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Young learner perspectives on four focus-on-form tasks

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Recent studies suggest that focus-on-form (FonF) instruction has a positive effect on the second language proficiency of young learners. However, few have looked at learner perspectives on different FonF tasks, particularly in those young learners. This study investigates children’s attitudes towards four FonF task-types in three Primary 5 English classes in Brunei Darussalam. The four task-types selected are consciousness-raising, dictogloss, grammar interpretation and grammaring. Specifically, the study addresses children’s perceived task enjoyment, ease, performance and motivation. Findings show that while there was a general trend of positive attitudes among children towards FonF tasks, variations in task preference existed, particularly with respect to three main sources of influence: cognitive demands, production demands, and pair/group-work opportunities. This research has implications for both the implementation of FonF instruction at primary school level, and the manipulation of task features to suit learners at this level.

Keywords: ESL, focus on form, grammar tasks, learner perspectives, young learners

I Introduction

In recent years focus on form (FonF) has gained considerable ground in second language (L2) literature in the light of classroom research that supports the need for pedagogical interventions to push learners towards higher levels of proficiency in L2 (Doughty & Williams, 1998a; Mitchell, 2000; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Williams, 2005; Ellis, 2006). Apparently, when left to their own resources, ‘learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities’ (Widdowson, 1990, p. 161). Thus some form of instructional focus on linguistic features may be required to destabilize learners’ interlanguage (Ellis, 2006). FonF has evolved from Long’s instructional treatment that ‘overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication’ (Long, 1991, pp. 45–46) into such tasks as...
processing instruction (VanPatten, 2002), textual enhancement (Sharwood Smith, 1993; Harley, 1998; White, 1998), and linguistic or grammar-problem-solving activities (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 1997; Thornbury, 2001; Bourke, 2004). Despite such variation, the key tenet of FonF instruction remains: ‘meaning and use must already be evident to the learner at the time that attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across’ (Doughty and Williams, 1998a, p. 4).

The call for FonF is often triggered by learner problems or difficulties (Williams, 2005, p. 674), usually resulting in a breakdown in communication. The problematic linguistic features come into instructional focus to help learners get back on track. In this way, FonF is compatible with the communicative approaches (Muranoi, 2000; Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2004; Nunan, 2004), particularly when learners are required to stretch their inter-language resources to meet the communicative task demands. Without FonF, learners with limited L2 processing capacity experience difficulty in simultaneously attending to form and meaning. VanPatten (2002) states that these learners will prioritize meaning over form when performing communicative activities. The need for FonF becomes even more significant ‘when learners have acquired some communicative ability and when they run the risk of fossilizing’ (Ellis, 2003a, p. 78). FonF pedagogical intervention can occur by increasing the input (and output) frequency and enhancing the saliency of problematic linguistic features. Such treatments, however, do not claim to develop immediate mastery of target structures. What they strive for is the heightening of learners’ awareness to facilitate further noticing and analysis of the target structures in subsequent input. The very nature of FonF as learner-centred allows for a non-linear learning process to take place in the L2 classroom, and for individual learners to progress according to a developmental sequence that is not necessarily in step with explicit instruction.

Ellis (2002, p. 229) reviews studies that show FonF’s positive effect on L2 acquisition for children aged 12 or below. Among those cited are Harley’s (1989) 319 Grade 6 early French immersion students and Day and Shapson’s (1991) 315 Grade 7 early French immersion students. Both studies involved using analytic functional grammar materials, and both reported improvement made by the experimental group. Harley’s subsequent (1998) study on FonF with 111 Grade 2 French immersion students found that her noticing activities helped young children to learn the grammatical gender of high-frequency words used. These studies suggest that without attention to form, L2 children will continue to experience problems with basic structures. Thus, there is a need to find an appropriate instructional expedient to help young learners attain linguistic accuracy in communicative language classrooms.

Beyond the several empirical studies that show FonF as having a facilitating effect on children’s L2 learning, relatively little is known about what aspects of this grammar instruction actually appeal to young learners, if any. It is not yet clear which FonF tasks, for instance, can best generate interest in
young learners of different age groups, or of different cultural and educational backgrounds. Harley (1998, p. 158) notes the importance of using stimulating and visually attractive FonF activities and material for primary school children in order to promote attention and relates attention to learners’ intrinsic interest in the activities. A related finding indicates that ‘although the importance of instrumental motivation increases with age, engagement and persistence in learning activities are not directly influenced by this: children will only persist in learning tasks if they see them as worthwhile’ (Hunt et al., 2005, p. 374). Yet, the question that remains is what specifically in a FonF task would stimulate or attract children’s attention and learning motivation.

One way to determine the compatibility of task-types with the interests and motivation of learners is to investigate their attitudes towards the tasks in questions. If participants evaluate tasks they have completed, their attitudinal judgment can be taken as evidence for task types or features suitable for their age group. This article identifies a role for young L2 learners as evaluators to express their perspectives and preferences of FonF tasks. In doing so, the investigation not only adds insights into how the focus of attention of learners can be induced through task design and implementation, but it can also be seen as a preliminary phase in determining the feasibility and effectiveness of incorporating FonF instruction into an upper-primary classroom. As young learner attitudes may be influenced by factors such as desire to please, it was decided to elicit learner preferences to four different FonF tasks.

II The FonF tasks

The four FonF task-types selected for the present study are consciousness-raising (CR), dictogloss, grammar interpretation (GI) and grammaring. These offer different ways of engaging in meaningful communication while focusing attention on specific grammatical features. More significantly, they hold ‘noticing’, the central cognitive construct in FonF, as an essential component of instruction. This may involve Schmidt and Frota’s (1986) ‘noticing’, which requires learners to attend to the target features of the input, and ‘noticing-the-gap’, which requires learners to make comparisons between their current state of linguistic competence (in their output) and the target language (input). Alternatively, Swain (1995, p. 126) proposes another level, which Doughty and Williams (1998b, p. 255) termed ‘noticing-the-hole’, where learners are ‘pushed’ to notice deficiencies in their current state of interlanguage development while attempting to produce the target language (as output).

The key feature of consciousness-raising tasks is the provision of data to learners which illustrate a specific linguistic form. Using the data, learners are required to understand the targeted form, and may be asked to verbalize a language ‘rule’ (see examples in Ellis, 2003b). Here, ‘noticing’ plays a prominent role in that learners are specifically required to attend to how certain grammatical structures work. This process of ‘noticing’ not only enables
learners to develop awareness of the targeted form but also raises their consciousness of it. This promotes subsequent noticing of the form. Such continued awareness of the form appears to facilitate the process of restructuring learners’ mental grammar (Ellis, 1996). Importantly, it is in fact not the linguistic point that is the focus of these CR tasks, but rather the talk that learners must produce in order to achieve a task outcome (Ellis, 2003b, p. 163). The main focus of instruction in CR tasks is thus for learners to engage with input that establishes form–meaning relationships of target structures, rather than produce immediate accurate output. In the present study, CR tasks targeted present and past tense verbs. Learners were told a story about a fictional character’s past and present, then asked to compare the use of verbs in a written version of the story. Using an information gap activity, they were later asked to identify tense errors in a related story rather than being asked to explicitly state the rules.

For dictogloss, learners are required to listen to a short text read to them at normal speed, and reconstruct their version of the original text, first individually, then in small groups (Wajnryb, 1990). Different versions are then compared and analyzed in a whole class setting. Dictogloss thus overtly directs learner attention to differences between their interlanguage and the target language via the process of ‘noticing-the-gap’. The requirement for production in the target language in dictogloss may trigger learners to become consciously aware of their current language competence as they attempt text reconstruction. This process, which involves cognitive comparison, tends not only to raise learners’ awareness of certain grammatical structures but also to reformulate their hypotheses of the structures as they modify their output. In the present study, dictogloss was designed to elicit ‘did not’ + base form (Shak, 2006). The learners were told a short story and they had to reconstruct the text and write a final version.

Grammar interpretation tasks engage learners in the process of ‘noticing-the-gap’ by making salient distinctions in meaning and use between related forms. Learners are required to attend to meaning and to notice the form and function of the grammatical structures in use (see examples in Ellis, 2003b and Thornbury, 2001). Learners then interpret the meaning of the text(s), leading to the restructuring of their mental grammar. These tasks enable cognitive comparison. In the present study, GI tasks were designed to target active (past) and passive forms. Learners were shown several pictures and asked to select the sentence that described each picture (Appendices 1a and 1b).

For grammaring tasks, learners are required to extend the use of grammatical structures to attain communicative clarity and appropriacy. In line with Swain’s (1995) Output Hypothesis, these production-oriented tasks attempt to move ESL learners’ language from a lexical-dependent mode to a more elaborate grammatical mode in their output. Thus, given a text that has been reduced to content words only, learners not only have to produce texts that are grammatically correct and possible, but also to come up with something appropriate in
the given context (see examples in Thornbury, 2001). In this respect, learners may be ‘pushed’ to notice the form, meaning and use of certain linguistic features as they produce the target language. While grammaring tasks are designed to trigger ‘noticing’ in learners, there are, arguably, circumstances in which the level of ‘noticing’ may shift to that of ‘noticing-the-hole’, particularly when learners encounter problems in the production of the target language. In this case, learners use the production phase of grammaring tasks to reflect on their own linguistic inadequacies. In the present study, grammaring tasks were designed to target the past tense. The learners were shown a series of pictures and key verbs, and directed to tell their friends the story orally then write it down.

The four tasks in this study require children to discover rules for themselves through meaningful communication, but vary in their level of ‘noticing’ and emphasis on production (learner output) to induce optimum cognition or learning (Figure 1).

All four tasks were designed to provide learners with opportunities to interact with peers and receive feedback on their production of the targeted grammatical forms. It should be noted that although CR and GI tasks do not normally require immediate production, we have included in this study a short writing activity in the CR tasks and a gap-filling activity in the GI tasks to determine levels of task accomplishment.

III Method

To better understand the pedagogic potential of implementing FonF tasks at upper-primary level for L2 children, the present study examined the attitudes of Bruneian children in Primary 5 towards four FonF tasks. In particular it asked:

1. How did children rate the tasks for enjoyment, ease, performance and motivation over the 2-day lessons?
2. What task features influenced children’s preferences?

![Figure 1](http://ltr.sagepub.com) ‘Noticing’ and production dimensions of FonF tasks
Children in Brunei Darussalam learn English as a second language. Currently, English teaching in Brunei primary schools revolves around the Reading and Language Acquisition (RELA) Approach which promotes communicative activities through reading. The FonF approach in the present study intends to take children a step further in grammar instruction. In addition to the communicative aspect of RELA, the FonF instruction proposes to provide meaning-focused activities that facilitate children’s understanding of the target form, and to raise their awareness of its use in communication. The FonF tasks involve indirect explicit instructions (Ellis, 1998, p. 48) which engage learners in discovery learning through active exploration of the target language.

1 Participants

A total of 78 children from three intact classes of Primary 5 received FonF treatment. These classes, shown in Table 1 as Groups 1, 2 and 3, were from three different schools.

Children’s EPL was determined by their teachers based on performance in class and previous English test scores. The placement of children in Group (G) 2 was based on a beginning year assessment, and G2, as a ‘top’ class, has more proficient, younger girls than the other two groups. All classes were following the national English curriculum. Thus, although the children were from different schools, the instructional approach and the language content of their lessons had been similar.

2 Instruments

Instruments developed for the study comprised:

a. FonF tasks: Each FonF task was assigned a specific linguistic form (as discussed above), and activities were created to promote focused attention and use of these forms. Stories of five good friends, Moody

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Mimi, Friendly Faridah, Timid Tassim, Honest Omar and Lucky Lucas, were used in the tasks to provide contexts for the structures. As the purpose of this study was also to determine which task features appeal to young learners, the materials constructed for each task were divided into sections to allow children to pinpoint the part of the task they liked or disliked (Appendices 1a and 1b). The main sections include:

- **Just wondering**, in which children were exposed to the targeted form in the context of a story, followed by a teacher-led discussion.
- **Noticing**, in which children were provided with text which they had to manipulate, either verbally or in the written form, so as to have their attention drawn to the grammatical form.
- **Activity**, in which children had to work together in small groups or pairs to complete a short activity which required learners to use the targeted form in their interaction.
- **Grammar detective**, in which children were directed to formulate a rule or hypothesis on the use of the grammatical form. Here, they were to demonstrate their awareness of the correct use of the target language form.
- **Writing**, in which children were asked to produce a written text individually.

b. An attitude questionnaire: Both open and closed questions encouraged children to reflect on their perceived task enjoyment, ease, performance and motivation (Appendix 2). Children were also invited to express their opinions on aspects of the task that they particularly liked and disliked, and to say if they felt they had learnt anything from the task.

c. Group interviews: All children were involved in group interviews conducted by their respective teachers at the end of the research. They were put in friendship groups of 3–5 for each interview. Such friendship groupings for interviews were used to encourage children to be more responsive and ‘can elicit more accurate accounts, as participants must defend their statements to their peers’ (Eder and Fingerson, 2002, p. 182). Key questions asked during these semi-structured interviews include:

i. Which activity did you enjoy doing most? What did you like about it?
ii. Which one did you find most difficult? Why?
iii. Sometimes you had to work with your friends to find out how to finish the activities. Was that easier for you than doing the activities on your own? Why?

All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3 Procedures

The three teachers were briefed by the researcher on the rationale and basic procedures of the four FonF tasks. They were provided with lesson plans and
task material. As the researcher was not actively involved in teaching, the teacher-researcher effect was not an issue.

The instructional treatment was conducted over four weeks. Each week the three groups of children were introduced to a different FonF task-type. Each task-type was taught over two days. Lessons on Days 1 and 2 were similar, except that Day 1 focused more on providing comprehensible input for learners’ and Day 2 usually required more learner production (Appendices 1a and 1b). These two-day lessons provided task repetition with recycling of target grammatical structures, and familiarized children with the procedures involved in each task-type. Each lesson took an hour. For the remaining three hours of English each week, the children received their normal classroom instruction.

CR tasks were implemented first to provide a common introduction to the teaching cycle and tasks. Then, to reduce effects of memory-bias during group interviews, and of familiarization through task sequencing, the order of the FonF tasks was different for each group. The task schedule is given in Table 2.

An attitude questionnaire was administered to all children immediately after each FonF lesson. So for each task type, participants completed two questionnaires (one on Day 1 and one on Day 2). Group interviews to explore children’s attitudes were conducted after completion of the instructional treatment.

IV Results and discussion

I How did the children rate the FonF tasks for enjoyment, ease, performance and motivation over the 2-day lessons?

Responses to attitude items were scored on a three-point Likert scale, with the options of 1 – No, 2 – Not sure and 3 – Yes. The scores were calculated to give the means and standard deviations (SDs) of each lesson, as shown in Table A.1 (Appendix 3). Figures 2–5 summarize the means of children’s ratings based on each task on Days 1 and 2.

The figures, with all mean scores above 2.0, generally show positive attitudes towards the four tasks. A substantial majority of children, for instance, answered item 1 affirmatively with means of 2.6 to 3.0 in I enjoyed doing this activity for all FonF tasks. In contrast, the lower means of 2.3 to 2.7 for I think I did well in this activity suggest either modesty or an awareness among some
that their performance could be improved. This was particularly marked in CR Day 2 and Dictogloss Day 1 (mean value 2.3). In the case of CR, it was the first lesson for everyone, and on Day 2 the students were first asked to write a paragraph, the response may simply be to unfamiliarity with the demands of these language tasks which aimed to ‘push’ the children to work beyond their current performance level. Similarly, Dictogloss was a new task for the children, and they were not familiar with the task procedures. Despite
this, motivation was generally positive across all tasks (item 4, 2.4–2.8) as were perceptions of how easy it was for them to do the task (item 2, 2.4–2.9). There is a tension here, then between the children’s perceived performance and the ease of the task, while enjoyment and motivation are both positive. It can also be seen from the four graphs that the GI tasks mean, particularly on Day 1, is higher than the mean attitude scores of other tasks. In other words, there was a marked preference for GI tasks in terms of enjoyment, ease, performance and motivation.
Not surprisingly, there were fluctuations in children’s attitudes towards each task over the 2-day lesson (Figures 2–5). Dictogloss, for instance, presents the epitome of the ‘Resultative Hypothesis’ (Johnson, 2001, p. 132), the notion in which mastery of a task can influence learner attitudes which in turn leads to further progress in task performance. As Dictogloss was a new task for children, the second day with the increase in task familiarity showed a significant increase particularly for G1 in children’s reported enjoyment (2.2/0.7 to 2.9/0.3) and motivation (2.1/0.8 to 2.9/0.3). Children in G2 and G3 were familiar with Dictation and did not react to the novelty of the Dictogloss in the same way. In the attitude questionnaire on Dictogloss Day 1, one child from G1 noted:

I think this activity some [parts] I understand[,] some [parts are] difficult. I did not do well in this activity. (P14)

Day 2 of Dictogloss saw the same task repeated with variation in the protagonist and story details. The same child commented:

I enjoyed this activity because I can share with [the] class what I learn this time. This activity I can do better. (P14)

Similar views from other children help explain the overall improvement in attitudes towards Dictogloss on Day 2. Thus in our case familiarity with the task demands led to an increase in positive perceptions.

In contrast to the Dictogloss trend of rising learner attitudes on Day 2, GI tasks experienced an overall decline from Day 1 to Day 2 (Figure 4). Learner responses disclosed a feeling of anti-climax, a disappointment almost, with the mismatch of task expectancy on Day 2. Here, the issue was clearly not task familiarity. The cause of the children’s decreased interest was the output requirement of these tasks. Similar comments about writing output were at the root of children’s more negative responses to CR tasks, and to Grammaring tasks on Day 2:

Yang saya paling tak suka ialah membuat cerita sendiri. <The one that I dislike most is composing my own story.> (P59)

I [am] not sure [if I like this task] because we have [to] look at [the] dictionary dan batah lagi mencarinya. <and it takes a long time to find it.> (P44)

However, particularly among G2, there were children who reported writing as something they enjoyed. There was an observed increment in the confidence level among children in G2 for the Grammaring tasks of Day 2, corresponding to a rise in their enjoyment level. This contributed to an overall positive gain in mean attitude scores for perceived performance (Figure 5). Thus learners’ perception of their own competence in different language skills and their interpretation of the task at hand seem to have an impact on attitude towards task completion. They saw the ‘main’ task of Dictogloss as one that
involved ‘we listen and write’ (P57) while GI tasks required ‘matching sentences with the picture’ (P15). Grammaring tasks, on the other hand, were seen to transform from ‘This activity just write a sentence about each picture’ (P67) on Day 1 to ‘Doing a story (P22) on Day 2. Here, the learners’ perception of their status as writers was apparently challenged, and this triggered a complementary level of perceived difficulty of the tasks. For low-proficiency writers, this may, to a large extent, influence their willingness to engage in similar tasks in the future.

Of CR tasks, Figure 2 identifies some increment in children’s enjoyment and motivation as they progressed from Days 1 to 2. Children in general also perceived the task to be easier on the second day. This seems to corroborate the preceding discussion that task familiarity enhances learner performance. Yet, on the question of whether I think I did well in this activity, the figure shows CR as having the majority of children’s responses centred on Not sure (M = 2.3, SD = 0.7). Although CR was the first task, and included a writing stage, this probably does not fully explain the drop in perceived proficiency. CR differs from other FonF tasks in that it explicitly engages children in grammatical analysis, a skill that requires children to formulate and test hypotheses about linguistic forms and functions. This, in effect, places high demands on the ‘intellectual effort’ (Ellis, 2003b, p. 163) of these young learners. Children’s views on CR tasks were:

I enjoy this activity, [but] I don’t understand tense. (P7)
It’s easy because it’s only listen and circle. [However,] I am not sure [whether] I did well or not. (P60)

These perceptive comments showed that children were aware that they were able to do the initial activities. What was difficult for them was the translation of ‘answers’ obtained via activities into data to be dissected in order to derive a rule in Day 2 for their linguistic form and function. From this perspective, the level of cognitive processing influenced learner attitudes. The extent to which the cognitive construct was influential in children’s preference of tasks was neatly put by one G2 child:

Not sure[,] my heart said I like [it] but I think my brain [said] I don’t like [to] do it. (P44)

In the context of positive attitudes to all four tasks, the implications from task ratings are fourfold:

1. task familiarity can enhance enjoyment, ease, performance and motivation;
2. the written production stage appears to negatively influence children’s attitudes to tasks, particularly in rating their performance;
3. advocates for ‘pushing’ learners beyond current performance levels (Swain’s [1995] Output Hypothesis) may need to think more in terms of gently ‘nudging’ young learners to ensure learner attainability and to maintain interest;
4. the level (and the definition) of ‘difficulty’ for tasks may be learner-specific and may relate to cognitive, affective or linguistic factors. It is important to uncover the nature of the difficulty before repeating tasks with children.

2 What task features influenced children’s preferences?

Children’s responses to Write one thing you liked about the activity and Write one thing you did not like about the activity provided insights into the children’s experience of the FonF tasks. As noted in the instruments section, the materials used for each task were divided into various sections. The findings are presented here first in terms of the sections of FonF tasks children commented on most, i.e. Noticing, Grammar Detective, Activity and Writing. This is followed by comments on materials design and learning value.

It was found that on Day 1 aspects of the Noticing section (Appendix 1) were referred to most frequently (from 26% of CR responses to 42% of GI responses) in children’s comments on all tasks. This probably responds to the relative novelty of the cognitive processing required by FonF tasks.

CR task (called grammar search activity)
Like: I like to listen to a story and fill in the past tense and present tense. (P24)
Dislike: I need to read it and I hate [to] fill in the blanks. (P32)

Dictogloss
Like: I like [to] share with [the] class. (P17)
Dislike: I don’t like do[ing it] on my own. (P51)

GI task (called grammar comprehension activity)
Like: matching sentences with the pictures. (P21)
Dislike: I don’t like to write the sentences. (P29)

Grammaring task
Like: I like to find the past tense and present tense and arranged [the sentences]. (P28)
Dislike: I [am] not sure because [there are] some past tense [verbs that] I forget to change. (P19)

In Grammar Detective, the section designed to induce formulation of rule or hypothesis, there were more children (26%) who expressed a dislike for it in CR than in other tasks. A possible explanation is that this particular section of CR forces children to deal with the linguistic problem (identify certain verbs and use them to complete sentences) and the use of metalinguistic terms (e.g. past tense, verbs) to solve the problem. Their comments are indicative of their less favourable attitudes towards the cognitive load required of CR tasks (see Excerpt 1). Notably, the Activity section with its group or pair work was
typically the most preferred section. The majority of the children in all three groups expressed their enjoyment and preference to work with friends, as evidenced both in the written comments and in the interviews. Excerpt 2 shows children’s explanation of their positive attitudes. From their feedback, it was apparent that children generally found pair work easier and preferable to individual work. This was seen as mutually beneficial, with each helping the other.

In contrast, individual Writing sections were least preferred. This echoes the general observation that ‘The writing skill is often perceived as the most difficult language skill since it requires a higher level of productive language control than the other skills’ (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000, p. 161). Across Writing sections, children expressed a preference for gap-filling over longer writing. (See Excerpts 3 and 4.)

The findings from written responses thus far suggest that children’s impressions of tasks centre on three main concerns:

1. cognitive demands, which included the amount and ‘depth’ of ‘noticing’, ‘thinking’ and processing of (new) information (e.g. task familiarity) needed for task completion;
2. production demands, which concerned the amount of output as well as the language skills and linguistic level required of that output; and
3. interaction opportunities, which provided language scaffolding and practice for L2.
Materials design, though not the sole determinant of task preference, did play a vital role in attracting children’s interest. This was notable during group interviews, where children referred foremost to the story or the story characters, followed by their association to other features (Excerpt 5). Group interviews also revealed that children seldom selected their favourite task(s) solely on the basis of attractive visuals (Harley, 1998). Often there was another element, usually of cognitive (e.g. familiarity with target form) or social bearing (e.g. pair work), that sustained the children’s interest in the task.

Another crucial role of materials design is the provision of the much-needed contextual support for language use and production. Their effects, though not empirically tested in this study, were evidenced in children’s testimonies of how they had aided their comprehension, as exemplified in Excerpt 6.

Here the pictures provide salience to linguistic forms and attract children’s attention. Children were likely to retain these forms longer in their memory when associated with their favourite story character or humorous illustrations.

A final concern of this study was whether the tasks were seen as worthwhile. They were asked Have you learnt anything from this activity? If yes, what? in the daily questionnaire. Affirmative responses ranged from 83% (Grammaring Day 1)
to 95% (GI Day 1), indicating that most of the 78 children felt they had benefited from each of the four tasks. Those who gave negative responses (five in Dictogloss Day 1, five in Grammar Day 2, and eight in Grammar Day 1) all stated that they found writing a difficult task. The positive responses of what the children had learned fell into six distinguishable categories: the target form lexical items, how to perform the activity, moral of the story, general language skills, and personal and social development (Table 3).

The diversity of these responses shows how FonF tasks are much richer than simple grammar exercises. They are embedded in meaningful, communicative contexts, within which the focus on form leads to worthwhile learning.

### V Conclusion: What is the children’s verdict on FonF tasks?

Research on FonF to date has focused on the overall benefits of FonF based on the language outcomes with advanced L2 or foreign language learners, or on the differences between form-focused and non form-focused instruction. This study of 78 upper-primary school children in Brunei has shown that FonF tasks can be embedded in this communicative language teaching context, and that their use is perceived as effective by the children. They reported that they found the lessons enjoyable and easy. They were able to perform well, were motivated to do more FonF tasks, and enjoyed the stories, illustrations and humorous cartoon characters, which also provided contextual support.
Three major sources of influence were evident in children’s evaluation of tasks, viz. production load, cognitive load, and pair/group work opportunities. Tasks that children perceived as cognitively stimulating, yet not overly demanding, and that presented lesser production demands tended to be rated more positively, as found in GI tasks and Dictogloss. Children also expressed particular partiality for activities that allowed them to work with their friends.

It is important to point out that children, as shown in this study, seem to give undue significance to production tasks. They have a tendency to view output as a measure of their own success and of the overall difficulty of tasks. Hence, these findings imply that to improve children’s L2 proficiency, FonF tasks should be supplemented with ample contextual support and language scaffolding, as found here in amusing stories and in pair/group work, to ensure a sense of accomplishment in learners. Also of relevance to children’s interlanguage development is the need to consider learner ‘readiness’ for pushed (not necessarily immediate) output of the target form, i.e. the amount and explicitness of ‘noticing’ opportunities to be provided before oral and/or written production. While it would be premature to generalize from one small-scale study, the results, nevertheless, provide information for teachers, and avenues for researchers, about the potential of FonF tasks to assist children’s L2 development.

Notes
P14 = pupil 14
G2 = Group 2
T2 = G2’s teacher
Ps = pupils
P2F1 = Group 2 interview group F Pupil 1
*italics* = text in Malay
<translation> = translation from Malay
[gloss] = analyst’s interpretation of learner English or gloss
( ) = unintelligible speech
(…)= pause
… = text omitted

VI References


Appendix 1a: Grammar interpretation task, Day 1

Grammar comprehension activity: What happened? (Day 1)

Just wondering: Think of a day when something exciting, funny or strange happened to you. When was it? What happened on that day?

Reading: Honest Omar and Timid Tassim are good friends of Moody Mimi. Honest Omar is a helpful boy. Timid Tassim is also a helpful boy but he is always afraid of everything.

Noticing: Look at what happened to Timid Tassim last Tuesday. Choose the sentence that goes with the picture. Underline the sentence.

(a) Timid Tassim saved a cat.
(b) Timid Tassim was saved by a cat.

(The activity is repeated with four other pictures.)

Now, look at what happened to Honest Omar yesterday. Write sentences to go with these pictures.

(The activity is again repeated with four other pictures.)

Grammar detective: Complete the sentence with frightened in the correct form.

Last Tuesday Nosy Nazirah__________Timid Tassim but yesterday she ____________Honest Omar.

Your grammar box: Do you want to add anything to your grammar box today?

Grammar box

Remember:
Appendix 1b: Grammar interpretation task, Day 2

Grammar comprehension activity: What happened? (Day 2)

Just wondering: Do you remember what happened to Timid Tassim and Honest Omar? Something happened to Friendly Faridah too. It was her birthday last Friday. Can you guess what happened?

Activity: Work with a friend. Look at the picture and say what you think happened.

Which sentences are true? Put a tick [ ] in those boxes.

(a) Timid Tassim was pushed into the water by Moody Mimi. [ ]
(b) Timid Tassim pushed Moody Mimi into the water. [ ]

(This activity is repeated with eight other statements about the picture.)

Writing: Now, complete the story. You may add as many of your own words as you like.
It was Friendly Faridah’s birthday last Friday. She ______________ Moody Mimi, Honest Omar and Timid Tassim and they ______________ to her birthday party. Friendly Faridah ______________ presents by Moody Mimi, Honest Omar and Timid Tassim.
Suddenly, two of Friendly Faridah’s mice got out of their cage and they ______________ the cat. One of them ______________ Friendly Faridah. Timid Tassim was scared. He ______________ Moody Mimi into the water by accident. Luckily, the cake ______________ Honest Omar. His arm ______________ a bee. Finally, Friendly Faridah’s father came and ______________ the cat into the house. Friendly Faridah, Moody Mimi, Timid Tassim and Honest Omar ______________ looked at each other and they ______________ very loudly. It was a fun birthday party after all!

(Each blank is provided with a rebus. In cases of words that are more difficult to work out from rebuses, the base form is given.)
Appendix 2: Attitude questionnaire (sample)

Lesson C: Grammar comprehension activity (What happened? – Day 1)

Please circle a face and write a sentence if you can (You may write in Malay if you want).

I enjoyed doing this activity. ☺ ☺ ☺ Why? ________________________

I think this activity was easy. ☺ ☺ ☺ Why? ________________________

I think I did well in this activity. ☺ ☺ ☺ Why? ________________________

I want to do more activities like this. ☺ ☺ ☺ Why? ________________________

Write one thing you liked about the activity. ________________________

Write one thing you did not like about the activity. ________________________

Have you learnt anything from this activity? If yes, what? ________________________

Note: Illustrations have been removed and the formatting condensed to save space. Researchers who wish to replicate these studies are welcome to contact the authors for the FonF tasks packages.

Appendix 3: Table A.1

Table A.1 Means and SDs of children’s ratings based on FonF tasks

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Enjoyment M/SD</th>
<th>Ease M/SD</th>
<th>Performance M/SD</th>
<th>Motivation M/SD</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.6/0.7</td>
<td>2.5/0.7</td>
<td>2.4/0.7</td>
<td>2.6/0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
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<td>2.6/0.7</td>
<td>2.3/0.7</td>
<td>2.7/0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictogloss</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>2.6/0.7</td>
<td>2.4/0.7</td>
<td>2.3/0.6</td>
<td>2.4/0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.7/0.6</td>
<td>2.5/0.6</td>
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</tr>
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<td>2.9/0.4</td>
<td>2.7/0.5</td>
<td>2.8/0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.7/0.6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
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