

# EFFECTS OF FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION ON THE ACQUISITION OF WEAK FORMS BY JAPANESE EFL LEARNERS

*Hideki Abe*

Tsuruoka National College of Technology, Japan

habe@tsuruoka-nct.ac.jp

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) on the learning of weak forms in L2 pronunciation pedagogy. FFI treatment was designed to encourage learners to notice the gap of the target pronunciation, negotiate its phonetic form, and correct the output by themselves. Results of the treatment were compared with the non-FFI treatment involving sixty elementary to low intermediate level students. Progress of performance was measured with a pre-test, and immediate and delayed post-tests, yielding two major findings: (1) FFI had positive effects on the learning of English weak forms; (2) the subjects in the FFI treatment improved more significantly than those of non-FFI treatment.

**Keywords:** form-focused instruction, weak forms, pronunciation pedagogy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

The acquisition of English weak forms has been examined from several perspectives, yielding positive effects of instruction in the formal setting. [3, 5, 12, 13]; nevertheless, the question of instructional approach aiming at the effectiveness of instruction and the long-term gain in the classroom has not been thoroughly and empirically investigated thus far.

Even though the learning of weak forms is not always considered crucial in EIL or ELF settings [7], the English weak forms were chosen because this aspect of phonology is considered to be critical communicative competence in intelligibility, and because Japanese EFL learners tend to have difficulty in learning the phonological form (cf. [8]). The present study further explores this line of inquiry by investigating perception and production training effects on the acquisition of English weak forms by Japanese EFL students.

### 1.2. Form-focused instruction

Recent studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have suggested that instruction taking psycholinguistic and cognitive factors into consideration is highly beneficial to second language teaching and learning [2, 3, 9, 10, 11]. To examine this issue in Instructed SLA, an approach called “focus on form” has been proposed. According to Long [9], focus on form is defined as a type of instruction drawing “students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication”. Most studies investigating focus on form, however, have grammar instruction as their primary focus, while classroom pronunciation research has received only a little attention.

Although L2 pronunciation research has not been directly concerned with focus on form, several researchers appeared to claim that classroom instruction should involve systematic treatments to draw L2 learners' attention to phonetic forms to develop a well-balanced phonological metacompetence [14]. The current study examined how a form-focused instructional technique, more precisely the Negotiation of Form (NoF) in which a linguistic error is made explicit and ongoing negotiation (or interaction) helps learners notice the error(s) and corrects the error(s) by themselves [1].

To obtain significant data for this issue, the present study explored the effects of an instructional technique, a form-focused approach, in which a linguistic error was made explicit to activate learners' cognition encouraging learners to notice the gap in the target phonetic form and restructure their interlanguage phonology. The following two major questions were investigated:

- (1) Dose FFI, in which a teacher provides explicit instruction through NoF, affect EFL learners' restructuring of their interlanguage phonology?
- (2) If FFI has an effect on EFL learners' acquisition of the L2 English weak forms, does the effect hold over the four-week post-test period?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Setting

The study was conducted in a regular classroom setting in Japan, and the participants were second-year students of high-school level enrolled in their intact EFL classed at a technical college. Their English levels at school were equivalent: low to intermediate. In this classroom-based study, the effects of FFI and the control treatment were compared quantitatively. The whole period of evaluation lasted over a period of two months; a period of four weeks for all treatments and one month between the immediate and delayed post tests.

### 2.2. Treatment

The subjects in the experimental group (henceforth, FFI) received a Negotiation of Form treatment, which was comprised of noticing and form-negotiation task. NoF was incorporated into a regular lesson to encourage learners to notice the gap in the target phonetic form and restructure their interlanguage phonology, because learners occasionally find it difficult to phonetic deviation in dyads' performance unless properly instructed. In this task, the subjects listened to two different versions of oral readings of the same material one spoken at a natural speed and one without connected speech processes). The teacher asked the subjects to compare the differences between the two in pairs. Alternatively, the classroom teacher could ask students directly to find the gap between the target phonetic form and the Japanese accented speech. After noticing-task between pairs, they shared their findings in class and were encouraged to produce the target pronunciation. Finally the treatment ended with a chorus reading. The control group (NFI) received explanation of English weak forms and listen-and-repeat exercises.

### 2.3. Assessment

The pre-and post-test consisted of 20 questions, including the targeted prosodic features. Examples of test sentences (taken from [6]) are listed in Table 1.

Both pre-test and two post-tests were examined and scored by the investigator and a native speaker of American English. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run to determine if there were any statistically significant differences among the two groups' mean scores on the pre-test

measuring ability to use English connected speech. No significant difference among the participants was revealed ( $F(2/87) = 3.10, p > .05, ns$ ).

**Table 1:** Examples of test sentences.

Aspect	Example
Perception	<i>He threw the ball <u>at me</u></i> <i>Bill <u>and</u> Mark <u>have</u> left</i> <i>Can you tell <u>us</u> now?</i>
Production	<i>I <u>was at</u> home <u>from</u> five o'clock</i> <i>Ask <u>them to</u> come <u>to the</u> party</i> <i>We <u>were</u> going <u>to the</u> park</i>

## 3. RESULTS

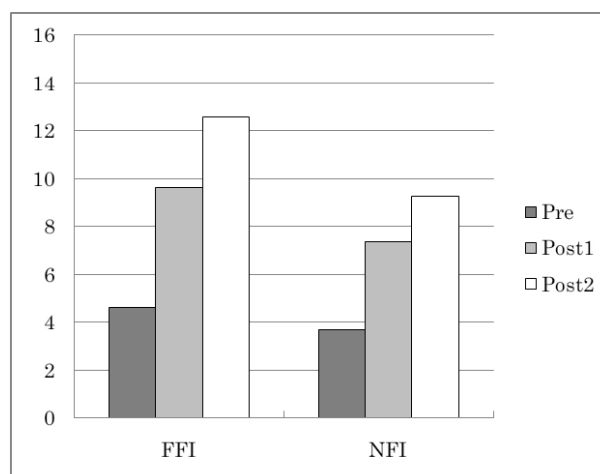
### 3.1. Instruction effects

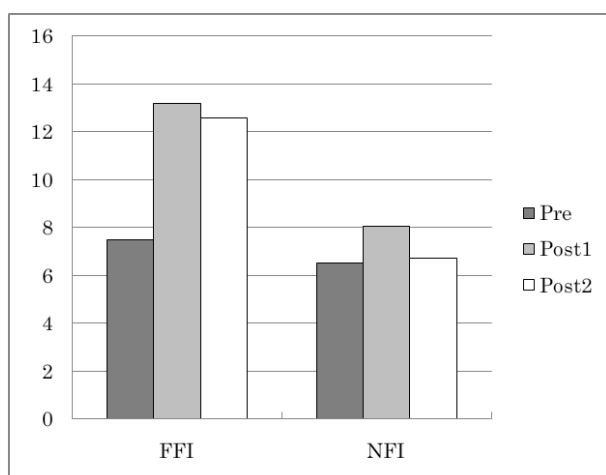
Table 2 indicates the means (M), standard deviations (SD) and the effect size (ES) of the pre-test and two post-tests. Effect sizes for the between-test comparisons were calculated to examine the practical significance of between-test differences. Figures 1 and 2 below graphically display the total scores respectively.

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics for the total scores of perception and production.

[The highest possible score = 20]						
Experimental group (FFI)						
	Perception			Production		
	PR	P1	P2	PR	P1	P2
<i>N</i>	30	30	30	30	30	30
<i>M</i>	4.6	9.6	12.6	7.5	13.2	12.6
<i>SD</i>	2.2	2.8	3.6	2.6	2.8	3.6
<i>ES</i>		(.79)	(.64)		(.88)	(.81)
Control group (NFI)						
	Perception			Production		
	PR	P1	P2	PR	P1	P2
<i>N</i>	30	30	30	30	30	30
<i>M</i>	3.7	7.4	9.3	6.5	8.1	6.7
<i>SD</i>	2.07	2.6	2.4	2.2	2.4	2.2
<i>ES</i>		(.74)	(.84)		(.37)	(.10)

**Figure 1:** Improvement in perception abilities.



**Figure 2:** Improvement in production abilities.

As shown in Table 3, results of the repeated measures ANOVA for the perception and production scores revealed a significant main effect for instruction. The results, especially those from between-group comparisons, indicated that the FFI group receiving explicit instruction through NoF task performed significantly better than the NFI (Non-Form-focused Instruction) group ( $F(2, 87) = 3.10, p < .01$ ,  $F(2, 87) = 3.10, p < .001$ , respectively). Therefore, FFI positively affected the learning of connected speech. The level of improvement is indicated by the number of asterisks in the tables: the significance level of  $p < 0.05 = *$ ,  $p < 0.01 = **$ ,  $p < 0.001 = ***$ , and (ns) = ns.

**Table 3:** Perception comparison between groups according to test type

	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2
Perception	> .05 (ns)	< .05*	< .001***
Production	> .05 (ns)	< .05*	< .05*

The data of the effect size in Table 2 indicates that, first, between-test comparisons for the FFI group revealed (1) that the FFI group did significantly better on the two post-tests for perception and production alike, and (2) the post-test period. Second, between-test comparisons for the NFI group indicated (1) that there was a significant difference at a practical level for perception data, and (2) production data had just a small effect size.

### 3.2. Effect on perception and production

The results of the repeated measures ANOVA in Table 3 suggest that for the perception data there was a significant difference between groups.

The FFI group exhibited significant improvement in the first and the delayed post-tests in the perception data. The general pattern of the FFI group outperforming the control group did not change in the second post-test, suggesting that the gains in the first post-test lasted for the post-test period.

The results in the production data also show that although there were no significant differences in the pre-test scores between groups, the effect of NoF was robust and consistent (see Table 3). However, as indicated in Figure 2, there was a decrease between post-test 1 and post-test 2, though the participants did not fall back to their pre-test level. This implication is discussed in the next section.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The results can be summarized as follow: (1) NoF had positive impacts on L2 leaning of English connected speech, which lasted for one month; (2) NoF treatment had greater effects on learner performance than the control treatment.

The present study has investigated methodological difference and different effects they have on learners' restructuring of their interlanguage phonology. Results indicated that the FFI group outperformed the NFI group on all tested items of post-tests. This suggests that NoF with teachers and students was more beneficial for L2 learning of connected speech than the NFI group, where NoF treatment was not provided.

The study has further examined whether the effect of instruction holds over the post-test period, i.e. if FFI indeed has some effect on learners' restructuring of their interlanguage phonology. This finding leads us to assume that instruction that appropriately incorporates NoF treatments can have a lasting positive effect on L2 phonology. More specifically, the results of this study suggest that lasting instructional effects can be obtained through providing learners with opportunities to think of the target form through the negotiation task. This, in consequence, had an effect which did not decline in the delayed post-test. However, results also indicated the possibility that gains in the treatment might slightly decrease without constant practice in production.

With the NoF treatment, the teacher could promote activation of such cognitive processes as noticing and cognitive comparison as an option of

pronunciation teaching in the EFL classroom setting.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present study has demonstrated that the learners' overall performance in perception and production significantly improved over time due to explicit form-focused instruction. It has also proved successful in exploring the relationship between an instructional approach and L2 phonological acquisition, and in proposing that the FFI in pronunciation pedagogy could be more effective than the traditional approach in the classroom. Further research should also consider whether form-focused treatments involving both implicit and explicit formal instruction could help learners improve their L2 pronunciation.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Katsumasa Shimizu for his valuable advice on an earlier version of the paper. Special thanks go to two anonymous reviewers for their questions and comments. All remaining errors are my own.

## 7. REFERENCES

- [1] Batstone, R. 2002. *Key Concepts in Language Teaching and Learning*. London: University of London Institute of Education.
- [2] Doughty, C., Williams, J. (eds.). 1998. *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [3] Fotos, S., Nassaji, H. (eds.). 2007. *Form-Focused Instruction and Teacher Education: Studies in Honour of Rod Ellis*. Oxford: OUP.
- [4] Gómez Lacabex, E., García Lecumberri, M.L., Cooke, M. 2009. Training and generalization effects of English vowel reduction for Spanish listeners. In Watkins, M.A., et al. (eds.), *Recent Research in Second Language Phonetics/ Phonology: Perception and Production*. Newcastle upon Tyne: CSP, 32-42.
- [5] Gonet, W., Szypra-Kozłowska, J., Swiecinski, R. 2010. The acquisition of vowel reduction by Polish students of English. In: Waniek-Klimczak, E. (ed.), *Issues in Accents of English 2*. Newcastle upon Tyne: CSP, 291-307.
- [6] Hewing, M. 2003. *Pronunciation Practice Activities*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [7] Jenkins, J. 2000. *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: OUP.
- [8] Kohmoto, S. 1982. *New English Phonology* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Tokyo: Nan'un-do.
- [9] Long, M. 1991. Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In de Bot, K., et al. (eds.), *Foreign Language Research in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 39-52.
- [10] Long, M., Robinson, P. 1998. Focus on form and practice. *Key Concepts in Language Teaching and Learning*. London: University of London Institute of Education, 15-41.
- [11] Muranoi, H. 2006. *SLA Research and Second Language Teaching and Learning* [in Japanese]. Tokyo: Taishuukan.
- [12] Porzuczek, A. 2010. The weak forms of TO in the pronunciation of Polish learners of English. In: Waniek-Klimczek, E. (ed.), *Issue in Accents of English 2*. Newcastle upon Tyne: CSP, 309-323.
- [13] Shimizu, K. 2010. *On the Phonetic Feature of Reduced Vowels*. Unpublished MS. Nagoya: NGU.
- [14] Wrembel, M. 2003. An empirical study on the role of metacompetence in the acquisition of foreign language phonology. *Proc. 15<sup>th</sup> ICPhS Barcelona*, 985-988.