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Reviewing the case for explicit grammar instruction in the university foreign language learning context

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This paper examines the extent to which research findings from second language and immersion programmes, concerning the efficacy of different instructional approaches, are transferable to the context of foreign language learning in British higher education. It draws on data from a four-year longitudinal study involving two experimental groups of undergraduate learners of German as a foreign language, one of which was exposed to ‘focus-on-form’ tuition, the other to ‘focus-on-forms’ instruction. The relative merits of the two approaches are assessed through analysis of proficiency gains for classroom instruction and residence abroad phases of the programme, using holistic and discrete proficiency-testing instruments. The study also highlights the effect of formal and naturalistic learning contexts on the rate and order of development of particular grammatical competencies in L2 German for the sample.

I Introduction

Over the past 30 years there has been a considerable amount of research into the effects of second language (L2) instruction. Many of these studies have focused on immersion programmes and contexts in which the target language is the dominant social language. It has furthermore been assumed that the insights into the efficacy of different types of instruction gleaned from this research are automatically transferable to other foreign language learning contexts. This paper reports on a study of two distinct instructional approaches at a major UK university, examining the transferability of such research findings to the higher education

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(HE) foreign language learning context.

Studies of foreign language learning at UK universities are few and far between. The most significant contribution is Coleman's broad-based, multilingual 'European Language Proficiency Survey' or ELPS (Coleman, 1996a), which provides a comprehensive study of rates of linguistic progress across the undergraduate degree and some important insights into the nature of language learning. Coleman's data, however, was almost exclusively cross-sectional and as such offered no opportunity to explore the year-on-year effect on language proficiency development of different types of instruction. There thus exists a major gap in research into the effectiveness or otherwise of different methodological approaches to language teaching in British HE.

The study reported in this paper stems from a research project involving a longitudinal study of degree-level learners of German as a foreign language. The project aimed to investigate different aspects of foreign language learning in the HE context, including the effects of instruction, residence abroad, individual learner differences, learning strategies and styles.

The study focuses upon two groups within the project sample, a specialist group and a less specialist group.¹ Both received similar amounts of instruction and had a similar profile in terms of entry IQ and German language proficiency scores. However, the two groups were exposed to different instructional approaches: the specialist group received substantial explicit teaching of grammatical forms, while the less specialist group received more meaning-focused tuition in German with only occasional and, generally, more incidental attention to linguistic form. The study charts the development of the two groups' language competence over the four years of their degrees, using two different and repeated measures of proficiency, one holistic, the other focusing on grammatical competence.

II Form-focused instruction

Some studies of the stages of L2 development (e.g., Meisel *et al.*, 1981; Felix and Hahn, 1985) have suggested that all L2 learners pass through the same stages in acquiring L2 grammatical forms. However, subsequent research (e.g., Ellis, 1989; Pienemann, 1988)

shows that although learners develop along similar routes in their acquisition of grammatical forms and that teaching does not appear to change acquisition sequences in any significant way, form-focused instruction can help to speed up the rate at which learners acquire these forms; it can also increase learners' accuracy in using them (Hulstijn and Hulstijn, 1984).

Furthermore, in contradiction of Krashen (1982), research suggests that implicit acquisition, especially the exclusive use of meaning-focused tasks in the classroom, such as in Canadian immersion programmes and content-based ESL programmes, leads to fossilization of language forms and is very unlikely to help the learner develop a full and complex L2 grammar (Genesee, 1987; Harley, 1992; Swain, 1985). Similarly, a number of researchers have pointed out that some important grammatical differences between L1 and L2 cannot be learnt just from positive evidence of L2 use, since certain forms may be rare in meaning-based, unplanned communicative classroom interaction (Harley and Swain, 1984; Lyster, 1994; White, 1991).

In short, form-function mapping in L2 learning can never be complete if it is not promoted through appropriate instruction; opportunities for implicit acquisition of the target language through meaningful input need to be balanced by some type of conscious learning of linguistic forms (Long, 1983, 1988; Ellis, 1994: 639–47). The real debate concerns how these two can be most successfully linked and incorporated into classroom activity.

There have been various attempts to categorize attention to form in the classroom and there is still some debate over the precise terminology (Doughty and Williams, 1998b; Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991; Long and Robinson, 1998; Spada, 1997). However, the term 'form-focused instruction' (FFI) is becoming established as a generic description of 'any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly' (Spada, 1997: 73), or 'any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form' (Ellis, 2001: 1–2). A number of writers have sought to distinguish pedagogical treatments *within* the umbrella term FFI (see Doughty and Williams, 1998b); Long's (1991) distinction between focus-on-form (FonF) and focus-on-formS (FonFs) has been widely adopted (e.g., Doughty and

Williams, 1998a) and will be the one used here.

In FonFs, the main principle of curriculum design is division of the language according to lexis, structures, notions or functions, which are selected and sequenced for students to learn in a uniform and incremental way. In this so-called ‘synthetic’ syllabus (Wilkins, 1976), exposure to the target language is deliberately restricted and rationed. Particularly with regard to grammatical structures, the belief is that the discrete parts of the syllabus gradually build on each other and that this can lead the learner towards mastery of L2. However, second language acquisition research has cast doubt on the efficacy of this approach. Studies have shown that naturalistic and classroom L2 learners rarely acquire new and discrete linguistic forms instantaneously or one at a time (for reviews, see Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Rutherford, 1988). Instead, as already noted, learners seem to pass through clear developmental stages in their acquisition of grammatical forms. Their progress towards native-like command of structures is not unidirectional or immediate, as much traditional grammar-based teaching has sought to achieve, but is characterized by stages of non-target language use and backsliding, or ‘U-shaped’ behaviour (Selinker and Lakshamanan, 1992, and Kellerman, 1985, respectively). Yet, in spite of these findings and in spite of the substantial changes that have taken place in language teaching methods over the past 30 to 40 years, the ‘synthetic’ syllabus is, especially in many *foreign* language teaching contexts, still the most prevalent approach to course design.

In a FonF instructional mode, on the other hand, learners are involved first and foremost in meaning-based activities before any attention is paid to specific linguistic features:

... during an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production.

(Long and Robinson, 1998: 23)

While FonFs involves taking individual linguistic items out of context and isolating them for separate study as part of an *a priori* synthetic syllabus, in a FonF approach it is a primary communicative need, identified as part of meaning-based interaction, that

draws the learner's attention to a formal aspect of the language, often as a result of a mismatch between input and output that induces 'noticing' (Schmidt and Frota, 1986; Schmidt, 1990). Meaning-based communication between learners or proficient L2 speakers, it is claimed, serves to provide crucial negative feedback for the learner in the form of recasts or corrective reformulations of his or her L2 utterances.

In a refinement of Long's definition of focus-on-form, Ellis (2001) distinguishes two types: 'planned focus-on-form' and 'incidental focus-on-form'. In the former, the primary focus is on meaning rather than form but instruction involves intensive attention to preselected forms. In incidental FonF, by contrast, there is again a primary focus on meaning, however attention is distributed to a wider range of forms and none of these are preselected for treatment. As will be seen, the FonF group in this study was exposed to elements of both planned and incidental focus-on-form.

Studies of the effectiveness of FFI, in particular of FonF, have proliferated in recent years. In their meta-analytic review of 49 studies published between 1980 and 1998, Norris and Ortega (2000) found that FFI in general results in large proficiency gains, and that its effects are durable. More specifically, their study shows that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction and that both FonFs- and FonF-type interventions were highly effective. Spada (1997) too reviews classroom research and laboratory studies and points to the benefits of a wide range of FFI instructional types, suggesting the effectiveness of both FonFs and FonF.

By tracking the linguistic progress of one group exposed to essentially a FonF approach and another exposed to more specific FonFs instruction, the present study aimed to further explore this area, concentrating in particular on the two approaches' effect on the development of general and grammatical competence. By monitoring subsequent progress over a period of naturalistic exposure in the target country it was hoped further to investigate the longer-term acquisitional effects of the two approaches.

III Study sample

The sample (n = 57) were all post-A level students of German.² Approximately three quarters of them (hereafter referred to as 'specialists') were enrolled on either a Single Honours (SH) or Joint Honours (JH) degree in German Studies devoted to study of various aspects of the society and culture of German-speaking countries and the German language. The remainder of the sample were studying German on a four-year institution-wide language programme in combination with a degree in Commerce, Social Science or Law (hereafter 'less specialist' students); the 'society and culture' component here was less substantial than on the specialist programme, but, most importantly, *the time devoted to German language was almost identical*.

Inevitably there were differences in classroom experience between (but not within) the two groups. Furthermore, their programme aims differed slightly and therefore possibly also their motivation (specialists tending to evince a more integrative motivation than the more instrumentally motivated less-specialist learners – see Coleman, 1996a). On the other hand, they had comparable prior learning experiences, had near identical A-level point scores and were all aged 18 or 19. Moreover, all students in the sample spent a substantial period studying in a German-speaking country during the third year of their degree; with the exception of dual language students (11 in total), this amounted to a full year.

It is important to understand the different language programmes of the two groups. The specialist students were taught together for their German language classes; these took up two or three hours per week, depending on the year of study. Half of the German language programme was devoted to explicit instruction in grammatical and lexical forms following a structural syllabus; this had an exclusive focus on grammatical form rather than meaning, was conducted partly in English, featured a good deal of metalanguage and involved substantial amounts of controlled practice via written and oral drills, gap-filling, manipulation and transformation exercises, supplemented by small amounts of translation from English into German. The methodology employed was, in part, not dissimilar to grammar-translation. As the degree

progressed, this part of the programme introduced more extensive translation both into and out of German. The other half of the specialist language programme was devoted to work on authentic texts and more meaning-based communication (e.g., writing CVs and job applications, reading texts of different registers, watching and discussing video and film); it involved less frequent attention to grammar but featured regular formal work on vocabulary building and learning. Course assessments and end-of-year examinations were primarily language- and accuracy-focused. A substantial element of the programme thus merits the designation FonFs. The language modules formed just part of the specialist degree in German Studies which also included lectures and seminars on German literature, history, philology, linguistics and politics. While the latter involved a small amount of exposure to German texts or films and so on, they were taught through the medium of English and so there was limited input enrichment from the non-language part of the programme.

By contrast, the less specialist students received separate 'language and society' courses for a total of three hours per week; these were conducted almost exclusively in German, did not involve a grammar syllabus, and generally had a much less specific focus on the forms of the language. Classroom work centred on factual authentic texts, both written and video, some textbook-based, others from the German press, devoted to aspects of contemporary German society and post-war history. Student activity featured discussion of topics, individual presentations, lectures in German, oral and written comprehension work, summary and precis writing, essays, and project work. Course assessments and end-of-year examinations had a dual focus on task fulfilment and quality of language. With the exception of students of Law with German who receive some specific-purposes tuition (legal terminology), German language did not feature in the main part of these students' degree programmes. Overall the programme was thus very distinct from the specialist programme: since work on the language itself was driven by content- and meaning-based instruction, the programme comes closer to the designation FonF.

The instruction received by this FonF group consisted of a mixture of Ellis's (2001) 'planned focus-on-form' and 'incidental focus-on-form'. The *planned* FonF involved the (native-speaker)

teacher ensuring some form of enriched input: either she used texts specially modified to provide plentiful exposure to a particular linguistic feature (e.g., strong verbs) and in the course of work on the text drew learners' attention to the feature; or else, more commonly, she involved learners in meaning-based activities which, besides fulfilment of a communicative purpose, also required attention to be focused on a specific structure or phrase, for example, responding to hypothetical questions about past economic performance requiring use of subjunctive forms ('if unemployment hadn't risen, . . .'), or answering questions on post-war history requiring use of passive constructions ('The GDR was established in . . .'). This was on occasions followed up by intensive practice in which learners' attention was briefly focused exclusively on form – for example, following meaning-focused discussion of a text on marketing strategies rich in modal expressions, there might be 10–15 minutes of oral work on different modal verb forms (e.g., 'the company could/should/ought to/might have to', etc.) with a follow-up written task requiring equal focus on form and meaning ('Write a description of the company's marketing strategy outlining points it should have previously addressed, ones it must now address and those it might consider in the future').

The *incidental* FonF instruction involved largely reactive focus-on-form in the shape of negative feedback in response to learners' errors made either in oral or written work. Such feedback was often implicit via such techniques as reformulation of incorrect responses, simple repetition of correct forms, or prompts (e.g., 'Nicht in *den* Bundesrat, sondern in . . . ?'). More explicit negative feedback occurred regularly in response to written tasks, often with correct forms written onto student scripts. The FonF learners were in both years given advice on more specific *FonFs*-type work they might undertake in private study (e.g., via a reference grammar and accompanying workbook or via CALL exercises) but these did not feature in classroom activities. Course evaluation forms and interviews with selected members of the FonF group suggest that although most students purchased the recommended reference grammar, little use was made of it. Amongst those who did occasionally refer to it, use was limited to checking structures when performing written tasks outside of class. The workbook tended to be used even less frequently. CALL exercises were, to begin with,

used by several students but use tailed off after the first semester, several finding the tasks demotivating and the L2 metalanguage difficult.

IV Procedures

Over the four years of the study the following procedures were carried out:

Entry to programme

- German Grammar Test
- German C-test
- AH5 IQ test
- Collection of biographical data on cohort

End of year 2

- Repeat German Grammar Test
- Repeat German C-test
- Pre-year abroad questionnaire

Start of year 4

- Repeat German Grammar test
- Repeat German C-test
- Post-year abroad questionnaire
- Selected interviews with 18 students

End of year 4

- Recording of language marks in finals exams
- Recording of degree classification

Programme-related oral scores for both groups were also recorded at the end of years 1 and 4 but were not used in the measurement of progress gains.

The Grammar Test consisted of 125 gapped sentences, covering 13 major topics in German grammar, for example, adjective endings, word order, prepositions, passive, subjunctive. The test had been piloted during the year preceding the main study and the

number of items reduced from 150 to 125, following rigorous item analysis. Test reliability had been estimated using an internal consistency calculation (Cronbach alpha = 0.79). The test was devised independently of the two groups' syllabuses and textbooks, by someone not involved in teaching either group. This was to minimize grammatical or lexical bias in the test design and avoid the danger of the items being more accessible to one group than the other. Students were not told in advance that they would be doing a grammar test, the tests were 'closed', that is, no papers were released between iterations, and students did not know they were to be retested at some future point.

The C-test was the same German test as used by Coleman in the ELPS (n = 3739), consisting of five gapped texts and 110 separate items. The test was thoroughly trialled in the pilot study for the ELPS and subjected to rigorous statistical analysis. Based on data from the pilot study, Coleman (1996b) reports an alpha coefficient for the test of 0.891 (n = 1867). The C-test was, once again, 'closed' and no mention was made of retesting. Thus, although a retest factor cannot be entirely excluded, the time gaps involved (19 months and 17 months respectively) make it unlikely to be very significant at all.

This study was primarily concerned with measuring grammatical accuracy and general proficiency, rather than oral fluency. The C-test was employed in the belief that it provides a proven measure of *overall* language proficiency. Indeed, Coleman (1996a), drawing on the work of Grotjahn and Tönshoff (1992), Raatz and Klein-Braley (1982, 1985), presents a strong case for the C-test to be regarded as a holistic measuring instrument of foreign language proficiency, valid for the assessment of accuracy and fluency, implicit and explicit language knowledge. It is, nevertheless, acknowledged that the two tests employed might be thought to favour explicit over implicit language knowledge and it is certainly possible that slightly different results might have been obtained with fluency measures.

The study was designed to test the following experimental hypotheses:

1. The mean progress rates of the two groups will not differ significantly on either the C-test or the Grammar Test for years 1 to 2.

2. The mean progress rates of the two groups will not differ significantly on the C-test or the Grammar Test for the period of residence abroad.
3. The mean proficiency levels of the two groups will not differ significantly on the C-test or the Grammar Test in the final year of the programme.

A series of independent sample t-tests were employed to investigate these hypotheses, employing a probability level for rejection of $p < .05$ (in accordance with the practice in most research studies in applied linguistics).

In addition it was hoped the analysis would provide insights into the following two questions:

- What are the relative benefits of FFI and naturalistic exposure to L2 for grammatical competence and general proficiency?
- Are there any areas of L2 German grammar which are more susceptible to formal, explicit instruction; and do any develop more readily as a result of naturalistic exposure?

V Findings: general progress

1 Entry picture

Looking at the point of departure for the two groups in the cohort, what strikes one is their essential homogeneity. There is virtually no difference in mean scores between the specialist (FonFs) and less specialist (FonF) learners on the holistic C-test measure, while on the grammatical measure, although the less specialist students outscore their specialist counterparts by close to six percentage points, this is not statistically significant ($p = 0.13$).

Besides displaying broadly comparable linguistic competence, the groups also appear to be of much the same general ability as measured on the AH5 IQ test (see Table 1).

2 Interim progress (years 1–2)

Test results at the mid-point of the programme reveal some interesting developments. On the C-test, the FonFs group has made a statistically significant greater mean gain ($p = <.05$) than the FonF group (7.20% versus 4.43%). On the Grammar Test, there is

Table 1 Entry scores (%) on IQ and proficiency measures for the two groups

Test	Group	Mean	Std dev.
AH5	FonFs	33.00	8.69
	FonF	34.69	7.15
CTEST1	FonFs	47.43	8.44
	FonF	47.38	10.95
GTEST1	FonFs	49.63	11.68
	FonF	55.40	14.34

an even more startling difference: the FonF group remains virtually static (0.1% progress over the two years), while the FonFs group improves on its entry score by a full 11% ($p = <.001$) (see Table 2).

Under the influence of its programme of explicit grammar instruction, the slightly less able group, as measured by the AH5 IQ test (Table 1), is thus making significantly greater progress on both measures at this stage of the programme.

3 *Progress over residence abroad*

The study abroad period was a central and compulsory part of the course for all students. For those studying two languages, the period was split between the two target countries; this meant 19% of our sample spent a maximum of six months in Germany or Austria. Students attended different universities, had a largely free hand in choosing which subjects to follow and were consequently enrolled on a variety of courses. Owing to this variety there were

Table 2 Progress scores (%) for groups on proficiency measures, years 1–2

Test	Group	Mean	Std dev.
CTEST1	FonFs	47.43	8.44
CTEST2	FonFs	54.63	8.89
CTEST1	FonF	47.38	10.95
CTEST2	FonF	51.81	11.93
GTEST1	FonFs	49.63	11.68
GTEST2	FonFs	60.65	12.11
GTEST1	FonF	55.40	14.34
GTEST2	FonF	55.50	15.78

clear qualitative differences in the type of academic language they were exposed to. On the other hand, they had to follow a prescribed number of courses at their chosen institution and the post-residence abroad questionnaires revealed the number of classes attended per week was in the majority of cases between 5 and 10.

Some students chose to attend supplementary German language classes and/or translation classes. The post-residence abroad questionnaires revealed that this applied to 44% of our sample. Interestingly, a higher proportion of the specialist students within the sample (48.9%) attended such classes than the less specialist students (31.25%). Furthermore, the specialist learners showed a greater interest in studying grammar in class (30%) than the less specialist learners (19%). While it is conceivable that the non-specialist, FonF group may have undertaken *independent* study of grammar while abroad to make up for the lack of earlier instruction, the above figures suggest such a scenario is unlikely.

The sample was tested on both proficiency measures upon their return from residence abroad, at the beginning of the fourth year of their degree. Results show that, compared with the initial two years of the programme, the relative rates of progress on both the C-test and the Grammar Test, are now reversed (Table 3).

Whereas the less specialist FonF group had lagged behind the specialist FonFs group by almost 3% on C-test progress over the first two years, they have now made relatively greater progress (10.90%, versus 8.95% for the FonFs group) and have very nearly caught up with the latter's proficiency level. The findings on the

Table 3 Progress scores (%) for groups on proficiency measures, years 2–4

Test	Group	Mean	Std dev.
CTEST2	FonFs	54.63	8.89
CTEST3	FonFs	63.58	10.20
CTEST2	FonF	51.81	11.93
CTEST3	FonF	62.71	9.09
GTEST2	FonFs	60.65	12.11
GTEST3	FonFs	70.14	16.64
GTEST2	FonF	55.50	15.78
GTEST3	FonF	71.71	13.24

Grammar Test are even more dramatic: the FonF group has improved its second-year score by an astonishing 16.21% as a result of naturalistic exposure in the target country, easily outstripping the FonFs group's 9.49% progress and regaining its initial superiority on this measure over the latter.

4 Overall progress (years 1–4)

It is interesting to compare the C-test results with those from the ELPS, both the figures for all institutions and for the nearest comparator universities – Coleman's (1996a) pre-1970 grouping (Table 4).

Our sample starts from a lower base than students at comparable institutions but makes above-average progress over the first two years of the programme and just about catches up with the comparator figure. However, progress during residence abroad is considerably slower than that of both the ELPS groups, and the final proficiency level is lower not only than the comparator figure but also, most surprisingly, the global ELPS figure. Looking at progress over the whole programme, we see that our sample improved by only 15.96%, the ELPS comparator students by 20.71% and all ELPS institutions by 21.01%. This confirms Coleman's (1996a) finding that those students who start from a lower base make greatest progress and do a lot of 'catching up' over the course of a languages degree. It also points to a slightly lower calibre of student in our sample compared with the ELPS 'norm'.

With regard to our sample's progress across the degree as a whole (Table 5), we can see that on the holistic measure there is now little to choose between the groups. Furthermore, on the grammar measure, over the period of residence abroad the FonF group has made up a lot of the ground that it lost during the first two years of the programme; although the FonFs group still has a

Table 4 Whole sample mean C-test scores comparison with ELPS (%)

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 4
ELPS (all HEIs)	44.50	47.51	65.51
ELPS (pre-1970)	49.94	54.08	70.65
SAMPLE	47.41	53.90	63.37

Table 5 Analysis of mean progress rates (%) across whole programme

Progress type	Group	Mean progress	Std dev.
CTEST YEARS 1–2	FonFs	7.20	6.35
	FonF	4.43	3.37
GTEST YEARS 1–2	FonFs	11.02	8.97
	FonF	0.10	5.70
CTEST ABROAD	FonFs	8.95	8.72
	FonF	10.90	8.86
GTEST ABROAD	FonFs	9.49	7.63
	FonF	16.21	10.02
CTEST YEARS 1–4	FonFs	16.15	7.83
	FonF	15.33	8.79
GTEST YEARS 1–4	FonFs	20.51	10.25
	FonF	16.22	12.36

clear advantage here with regard to overall *progress*, the groups' final mean grammar scores are again very similar (specialist = 70.14, less specialist = 71.71).

VI Findings: grammar test sub-categories

1 Progress (years 1–2)

An analysis of the groups' progress rates on different sections of the first two iterations of the Grammar Test shows that the specialist FonFs group outscores the less specialist FonF group on all but two categories, sometimes substantially. Interestingly, these categories (Reflexives and Pronouns) were two of the four that did not feature on the FonFs group's grammar syllabus. The teacher of the FonF group reports that both topics did feature in her teaching on more than one occasion but always incidentally, never formally. Coverage of these topics does, however, seem to have been sufficient to give the FonF learners an advantage in these two areas. A comparison of mean rates of progress by group across the two tests (see Table 6) illustrates the differences. Independent sample t-tests were run to establish whether the differences in mean progress rates were statistically significant.

It is also interesting to note those areas in which the FonF group made little progress or indeed regressed. This suggests that there

Table 6 Mean progress rates (%) by group on sub-categories of Grammar Tests 1–2

Grammatical categories	FonF mean progress	FonFs mean progress
Reflexives	8.06	2.12
Pronouns	5.36	1.52
Passive	3.91	12.24
Conjunctions	2.35	13.56
Relatives	1.39	14.42
Prepositions*	1.14	14.32
Use of tenses	1.04	9.93
General vocabulary	0.90	9.88
Adjectives*	0.49	12.60
Modals	-0.78	11.44
General verb forms**	-4.30	3.99
Word order*	-5.56	11.12
Strong verb forms*	-6.94	8.75

Notes:

* Denotes categories where the difference reaches statistically significant levels ($p = <.05$)

** Denotes use of infinitive, past participle and imperative forms

are certain grammatical topics which particularly benefit from explicit, systematic instruction or, to put it another way, which particularly suffer if they merely receive fleeting mention as they arise in context, or indeed are not dealt with explicitly in instruction at all. Germanists will not be surprised to learn these include strong verbs, word order, modal expressions, adjective endings, prepositions, use of tenses and relatives. A comparison with the progress made by the FonFs group on these same topics suggests that, although the topics may be inherently problematic for English-native L2 learners of German, instruction can clearly help develop command of them – see Table 7.

Table 7 Mean progress rates (%) on selected topics from Grammar Tests 1–2

Topic	FonF	FonFs
Relatives	1.39	14.42
Use of tenses	1.04	9.93
Prepositions	1.14	14.32
Adjectives	0.49	12.60
Modals	-0.78	11.44
Word order	-5.56	11.12
Strong verb forms	-6.94	8.75

2 Progress (residence abroad)

A comparison of relative performance by group at this stage reveals major changes. On three topics (Adjectives, Use of tenses and Conjunctions) there is little to choose between the two groups and the FonFs group now significantly outcores the FonF group on only three of the other topics. This means the FonF group's performance is superior on the seven remaining topics, in some cases substantially so – a complete change from the pre-residence abroad findings.

A comparison of mean *progress* rates by group reflects this turnaround, with the less specialist FonF learners making greater progress on 11 of the 13 topics (Table 8). Once again, independent sample t-tests were run to establish statistical significance.

3 Acquisition orders

An analysis of the whole sample's performance on the various sub-categories of the Grammar Test shows a clear order of difficulty for grammatical topics, with a relatively large spread. In comparing the rank order of difficulty for the whole sample across the three tests (Table 9), what strikes one is the overall stability of the rank

Table 8 Mean progress rates (%) on sub-categories by group, Grammar Tests 2–3

FonF	Mean progress	FonFs	Mean progress
Conjunctions*	25.44	Conjunctions*	13.28
General verb forms	21.60	General verb forms	15.52
Word order*	20.14	Word order*	2.55
Relatives*	19.34	Relatives*	7.22
General vocabulary	18.81	General vocabulary	14.52
Passive	17.74	Passive	7.25
Prepositions	16.31	Prepositions	13.68
Use of tenses	15.63	Use of tenses	14.27
Modals	14.51	Modals	6.38
Reflexives	14.03	Reflexives	13.77
Strong verb forms	10.81	Strong verb forms	11.00
Adjectives	8.25	Adjectives	4.85
Pronouns	5.23	Pronouns	8.16

Note:

* Denotes categories where the difference reaches statistically significant levels ($p = <.05$)

Table 9 Order of difficulty (low to high) for whole sample (% correct responses)

Grammar Test 1	Mean	Grammar Test 2	Mean	Grammar Test 3	Mean
Modals	64.68	Modals	73.02	Conjunctions	84.82
Pronouns	63.04	Conjunctions	68.45	Modals	81.47
Conjunctions	57.74	Pronouns	65.53	General verb forms	75.78
Word order	57.14	Relatives	64.90	Relatives	75.20
General verb forms	56.85	Passive	64.88	Passive	74.78
Passive	54.76	Word order	64.02	Pronouns	72.96
Relatives	53.79	General verb forms	58.73	Reflexives	71.17
Reflexives	53.74	Reflexives	57.37	Word order	71.03
Strong verb forms	48.15	Strong verb forms	52.91	Use of tenses	67.26
Use of tenses	44.97	Use of tenses	52.65	Strong verb forms	66.89
General vocabulary	43.65	General vocabulary	51.25	General vocabulary	66.84
Adjectives	39.68	Prepositions	49.78	Prepositions	64.12
Prepositions	38.82	Adjectives	48.96	Adjectives	54.67

order, suggesting fairly even progression: those topics which at the start of the programme posed greatest difficulties remained difficult at the end, while those which proved more accessible early on, remained so. This shows that even under the influence of two different types of input, the one formal classroom instruction, the other naturalistic exposure, progression across topics was remarkably even, with, on the whole, greater progress being made over the residence abroad period. There is, thus, no evidence of instruction having any effect on the *order* in which structures were learnt.

4 Non-instructed grammar topics

As noted above, of the 13 topics covered in the Grammar Test, four (General verb forms, General vocabulary, Pronouns and Reflexives) were not part of the syllabus followed by the FonFs group. These four topics thus act as a sort of control measure for progress on the Grammar Test.

A ranking by mean progress rates per section for the FonFs group over the first two tests (Table 10, first two columns) shows quite clearly the benefits of instruction, as those topics not formally taught gather at the bottom of the table, that is, substantially greater progress was made on those topics that featured in tuition. However, it is also interesting to note that the FonF group made appreciable progress on two of the non-instructed topics (Pronouns and Reflexives) and indeed outperformed the FonFs group on these (see Table 6).

An analysis of mean progress rates during residence abroad for the FonFs group (Table 10, third and fourth columns), shows that, whereas before those topics not taught in the pre-residence abroad language syllabus were grouped at the difficult end of the scale, they now appear much higher up the table – the most striking transformation having occurred with command of ‘General verb forms’ – indicating that naturalistic exposure has helped substantially to compensate for the earlier lack of tuition.

VII Discussion

With regard to the initial phase of the study (years 1 to 2), experimental hypothesis 1, that is, the mean progress rates of the

Table 10 Mean progress (%) on sub-categories, Grammar Tests 1–2 and 2–3, for specialist group only

FonFs group	Progress, Tests 1–2	FonFs group	Progress, Tests 2–3
Relatives	14.42	General verb forms	15.52
Prepositions	14.32	General vocabulary	14.52
Conjunctions	13.56	Use of tenses	14.27
Adjectives	12.60	Reflexives	13.77
Passive	12.24	Prepositions	13.68
Modals	11.44	Conjunctions	13.28
Word order	11.12	Strong verb forms	11.00
Use of tenses	9.93	Pronouns	8.16
General vocabulary	9.88	Passive	7.25
Strong verb forms	8.75	Relatives	7.22
General verb forms	3.99	Modals	6.38
Reflexives	2.12	Adjectives	4.85
Pronouns	1.52	Word order	2.55

Note:

Highlighted items are those not formally covered on the language syllabus of the FonFs group

two groups will not differ significantly on either the C-test or the Grammar Test for years 1 to 2, was rejected ($p = <.05$). Although the two groups in the sample had near identical starting proficiency, the FonFs learners, under the influence of their language programme's targeted and explicit grammatical syllabus, made significantly greater progress on both C-test and Grammar Test than the FonF learners, whose programme involved less consistent attention to linguistic features and a more meaning-led syllabus. Furthermore, the FonFs group's performance on the four 'control' grammar topics not featured in instruction was distinctly weak compared to those in which they had received tuition. While this should not be interpreted in isolation from subsequent developments over the four-year programme, it does suggest that *for exclusively classroom-based foreign language learning*, we should be careful not to abandon all explicit grammar instruction. There is still a role for formal (declarative) knowledge of language in contexts where naturalistic input is limited.

At the same time, it should be noted that the FonF group actually regressed in several areas of grammatical competence while simultaneously registering gains on the holistic measure

comparable to national norms. Their tuition clearly benefited their overall language competence, but their performance perhaps provides evidence of a focus on function rather than grammar, on meaning rather than forms, on fluency rather than accuracy.

This is not to argue for a return to *purely* structure-led syllabuses. It should not be forgotten that the FonFs group also had a substantial meaning- and communication-based element in their programme which undoubtedly has a role to play in proceduralizing the declarative knowledge acquired in the grammar strand of the programme (cf. DeKeyser, 1998; Johnson, 1996: 91–119). However, the fact that the progression rates of the FonFs students during the first two years of classroom-based learning (in effect a total of only 132 hours of instruction over the two years) were comparable with and, in the case of the Grammar Test, exceeded the gains they made during residence abroad, is a notable finding and points to the efficacy of an instructional approach that offers specific teaching of grammatical forms in combination with meaning-based communication.

Further evidence of the effectiveness of instruction comes from the fact that over the first two years of the programme, that is, the classroom instruction phase, the sample as a whole, driven almost solely by the performance of the FonFs group, made (C-test) proficiency gains well above that of the ELPS comparator group. The instruction they received during this period effectively served to mask and indeed partly compensate for their relative overall weakness compared with ELPS norms. This compensatory effect suggests, once again, that for classroom-based language learners, a FonFs approach, supported by meaningful interaction with L2 sources, has distinct advantages over a less consistently explicit FonF approach.

Looking at the results for the second phase of the programme, that is, the progress made between the end of year 2 and the start of year 4, we see that the first part of the second experimental hypothesis, that is the mean progress rates of the two groups will not differ significantly on the C-test for the period of residence abroad, is accepted ($p = > .05$). The second part of the hypothesis, relating to performance on the Grammar Test is, however, rejected ($p = < .01$). Indeed, during their period in Germany, the FonF

group progressed considerably further in grammatical competence (16.21%) than the FonFs group had done during two years of classroom instruction (11.02%). This seriously calls into question research studies (reported by Coleman, 1997: 14) suggesting residence abroad brings no benefit to grammatical competence. To what do we attribute these substantial gains?

They can, we suggest, be seen as confirmation of those second language acquisition research studies reviewed above which assert that *any* FFI is beneficial to L2 development. The benefits may not be immediately evident, but FFI serves a consciousness-raising purpose (Rutherford, 1988; Schmidt, 1990); it makes formal features of L2 more salient and induces learners to 'notice' such features – especially those that appear less commonly in unstructured communicative interaction – in readiness for when further input provides sufficient positive evidence for the learner to adapt his or her interlanguage to correct usage. On this view, despite the marked lack of progress in formal grammatical competence amongst the less specialist learners during the initial stages of the degree, FonF instruction is seen as preparing the ground for the beneficial effects of subsequent naturalistic exposure. We can speculate that naturalistic exposure that *builds on prior FonF instruction* appears to be just as effective in developing grammatical competence as FonFs classroom-based instruction and subsequent naturalistic exposure.

Support for this position comes from the performance of the FonFs group on the four grammar topics not featured in their syllabus. While this group made minimal gains on these topics during the instructional phase, during residence abroad they made substantial progress with them. This strongly suggests that naturalistic exposure served to compensate to a considerable degree for the earlier lack of tuition – as happened with the FonF group's grammatical competence as a whole during residence abroad.

As far as final proficiency levels are concerned, experimental hypothesis 3, that is, the mean proficiency levels of the two groups will not differ significantly on the C-test or the Grammar Test in the final year of the programme, is accepted ($p = > .05$). By the end of residence abroad, the FonF group more or less regained parity with the FonFs group on the C-test, while on the Grammar

Test it even nudged slightly ahead, regaining its initial superiority on this measure.

There are three established positions in the research on second language acquisition and language instruction for which one can find support here. First, the stability of the rank order of difficulty of grammar topics across the three iterations of the Grammar Test supports the view that L2 develops via a natural route. Comparison of the order of difficulty for Tests 1 and 2 shows that instruction does not change the order of acquisition of structures; furthermore, the residence abroad findings show that naturalistic exposure to L2 does nothing to change this order either. Across the programme as a whole, grammatical topics are shown to develop fairly evenly, providing confirmation of the L2 acquisition order studies reviewed above.³

Secondly, notwithstanding this, the rapid gains of the FonFs group over the first two years point to the *acceleration* of the acquisition process that can be achieved through instruction. It would seem, comparing the two groups, that an element of conscious and explicit focus on structures can increase the rate of this acceleration.

Thirdly, in the absence of any evidence of substantial independent grammar study during residence abroad by the FonF group, one might argue that their rapid 'catch-up' progress provides support for the claim that instruction which serves to raise learners' awareness of linguistic structure 'prepares the ground' for subsequent acquisition under the influence of naturalistic exposure: the effects of instruction which focuses on form in a general, consciousness-raising way are indirect and not immediate but they appear real enough in the medium to long term.

We can now attempt to answer the two general questions raised earlier:

- What are the relative benefits of FFI and naturalistic exposure to L2 for both grammatical competence and general proficiency?

The FonFs learners' progress on both measures over the first two years of the programme, and, just as importantly, the FonF group's stagnation and partial regression over the same period on the grammar measure, clearly point to the benefits of a substantial element of formal grammatical instruction. These insights are

especially important for foreign language learning programmes with minimal exposure to naturalistic use of L2. However, the FonF group's progress on the two measures as a result of residence abroad, especially the grammar proficiency gains, suggests naturalistic exposure that builds on a less formal, more *ad hoc* approach to grammar teaching can go a long way towards compensating for the lack of a formal grammar syllabus. FonF instruction may not lead to immediate restructuring of learners' L2 knowledge but it serves to lay the foundations for effective acquisition during subsequent naturalistic, input-rich exposure in the target country. Where this extended natural exposure is not available, that is, in a purely classroom-based programme, it is suggested that a FonF approach is not to be recommended.

- Are there any areas of L2 German grammar which are more susceptible to formal, explicit instruction? And do any develop more readily as a result of naturalistic input?

Research with a broader sample would be needed to provide a definitive answer to this, but our study points to the following four conclusions:

1. Over the two years of instruction prior to residence abroad, least progress was made by the FonFs group on those grammatical topics in which they had received no formal tuition. However, the same group made statistically significant progress on almost all topics compared with the FonF group. Furthermore, judging by the regression or near-regression rates of the latter on some topics, and compared with the substantial gains made by the FonFs group on the same topics, an initial analysis would suggest that there seem to be certain grammatical categories which are especially susceptible to attrition when they are not supported by attention to form, or are merely supported in an *ad hoc* manner, and which, conversely, can benefit substantially from planned, formal and explicit instruction. For L1-English learners of L2 German these include Adjectives, Modals, Passives, Prepositions, Relatives, Strong verbs, Use of tenses and Word order.
2. Analysis of performance on grammatical sub-categories over the residence abroad phase, however, serves to refine this

picture. Thus, some of the FonF group's greatest progress gains, compared with the FonFs group, were in the use of Modals, Passive, Relatives and Word order, all topics on which the FonFs group had earlier made substantial progress under the influence of pre-residence abroad tuition. It would seem these topics respond to either formal instruction or naturalistic exposure.

3. Supporting our findings from the instruction phase of the programme, significant progress was made by *both* groups during residence abroad in the accurate use of Conjunctions, General verb forms, General vocabulary, Prepositions, Reflexives, Strong verb forms and Use of tenses, suggesting these may be less crucial in classroom instruction, provided the overall programme includes a substantial element of naturalistic exposure.
4. There appear to be certain grammatical topics that do not develop especially well on a diet of predominantly naturalistic input, possibly because of their reduced salience and frequency in such input. Neither group made much progress during residence abroad on Adjectives and Pronouns. It might be concluded that these should therefore figure prominently in formal instruction.

To sum up these findings, the lessons for syllabus design are that areas of L2 German grammar which particularly benefit from explicit instruction, include Adjectives, Modals, Passive, Pronouns, Relatives and Word order. Conversely, topics which seem to develop substantially through naturalistic exposure, and therefore might not need as much formal attention in the classroom, include Conjunctions, General verb forms, General vocabulary, Prepositions, Reflexives, Strong verb forms and Use of tenses.

VIII Conclusion

So what do these findings tell us about L2 instructional approaches? In the specific context of *foreign language* teaching in a majority L1 setting, this study suggests there is still a substantial need for a FonFs approach to language instruction. It would appear that foreign languages are taught more efficiently and effectively when meaning-based classroom interaction in L2 is linked to FonFs, rather than (just) FonF instruction. In this sense, the study

provides a corrective to theoretical positions on foreign language instruction that are based solely on the findings of research into the efficacy of FFI on second language, content-based or immersion programmes (summarized in Spada, 1997).

However, we would contend that less explicit, consciousness-raising approaches to grammar instruction (focus-on-form), whether 'planned' or 'incidental', can be just as effective *when linked to extensive exposure to naturalistic use of the target language*, as in second language or study abroad settings. We conclude this from the absence of significant differences in the groups' overall proficiency on either measure by the final year of the degree programme, and from the dramatic compensatory effect of residence abroad on the FonF learners' grammatical competence.

Ultimately, the real insight of this study is that, in the context of the four-year foreign language degree, the type of language tuition seems to make little overall difference to proficiency and that natural language exposure that builds on instruction is the key. It thus provides a strong argument against any attempt to remove residence abroad from language programmes.

Of course, this conclusion needs to be seen in the context of the learning environment and the type of learners studied: an academic programme involving students who already had several years of experience studying L2 in an instructional context. It is difficult to make any strong claims on the basis of this study with regard to other types of learner, for example, *ab initio* students, who might well not benefit to the same extent from FonF instruction and might require a more intensive pre-residence abroad focus-on-formS in order to make similar progress during naturalistic exposure.

A further conclusion is confirmation of a natural route of language acquisition. Neither instruction nor naturalistic exposure would seem to alter L2 acquisition orders. However, the same analysis of progress on specific structures in L2 German suggests some develop better under the influence of formal instruction, while others are more effectively stimulated by naturalistic exposure. Further analysis of these categories to establish underlying commonalities will be required to determine the generalizability of these findings to other languages or teaching contexts.

Longitudinal studies are time-consuming and difficult to set up; establishing groups taught by distinct methodological approaches is equally, if not more challenging. But these approaches are also essential if we are to have reliable data on which to base our language learning theories. This study was clearly limited in that the sample was not large; it was relatively homogeneous; it had a single-language focus; the number of learners exposed to the two methodological treatments was imbalanced; a small number of specialist students only spent six months abroad, which may have slightly distorted the progress means; and, of course, circumstances did not allow a (non-instructed) control group. Furthermore, the testing measures employed do not focus specifically on fluency and might be thought to favour explicit over implicit language knowledge. It will be important to replicate the study with a larger sample, a wider range of languages and an increased number of proficiency testing instruments, including a separate fluency test (such as used by Towell, 1987), in order to further explore planned and incidental FonF versus explicit FonFs instruction in classroom-based foreign language learning.

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Notes

- ¹ In foreign language programmes in UK universities, a distinction is made between 'specialist' modern language degrees, in which the language is taught in conjunction with study of the society, culture and history of the target country, and 'less specialist' degrees for students wishing to study a language as a minor component of a non-language degree, for example, Politics with French, Business Studies with German, and so on. Degree-level study lasts four years, with normally the third year being spent in the target country.
- ² A levels are the standard school-leaving exams at age 18 in Britain. Four subjects are studied in year one (AS level), reducing to three in year two (A2). The combined points tally is used for entrance to university.
- ³ This order has been established using group scores. It is clearly possible

that individual learners did not manifest this order and, indeed, that the order of difficulty varied from one time to another for individuals. This is the subject of ongoing investigation.

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