Effectiveness of Focus-on-Forms Instruction: Different Outcomes on Constrained- and Free-Production Tasks?

Giselle Corbeil
Acadia University

The purpose of this study is to investigate how focus-on-forms instruction in second language teaching affects attention to forms in two different types of task: constrained and free production. These two different types of task were administered to 87 university students enrolled in a first-year French as a second language course before and after instruction on qualifying adjective agreement. Comparisons were made between learning-gain differences from pre- to post-tests for both tasks. Significant differences between pre- and post-test scores were found for both tasks. Although the difference between the two tasks was not significant, the learning-gain difference was somewhat higher for the constrained-production task than for the free-production task. When the total number of adjectives used in the compositions was broken down into colour adjectives and non-colour adjectives, no significant learning gains were observed between the two categories, although the learning gains for the non-colour adjectives was twice as high as for the colour adjectives. Possible explanations for these results are discussed.

Cette étude a pour but de déterminer de quelle façon un enseignement centré sur la connaissance des règles grammaticales influence l'attention portée aux formes lors de l'exécution de deux tâches différentes: l'une, bien encadrée et l'autre, une production libre. Quatre-vingt-sept étudiants de niveau universitaire inscrits dans un cours de français langue seconde de première année ont participé à cette recherche. Ces deux différentes catégories de tâches ont été assignées aux étudiants avant et après l'enseignement de l'accord des adjectifs qualificatifs. Des comparaisons ont été établies quant au progrès réalisé entre les pré- et post-tests. Des différences significatives ont été relevées entre les pré- et post-tests pour les deux sortes de tâches. Ces différences étaient plus grandes pour la tâche bien encadrée, sans toutefois être significatives. Quand le total des adjectifs est subdivisé entre adjectifs qualificatifs de couleur et de non-couleur, aucune différence significative n'apparaît entre les deux catégories, bien que les progrès réalisés pour les adjectifs de non-couleur soient deux fois plus élevés que pour les adjectifs de couleur. Des explications possibles pour ces résultats sont proposées.

Address for correspondence: Giselle Corbeil, Department of Languages and Literatures, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS B4P 2R6.
E-mail: giselle.corbeil@acadiau.ca.

Introduction

Focus-on-form instruction in second language teaching (henceforth FonF) is defined by Long (1991, pp. 45–46) as an attempt that "overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication". In contrast, focus-on-forms instruction (henceforth FonFs), is, according to Long, limited to instruction on discrete points of grammar in isolation, with no apparent focus on meaning. This definition might hold of traditional teaching methods, but more recent FonFs approaches include a variety of communicative themes and meaningful activities. It is not unusual, for instance, to find textbooks designed for false beginners at the university level that introduce chapters with communicative themes selected because they contain a specific grammatical structure. The remainder of the chapters, however, consists mainly of points of grammar. In Canadian universities, the emphasis put on a grammatical syllabus for false beginners in French is justified by the lack of grammatical accuracy generally found in the writing of immersion students who were exposed to content-based programs in elementary and high school. These students have developed linguistic fluency, but accuracy in production is not as well developed (Harley and Swain, 1984; Swain, 1985).

In this specific FonFs teaching environment, tasks used to measure learners' intake of the target structures tend to fall into two main categories: discrete-point exercises such as fill-in-the-blanks tasks which draw students' attention to the target structure, and free-production tasks such as composition writing on a topic chosen to elicit the target structure. These two tasks are believed to elicit two different types of knowledge. While the former task is deemed to elicit explicit knowledge, the latter is thought to elicit implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2002). Implicit knowledge, according to N. Ellis (2002, p. 224), is "knowledge about the distributional properties of language, which can only be revealed to the learner through substantial and repeated experiences with input". Krashen (1982, 1993) has argued that FonF instruction can only affect explicit knowledge, not the acquisition of implicit knowledge. On the other hand, other researchers (Long, 1983; Doughty, 1991, 2004) have argued that FonF can indeed speed up the acquisition of implicit knowledge. Since few studies have examined the influence of FonFs instruction compared to FonF instruction on the acquisition of implicit knowledge, it therefore becomes important to analyse the influence of this type of instruction on this type of knowledge.

Review of the literature

Focus-on-Forms studies

Before reporting on the FonFs studies and in the light of the debate surrounding FonF instruction, it seems appropriate to briefly reflect on some important observations concerning the differences between FonF and FonFs approaches. First, the difference between the two approaches as to their effectiveness is not that significant. Norris and Ortega (2000, p. 500), who examined a large number of studies comparing both types of instruction, observed that "although both FonF and FonFs instructional approaches result in large and probabilistically trustworthy gains over the course of an investigation, the magnitude of the gains differs very little between the two instructional categories".

Studies which analysed the effectiveness of FonFs instruction accompanied by explicit treatment are not numerous. Some of the FonFs studies tended to make comparisons with either this type of instruction and FonF instruction using different treatments or conditions (Scott, 1989, 1990; Fotos and Ellis, 1991; VanPatten and Cadierno, 1993; Cadierno, 1995; Kubota, 1995; VanPatten and Oikkenon, 1996; Leow, 1998) or FonFs instruction compared to either FonF instruction or focus on meaning (Hulstijn, 1989; Doughty, 1991; Fotos and Ellis, 1991; Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson and Doughty, 1995; Kubota, 1995; Robinson, 1996). Others compared both a combination of instruction and treatment, for instance, a combination of FonFs accompanied by either an explicit or implicit treatment or a combination of FonF accompanied by either an explicit or implicit treatment (Carroll and Swain, 1993; Kubota, 1995, 1996; Alanen, 1995; DeKeyser, 1995; de Graaff, 1997; Leow, 1998).

Different independent variable conditions were also investigated in these studies such as processing instruction (PI), negative feedback, consciousness raising, and textual enhancement. All of these features were present to some degree in the FonFs instruction used in this study. Only the PI and the textual enhancement studies, however, will be reported in this article as they represent features that are not always found in regular FonFs instruction. PI is defined by VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) as an explicit focus on form that is input based. Input refers to comprehension activities whereas output refers to production activities. PI, unlike traditional instruction (TI) that encourages learners to engage in drills or other kinds of controlled oral or written practice, seeks to alter the way in which learners perceive and process linguistic data in the input. All of the PI studies (VanPatten and Cadierno, 1993; VanPatten and Sanz, 1995; Kubota, 1996; VanPatten and Oikkenon, 1996; Salaberry, 1997; Nagata, 1998; Cheng, 2004; VanPatten, 2004; Wong, 2004) reported overall superior effects for PI over TI. According to Wong, the reason for the success of PI is the structured input rather than the explicit instruction.

Interestingly enough, Cheng (2004) did not report results as convincing as those reported by others investigating the superiority of PI over TI. One of the reasons given by Cheng is that the TI instructional materials developed for her study included substantially more meaningful exercises. Farley (2001) made a similar suggestion, that largely meaning-based TI may provide incidental structured input to learners. This suggestion is interesting in that it hints that TI could be as effective as PI provided that structured and meaningful activities are added, as is the case in the current study. The current study contains some of the PI features listed in Lee and VanPatten's (1995) study such as the presentation of one item at a time (sequencing), and the gradual shift from sentences to connected discourse, and from mechanical to communicative language. Unlike PI's sole focus on comprehension activities, the current study includes both production and comprehension activities. It differs as well from PI studies on the target linguistic structure, which is qualifying-adjective agreement, and also, with the exception of Wong's (2004) study, on the language of instruction, which is French. Another feature of the current study was the use of Powerpoint presentations, which can be viewed as a type of textual enhancement. Schmidt (1995) attributed an important role in learning to *noticing*. According to Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, conscious attention is a necessary condition for learning to occur. Attention to grammatical information can be achieved through enhanced input that can take different shapes, for example, manipulation of typography such as highlighting, underlining, italics, and boldface letters (Sharwood Smith, 1991). Until now, only a few studies have concentrated on analysing the effects of manipulating typography on L2 learning, and results of these studies are rather mixed. Jourdenais *et al*. (1995), for instance, who used a think-aloud procedure to determine whether the highlighting of target forms would affect learners' on-line processing of forms, found that the think-aloud protocols of students exposed to enhanced text contained significantly more episodes related to the target forms than the group who did not have enhanced texts. Doughty (1991) found as well that increasing the salience of target forms was as successful as providing explicit metalinguistic description in fostering acquisition of relative clause structures. Other studies (see Leow, 2003), however, found no significant effect among students exposed to enhanced versus unenhanced text. While all of these studies examined the effect of implicitly drawing students' attention to targeted forms, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of explicitly drawing students' attention to grammatical features using the new technology to make information more perceptually salient. Enhancement of input using Powerpoint presentations as used in the current study will also help provide more information about the effectiveness of this teaching tool.

Studies with a measure of acquisition of implicit knowledge

Implicit knowledge, according to N. Ellis (2002, p. 224) is "knowledge about the distributional properties of language, which can only be revealed to the learner through substantial and repeated experiences with input". N. Ellis suggests that the typical route of acquisition is from formula through low-scope patterns to constructions and that this process is the result of the human ability to categorize, which enables learners to figure out linguistic sequences and their frequencies in the input. Some researchers (Krashen, 1982, 1993; Bialystok, 1994; Paradis, 1994) do not acknowledge an interface between explicit knowledge (gained through explicit grammar teaching) and implicit knowledge (gained implicitly through exposure to input) while others suggest that explicit knowledge can evolve into implicit knowledge through practice (Anderson, 1982; DeKeyser, 1998, 2003; Ellis, 2004). As pointed out by Krashen (1993), implicit knowledge can only be measured by means that allow for unplanned and meaning-focused language use, and it follows from this observation that both FonF and FonFs instruction can only be shown to affect implicit knowledge if assessment measures include free-production tasks.

This requirement was not observed in most of the studies mentioned above except for Salaberry (1997) and Jourdenais *et al*. (1995), who used a free-production task. The other studies used a mix of constrained-constructed response, selected response, fill-in-the-blank exercises, metalinguistic judgements or multiple choice to assess the effectiveness of their respective conditions. This lack of free-production tasks to test the effectiveness of either FonF or FonFs instruction was also reported by Ellis (2002), who observed that out of the 49 studies analysed by Norris and Ortega (2000), only eight (or 16%) included a measure of acquisition based on free production. Ellis reviewed six of these eight studies, to which he added five more recently published ones. Tasks in the studies reviewed by Ellis (2002) consisted of free production, either oral (interviews, storytelling, narrative, picture description) or written (compositions, letters, dictogloss, picture description). Seven of the eleven studies reviewed by Ellis reported results that show the influence of FonF instruction on improving accuracy scores on free production tasks. Five out of the seven studies (Harley, 1989; Lyster, 1994; VanPatten and Sanz, 1995; Doughty and Varela, 1998; Muronoi, 2000) used both oral and written free-production tasks. Results of these studies show that when FonF was effective in the oral task, it was also effective in the written task.

However, as illustrated in the above section on FonFs studies, few empirical studies have measured the influence of FonF or FonFs instruction on written free-production tasks that are believed to elicit implicit knowledge compared to their influence on constrained tasks that are believed to elicit explicit knowledge (see DeKeyser, 2003 on the topic). Attention to forms as elicited by

tests such as fill-in-the-blanks usually yields results that confirm the successful application of explicitly taught grammatical rules as shown in the studies discussed above. So far, it is not clear whether free-production tasks, which do not draw attention to forms in the same way as do fill-in-the-blanks tasks, yield the same significant results as the fill-in-the-blanks tasks.

The dearth of studies looking at the effectiveness of instruction — whether focused on form or focused on forms — on both explicit knowledge (fill-in-the-blanks tasks) and implicit knowledge (free-production tasks) makes it all the more necessary to conduct more studies in this specific area of research. It is particularly important to shed some light on the role of FonFs instruction using PI and Powerpoint presentations, the latter of which is widely used at the university level, on the acquisition of implicit knowledge.

The research question is therefore the following:

> Does FonFs instruction on the agreement of French qualifying adjectives equally affect the accurate production of these adjectives in free-production tasks (composition writing) as compared to highly structured tasks (fill-in-the-blanks exercises)?

Method

Subjects

The subject pool consisted of four intact classes of students taking a first-year FSL course at a Canadian university in the Maritimes. The number of students totaled 87. These students were allowed to register for this course after taking a placement test. The placement test used at this university is the Université Laval Test — Form C — French as a Second Language (1976). It consists of 54 grammar questions and 30 vocabulary questions. As an additional diagnostic test, students write a composition on the first day of classes to ensure that they have been placed at the appropriate level.

This first-year course (Fran 1213) is offered to students who have completed Grade 11 or 12 Core French, although students from Extended Core French and French Immersion programs may also be found in this course depending on their scores on the placement test. In Canada, students are taught Core French from Grade 4 through Grade 9, 10, 11 or 12. Core French is a program which consists of teaching language arts in French for 30 to 40 minutes a day. At the end of Grade 12, these students have received approximately 956 hours of French instruction. In general, these students develop minimal abilities to communicate in French due to the limited time of contact with the language (Netten and Germain, 2004). The traditional teaching of grammatical rules has recently been replaced by a more communicative approach, but some teachers are still adapting to these changes.

Basic grammar is reviewed in Fran 1213, and while both oral and written communication are stressed, students are tested primarily on their written expression. Multi-section language courses, like Fran 1213, follow the same syllabus and instructors spend the same amount of time (approximately 2 weeks or 300 minutes) on each grammatical structure in order to prepare their students for the common final examination at the end of the semester.

Target grammatical structure

The agreement and placement of French qualifying adjectives was selected for this study. Unlike English, the French linguistic system requires qualifying adjectives to agree in number (singular, plural) and gender (masculine, feminine) with the noun or pronoun they qualify, as illustrated in the following phrases:

(1) a. le papier blanc
the-MSG paper-MSG white-MSG
'the white paper'

b. la plume blanche
the-FSG feather-FSG white-FSG
'the white feather'

c. les papiers blancs
the-PL papers-MPL white-MPL
'the white papers'

d. les plumes blanches
the-PL feathers-FPL white-FPL
'the white feathers'

As can be seen in (1), adjectives agree with the noun they modify in gender and number; (1a) and (1b) show the masculine and feminine singular forms *blanc* and *blanche*, and (1c) and (1d) show the plural forms, *blancs* and *blanches*. Whether they are adjectives of colour (black, green, red, yellow, etc.) or not (big, tall, short, heavy, etc.) they agree in number and gender with the noun they modify. To distinguish between these two categories of adjectives, adjectives other than adjectives of colour will be termed "non-colour adjectives" throughout the study.

With regard to the placement of adjectives, unlike in English, descriptive adjectives do not always precede the noun they modify. Some short, common adjectives normally precede the noun e.g. *un gros chien* 'a big dog', but adjectives of colour, religion, nationality and class almost always follow the nouns e.g. *un chien noir* 'a black dog.'

Explicit instruction

The textbook used for this course is *Ensuite* (Thompson and Hirsch, 1998). Communicative themes such as *Qui êtes-vous?* 'Who are you?', *L'enfance*

'Childhood', *Transports et vacances* 'Transportation and vacation', etc. are first introduced with a list of functions and grammatical structures provided for each theme. For example, functions for the first theme, *Qui êtes-vous?* 'Who are you?', include describing in the present tense, and narrating and asking questions, while the grammatical structures deal with adjectives, verbs in the present tense and interrogative forms. The first chapter, on the agreement of qualifying adjectives, was used for this study for the reasons already mentioned.

The study was spread over two years. The author taught two of the classes while another instructor taught the other two. Four fifty-minute classes were devoted to teaching this grammatical structure.[1] There was frequent consultation between the two instructors to ensure that the amount of time allocated to explanations on the use of adjectives and the methods employed to explain them were the same. Both instructors administered the pre-test on the same day and allocated the same amount of time for students to write it. Then, both began instruction on qualifying adjective agreement. Instructors followed the textbook's guidelines and spent the first class introducing a vocabulary list dealing with physical appearance, personality, feelings, and clothing. Students were called upon to describe their classmates. After this activity, each student was invited to read out loud parts of the cultural text. Questions were asked of students to test their oral comprehension of the text. The second class concentrated on teaching the targeted grammatical element. The statement of the rule, explanations, and examples from the textbook were used, and both Powerpoint presentations and the blackboard were employed to make the endings of qualifying adjectives more salient by highlighting, bolding, circling, and so forth. Homework assignments consisted of textbook exercises dealing with the use of qualifying adjectives in the feminine and plural forms. The third class was used to correct homework, explain errors and have students use qualifying adjectives in guessing games, such as "Guess who I am? I am a celebrity. I am a tall woman. I have long brown hair, brown eyes. I am very smart, etc." The fourth class focused on the placement of qualifying adjectives. The general rule was stated followed by the provision of examples drawn from the textbook. Again, Powerpoint presentations and the blackboard were used to explain this structure. Students were then given problem-solving exercises to practice the placement and agreement of adjectives, such as "Are you a good detective?" For this activity, students were given a list of clothes with matching adjectives and they had to identify the type of person to whom they thought they belonged. The purpose of this exercise was to have students write sentences using nouns and adjectives. A post-test was administered by both instructors during the class following the completion of the teaching of qualifying adjectives.

As can be seen, this FonFs instruction contains techniques that were used in the studies reported in the previous section such as processing instruction,

textual enhancement and corrective feedback in addition to communicative activities and presentation of rules.

Measures

All four classes were combined for the purpose of the study, which was to find the effect of FonFs instruction on two different tasks: fill in the blanks and composition writing. A pre-test was administered to students during the class which preceded the teaching of the target grammatical structure. This test was administered at the beginning of the semester due to the fact that the agreement of qualifying adjectives happened to be the first chapter of the textbook. It consisted of three different tasks, and can be found in the Appendix. The first task, in fill-in-the-blanks format, focused on the agreement of qualifying adjectives in number and gender with the nouns they modified e.g. *Josette a les cheveux (châtain) et les yeux (marron)* 'Josette has hair (chestnut) and eyes (brown)' (see Part I, Appendix). The second task involved sentence completion with a given number of nouns and qualifying adjectives and aimed at both correct placement and agreement of qualifying adjectives e.g. *pantalon* / *pressé* / *veston* / *propre* / *chaussettes* / *nouveau* / *vert foncé* / *chemise* / *gris* / *cravate* / *noir* — 'pants / pressed / jacket / clean / socks / new / dark green / shirt / grey / tie / black' (see Part II of Appendix). The third task consisted of writing a short composition on a topic designed to elicit the use of qualifying adjectives (see Part III of Appendix).

The post-test followed the same format although the content of the two tests was different, making it possible to conduct a counterbalanced design. Half of the students who took Version A of the pre-test took Version B of the post-test and vice versa. The number of adjectives was the same in both versions of the test, and care was taken to have the same number of adjectives to be written in the feminine or plural forms on both tests. Comparability of tasks with regard to complexity was checked by having students in classes that were not involved in the study take both tests. Twelve students took Version A and nine took Version B. A t-test for independent means was conducted and no significant difference was found between the two groups or between the two versions ($p = 0.192$).

Scoring procedure

As mentioned above, the pre-test consisted of three tasks or exercises. Only the first task (fill in the blanks) was used for comparison with the composition. The second task (correct placement of adjectives) was not considered for this comparison, since the placement of adjectives was rarely an important issue in the composition writing. In fact, most of the adjectives used in the compositions

were adjectives of colour (brown, blue, blond) which follow the nouns, or attributes referring to pronouns, e.g. *Je suis grande, grosse...* 'I am tall, fat...'

The first task included 15 blanks and 1 mark was awarded for each correct answer for a total of 15 marks. One mark was taken off for every error of adjective agreement (e.g. *blond* for *blonds*) and half a mark was taken off for spelling errors (e.g. *legere* for *légère*, *professionelle* for *professionnelle*). Percentages were then computed. Two scores were awarded for the composition. The first score consisted of a global assessment based on the vocabulary, the sentence structure, the correct spelling of words, the correct use of verb tenses, and the correct agreement of nouns, verbs and adjectives. The second score reflected the correct use of qualifying adjectives. It was done by recording all occurrences of correct qualifying adjectives. Percentages were then computed by multiplying by 100 the number of adjectives which had correct agreement with the noun they modified and dividing the answer by the total number of adjectives used. As in the first exercise, only half a mark was deducted for spelling errors.

Analyses and Statistical measures

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the pre-test scores of the four groups of students to ensure that the four classes were comparable as far as knowledge of this grammatical structure was concerned. The results of this analysis did not show any significant differences between the four classes ($p = 0.115$). To examine the differences in the number of errors made from pre- to post-tests for both tasks — the fill in the blanks and the compositions — paired t-tests, juxtaposing the means, were performed. Further analyses looked at the learning gains from pre- to post-tests between the two tasks. Other paired t-tests, juxtaposing the means, were run to determine these differences. The level of significance was pre-set to .05.

Additional analyses focused on one category of qualifying adjectives which appears to be more rule resistant than any others, namely adjectives of colour. The difference in the number of inaccurate qualifying adjectives of colour used from pre- to post-tests was compared to the number of all other inaccurate qualifying adjectives used from pre- to post-tests. Paired t-tests were run to see if there was any significant difference in the students' improvement on these two categories of qualifying adjectives from pre- to post-tests.

Results

Table 1 shows the learning gains from pre- to post-tests for the fill-in-the-blanks exercise. Learning gains were defined as the progress made from pre- to post-test and are calculated by subtracting the mark awarded on the post-test from the mark awarded on the pre-test.

Table 1: Learning gains from pre- to post-tests for the Fill-in-the-blanks exercise

	N	*M*/15	*S*D	*S*EM	*t*	*p*
Pre-test	82	8.71	2.95	0.325	10.20	0.001
Post-test	82	12.30	1.96	0.216		

As illustrated in Table 1, the students' mean, which was only 8.71/15 on the pre-test, increased to 12.3/15 on the post-test. The learning gain from pre- to post-tests is highly significant ($t = 10.20, p < 0.001$); it indicates that students made impressive progress on this task from pre- to post-tests as a result of FonFs instruction.

The learning gains made from pre- to post-compositions are presented in Table 2. As explained in the previous section, a global score out of 15 took into account the vocabulary, the sentence structure, the correct spelling of words, the correct use of verb tenses, and the correct agreement of nouns, verbs and adjectives

Table 2: Learning gains for compositions' overall quality from pre- to post-tests

	N	*M*/15	*S*D	*S*EM	*t*	*p*
Pre-test	82	10.89	1.90	0.210	5.81	0.001
Post-test	82	11.92	1.62	0.178		

The results show that the students' mean which was 10.89/15 on the pre-test increased to 11.92/15 on the post-test. As shown on Table 2, these learning gains from pre- to post-compositions are highly significant ($p = 0.001$).

As explained in the previous section, a second score was given for the compositions, this time examining the difference between the number of accurate adjective agreements used on the pre-composition compared to that used on the post-composition. These learning gains are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Learning gains for the number of accurate adjective agreements from pre- to post-compositions

	N	*M*	*S*D	*S*EM	*t*	*p*
Pre-test	81	3.19	2.52	0.279	6.48	0.001
Post-test	81	5.34	2.69	0.299		

When the number of correct adjective agreements is computed, it would seem that students used an average of 3.19 correct adjectives on the pre-test compared to 5.34 on the post-test. This difference between pre- and post-compositions is highly significant ($p = 0.001$). When the number of correct adjective agreements is compared to the total number of adjectives used and then turned into percentage figures by multiplying the number of correct adjective agreements by 100 and divided by the total number of adjectives used, results show that 54.2% of all adjectives used were correctly modified on the pre-composition compared to 73.93% on the post-composition. This difference between the two compositions is also highly significant ($t = 5.42$, $p = 0.001$).

Differences in learning gains made on the fill-in-the-blanks task from pre- to post-tests compared to those made on the composition task are presented in Table 4. Percentages figures were used for this comparison.

Table 4: Learning gains difference between fill-in-the-blanks and composition tasks for the percentages of correct adjective agreements

	N	*M* (%)	*S*D	*S*EM	*t*	*p*
Fill-in-the-blanks	81	24.27	21.0	2.3	1.13	0.260
Compositions	81	19.73	32.7	3.6		

As shown in Table 4, students made more progress on the fill-in-the-blanks task since 24.3% more adjective agreements were correctly made on the post-test than on the pre-test compared to 19.7% more adjective agreements correctly made on the post-composition than on the pre-composition. The difference between the learning gains of almost 5% between the two tasks is, however, not significant ($p = 0.260$).

Additional analyses were performed to determine whether the category of qualifying adjectives of colour was more or less influenced by instruction than non-colour adjectives. Results from pre- to post-compositions show that students made fewer errors on the post-composition with regard to the correct agreements of colour adjectives than on the pre-composition, and that this difference is significant ($t = 2.81$, $p = 0.007$). These results, although encouraging, show that, on the post-composition, there was still a large percentage of colour adjectives (50.4%) which did not correctly agree with the noun they modified.

As for non-colour adjectives, differences observed between the pre- and post-compositions for the number of incorrect adjective agreements reveal that students made considerable progress from pre- to post-compositions for this class of qualifying adjectives. The difference of almost 25% fewer mistakes made on the post-composition compared to the pre-composition is highly significant ($t = 4.63$, $p = 0.001$). To determine whether the differences in

learning gains from pre- to post-compositions between the two categories of qualifying adjectives was significant, another paired t-test was run. No significant difference was found ($t = 1.50, p = 0.139$), but a closer look at the results shows that twice as much progress was made on the agreement of non-colour adjectives as on the agreement of adjectives of colour.

Discussion

The results of the study show that students made significant progress on both tasks, the fill-in-the-blanks task and the composition task, as a result of FonFs instruction using PI and enhanced input. PI instruction consisted of making learners aware that students of French tend to not make qualifying adjectives agree with nouns they modify, as is the case in English. Then, sentences were presented to them that reflected both an incorrect usage based on English grammar and correct usage. Similar awareness-raising activities were presented to students for the placement of qualifying adjectives. Comparisons with English were made using Powerpoint presentations. Comprehension tasks preceded production tasks. All these differences with the learners' first language (mostly English) were made more salient by the use of highlighting, bolding, and underlining. All of this enhanced input (rule statement, explanations and examples) was projected on a big screen with only one specific feature at a time. Animation schemes were also used to draw students' attention.

According to the results, students made significantly fewer errors on the post-test than on the pre-test for each of these tasks. These results indicate that FonFs instruction had an unequivocal effect on both a fill-in-the-blanks task and a free-production task. The results of FonFs on the fill-in-the-blanks tasks are not surprising, given the results of previous studies which used discrete-point tasks to measure the effectiveness of a variety of conditions such as PI and textual enhancement. The results of FonFs on free-production tasks however, contribute interesting new results, given the fact that most of the previous studies including a measure of acquisition based on free production were mainly concerned with FonF instruction. Results of these studies, as reported in Ellis (2002), show mixed results. At times, both oral and written free productions were positively affected by instruction (Harley, 1989; Lyster, 1994; Doughty and Varela, 1998; Muronoi, 2000), at other times, only written production was positively affected (Day and Shapson, 1991; VanPatten and Sanz, 1995). Results of the PI (Salaberry, 1997) and textual-enhancement studies (Jourdenais *et al.*, 1995) which included a measure of free production, reported insignificant results for the former studies and positive results for the latter ones.

When comparisons are made between both tasks to measure the respective influence of FonFs on each of them, results show that the progress realized on

the fill-in-the-blanks task in terms of percentages of correct adjective agreements was greater than the progress made on the composition task. Students wrote 24.3% more correct adjective agreements on the fill-in-the-blanks task on the post-test than on the fill-in-the-blanks task on the pre-test compared to 19.7% more correct adjective agreements on the post-composition task than on the pre-composition task. The difference is however not significant. It can therefore be suggested that both tasks are equally affected by FonFs instruction.

Comparisons between pre- and post-compositions show, however, that colour adjectives are more resistant to FonFs instruction than non-colour adjectives. Colour adjectives, either left in their original form or incorrectly modified according to the nouns they qualified, still represented almost half the total number of adjectives used on the post-composition. In contrast, the percentage of incorrect non-colour adjective agreements from pre- to post-composition was reduced by almost 24%.

Conclusion

This study represented an attempt to examine the effects of FonFs instruction for the agreement of French qualifying adjectives on two different tasks, one explicit (a fill-in-the-blanks task), and the other one implicit (composition writing). Results show that students made significant progress from pre- to post-tests on both tasks. These results not only suggest that FonFs coupled with explicit instruction has a positive effect on explicit knowledge, but, more importantly that FonFs instruction may also have a beneficial effect on the acquisition of implicit knowledge.

These results also suggest that FonFs instruction as described in the current study, that is, FonFs instruction that combines a variety of conditions — explicit instruction, communicative activities, meaningful activities, enhanced input and corrective feedback — could be an appropriate teaching method for false beginners in Canadian universities. As mentioned before, a large number of false beginners in these universities come from immersion programs and are in need of explicit instruction of grammatical rules. Based on the results of the current study, FonFs instruction appears to be successful with these students.

Recommendations for future research

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of FonFs instruction accompanied by an explicit treatment on free-production tasks. A delayed post-composition on a topic similar to the ones used in this study would indicate whether the effects of explicit instruction on the acquisition of implicit knowledge are durable. Another valuable area of research would be to examine how different types of homework or in-class activities required routinely

from students to reinforce teachers' explicit instruction of some rules may affect their acquisition or automatization of these rules. For instance, it would be interesting to measure the influence of activities such as dictations — which are now being introduced in some language classes — on the development of automatized application of grammatical rules in free-production tasks. Other free-production activities such as the ones suggested in the following section could also be investigated to determine their influence on the automatization of grammatical rules compared, for instance, to the widely used fill-in-the-blanks activities.

Finally, another follow-up study would be to discover the reasons for the low accuracy rate of colour-adjective agreements compared to the higher accuracy rate of non-colour-adjective agreements.

Pedagogical implications

To improve the accurate use of colour adjectives in compositions, students could be given more homework or in-class activities that would encourage them to produce their own meaningful contexts for the use of grammatical rules. Students could be asked, for instance, to describe in writing the physical appearance of their family members; e.g. *Ma mère a les cheveux noirs et les yeux verts* 'My mother has black hair and green eyes.' They could provide teachers with family pictures along with their written descriptions. The same could be done in the classroom, this time describing classmates instead of family members, followed by drawing a chart or table on the blackboard. Percentages of students in the class with blond, brown, black hair, and blue, black, brown, green eyes could then be calculated. The more practice students are given in writing down these adjectives, the greater the chances are to develop automatization of this rule (see DeKeyser, 2003 on this topic). A contrast made between French and English with regard to the agreement and placement of qualifying adjectives might also be appropriate in order to make students aware of the differences between the two systems and the reasons behind their tendency to ignore this grammatical rule in French.

Note

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[1] As noted on the previous page, usually 300 minutes of classtime are spent on each grammatical structure. In this study two classes (100 minutes) were taken for pre- and post-tests, leaving 200 minutes for teaching.

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Appendix[1]

I. **Mettez les adjectifs entre parenthèses à la forme qui convient : (15 points)**

1. Josette a les cheveux (châtain) _____ et les yeux (marron) _____. Sa copine, elle, est (roux) _____. Josette aime la vie, elle n'est pas (inquiet) _____. Elle aime faire du shopping et aime trouver des vêtements (bon marché) _____.
2. Sa copine la trouve (doux) _____, (mignon) _____, (franc) _____ et (travailleur) _____. Elle est souvent la (premier) _____ élève de sa classe. Elle adore les sports. C'est une personne très (actif) _____. Elle sait écouter ses amies si elles ont des problèmes (familial) _____. Elle tâche de trouver de (nouveau) solutions (fém.) _____. Elle aime les travaux (manuel) _____. Une chose lui fait toujours peur cependant, ce sont les examens (final) _____.

II. **Inventez des phrases complètes avec les noms et les adjectifs donnés. Ajoutez les articles (un, une, des), placez les adjectifs au bon endroit et faites les accords nécessaires : (15 points)**

1. pantalon / pressé / veston / propre / chaussettes / nouveau / vert foncé / chemise / gris / cravate / noir
   Bill Gates porte souvent _____.
2. jupe / court / blanc / pull / bleu pâle / baskets (fém.) / cher
   Aujourd'hui Jennifer Capriati a mis _____ pour jouer au tennis.
3. imperméable / vieux / froissé / chapeau / gris / ancien / chaussures (fém.) / démodé
   Comme d'habitude, l'inspecteur Colombo n'est pas très coquet. Il porte _____.

III. **Sujet de composition : (25 points)**
Vous venez de rencontrer l'homme ou la femme de votre vie ! Dans une courte lettre, présentez-le ou la à votre ami(e) francophone. Décrivez son physique, sa personnalité, ses goûts en matière de vêtements, ses ambitions, etc. Commencez votre lettre par 'Cher (chère) _____ (choisissez un nom bien français) et terminez par 'Bien amicalement'.

[1] In I and II, gender was provided for words which might be unfamiliar to the students, since the purpose of the exercises was to test students' ability to make qualifying adjectives agree, not to test their knowledge of the gender of the noun.