Researching form-focused instruction: Ideas, issues, and challenges

Hossein Nassaji

University of Victoria

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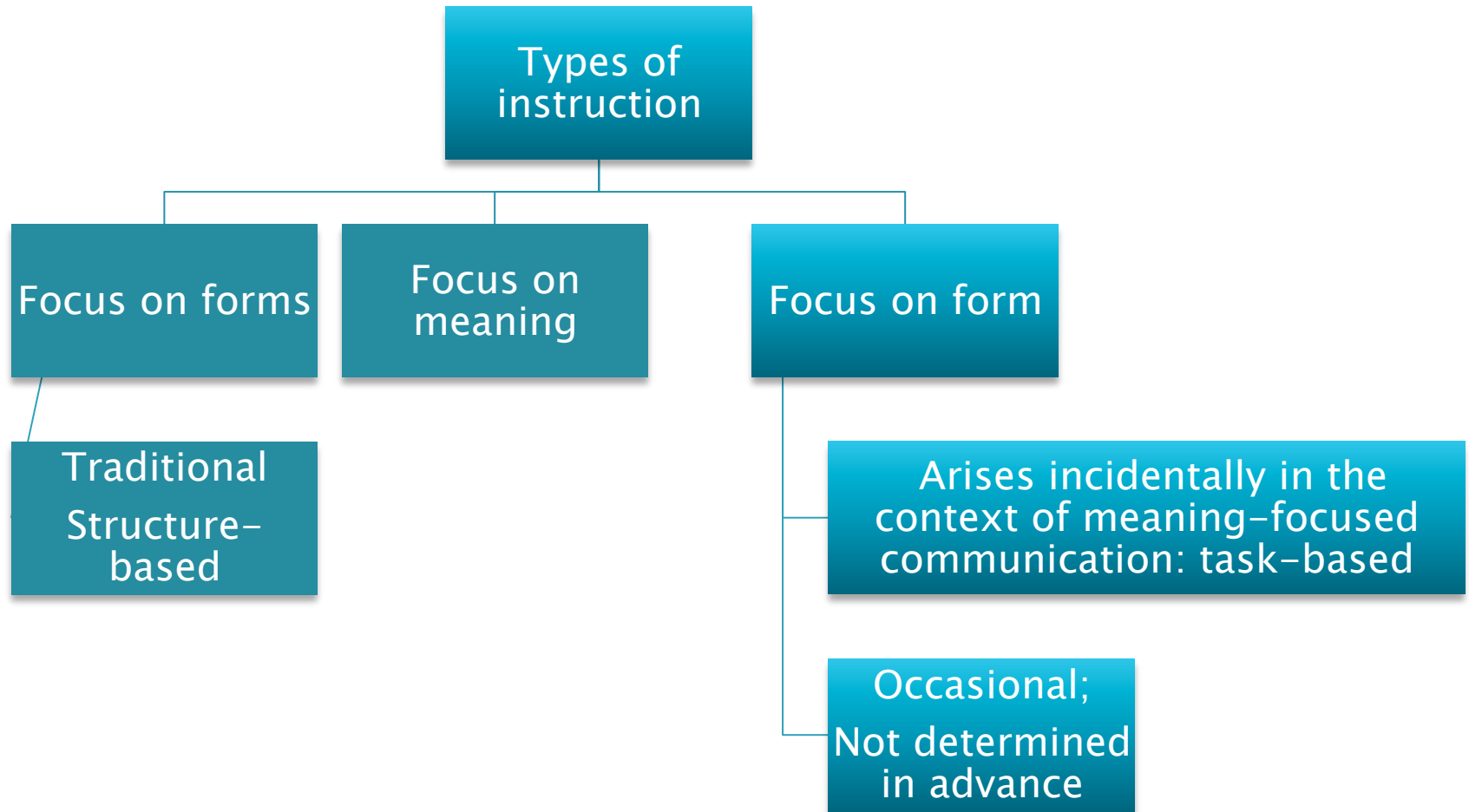
Spada (1997)

Form-focused instruction "is any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to form either implicitly or explicitly." It occurs "within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction but in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways" (Spada, 1997, p. 73).

Ellis (2001)

> "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form. . . . includes both traditional approaches to teaching forms based on structural syllabi and more communicative approaches, where attention to form arises out of activities that are primarily meaning-focused" (Ellis, 2001, p. 1-2).

Long & Robinson (1998)

Long (2000)

➢ "Focus on forms": ineffective; ignores language learning processes.

➢ "A pure focus on meaning": insufficient
  • Both theory and research highlight the importance of attention to form.

Long's (2000) argument

> "adults can and do learn much of the grammar of a language incidentally, while focusing on meaning and communication" (p. 179).
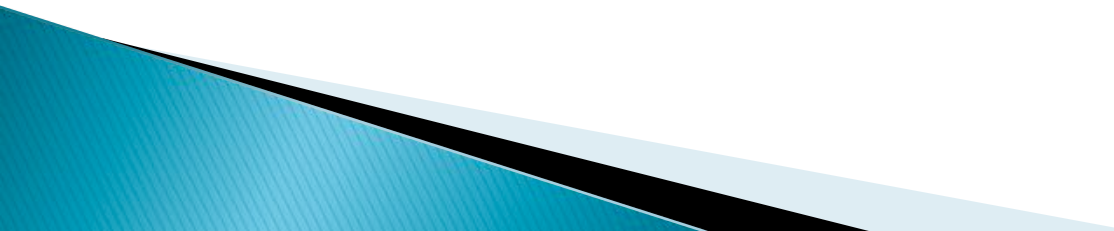
➢ Long's original coception:

- Too narrow

- FonF: both incidental and planned

- Both integrative and sequential

- Both more explicit or less explicit
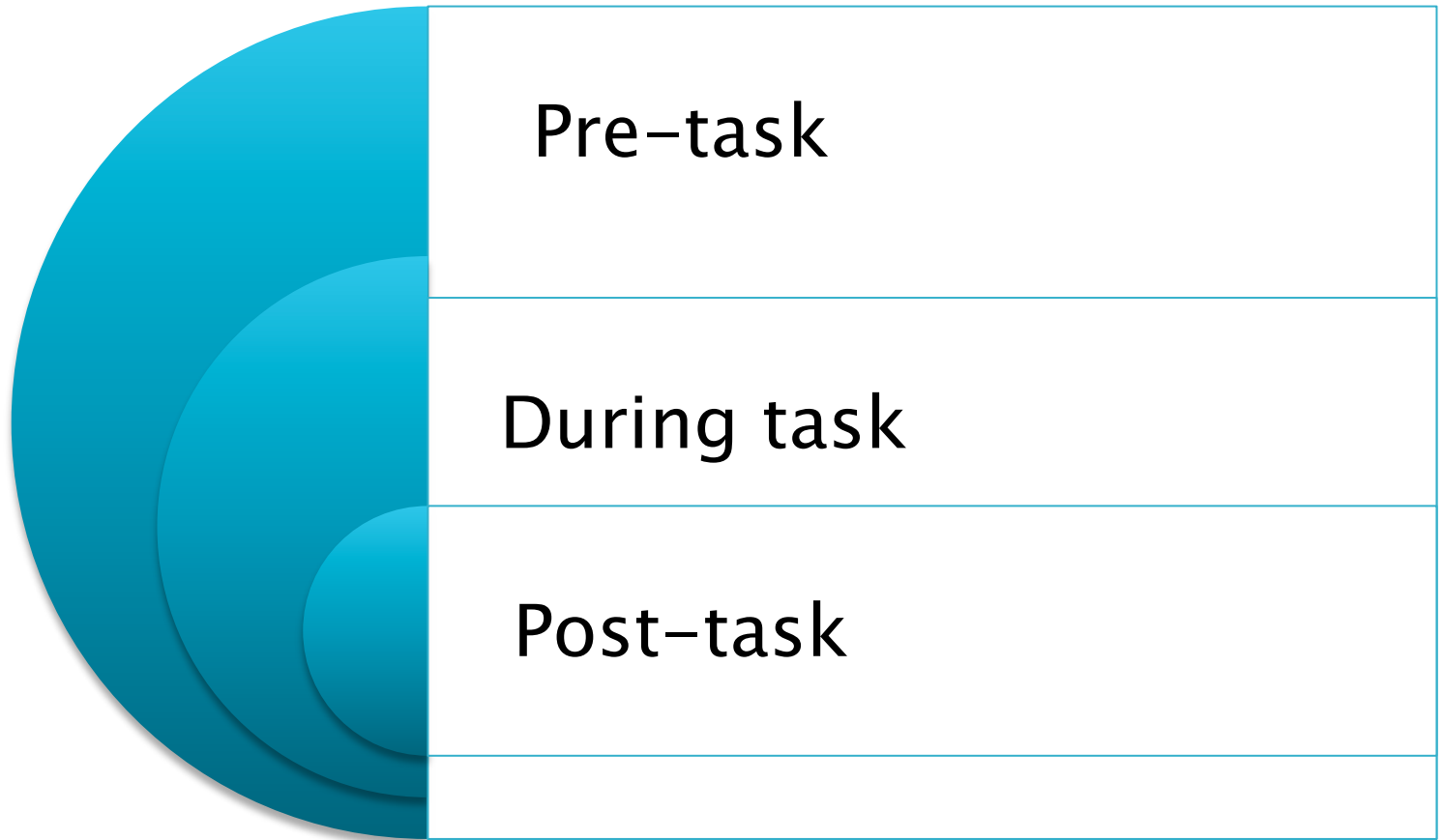
Doughty & Williams (1998)

➤ "some focus on form is applicable to the majority of the linguistic code features that learners must master" and that "leaving the learners to their own devices is not the best plan."

(Nassaji, 1999, 2000)

➢ Focus of form can be through process

➢ Focus on form can be through design

Focus on form through process

Pre-task

During task

Post-task

Focus on form through process

1. Pre-task focus on form

- Reviewing and highlighting language forms (words, phrases, and structures) needed for task completion.
- Time for task planning and preparation

Focus on form through process

2. During the task focus on form

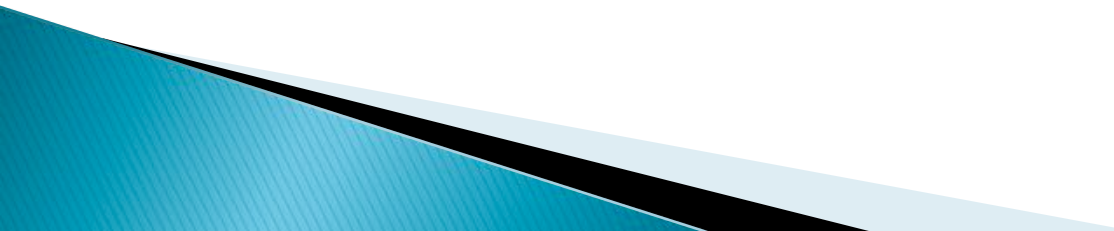- Students do the task in pair or small groups

- Helping learners with the language they need.
- Correcting their errors through interactional feedback.
- Encouraging learners to provide peer-feedback.
- Encourages learners to use other sources.

Focus on form through process

2. Post-task focus on form

- Students report the task to the whole class (written/spoken or a combination).

- Students receive interactional feedback when reporting the task

- The teacher reviews language features learned.

- Reminds students of useful language forms (words, phrases or grammatical structures , spelling, pronunciation, etc.).

Focus on form through design: Grammar focused tasks

➤ Tasks designed specifically to focus on form

➤ Designed to push learners to process or produce certain linguistic forms.

An example

Form-focused information-gap task

(Pica, Kang, &Sauro, 2006)

Original text

"Philadelphia" opens strongly with an effective collection of city scenes. We see Andrew as a typical workaholic attorney, already living with HIV as part of his life. HIV from the outset is simply one element in Andrew's life, but not the defining element. Joe Miller is equally well-established, both at work and at home. Nevertheless, he recognizes the social similarities between being a black man and being a person with AIDS.
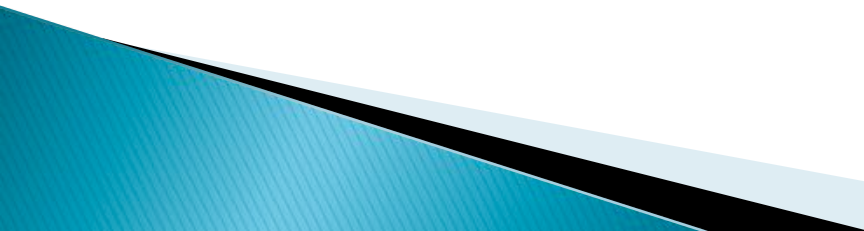
Form-focused information-gap task

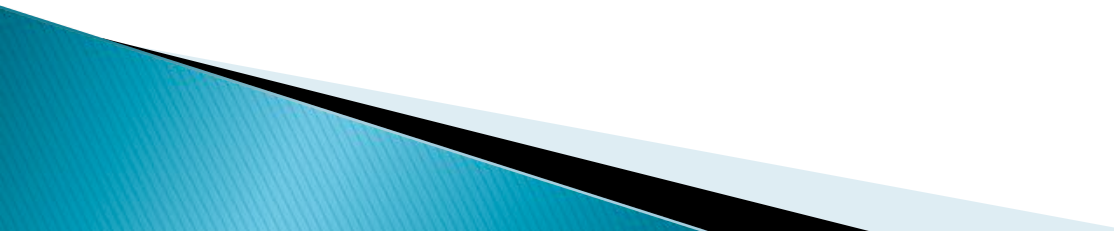| Targeted structure	Version A	Version B
Articles and determiners	"Philadelphia" opens strongly with an effective collection of city scenes. 2. We see Andrew as a typical workaholic attorney, already living with HIV as part of his life. 3. HIV from the outset is simply one element in Andrew's life, but not a defining element. 4. Joe Miller is equally well-established, both at work and at this home. 5. Nevertheless, he recognizes social similarities between being a black man and being a person with AIDS.	"Philadelphia" opens strongly with an effective collection of city scenes. 2. We see Andrew as one typical workaholic attorney, already living with HIV as part of his life. 3. HIV from the outset is simply one element in Andrew's life, but not the defining element. 4. Joe Miller is equally well-established, both at work and at home. 5. Nevertheless, he recognizes the social similarities between being a black man and being a person with AIDS.

(Pica, Kang, &Sauro, 2006)

Procedure

➤ The teacher reads the original text.

➤ One student receives version A and another version B.

➤ Students try to choose the correct order of individual sentences as they appear in the original version.

➤ They compare different sentences in versions A and B to find which ones are the same and which ones are different in terms of grammatical accuracy from the original text.

➤ They justify their choices.

➤ They compare their constructed passage with the original passage.

Grammar focused task

Mystery pocket (Samuda, 2001)

➤ Learners are told the contents of a mystery person's pocket; work together in groups; speculate about the person's possible identity.

➤ Each group completes a chart (next slide), noting their speculations in one of three possible columns.

Grammar focused task

	Less than 50% Certain (It's possible)	90% Certain (It's probable)	100% Certain (It's certain)
HOW CERTAIN ARE YOU?			
Name			
Sex			
Age			
Martial Status			

It's a research question!

➢ No matter how we define form-focused instruction or focus on form, when it comes to effectiveness, it becomes a research question.

General research questions

➢ Is it possible that form-focused instruction (in any form) makes any contribution to L2 acquisition?

➢ Does the effect depend on type and nature of instruction?

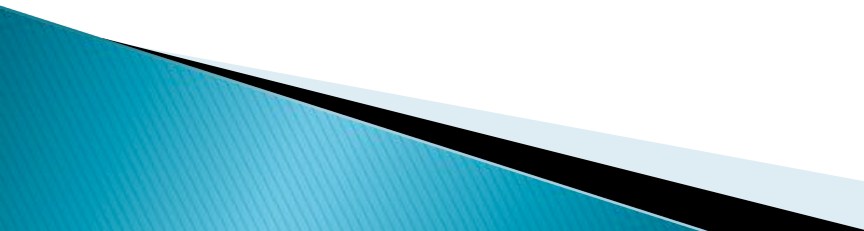- Are there particular types of instruction more effective than others?

Types of instruction

- Focus on form vs. focus on forms
- Input-based instruction
  - input flood,
  - input enhancement
  - structured input
- output-based
  - Presentation-Practice-production (PPP)
  - Pushed output (Dictogloss)
- Feedback
  - Implicit versus more explicit

General research questions

➢ Does the effect depend on the type of language features targeted?

- Are there particular linguistic forms that may benefit more from form-focused instruction than others?
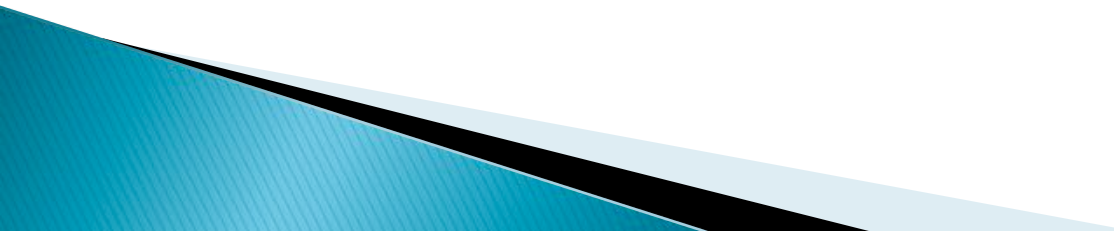
Types of target structure

- Grammatical, lexical, phonological
- Simple, complex; easy, difficult
- Low frequency, high frequency
- Forms structured differently in the L1 and the L2
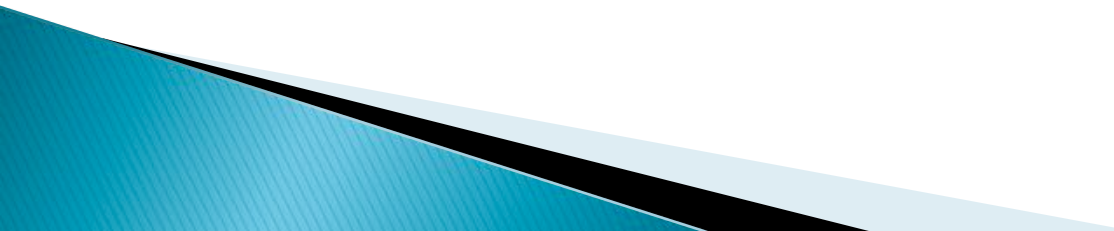- Some structures may follow developmental sequences

Simple/complex: A controversial issue

Some have claimed:

➤ It is the easy rules that can be taught.

➤ Hard rules are by their very nature too complex to be successfully taught and thus difficult to learn through instruction.
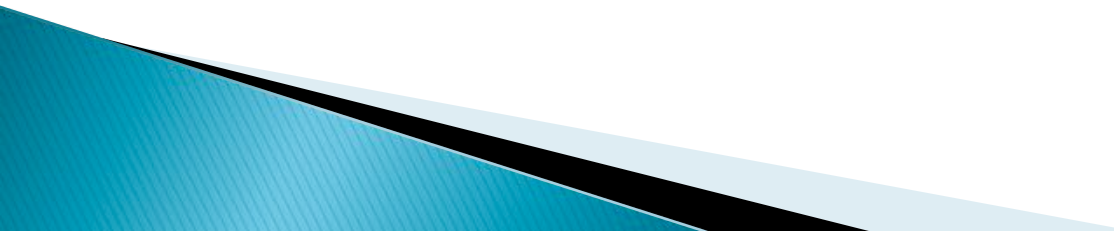
Simple/complex: A controversial issue

Others have claimed:

➢ learners can pick up easy rules from meaning-focused input: no need for instruction.

➢ Complex rules benefit from instruction as they cannot easily be noticed in meaning-focused input.

More general research questions

➢ Does the effect depend on the type of learners?

- Do all learners benefit from form-focused instruction? Are particular learners who benefit more from FFI than others?

➢ What is the role of individual learner differences?

- Motivation, cultural background, language proficiency, L1 background

More general research questions

➢ How durable is the effect of instruction?

➢ Does timing of FonF matter?
  • Proactive (before any problems happen)
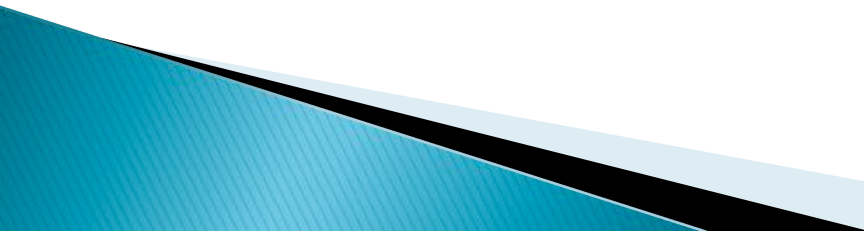 • Reactive (in response to a problem)

Specific research questions

➢ Does the explicitness of focus on form matter, and if so how explicit or implicit should FonF be?

➢ Does the intensity of focus on form matter?

- Should FonF address errors selectively and repeatedly or should it address a wide range of errors or problems whenever they occur?

Specific research questions

➢ Does the initiator of focus on form matter?

- The student
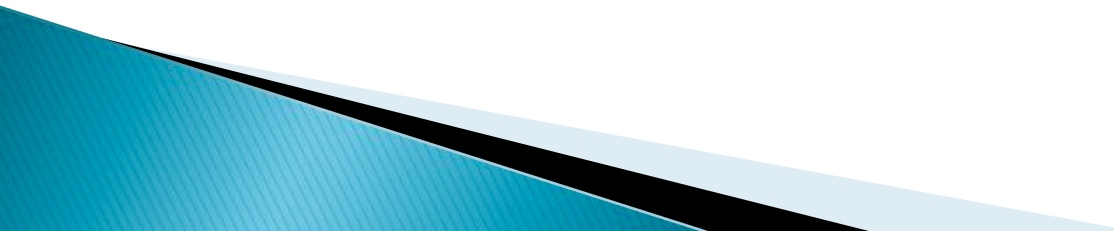- The teacher

Specific research questions

➤ Does the context of instruction matter, and if so how?

- e.g., ESL, EFL. Immersion

➤ Does the context of interaction matter, and if so how?

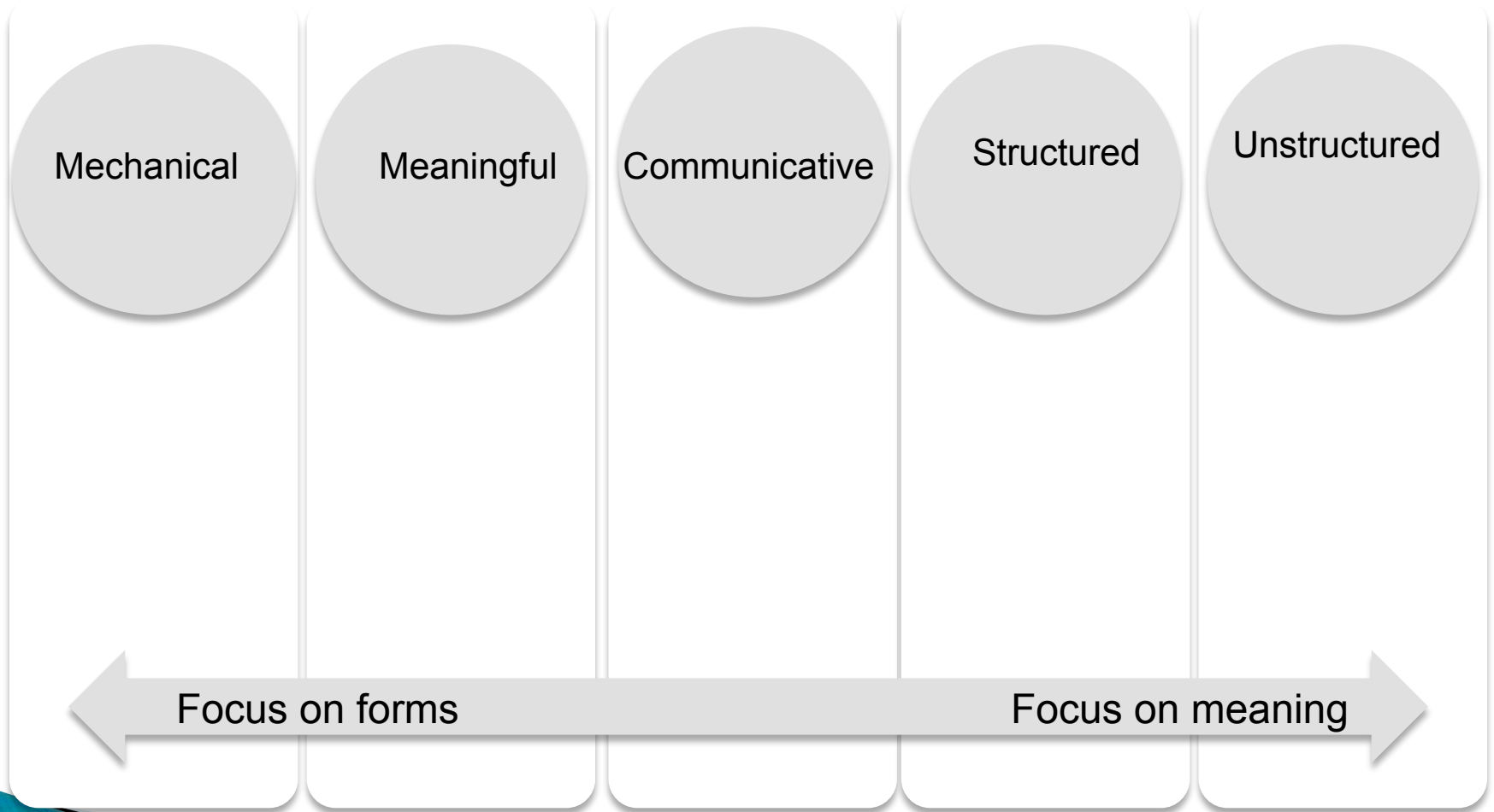- dyadic, whole class, pair work, small group

Specific research questions

➢ Does type of feedback matter and if so, what type of feedback is more effective?

- E.g. recasts, elicitations, metalinguistic feedback, explicit correction, etc.

- Teacher vs. peer feedback

- Delayed vs. immediate feedback

- Focused vs. unfocused feedback

- Computer vs. face-to-face feedback

Specific research questions

➢ What is the role of the learner's response to feedback (Uptake)?

➢ What is the role of Learners' and teachers' attitudes towards instruction and corrective feedback?

The role of classroom tasks?

Mechanical Meaningful Communicative Structured Unstructured

← Focus on forms   Focus on meaning →

Activity 1

Teacher	Watch—Japan. Yuri.
Learner 1	The watch was made in Japan.
Teacher	Good. Shoes—Italy. Raisa.
Learner 2	The shoes was . . . were made in Italy.
Teacher	Mm . . . Again.
Learner 2	. . . The shoes were made in Italy.
Teacher	OK. Calculator—China. Boris.
Learner 3	The calculator was made in China.
Teacher	Car—USA. Elena.

(From Davies &Pearse, 2000)

Activity 2

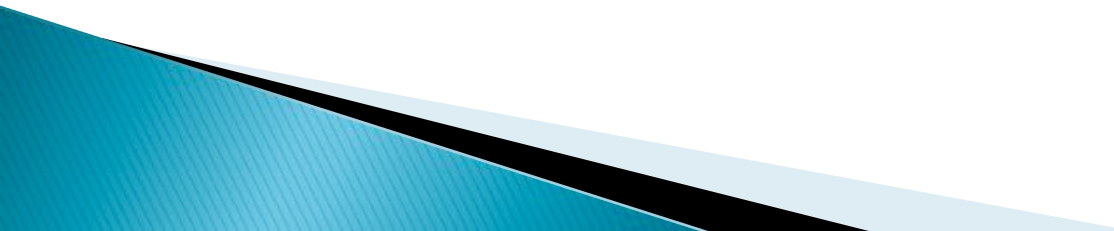| Teacher | OK, check your watches, calculators, pens … |
Learner 1	Our shoes, teacher? Our bag?
Teacher	Sure. Why not? OK, let's see how free trade is affecting us. What about your watch, Samuel?
Learner 2	My watch was made in Japan.
Teacher	Ah, a Citizen like mine. What about your shoes, Lucy?

(From Davies &Pearse, 2000)

Specific research questions

➢ Does type of test used to measure learning outcomes make a difference, and if so how?

- Tests of explicit or metalinguistic knowledge

- Tests of communicative knowledge

- Receptive vs. productive

Research strategies

Research strategies

- Descriptive
- Experimental
- Qualitative/ethnographic (student-teacher perspectives)
- Correlational
- Action research (teacher research)
- Meta-analysis

Meta-analysis

Norris and Ortega (2001)	49 studies	Form-focused instruction
Russell and Spada (2006)	15 studies	Corrective Feedback
Mackey and Goo (2007)	28 studies	Interaction
Spada and Tomita (2010)	41 studies	Interaction between types of instruction and types of language features
Lyster and Saito (2010)	15 classroom-based studies	Classroom feedback

Different theoretical approaches

Psycholinguistic approaches

➤ Qualitative/experimental studies of the psycholinguistic processes involved in learning :

- input, output, intake, uptake, noticing.
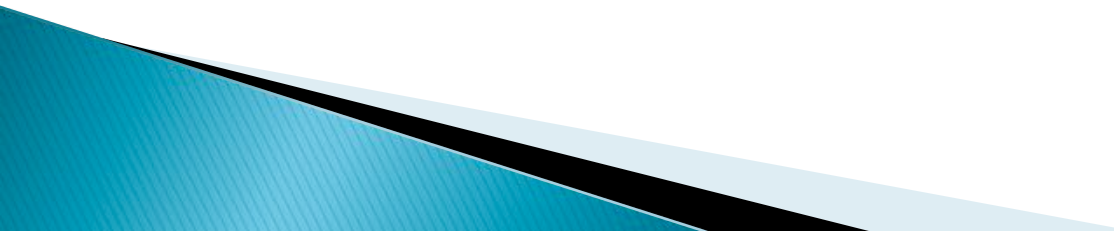- accuracy
- Fluency
- complexity

Sociocultural approaches

➤ Knowledge is socially constructed: Vygotaskian framework:

- Instruction as a mediation tool
- language as a semiotic tool
- Feedback as a form of scaffolding
- Instruction within the Zone of proximal development (ZPD).

An example

Nassaji & Swain (2000)

➤ A study of the role of feedback within the zone of proximal development

Procedure

➤ One learner received feedback in a random manner, the other received feedback within her ZPD.

➤ Feedback consisted of a number of feedback moves, beginning with broad implicit feedback and gradually moving toward more specific direct/explicit feedback in a scaffolding manner.
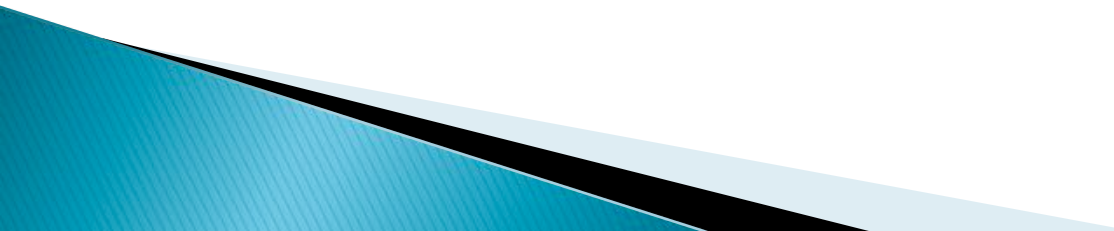
Findings

➢ Feedback within the learners' ZPD more effective that random feedback.

- in facilitating learner accuracy as measured in subsequent posttests,
- in making learners able to correct the same linguistic error in subsequent occasions with much less assistance.

Activity theory

➢ A descriptive tool to understand classroom instruction as form of goal- oriented collective activity mediated by various tools or artifacts used to achieve the goal.

Example

➢ **Nassaji (2008):** A study of the role of two aspects of classroom interaction: episode activity orientation and episode exchange types and their effects on the use and effectiveness of FonF.

➢ 68 hours of classroom data were analyzed.

Types of episode activity orientations

➢ **Plan**
- Episodes used to plan or monitor classroom activities.

➢ **Instruct**
- Episodes with an evident instructional goal: reading, listening, and speaking

➢ **Report**
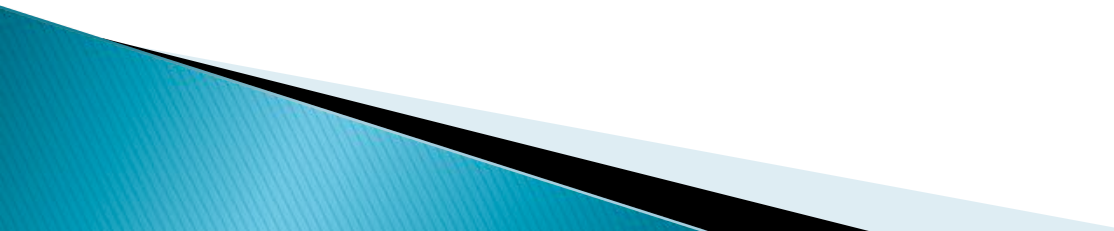- Episodes that reported past events.

➢ **Explore**
- Episodes that explored real-world topics.

Exchange types and relations

➢ two types of exchanges were identified:

- Nuclear

  - An exchange that initiated the topic.

- Bound:
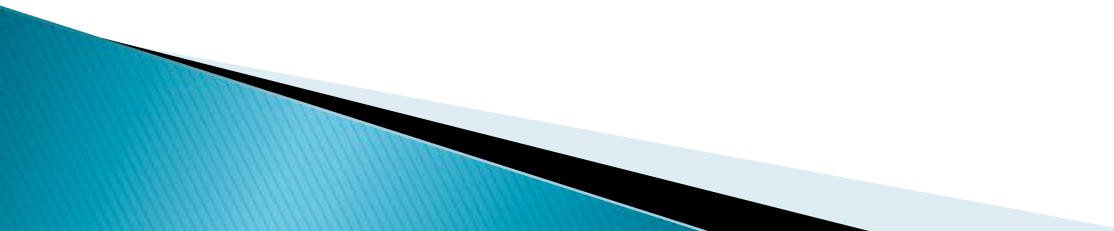
  - An exchange that continued the topic

➢

Results

➤ A significant relationship between episode activity orientation and type of FonF.

➤ Significant variations in the amount and type of FonF according to differences in episode exchange type.

Socio-cognitive approaches

➢ How cognitive processes are affected and shaped by social context.

➢ Attempts to reconcile the social and cognitive side of learning

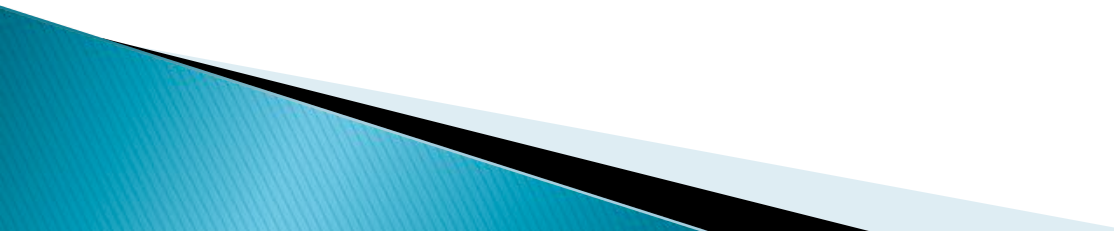- Disagreement among researchers over what and how context affects learning.

Different perspectives

Long (1998): "the way the learner acquires does not change much . . ., as suggested, e.g., by a comparison of error types, developmental sequences, processing constraints, and other aspects of the acquisition process in and out of classrooms."

Different perspectives

Tarone (2007): Learners' "cognitive processing of the L2 is affected by social interactions and social relationships with others, including those others who provide L2 input and corrective feedback".
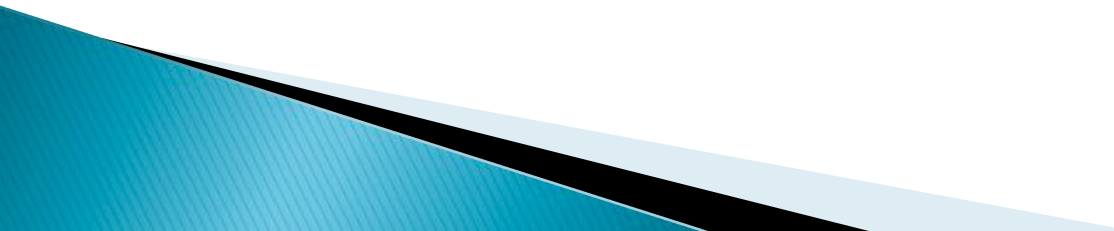
Nassaji (2013)

➢ A study of the impact of a particular dimension of classroom context (i.e. participation structure) on provision and effectiveness of spontaneous FonF.

Procedures

➢ Participation structure: the ways in which students and the teacher participated in classroom discourse within a single lesson:

- During student-teacher one-one interaction
- During small group work activities
- During whole-class discussion activities

Data

➢ 54 hours of classroom data at three levels of language proficiency: beginner, intermediate, and advanced.

➢ Individualized posttests developed and administered 1 week after each classroom observation.

Results

- Incidental FonF occurred in all classrooms but its occurrence varied depending on the type of PS.

  - More student initiated FonF during during small group works.

- A significant relationship between PS and the effectiveness of FonF.

  - More effective in individual one-on-one interaction than in whole class interaction particularly in beginner level classes.

Answers to some of the other questions posed earlier?
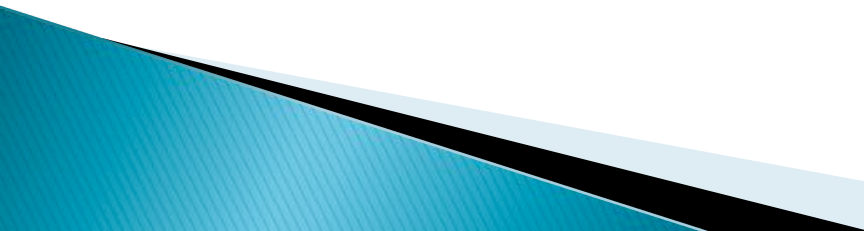
➢ Only some general tentative answers

Does form-focused instruction contributes to L2 acquisition?

- There is a general agreement that instruction is beneficial for L2 acquisition (see Truscott for a different opinion),

- Norris and Ortega (2000), in their meta-analysis of a large number of L2 studies, found a clear evidence that form-focused instruction (both FonF and Fonfs) is more effective than instruction with no focus on form.
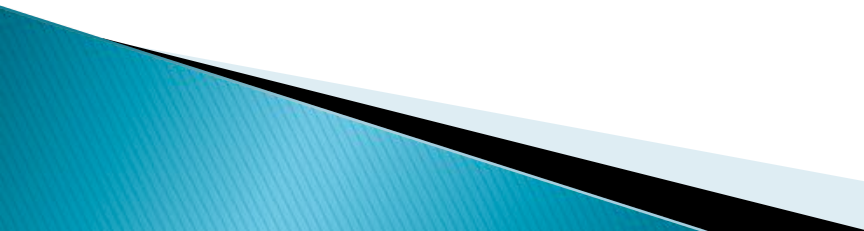
Does form-focused instruction contributes to L2 acquisition?

➢ Instructed language learning has significant effects on both the rate and the ultimate level of L2 acquisition, but may not change the route of acquisition (Ellis, 2008).

Does form-focused instruction contributes to L2 acquisition?

➤ Form focused instruction is more effective when incorporated into a communicate context as concluded by Lightbown and Spada (1993) after the review of a number of studies.

➤ Form-focused instruction does not mean a return to the traditional methods of instruction

Does the effect of instruction depend on types of focus on form?

➤ Explicit focus on form is in general more effective than implicit focus on form (Ellis, et al, 2006; Nassaji, 2009).

➤ Student-initiated focus on form is in general more effective than teacher initiated focus on form (Nassaji, 2010, 2013; Slimani, 1992; Williams, 2001).

Does the effect of instruction depend on the nature of the target form?

➤ Inconsistent results:

- Robinson (1996), Spada & Tomita (2010): explicit instruction has greater effects on complex features than simple features.

- DeKeyser (1995) and Williams and Evans (1998): Greater advantages of explicit instruction for simple features.

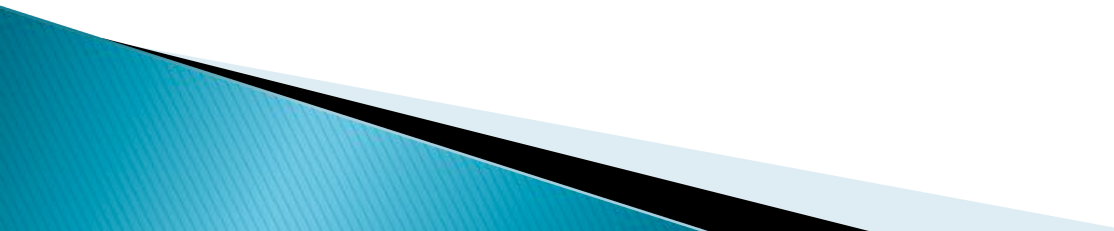# How does instruction assist language acquisition?

Inconsistent conclusions:

➤ Ellis (2005) (narrative review):

- Form-focused instruction results in greater accuracy in test-like performance.

- It is much less likely to lead to improved accuracy in spontaneous oral language use.

➤ Spada and Tomita (2010) (meta-analysis)

- The effect of instruction is greater on learners' spontaneous use.

What type of feedback is more effective?

➢ More explicit feedback is generally more effective than implicit feedback (e.g., Nassaji, 2009). But inconsistent results with respect to types of feedback:

- Positive effects for recasts (e.g., Author, 2007; Doughty & Varela, 1998).

- More positive effects for elicitation (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Panova & Lyster, 2002).

Reasons for inconsistencies

➤ Differences in research design

➤ Differences in defining variables

➤ Differences in measurement strategies

➤ Differences in the type of learners involved

➤ Differences in research contexts

Some remaining challenges

➢ What do we mean by effectiveness and how should we measure it?

- The development of implicit or explicit knowledge?
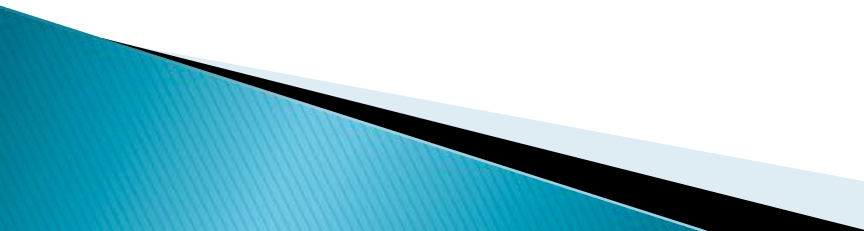- The development of grammar or communicative knowledge?

Some remaining challenges

➢ If language acquisition means the development of implicit knowledge, how to measure implicit knowledge?

➢ Most outcome measures have measured explicit knowledge

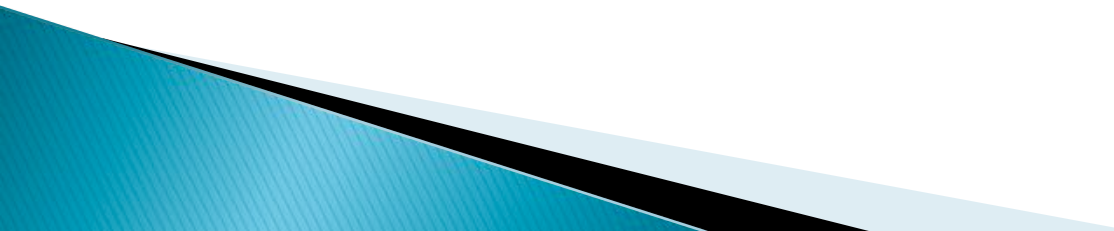- (Norris & Ortega, 2000: only 16% of studies)

Some remaining challenges

➢ There is a need for developing measures that tap into implicit knowledge. But how?

- Ellis et al (2006): timed versus untimed grammaticality judgement, Elicited imitation tests

- But out of context isolated sentences.

Some remaining challenges

➢ How can we measure long-term effects?

- The majority of the studies are cross-sectional, measuring learning at a certain point of time.

➢ A need for longitudinal studies measuring long term effects of instruction and feedback.

- But how to conduct longitudinal studies?

- How to control for the confounding effects of intervening variables?

Final remarks

➢ Despite challenges, a clear need for continued research into the relative effectiveness of different instructional strategies in different contexts and with different types of learners.

➢ A need for replication.

➢ A need for follow-up studies.
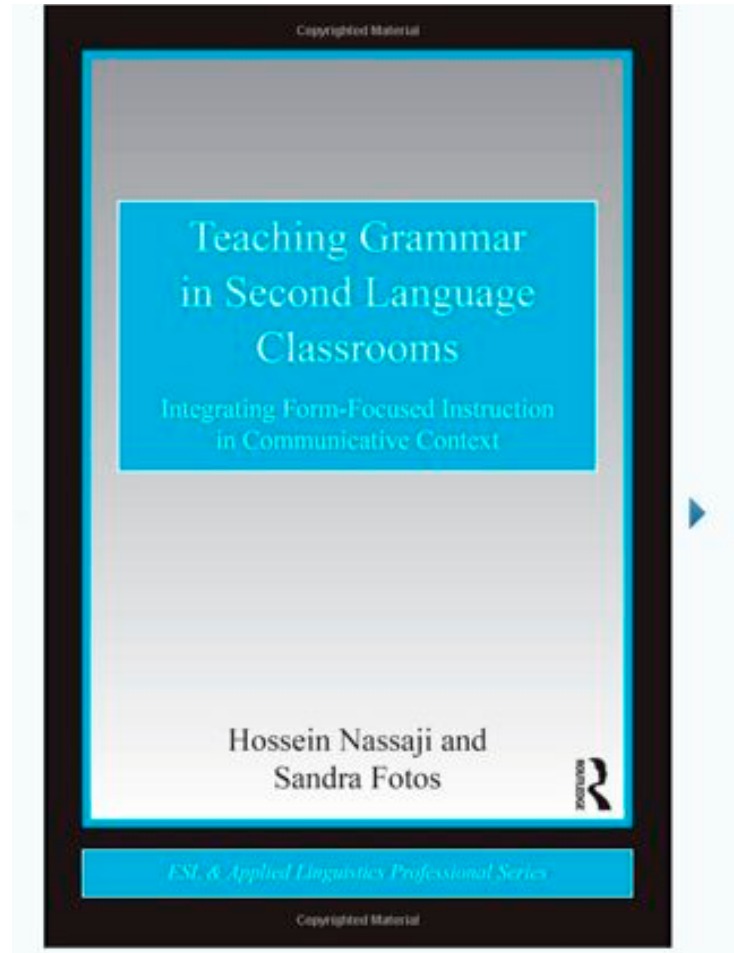
➢ A need for teacher (action) research

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Thank you!