty" (p. 269). These results suggest that learners may be more prone to notice some linguistic features than others, and that forms with more semantic value are more likely to be noticed than those with less semantic values (also see Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; VanPatten, 1996, 2004).

### 3. Learner Readiness

As noted earlier, the choice of the target form seems to play a crucial role in achieving successful focus on form. Additionally, there is another important factor which necessarily goes hand-in-hand with the target form—the issue of learner readiness. Following Pienemann's (1985, 1989) initial claim that the learnability of a linguistic structure is dependent on the learner's readiness to acquire the form at a particular point in time, several researchers (e.g., Han, 2002b; Izumi, 2002; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Williams & Evans, 1998) have argued that learners are more likely to notice forms that they are ready to learn and internalize, and that aiming at target forms which are too advanced for them may not be effective. The notion of learner readiness is an important issue for it puts an emphasis on the *internal, cognitive state* of the learner, rather than the *external* factors such as the type or presentation of the input he/she is exposed to. This inevitably invokes the Corder's (1967) notion of input versus intake. Defining intake as that subset of input which gets *internalized* by the learner, Corder argues that "it is the learner who controls the external stimuli . . . or more properly, his intake" (p. 165). Hence, for him, intake is likely to be determined by the characteristics of the learner-internal factors, and not by those of the syllabus (i.e., external factors). Arguing that there is an innate *learner-generated sequence*, which he equates with the learner's *built-in syllabus*, Corder contends that the learner-generated sequence may be more important than the instructor-generated sequence or the external syllabus. Similarly, more than 30 years later, Long and Robinson (1998) also emphasize that a more important sense of focus on form than the teacher's external behavior is the learner's *internal mental state*. It then follows that the effectiveness of FonF essentially depends on successfully striking a match between the learners' built-in or internal syllabus and the teacher's external behavior, which gives rise to the question of whether this match could be achieved, and if so, how one may facilitate the "matching" process.

### 4. External versus Internal Salience

The notion of learner's built-in syllabus versus the external syllabus is very much in line with the notion of learner's internal and external salience, which was first introduced by

Sharwood Smith (1991). In his discussion of input enhancement and consciousness-raising, Sharwood Smith argued that what is made salient by the teacher may not be perceived as salient by the learners since externally-created enhancement does not guarantee learners' internal salience. This implies that FonF techniques such as textual enhancement would be most effective when the externally-created enhancement successfully taps into the learner's internally-generated enhancement. Although the notion of learner's internal salience has not been explicitly formulated, it seems to be inherently related to learner readiness, which works vis-a-vis the target form. Sharwood Smith (1999) has further distinguished internally-generated salience (or "enhancement" in his terms) into *subconscious* and *conscious* salience. In this framework, the learner's acquisition mechanisms locate and fix on certain features of the L2, following some principles not consciously dictated by the learner (e.g., the learner may be naturally sensitive or attracted to high frequent words or unusual sounding words); or the learner consciously and deliberately locates and focuses on L2 features (e.g., learners may decide to memorize a list of vocabulary items devoted to cooking). Although the notion of learners' internally-generated salience is certainly very attractive and of great importance in L2 pedagogy, Sharwood Smith has not yet articulated in detail (to the best of my knowledge) how this internal salience could be achieved. However, its importance and significance has been implicated by various L2 researchers (e.g., Ellis, 2001; Gass, Svetics, & Lemelin, 2003; Han, 2002b; Long & Robison, 1998), and some recent studies have begun to directly explore the issue (see Park & Han, 2007).

## 5. Research Questions

To recapitulate the foregoing review, the current study is based on the premise that the FonF that the teacher aims to achieve (i.e., externally-generated) should ideally facilitate the unfolding of the learner's internal syllabus (i.e., internally-derived). Given that there are various factors at play in achieving a "match" between the two ends, and the current study is an exploratory attempt to investigate how one may facilitate the matching process and what factors are involved in the process. To this end, the following two research questions were posed:

- 1) Are learners in the Input Enhancement Group (IE Group) more prone to notice the target linguistic form than learners in the Comparison Group (CP Group) after the FonF intervention?
- 2) Do learners in the CP Group also notice the target form? If so, what induces noticing on the part of the CP Group?

The first research question addresses the effect of learners' externally-generated noticing of the target forms by examining the differences between the IE Group and the CP Group.

The second question investigates learners' internally-generated noticing, by focusing on the noticing behavior of the CP Group.

### III. METHOD

#### 1. Participants

The participants for the study comprised 24 students enrolled in three high-intermediate ESL classes in New York City. Their ages ranged from 18 to 40, with various first language (L1) backgrounds including Hungarian, Korean, Malayalam, Chinese, Spanish, Thai, Russian, Polish, French, and Hebrew. The three classes were selected because they were deemed to be at the same proficiency level.<sup>3</sup> A week before the treatment, a pretest consisting of 20 cloze items targeting different grammatical forms was administered to ensure that these students were more or less at the same proficiency level.

#### 2. Target Form

Since the FonF technique employed in the current study involved textual enhancement, which is an implicit FonF technique, it was deemed important to choose a target form that had some semantic value. This decision was motivated by previous research findings (e.g., Alanen, 1995; Doughty & Williams, 1998; White, 1998) which suggested that learners tend to notice words (or forms) with more semantic or communicative value in them. Additionally, since the purpose of the study was not to teach a new form, but to see the effects of an implicit type of FonF, it was decided that the target form should not be entirely new, but a form which students have partial knowledge of. Prior to the treatment, the researcher visited each class at least three times in order to observe the students' oral and written productions. After carefully reviewing the students' written productions from previous lessons as well as consulting with their teachers, "backshifting of the reported speech" was chosen as the target form. In English, the tense in the reported clauses is controlled by the tense in the reporting clause. For example, when the reporting verb is in the past tense, the verb in the reported clause should backshift:

Direct quotation: *"I left the party at 9 p.m. on Saturday."*

Backshifting: *He said that he had left the party at 9 p.m. on Saturday.*

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<sup>3</sup> Ensuring that learners are at similar proficiency levels would increase the likelihood of their being at a similar stage in their internal syllabus.

Direct quotation: “*I was shopping at the mall.*”

Backshifting: *She said that she had been shopping at the mall.*

Students’ written productions from previous lessons as well as the results from the pretest revealed that most of the participants had very little knowledge of this form, as seen in sample sentences that students produced on the pretest which are provided below:

*\*Peggy told me that she will be in town the following week.*

*\*She said that she has to attend an important meeting the next day.*

It should be noted that since the study was conducted in intact classrooms, the researcher did not have the option of disregarding individual students who failed to demonstrate minimal knowledge of (i.e., demonstrate readiness for) the target form. While it would be desirable to conduct the study where all the students had a uniform, emerging knowledge of the target form, this was quite ambitious and unrealistic given the heterogeneous nature of students in a real language classroom. As will be addressed shortly, this drawback (i.e., a fuzzy picture of the learners’ knowledge of the target form) prompted the researcher to incorporate two similar tasks in the study design where the first task served more as a pretest aiming at gauging the learners’ initial knowledge of the target form.

### 3. Tasks and Instruments

As Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) noted, “the characteristics of a task are often such that a particular structure is likely to arise naturally” (p. 132). Therefore, the task and the target form often go hand-in-hand. For the purpose of this study, it was deemed important to design the task such that the task itself would in some natural way encourage the use of the target form, but not force it in any obligatory manner, thereby minimizing task essentialness (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993). This was an attempt to ensure that the CP Group would not be inadvertently primed by task effects. Two *different* cartoon strips (one for each task; see Appendices A & B) were taken from ‘It’s a Big World, Charlie Brown’ by C. Schulz. Students, in dyads, had to collaborate and reconstruct the story in writing. It was anticipated that the task of rewriting the story would naturally encourage the learners to use the reported speech. Both comic strips (for Tasks 1 & 2) involved the characters talking about past events, with each comic strip consisting of eight frames with six usages of verbs in the past form, which could be readily “backshifted” into the past perfect or the past perfect progressive, when reformulated into the reported speech.

In the two tasks, both groups of learners were given a reading passage. The IE Group received the passage with the target forms enhanced (via means of bolding and

underlining; see Appendix C), whereas the CP Group received the same text with no enhancement (see Appendix D). This reading text served as a means to implicitly direct the learners attention to the target form (i.e., implicit focus on form for the IE Group) in order to examine if the IE Group does in fact attempt and use more instances of the target form in Task 2, after being exposed to enhanced input. The text was carefully designed to avoid any form of input flood, so as to preclude any potential priming effect for the CP Group.

#### 4. Procedure

As noted previously, the study was conducted in three intact classrooms by the researcher who had visited each class at least three times prior to the treatment. Thus, she was familiar with the students and the environment of each class. On the day of the treatment, the regular teacher was not present, and the researcher conducted the class instead. Students ( $N=24$ )<sup>4</sup> were paired up into 12 dyads and divided into two groups: the IE Group (6 dyads), and the CP Group (6 dyads). Students in both groups went through the exact same procedure. The only difference was in the reading passage that they received (i.e., enhanced vs. unenhanced) in-between the two tasks. Table 1 chronologically presents the procedure.

**TABLE 1**  
**Procedure**

Procedure	Description
Task 1 (35 mins.)	Each dyad was given a cartoon strip (see Appendix A), and the comprehension of the material was checked as a class. <sup>5</sup> Each dyad was then given a piece of paper, and asked to collaborate and write a story about what happened in the cartoon. They were asked to start with story with the words "One day..." which were written on the chalkboard. Students were also asked to think aloud with each other, and a tape-recorder was used to record the interactive think-aloud (this was a way to gauge their online thought processes, as discussed in the next section). The written productions were collected as soon as the students were done with the task.
Reading passage (15 mins.)	Students in the IE Group read a passage with target forms enhanced. Students in the CP Group read the same passage without any enhancement (see Appendices C & D).
Task 2 (35 mins.)	This was the same as Task 1, except this time a different cartoon strip (see Appendix B) was given to the students.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that each of the three classes had different number of students, and that the exact same procedure had been conducted in each class. The total number of students from the three classes added up to 24, resulting in 12 dyads altogether.

<sup>5</sup> This was an attempt to minimize learners' need to focus on the meaning in order to ensure that they would have most of their attentional resources available to focus on form.

Retrospective questionnaire (10 mins.)	Each student had to fill out a retrospective questionnaire (see Appendix E).
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## 5. Measures of 'Noticing' and the *Interactive* Think-aloud

Noticing was operationalized as learners' externalized observation of, or comments on features of L2 forms (cf. Bowles, 2003). Given the complexity inherent in the construct of noticing (see Izumi, 2002), the current study implemented a triangulation of measures which yielded in the following corpus of data: (1) students' written output of the cartoon stories; (2) the concurrent think-aloud protocols (i.e., two recordings of protocol data per dyad from Task 1 and Task 2, respectively); and (3) the retrospective questionnaires collected from each student.

With regard to the think-aloud protocol used in the study, the method incorporated here is quite different from previous studies. Precious studies that have incorporated the use of think-aloud protocols involved *individual* learner thinking aloud with the help of the researcher who would prompt the learner to verbalize his/her thoughts every 3 minutes (e.g., Alanen, 1995; Jourdenais et al., 1995). Such studies were conducted in laboratory settings where the researcher met with the student one-on-one. However, since this study was conducted in a classroom setting, such prompting was deemed unnatural and even obtrusive as the researcher had to be physically close to the student, putting pressure on each one to verbalize his/her thoughts. Also, taking into consideration findings from previous descriptive studies which found that FonF arises naturally during learner-to-learner interactions (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Williams, 2001), an *interactive* (as opposed to *individual*, which is typically the case with this type of instrument) protocol was deemed more appropriate for this study.

## 6. Data Analysis

The written outputs were examined for the frequency and accuracy of the target form. The frequency of occurrence of the target form (i.e., tokens) was tallied, and the number of accurate usage was divided by the total number of tokens to produce an accuracy percentage. Data from the think-aloud protocols were first transcribed, and then examined for the frequency of the target form. In addition, transcriptions from the think-alouds were identified for any language-related episodes (LREs). Following Swain and Lapkin (1995, 2001), an LRE was defined as any segment of the protocol in which the learners talked about language they were producing, questioned their language use, or corrected their

language production. The following transcription illustrates a typical LRE extracted from the database:

- S1: *Because Lucy loves Chuck. Right?*
- S2: *Misses, misses Chuck.*
- S1: *Lucy...*
- S2: *Misses...*
- S1: *Chuck.*
- S2: *No. Missed. Missed.*
- S1: *Missed?*
- S2: *Um. Simple past.*
- S1: *Simple past. Missed Chuck. O.K.*

Learners' responses to the retrospective questionnaires were analyzed specifically to see if they could provide an example of the enhanced input, and for any other insights that may help supplement/verify the other two types of data.

## IV. RESULTS

### 1. Written Output Data

The written outputs from both tasks were analyzed to compare the number of tokens produced by each group. As shown in Table 2, the results revealed that both groups sparingly used the target form in their written output.

**TABLE 2**  
**Use of Target Form (TF) in the Written Output**

	IE Group		CP Group	
	Task 1	Task 2	Task 1	Task 2
Total use of TF	4	3	7	6
Accurate use of TF	1	2	4	4
Accuracy percentage	25%	66%	57%	66%

A cursory look at the table indicates that students in the IE Group produced the target forms with more accuracy (from 25% to 66%) after the exposure to enhanced input. However, the number of tokens is far too small to be interpreted in any reliable manner. Given the small number of tokens, it becomes necessary to examine the differences across the dyads, as summarized in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**Use of Target Form in the Written Output Across Dyads**

Dyad	IE Group		Dyad	CP Group	
	Task 1	Task 2		Task 1	Task 2
IE-1	1	2	CP-1	3	2
IE-2	2	1	CP-2	1	1
IE-3	0	0	CP-3	1	0
IE-4	1	0	CP-4	2	3
IE-5	0	0	CP-5	0	0
IE-6	0	0	CP-6	0	0
Total	4	3	Total	7	6

In the IE Group, the target form was produced by three different dyads (4 tokens) in Task 1. In Task 2, the target form was produced by two dyads (3 tokens) who also produced them in Task 1. The CP Group produced slightly higher number of tokens in both tasks. Four dyads produced the target form in Task 1, and three dyads, in Task 2. In line with the IE Group, those dyads that produced the target form in Task 2 were the ones that also attempted to produce the form in Task 1.

The data from the written output show that both groups sparingly used the target form, and that those learners who produced the target form in Task 2 were the very ones that also produced the form in Task 1 (albeit inaccurately most of the time; see Table 2). Even though the written output data provide some insight on learners' productive use of the target form, this typed of data failed to provide insights into the internal cognitive processes that they may have gone through while producing the written output. Taking into account that whatever has been noticed should be available for verbalization during or immediately after the experience (Schmidt, 1990), the think-aloud protocol was analyzed to supplement the written output data.

## 2. Think-aloud Protocol Data

The think-aloud reports were transcribed and subsequently analyzed by tallying the frequency of occurrences of the target form. The results revealed that students verbalized the target form more in the think-aloud than in their written output. As seen in Table 4, the IE Group verbalized the target forms noticeably more in Task 1, than in Task 2. On the other hand, the CP Group verbalized comparable number of tokens in both tasks.

Comparing the protocol with the written output data, an interesting observation can be made. It appears that the IE Group verbalized the target form strikingly more in Task 1 (14 tokens), but actually used it in their written output just 4 times, getting it wrong most of the time (25% accuracy [see Table 2]). However, in Task 2, after the exposure to enhanced forms, students in the same group verbalized the target form only 5 times, out of which 3

instances were actually used in their written output, with 66% accuracy. Cross-referencing the written output with the protocol data indicated that learners in the IE Group may have experimented with the target form more freely before the FonF intervention, and that they may have become more cautious of using the target form after the exposure to enhanced input. Once again, it is important to examine the results across the dyads in order to see which dyad produced the target form and under which task. Table 5 displays the results across the dyads in the two groups:

**TABLE 4**  
**Use of Target Form in Think-aloud Protocol & Written Output Data**

	IE Group		CP Group	
	Task 1	Task 2	Task 1	Task 2
Total use of TF in the think-aloud	14	5	9	8
Actual use of TF in the written output	1	2	4	4
Accuracy percentage of TF usage in the written output (from Table 2)	25%	66%	57%	66%

**TABLE 5**  
**Use of Target Form in Think-aloud Protocol & Written Output Data**

Dyad	Input Enhancement Group				Dyad	Comparison Group			
	Task 1		Task 2			Task 1		Task 2	
	Protocol	Written Output	Protocol	Written Output		Protocol	Written Output	Protocol	Written Output
IE-1	3	1	4	2	CP-1	4	3	3	2
IE-2	5	2	1	1	CP-2	1	1	1	1
IE-3	1	0	0	0	CP-3	1	1	0	0
IE-4	3	1	0	0	CP-4	2	2	3	3
IE-5	0	0	0	0	CP-5	1	0	1	0
IE-6	2	0	0	0	CP-6	1	0	0	0
Total	14	4	5	3	Total	9	7	7	6

It is important to note that although dyad “IE-2” did not produce the target form in the written output, they *did* verbalize the form in both Tasks 1 & 2, as indicated by the think-aloud data. Hence, it appears that the written output provided only a partial picture of what the learners focused on while completing the task. From the protocol data, it was revealed that learners who produced the target form in Task 2 were the very ones that also verbalized the target form in Task 1. Assuming that learners who attempted to verbalize the target form in Task 1 were partially “ready” for the form, one can infer that only those learners who were ready were able to notice the forms, and subsequently produced them in Task 2.

### 3. Retrospective Questionnaires

The retrospective questionnaires distributed to the IE Group (see Appendix E) asked if the learners were actually aware of the presence of enhanced input, and if they could recall or provide examples of the enhanced input in the reading texts. All of the learners in the IE Group reported that they had noticed some kind of enhancement in the reading given in-between Tasks 1 & 2. However, only three students were able to provide examples of the enhanced forms. In other words, even though all students in the IE Group reported noticing that some parts of the text were enhanced, the majority could not describe nor give examples of exactly what was enhanced. Out of the three learners who provided examples of enhanced input, only *two* learners provided *accurate* examples of the target form – i.e., backshifting in the reported speech. The remaining one learner partially recalled that the enhancement had to do with the past perfect tense, and provided sample sentences containing the past perfect tense. Of note is the fact that all three students attempted to use the form in Task 1, even before the exposure to enhanced input. The fact that these learners experimented with the target form before the FonF intervention may be an indication that they had partial knowledge of the form.

### 4. Summary of Results

At this point, it is pertinent to go back to the research questions and summarize the results. The first research question asked if the IE Group would be more prone to notice the target form than the CP Group after being primed with enhanced input. The results showed no striking differences between the IE Group and the CP Group, suggesting that textual enhancement had a meager role to play in promoting learner noticing. Additionally, it was found that learners in the IE Group who verbalized and/or produced the form in their written output in Task 1 were the ones that demonstrated noticing of the target form by actually providing examples of the enhanced input. In other words, a subset of those students who verbalized the forms in their think-aloud protocols in Task 1 also produced them in Task 2 and provided examples of the enhanced input in their retrospective reports. Assuming that Task 1 served as an indicator of the learner's readiness vis-à-vis the target form, the results confirm that learners who noticed the enhanced forms were those who were ready for the target form (as gauged by their productions in Task 1).

The second research question sought to examine the factors which may contribute in inducing noticing on the part of the CP Group. The results from the written output showed that the CP Group also produced the target form in the written output – 7 tokens in Task 1, and 6 tokens in Task 2. In the think-aloud protocol, the CP Group verbalized the target form 9 times in Task 1, and 8 times in Task 2. Hence, this group produced comparable

tokens of the target form in both tasks. Once again, mirroring the results from the IE Group, those learners in the CP Group who produced the target form in Task 2 were the ones that also experimented with it in Task 1 (by verbalizing and/or produced the target form in the written output). The results therefore suggest that learners who were ready (as gauged by their verbalization in Task 1) noticed and used the target form even without the help of enhanced input.

Since the CP Group did not receive any enhancement, the retrospective questionnaire that they completed did not address the enhanced forms. However, one of the questions read: "Did you have a particular pattern/expression that you tried to use in writing the cartoon story? If so, could you provide an example?" Interestingly, a student from "CP-1" dyad answered: "*Yes, the relation between direct/indirect propositions. Example: He said that he had gone to his country.*" Similarly, his partner also responded: "*We used past tense in both exercises. I am not sure if it was in the right way, like 'Charlie Brown was talking...'*" These responses confirm that some students in the CP Group seemed to have "tuned in" to the target form, even though the form had *not* been enhanced in any way. Thus, the results show that learners in the CP group also noticed the target form, indicating that noticing took place even *without* the help of enhanced input. It is worth noting that one dyad from the CP Group demonstrated noticing on all three measures, providing unambiguous evidence that they had noticed the target form on their own, without any help of externally-created salience.

## V. DISCUSSION

As reported, the results revealed that the textual enhancement did not play a significant role in promoting learners' noticing of the target form. Instead, findings suggest that noticing is largely driven by individual learner's internal factors rather than the externally-engineered noticing of target form. This was evinced by the fact that learners in the CP Group who were deemed "ready" did not need any externally-created enhancement to draw their attention to the target form.

In view of the findings of the study, the next section will discuss some important issues that surfaced while analyzing and interpreting the results, focusing on a number of pertinent factors that need to be addressed when employing an implicit type of focus on form.

### 1. Learner Readiness and the Target Form

The results from the first research question revealed that the IE Group behaved similarly to the CP Group, indicating that the externally-created salience of the target forms did not

promote learners' noticing of these forms. This may be partly attributed to the fact that textual enhancement is a relatively *implicit* FonF technique. In addition, and more importantly, findings suggest that learner noticing is largely dependent on their readiness to process the form, which cannot be easily manipulated by external intervention. Thus, it appears that the most influential factor (and possibly a prerequisite) for successful FonF may be the learner's readiness vis-à-vis the target form.

The importance of learner readiness is widely acknowledged in the L2 literature insofar as the choice of target form is concerned (e.g., Mackey & Philp, 1998; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; Williams & Evans, 1998). According to Williams and Evans (1998), learner readiness is a crucial factor in achieving successful focus on form. They report that learners who made the greatest gains with FonF were those who already had partial mastery of the form, and that it would be useful to examine *a priori* learner's readiness with regard to the target form. However, gauging the learner's readiness is by no means an easy or a simple task. This is especially so in cases where no documentation of the developmental sequence of the target form is available. In the current study, even though a pretest was given, no systematic test was conducted to examine how much knowledge the learners had of the target form. In fact, since research findings have reportedly noted that highly-frequent exposure to a target form may increase its salience (Doughty & Williams, 1998), a pretest specifically targeting the predetermined form was avoided for the fear of inadvertently priming the learners with the possibility of input flood.<sup>6</sup> Coincidentally, Task 1 served as a relatively reliable indicator of gauging learners' readiness, and it was found that those learners who verbalized the target forms in Task 1 were the very ones who managed to notice the enhanced input during the FonF intervention, subsequently produced it in their output in Task 2.

There was also modest evidence that learners who are ready to process the target form can (and will) look for relevant data from any given input even without the help of FonF intervention. As results from the second research question revealed, such "unprompted noticing" of the target form *did* take place in the CP Group. One particular dyad ("CP-1") produced the target form in both of their written outputs (from Tasks 1 & 2), and both learners demonstrated noticing of the target form in their retrospective reports, even though they did not receive any enhanced input. This observation is in line with Williams and Evans (1998) who reported that some of their subjects went from low or middle scores to high ones, even in the *comparison* group. Thus, learners who are ready tend to seek out relevant input on their own, even without the help of any pedagogical intervention, culminating in the type of focus on form which ideally taps into their internally-derived salience. It appears that above everything else, targeting a form which echoes with learner

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that input flood constitutes a form of input enhancement.

readiness plays a crucial role in achieving a successful focus on form.

## 2. Learners' Focal Attention, the Target Form, and the FonF Method

The target form in this study was the backshifting of the reported speech. However, a close look at the results from the retrospective questionnaires indicated that some students in the IE Group had thought that the enhanced forms constituted the *past perfect form*. Some credit needs to be given for this response since all of the enhanced input had the past perfect forms embedded in them, with the exception of one past perfect progressive form. This imposed a closer examination of the data with regard to some students' use of the past perfect. A re-examination of the think-aloud indicated that some students may have been more inclined to use the past perfect, after being exposed to enhanced input. The following segment follows up on one student's use of the *past perfect*. He (from dyad "IE-6") seemed to have become more tuned in to the perfect tense in Task 2. It is worth noting that this kind of episode targeting the past perfect did not occur in Task 1, but exclusively in Task 2 (after the exposure to enhanced input). The following episodes, which took place while completing Task 2, are listed in the order of occurrence.

### Episode 1

A: *OK. He had a big problem because he didn't have any money or he doesn't have any money?*

B: *He didn't.*

A: *He didn't. It's past. It's good.*

B: *He hadn't have.*

A: *He didn't. He didn't have is good. Right?*

B: *Why not he hadn't had?*

### Episode 2

A: *She shows him a pair of gloves she already bought.*

B: *That she had, had already bought.*

A: *She already bought.*

### Episode 3

A: *At the same time, Peggy bought herself a pair of gloves.*

B: *No, no. At the same time, Peggy has been shopping in the same store.*

A: *No, we cannot say "has been shopping" because you wrote about the story, and they met right now. "I had been shopping." Does it mean "I make shopping, I did and I am doing now" too?*

A: Yes. Peggy has been shopping.

B: You cannot say “I have been shopping.”

Despite the fact that some of B’s attempts may not have been quite appropriate, it is evident that he did try to experiment with the past perfect in Task 2, which he did not try in Task 1. This prompted the researcher to check B’s questionnaire response to see if he was able to provide some examples of the enhanced input. It turned out that he did provide two examples of the enhanced input: one in the form of the past perfect, and the other in the form of the simple past. The exact question asked along with B’s response are reproduced below:

Question: “Do you remember what kinds of expressions were emphasized? Could provide an example?”

Response: “She had quit the job.”  
“She made \$40,000.”

Even though the forms he used to express the content did not perfectly mirror the enhanced input, he provided one of the examples in the *past perfect* form (“She had quit the job”), partly substantiating that he focused more on the past perfect in Task 2 after the FonF intervention. This could be attributed to a number of factors. One possibility could be that he may have been ready for the past perfect form, rather than the target form. Another possibility is that he may have *partially noticed* the enhanced input. Additionally, one interesting observation can be made with regard to the example he provided. It turned out that B actually remembered and wrote the *exact content* of the enhanced input,<sup>7</sup> indicating that he *did* attend to it closely. It seems that he was focusing more on the *content* of the enhanced forms rather than the *form*, and therefore, was successfully able to recall the exact content of the enhanced input, as provided in the original text.

The foregoing observation raises two related issues. Firstly, it demonstrates that learners do indeed seem to process input for meaning before they process it for form. This lends support to VanPatten’s (1996, 2004) Primacy of Meaning principle, which states that human beings, with limited attentional constraints, cannot process input for meaning and form at the same time, and tend to process the input for meaning before processing it for form. Secondly, a related issue regarding learners’ attentional constraints arises. It seems that in order for the enhancement to be maximally useful, the target form embedded in the text needs to be *minimally enhanced* for it to effectively capture the learner’s focal

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<sup>7</sup> The enhanced text read as follows: Gloria said that she had quit her last job; She also said that she had made \$40,000 at her last job (see Appendix C).

attention. In the current study, the target form involved the use of the reported speech. It so happened that the structure of the reported speech is rather long, comprising a complete clause with a subject and a verb as in “She **said that she had been late** to work.” As a result, the enhanced part constituted a substantive part of the sentence, becoming too long to effectively capture the learner’s focal attention. In a similar vein, but working with oral data, Philp (2003) points out that because of the limited attentional capacity of the learner, the length of a recast may affect his/her noticing, and suggests that shorter recasts may be more accurately recalled than longer ones. Given the limited attentional capacity of the students and their natural tendency to process the input for meaning, it is perhaps not surprising that B concentrated more on the *content* of the enhanced forms, especially since the enhanced portion in this case comprised the *most informative* and *meaningful* part of the sentence.

In summary, it appears that the target form could have been perceived as more salient by the learners had the enhancement *not* involved such a substantive portion of a sentence. Accordingly, a linguistic focus which comprises a whole clause does not seem to be the best candidate for textual enhancement. This observation is potentially useful in that it underscores the need for FonF studies to take the learner’s limited attentional capacity into consideration in choosing the target form vis-à-vis the FonF technique. As Williams and Evans (1998) aptly point out, “not all forms are equal in terms of the effectiveness of FonF activities” (p. 151). The current findings suggest that textual enhancement may be better suited for linguistic form(s) which can be highlighted minimally, and that any textual manipulation should be done in a succinct manner, so as to increase the likelihood of capturing the learner’s focal attention.

### 3. Learner Variables

Even though the current study had a predetermined linguistic target that the researcher intended for the learners to notice, the task employed herein allowed learners to freely attend to different aspects of the L2. Owing partly to the open-ended nature of the task, each student exhibited a lot of variability in what he/she focused on. In fact, it was revealed that students often focused on some aspect of the L2 driven by their own internal, psycholinguistic agenda as well as other individual factors pertaining to their backgrounds such as their L1, L2-training experience, as well as the different types of world knowledge they brought with them.

In analyzing the think-aloud data, it was found that different learners experimented with different forms, and formulated different hypotheses vis-à-vis different linguistic forms. Some similar patterns were observed for students from the same L1 background. For example, among the Spanish speakers and Chinese speakers, many instances of LREs

involving third person singular possessive determiners (*his/her*) were observed. Most of such episodes were very brief since many of the speakers were able to self-correct themselves as shown in the following:

e.g.) *Yeah, Charlie went to a park, and met her, his friend, with her, his dog.*

It appeared that L1-Chinese speakers, who use the same phonetic code for the possessive determiner, may have encountered difficulty with these determiners. This type of LREs targeting the third person singular determiner was observed mostly in the think-alouds from dyads with an L1-Chinese speaker, but not with other L1 speakers, suggesting that the learner's existing knowledge of the L1 can affect their noticing of certain forms (also see Park & Han, 2007).

It also appeared that learner noticing was influenced by their L2-learning experience. In searching for the past participle of "throw," an L1-Chinese speaker verbalized in the think aloud: "*Throw, throw, thrown,*" which seemed to be an artifact of "transfer of training" (Han & Selinker, 1999). The researcher had an opportunity to get some debriefing from the student after the treatment period, in which the student confirmed that he had in fact memorized most verb forms in that order (i.e., present, past, past participle). It seemed that in searching for the right form of the verb, he had recalled the verb forms in the manner that he had learned them.

In summary, an analysis of the think-aloud protocol revealed that different learners focused on different aspects of the L2, driven not only by their internal agenda, but also by their prior knowledge such as their L1, their educational and training backgrounds, as well as individual predilection. All of the aforementioned factors (and possibly many others) seem to work in tandem, resulting in divergent noticing of both target and *nontarget* forms. Such divergent noticing seems to affect the effectiveness of (or lack thereof) proactive focus on form, whose objective is to induce the learners to focus on specific aspects of the L2. Even though it may be unrealistic to control for all of these individual variables, future studies should strive to control for learners' L1 and/or L2-learning backgrounds, as much as possible.

#### 4. Limitations and Further Research

As mentioned at the outset of the study, this has been an exploratory study, and there are limitations that need to be taken into consideration in future studies. The first concerns the choice of the target form. In the current study, the outcome of a FonF intervention appeared to be very much contingent upon the learners' readiness vis-a-vis the target form. Despite the difficulties and practical constraints involved in assessing learner readiness, it

is crucial to ensure *a priori* that the participants are ready for the target form in order to increase the likelihood of achieving a successful focus on form, especially when the FonF method to be employed is of the implicit and proactive kind.

A related issue with regard to the target form concerns what is actually prescribed to be correct in grammar books as opposed to what is actually used in ambient speech. Even though “He said that he *had left* the day before” may be prescriptively correct, some people may opt to say “He said he *left* the day before” which could be considered equally acceptable, especially when one is engaged in a colloquial conversation. As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) point out, the backshifting rule is difficult because there are several exceptions in actual usage. Although the prescriptive criterion was called for in analyzing the results of the current study, the fact that the backshifting rule is something that is not always adhered to by the native speakers, posed an inherent problem.

The issue of learner variables also needs to be taken into consideration in future research. This needs to be carefully thought out and controlled for in designing this kind of study since such “variability in learner focus proposes a methodological challenge for researchers and pedagogical challenge for teachers especially if they wish the learners to focus on certain specific aspects of the input” (Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara, & Fearnow, 1999, p. 446). As noted, learners inevitably bring with them divergent backgrounds such as different L1s, training backgrounds, and professional backgrounds, which can potentially confound with the treatment effects. While it is virtually impossible to control for these variables in a “normal” classroom with real L2 learners (Hulstijn, 1997), all of these variables affect the learner’s noticing of different aspects of the L2. Hence, it would be most desirable if the participants consisted of a homogeneous group in terms of their L1 background and language-training experience, among others. Circumstances permitting, subsequent studies should try to control for learner variable as much as possible.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlight the complexity of factors surrounding the successfulness of implicit FonF techniques. In the Discussion, I have outlined some factors which need to be taken into consideration in achieving successful focus on form. The first factor pertained to *Learner Readiness and the Target Form*. It is important to note that *Learner Readiness* speaks to learner’s internally-generated salience whereas the *Target Form* speaks more to externally-created salience. Similarly, the second factor addressed *Learners’ Focal Attention, the Target Form and the FonF Method*. Once again, *Focal Attention* speaks to learner-internal factors whereas *FonF Method* speaks to external factors. Hence, it is evident that factors that correspond to internal salience and external

salience necessarily go hand-in-hand. In other words, the target form the researcher or teacher chooses to focus on (i.e., external syllabus) should mirror the learner's internal syllabus, thereby generating internally-created salience. Based on the results of this study, it may be speculated that achieving a successful focus on form is largely dependent upon the following: (1) recognizing and being mindful of the learner's internal syllabus and their internal agenda for learning, (2) accurately gauging learner readiness, and selecting the target form accordingly, and (3) employing an appropriate FonF means to maximally capture the learner's focal attention. Above all, accurately gauging learner readiness is paramount in light of the finding that learners do actively seek out and notice input that they are ready to internalize.

In retrospect, it seems that the very reason that *reactive* FonF has been more favorably received by researchers may be attributed to that fact that it responds to different needs of the learners, whereby teachers can provide immediate feedback on the problematic feature, targeting different features as they arise in context. Therefore, reactive FonF is "necessarily broad-based – that is, where many different forms rather than one single form are likely to be attended in the context of performing a communicative activity" (Ellis et al., 2001, p. 282). However, despite the positive aspect of reactive FonF in which the burden of choosing the form is somewhat released, research on reactive FonF studies has suggested that the effectiveness of recasts depends on *focused* and *consistent* treatment of the target form (Han, 2002a). Hence, even in the case of reactive focus on form, there is a need for the teacher to target a particular form (or forms), in order to provide focused and consistent feedback, specifically aimed at the target form. In other words, there is a need for a reactive FonF, which is also *proactive* in nature. As such, the issue of achieving a harmony between the learner's internal salience and external salience concerns not only proactive focus on form, but also reactive focus on form. It is therefore crucial that the researcher or practitioner be respectful of the learner's internal agenda for learning, and accommodate any external intervention accordingly. An acute understanding of our learners' developing interlanguage and the forms that they are ready for, coupled with an appropriate type of FonF technique, will increase the likelihood of achieving consciousness-raising in its true sense of the word (Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993), where there is that much-desired match between the teachers' externally-created salience and learners' internally-generated salience.

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### APPENDIX A

Cartoon Strip for Task 1



### APPENDIX B

Cartoon Strip for Task 2



## APPENDIX C

### Reading Passage for the IE Group

#### Lying on the Job

“Lying during a job interview is risky business,” says Martha Smith, director of the management consulting firm Maxwell Enterprises. According to Smith, the truth has a funny way of coming out. She tells the story of one woman applying for a job as an office manager. The woman **told the interviewer that she had graduated** with a B.A. degree in Economics. Actually, it was later found that she had majored in French Literature, not Economics. She also **said that she had made** \$40,000 at her last job. However, the truth was about \$8,000 less. “Many companies really do check facts,” warns Smith. In this case, a call to the applicant’s company revealed all the lies.

Smith relates a story about another job applicant, Gloria. During an interview, Gloria **said that she had quit** her last job, and **added that she had been dissatisfied** with her working hours in her previous job. Gloria did well on the interview, and landed the new job. She was doing well until the company hired another employee, Pete. It turned out that Gloria and Pete used to work at the same company. Pete eventually **told his boss that his old company had fired Gloria**. He also **added that Gloria was fired** because of her lying habit. In spite of the fact that the new employer was very pleased with Gloria’s job performance, he **said that he just couldn’t trust** her anymore. He **mentioned that he had lost** all the trust he had. Not surprisingly, Gloria got fired – again. “It’s a small world, and the truth always comes out sooner or later,” says Smith.

## APPENDIX D

### Reading Passage for the CP Group

#### Lying on the Job

“Lying during a job interview is risky business,” says Martha Smith, director of the management consulting firm Maxwell Enterprises. According to Smith, the truth has a funny way of coming out. She tells the story of one woman applying for a job as an office manager. The woman told the interviewer that she had graduated with a B.A. degree in Economics. Actually, it was later found that she had majored in French Literature, not Economics. She also said that she had made \$40,000 at her last job. However, the truth was about \$8,000 less. “Many companies really do check facts,” warns Smith. In this case, a call to the applicant’s company revealed all the lies.

Smith relates a story about another job applicant, Gloria. During an interview, Gloria said that she had quit her last job, and added that she had been dissatisfied with her working hours in her previous job. Gloria did well on the interview, and landed the new job. She was doing well until the company hired another employee, Pete. It turned out that Gloria and Pete used to work at the same company. Pete eventually told his boss that his old company had fired Gloria. He also added that Gloria was fired because of her lying habit. In spite of the fact that the new employer was very pleased with Gloria’s job performance, he said that he just couldn’t trust her anymore. He mentioned that he had lost all the trust he had. Not surprisingly, Gloria got fired – again. “It’s a small world, and the truth always comes out sooner or later,” says Smith.

## APPENDIX E

**Questionnaire for the IE Group**

1. Did you notice that some of the expressions in the reading ‘Lying on the Job’ were emphasized and underlined **(e. g., like this)**?
2. Do you remember what kinds of expressions were emphasized? Could you provide an example?
3. Did you try to use these forms in writing the cartoon story?
4. Do you think the reading ‘Lying on the Job’ helped you in re-writing the cartoon story? If so, in what way?
5. What did you learn from this lesson?
6. Any other comments you would like to add?

**Questionnaire for the CP Group**

1. Do you think the reading “Lying on the Job” helped you in writing the cartoon story? If so, in what way?
2. Did you have a particular pattern/expression that you tried to use in writing the cartoon story? If so, could you provide an example?
3. What did you learn from this lesson?
4. Any other comments you would like to add?

Applicable levels: secondary and tertiary education

Key words: focus on form, textual enhancement, learner readiness, noticing

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