

Children using dictogloss to focus on form

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study investigating children's attitudes towards dictogloss, a type of focus on form task designed to facilitate learners' understanding of the target form in a meaning-focused context. The compatibility of this language teaching procedure with interests and motivation of learners, in effect, provides a learner perspective of the effectiveness and usefulness of the task. This study can thus be seen as a preliminary step in determining the feasibility and effectiveness of incorporating focus on form (FonF) instruction into an upper primary ESL classroom. Specifically, the study addressed whether children found dictogloss compatible with their interests, needs and motivation, and whether teachers found dictogloss appropriate in terms of their learnability, teachability and task usefulness. A total of 78 children from three Primary 5 classes in Brunei Darussalam took part in the study, and they were given attitude questionnaires at the end of each lesson. Findings based on the children's responses show that there existed fluctuations in children's attitudes to the task during the grammar lessons, thus providing a strong implication that children's focus, through manipulation of task design and implementation, could be reinforced to process the target feature as they perform the task. The results also suggest that further classroom research is needed to find ways for teachers to adapt the FonF approach to their specific classes.

Introduction

Recent findings of classroom research appear to demonstrate that form-focused instruction is beneficial to learners in modifying their interlanguage grammar, thereby leading to improved linguistic accuracy in language use (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Norris & Ortega, 2000). However, to date, research has focused on general differences between focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFS) instruction, or on the overall effectiveness of FonF per se based on the language outcomes of, mostly, advanced second or foreign language learners. What is established in recent literature is the characterization of FonF as a pedagogical intervention that focuses primarily on meaning while attending to such linguistic elements as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation via communicative tasks (Ellis, 2001, p. 14). This is different from FonFS instruction in that its emphasis is mostly on discrete pre-selected form(s), and it typically involves intensive and systematic treatment of those linguistic elements. There is usually a lack of correspondence between the forms practised and their use in 'real' discourse. Having said that, according to Basturkmen, Loewen and

Ellis (2004, p. 244), a form for attention can also be pre-selected for planned FonF instruction, and incorporated into the design of the task for learners to 'notice' and use, as in the case of the present study. The key tenet of FonF instruction remains as "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 & Williams, 1998, p. 4). The issue now that remains uncertain in the literature of FonF is how learners' attention to grammar should be directed. There is still a lack of information for classroom practitioners to determine what particular qualities or specific features of FonF tasks they can utilize to effectively shape learner language performance. One way to determine what works in a task is to obtain learner perception of the task.

The present study concerns the attitudes of upper primary children towards dictogloss, a type of FonF task which proposes to provide a meaning-focused context to raise learners' awareness of the discursive use of the target linguistic feature. According to Wajnryb (1990, p. 5), the basic procedure of dictogloss consists of learners listening to a short text read to them at normal speed, and reconstructing the text, first individually, then in small groups, so that it has the same meaning as the original text. The various versions are then analyzed and compared in a whole class setting. In short, the task focuses not only on learner output, but also on learner interaction. This is different from the traditional dictation which requires learners to write down what is read by the teacher verbatim. What the present study aimed to do is to provide children a "voice" to express their opinions and preference of dictogloss and its task features. After all, the role of affect is crucial in language learning. Krashen's (1985, p. 3) *Affective Filter* emphasizes the importance of interest, motivation and beliefs of learners in their acquisition of a language. Furthermore, Savignon (1997, p. 107) rightly stresses that the "ultimate success in learning to use a second language most likely would be seen to depend on the attitude of the learner." In this respect, the study is significant in that it provides an insight from the learners' perspective into the suitability of dictogloss for the upper primary children.

Children in Brunei Darussalam learn English as a second language (L2) at school. The current method of teaching English in the Brunei primary schools revolves around the Reading and Language Acquisition (RELA) approach which, in essence, develops communicative activities through the reading process. The FonF approach in the present study aimed to take children a step further in the grammar instruction. Here, dictogloss takes the form of indirect explicit instruction which engages learners in active discussion and exploration of the target language. Ellis (1998, p. 48) argues that such an awareness-raising inductive option offers learners the opportunity to discover underlying patterns of the target structures for themselves, thereby increasing their motivation.

This study is part of a larger research project investigating attitudes of young learners and teachers towards several grammar tasks. The findings provide implications for possible implementation of FonF instruction at the upper primary level. In the present paper, however, we restrict our focus to the findings relating to one specific grammar task, dictogloss. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are children's attitudes towards dictogloss?
2. What are teachers' attitudes towards dictogloss?

Dictogloss as a FonF task

If 'noticing', as put forward by Schmidt (1990, p. 129), is paramount to L2 acquisition, the key issue, thus, is how to focus learners' attention on linguistic features in the input (or output) in order to promote the development of their L2 competence. Dictogloss is selected for this study because it allows for learners to engage in meaningful negotiation while drawing their attention to linguistic form, thus rendering it as a FonF task. More significantly, it holds noticing, the main cognitive construct in FonF, as the essential component of instruction.

Dictogloss overtly directs learner attention to differences between learners' interlanguage and the target language via the process of noticing-the-gap. Schmidt and Frota (1986) define noticing-the-gap as a process that requires learners to make comparisons between their current state of linguistic competence (in their output) and the target language (input). Based on Wajnryb's (1990, p. 7) dictogloss procedure, there are five basic stages in the grammar task in this study (see Appendix 1):

- the *Listening* stage, in which the teacher prepares children for the topic of the dictogloss text via story-telling and whole-class discussion.
- the *Noticing* stage, in which children listen to a short text read to them twice at normal speed. They may choose to take fragmentary notes during the second reading. After that, they reconstruct their version of the original text individually.
- the *Activity* stage, in which children work together in small groups to reconstruct the text.
- the *Checking* stage, in which children analyze and compare their various versions in a whole class setting. Here, the class written output is compared with the original text to find out which differences are acceptable.
- the *Writing* stage, in which children are required to produce a similar text individually. This feature is not part of the original dictogloss procedure. It is added to examine learner linguistic outcomes.

It should be noted that the noticing process does not only take place in the *Noticing* stage. These stages were used to signal to teachers a change in the focus of instruction.

The requirement for production in the target language in the *Noticing* stage may trigger learners to become consciously aware of their current language competence as they attempt to reconstruct the text. However, it is at the comparison phase in *Activity* when their attention is directed to notice the disparity between the target language and their own output that the process of noticing-the-gap is activated. Swain (1999, p. 145) observes that "Students gain insights into their own linguistic shortcomings and develop strategies for solving them by working through them with a partner." 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.

Other than focusing on negative feedback, the noticing-the-gap process may also help assimilate positive evidence or confirmation of, for instance, how certain linguistic forms work, as provided by the original text during the comparison phase, and serves to consolidate learners' existing knowledge. Additionally, in the process of noticing-the-gap, dictogloss allows for learners at different levels and with different needs to notice different language features (Thornbury, 1999, p. 85). This implies that the restructuring process occurs at learners' current stage of interlanguage development.

The effectiveness of dictogloss has yet to be fully researched, in particular with respect to young learners. There are several empirical studies to illustrate the effectiveness of dictogloss in promoting learners' grammatical competence. Kowal and Swain (1994, p. 78), for instance, in their research on 19 intermediate and advanced learners of French found evidence of grammatical improvements of learners when they worked together to reconstruct the text. They conclude that dictogloss promotes syntactic processing skills. Kuiken and Vedder (2002) reported that their qualitative analysis revealed interaction in the reconstruction phase often stimulated noticing.

Murray (1994, p. 79), on the other hand, in her investigation to verify the effectiveness of dictogloss in terms of verbal interaction, collaboration and consciousness raising of specific linguistic features, did not find data to support the claim that dictogloss can be used to focus learners' attention on specific features of language. Furthermore, the task structure appeared to create conflicts and frustration among her 14 Swiss EFL university students as they had no means of evaluating the accuracy and acceptability of solutions during the verbal interaction. In another study, del Pilar García Mayo (2002, p. 161) reported that when completing the dictogloss, her advanced EFL learners seemed to be more concerned about the form and meaning of words and expressions than about the features targeted by the task. In short, dictogloss did not help her students to focus on specific linguistic features.

Findings from both studies provide caveats for the preparation of the dictogloss text for the present research. Two features seem to play a causal role in determining the success of the task:

- the level of language used in the text should be compatible with the learners' linguistic ability;
- the target language features should be made apparent to the learners, and this can be achieved through recurrences of the features within the text.

Thus, the text for this study is modified to take into account these two features (see Appendix 2). It differs from other dictogloss texts in that it is less dense with information and is seeded with recurrences of the target structure. In effect, it serves as structured input for the young learners.

The study

Participants

Three intact classes of Primary 5 children (from three different schools) took part in the experimental treatment. The class sizes were 28, 24 and 26 for Groups 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Groups 1 and 3 were mixed ability classes. Even so, there was an uneven distribution of children in terms of English proficiency level (EPL) in Group 1 (comprising of 3 high EPL, 8 middle EPL and 17 low EPL, whereas Group 3 consisted of 6 high EPL, 15 middle EPL and 5 low EPL). Children's EPL was determined by their respective English language teachers on the basis of their language performance in class and previous English test score. The placement of children in Group 2 was based on the overall score of their first assessment given at the beginning of the year. This class was considered the high ability class. At the time when the research was conducted, children in all three schools received similar instruction and language content as determined by the national English curriculum.

Data collection

The instruments developed for this study included a student-attitude questionnaire, a teacher-attitude questionnaire and a grammar task. The student-attitude questionnaire consisted of both open and closed questions (see Appendix 3). It was distributed to children at the end of each lesson. The three teachers who administered the experimental treatment were also required to complete a teacher-attitude questionnaire after each lesson. The questionnaire comprised open and closed questions and was designed to examine teachers' attitudes towards, and opinions about, dictogloss in terms of its teachability, learnability and task usefulness (see Appendix 4). The grammar task was designed for an hour of daily use over a two-day period (i.e. two lessons). This was to provide task repetition and recycling for the target grammatical structure, as well as to familiarize children with the procedures involved in the task.

For dictogloss, the target form was '*did not*' + base form. This language feature was selected based on a free story-writing task given to two mixed-ability classes of Primary 5 children prior to this research. From their writing, it was found that '*did not*' + base form was one of the more problematic linguistic forms, and as such, was chosen as focus of this grammar task.

Lesson plans, teachers' notes and task material for Dictogloss Days 1 and 2 were given to all three teachers so as to ensure that instructional treatment was similar for all groups. At the end of each lesson, a written task was given (the *Writing* stage). For Dictogloss Day 1, children were required to complete a sentence, and for Dictogloss Day 2, they were to compose a short text. Scores for the written tasks were recorded.

Procedures

Dictogloss was conducted for two days. Each day the three groups received an hour of FonF instruction on the same target form, following the steps outlined

on page 49. Attitude questionnaires were administered to children and their respective teachers immediately after each lesson to determine their attitudes towards the grammar task.

Findings and discussions

1. What are children's attitudes towards dictogloss?

Items to evaluate learner attitudes towards dictogloss were scored on a three point Likert scale with a choice of 1-Yes, 3-Not sure and 5-No. Responses were calculated to give the means and SDs of each lesson, as shown in Table 1.

Children generally showed a favourable attitude towards dictogloss, as indicated in the mean scores of less than 2.5 for all items. It was clear, for instance, that a majority of the children had enjoyed the task, with the means ranging from 1.8 (SD=1.3) on Day 1 to 1.4 (SD=1.1) on Day 2. The mean value of 2.3 for *I think I did well for this activity* was very high towards *No* when compared with other attitude statements. Their perceived performance was apparently not matched by their high level of enjoyment, particularly on Day 1. This suggests a general lack of confidence among children in their task performance. A possible explanation for this is the unfamiliarity of the task. Moreover, children were not accustomed to the type of cognitive demands induced by the FonF approach, thus resulting in considerable variation among learners' opinion of the grammar instruction, in particular for Item 4 of Day 1 (M=2.3, SD=1.7).

Table 1

Means and SDs of children's attitude scores based on dictogloss

Dictogloss		1. I enjoyed doing this activity		2. I think this activity was easy		3. I think I did well in this activity		4. I want to do more activities like this	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Day 1	78	1.8	1.3	2.2	1.4	2.3	1.2	2.3	1.7
Day 2	78	1.4	1.1	1.6	1.1	1.9	1.3	1.7	1.4

Table 2

Means and SDs of attitude scores among the three groups for dictogloss

Dictogloss		1. I enjoyed doing this activity			2. I think this activity was easy			3. I think I did well in this activity			4. I want to do more activities like this		
		*G1	G2	G3	G1	G2	G3	G1	G2	G3	G1	G2	G3
Day 1	M	2.6	1.3	1.5	2.3	1.9	2.4	2.8	1.7	2.5	2.7	1.7	2.5
	SD	1.4	0.9	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.8	1.3	1.1	1.1	1.6	1.4	1.8
Day 2	M	1.2	1.3	1.7	1.5	1.6	1.7	2.0	1.6	2.2	1.2	1.7	2.3
	SD	0.6	0.9	1.5	1.0	1.3	1.1	1.4	1.1	1.3	0.6	1.4	1.8

*G refers to Group

In particular for Group 1, it was obvious that the task complexity led to low interest and motivation. Dictogloss was a completely new task for them. Children in Groups 2 and 3 were familiar with the concept of Dictation and as such, were not as affected by the novelty of the task. Thus, it was of no surprise that the means in Table 2 showed children in Group 1 expressing more negative attitudes about, for instance, their performance than the other two groups on Day 1 ($M=2.8$, $SD=1.3$).

In response to an open question in the attitude questionnaire regarding her views on Dictogloss Day 1, one child from Group 1 noted:

activity ini saya tidak faham. [B1Q1(13)] •
*<I don't understand this activity>**

• B1Q1(13) refers to: B1=Lesson B Day 1; Q1=Item 1 in the questionnaire; (13)=student no. 13

* <italic> All italicized words within parenthesis indicate the translated version.

Another child from Group 1 reflected on the frustration he felt during the task:

This activity so difficult because I cannot understand some of this activity.
 [B1Q1(25)]

On Day 2 all three groups were given the opportunity to repeat the task. There was an overall improvement in attitudes towards the task on Day 2. Comments from the respective children were:

... this activity is easy because I NOW I answer this question sebab saya sudah faham. [B2Q2(13)]
<because I already understand>

Because this activity can do me remember all the story. This activity is not difficult and I can answer all the question in the box. [B2Q1(25)]

Thus, it can be concluded that one of the factors that led to an increase in their positive attitudes in terms of enjoyment, perceived performance and motivation was their familiarity with the task demands. In other words, the gradual mastery of a task can influence learner attitudes which in turn leads to further progress in task performance. Notably, children in Group 3 reported a lower level of motivation (i.e. Item 4) for Day 2 ($M=2.3$, $SD=1.8$) than the other two groups. This strongly suggests the likelihood of other factors, such as the design of the task or interactive opportunities, affecting children's attitudes.

To gain greater insight into the preferences of children in the particular qualities or specific features of dictogloss, they were asked to identify the stage they especially liked or disliked in *Write one thing you liked about the activity and Write one thing you don't like about the activity*. It was found that the *Noticing* stage, which entails initial production in the target language, was referred to most frequently in children's comments. On both Days 1 and 2 there were more positive comments than negative ones. Their comments include:

I like about remember the story. [B2Q5(30)]
 I like to listend the story and write it in the boxes. [B1Q5(67)]
 I love the listen and write. [B1Q5(54)]

However, the forte of dictogloss lies in its ability to activate another level of noticing, i.e. noticing-the-gap, as children modify their output. The following extract taken from a child in Group 3 illustrates how she modified her output at different stages of the dictogloss instruction.

Box A: On my own

1. I can't not go to my friend's party.
2. I can't not watching tv.
3. I can't not eat any Ice-cerem.

Box B: With my friends

Last week I was sick.
I can't not go to my friend's party.
I can't not eat any Ice-cerem.
I did not wacting tv.
I can't not play game.
I stayed at the bed at whole day.

Box C: With the class

Last week I was sick. I did not go to my friend's party. I did not eat any ice-cream. I did not watch TV. I did not play any games. I just stayed in bed the whole day.

Children's partiality for such a process as cognitive comparison was seen in some of their written testimonies. Their stated reasons, however, were not directed to the underlying principles of cognitive processing (nor were they expected to). Instead, they referred to various activity types used in dictogloss to induce noticing.

Check story with teacher. [B2Q1(10)]

I like share with class. [B1Q5(27)]

Saya suka aktiviti yang berbincang sama kawan dan membuat sama-sama.

[B2Q5(74)]

<I like the activity where there is discussion with a friend and working together.>

Activity, which incorporated interactive group work, was seen to be the second most frequently referred to task feature in the children's comments for Days 1 and 2. Children in all three groups, though not unanimous, expressed their enjoyment and preference to work with their friends.

Saya suka membuat cerita sama-sama. [B1Q5(42)]

<I like to do the story together.>

I don't likes do on my own. [B1Q6(51)]

I want to writing with friend. [B2Q5(28)]

I like about this activity always work together as a team. [B2Q5(40)]

The third most prominent task feature that received numerous positive responses from children was *Listening*. Apparently, children liked to listen to

stories, particularly that of Moody Mimi. Amongst their comments were:

- I liked about the activity is about listen the story. [B1Q5(25)]
- one thing I like the activity about my teacher story. [B1Q5(36)]
- I like to listening about Moody Mimi. [B2Q5(14)]

The *Writing* stage, on the other hand, received the most comments for being the task feature they disliked most on Day 2. Based on children's responses to the attitude questionnaire, it appears that the production load may deter their interests in a grammar task. In this case, children found dictogloss less desirable due to the written task they had to complete at the end of the lesson. One child's comment was:

- I don't like about this activity is the writing because it so very hard. [B2Q6(40)]

Another major concern of this study was whether children felt they had learnt from the instructional treatment. This was posed as *Have you learnt anything from this activity? If yes, what?* in the attitude questionnaire. Affirmative responses for both days of dictogloss were 88.5%, indicating that most children felt they had learnt from dictogloss. On the other end of the continuum, five out of 78 students responded that they had not learned anything on Day 1. Three children responded negatively on Day 2. For children who felt they were positively affected by the tasks, their responses of what they had learnt fell into five distinguishable categories:

- the target form
 - I learnt did not + present tens played 'play'. [B1Q7(77)]
 - I learnt 'did not' back have present tense. [B2Q7(55)]
- lexical items
 - I have learned the 'did not brush'. [B2Q7(59)]
 - Yes take become took [B2Q7(61)]
- how to perform the activity
 - I learnt about the activity is about remember the story and write in the box. [B2Q7(25)]
 - Yes, remembering the sentences/words that my teacher has read. [B2Q7(46)]
- moral of the story
 - Yes don't be lazy. [B2Q7(26)]
 - I learn about Mimi lazy day. [B2Q7(69)]
- general language skills
 - Yes about write the story with your friend. [B2Q7(1)]
 - I learnt about write the story on my own [B2Q7(20)]

The diversity of responses from children indicates that though the dictogloss text was modified to elicit a specific form, children's learning was not confined to the grammar instruction. Rather, the communicative context within dictogloss empowers individual children by providing them the exposure and practice of a range of structures and patterns in the target language, thus increasing their repertoire of linguistic choices. The following extract, for instance, shows that a child in Group 2 was able to pick up the use of the contracted form *didn't* after several discussions and comparison of text, even though it was not the exact form in focus in the dictogloss instruction.

Box A: On my own

I don't go to my friend party.
I don't eat ice-cream.
I don't watch TV
I don't play games

Box B: With my friends

Last day I ~~were~~ was sick. I don't go to my friend party. I don't eat ice-cream. I don't watched television and I don't played any game. I just stay at my bed for the whole day.

Box C: With the class

Last week I was sick. I didn't go to my friend's party. I didn't eat ice-cream. I didn't watch television and I didn't play any games. I just stayed in my bed for the whole day.

The use of collaborative reconstruction of text is seen here to provide children with a valuable opportunity to notice the gap between their current level of L2 proficiency and their target competence.

2. What are teachers' attitudes towards dictogloss?

The three teachers, T1, T2 and T3, from Groups 1, 2 and 3 respectively were asked to complete a teacher attitude questionnaire after the implementation of dictogloss on Days 1 and 2. Their responses provided insights into the practical relevance of the task, specifically with respect to its learnability, teachability and task usefulness. Table 3 presents the mean attitude scores of teachers for dictogloss.

The analysis, showing mean scores of 2.0 or less for most attitude items, indicated that the three teachers who implemented the FonF treatment were generally positive towards the task, particularly on Day 2. Closer inspection of individual responses, however, revealed two opposing views to the teachability of dictogloss. Whereas T2 and T3 viewed dictogloss as easy to implement, T1 felt

Table 3
Mean attitude scores of teachers for dictogloss

Attitude item (Question 3)	Day 1	Day 2
a. The activity was useful in helping children improve their English language.	2.0	1.3
b. Children enjoyed the activity.	2.0	1.3
c. Children found the activity easy to understand.	2.0	2.0
d. The activity helped children to understand the grammar point/s in focus.	2.0	1.3
e. The activity was easy to carry out.	2.0	1.3
f. The activity was time-consuming.	2.3	2.3
g. I would like to have more activities like this one for the children in my class.	2.0	1.3

the procedure too complicated for her children. T2 and T3 also reported highly favourable attitudes from their children regarding the 2-day lesson. Accordingly, the two teachers had introduced the task as a game, and this increased their children's motivation to a great extent ($M=1.3$ on Day 2). Teachers' overall comments of the lesson were:

... most of them did not understand on how to share their story and write it in Box B. I don't think the pupils can grasp the grammar taught in the lesson. [T1Q1B1(1)]*

*[T1Q1B1(1)] refers to: T1=teacher from Group 1; Q1=1st questionnaire; B1=Lesson B Day 1; (1)=question 1.

I think most enjoyed the activity about the teacher (me) being sick. Then they have to rewrite the story; they treated it like a game. Then, sharing the story with their friends was extremely fun for them as a whole class. [T2Q2(6)]

... there is a lot of interaction going on and tasks for Day 1 and 2 were similar so even the weaker pupils could follow through. They enjoyed and had fun in doing the activity. I also enjoyed teaching this activity. [T3Q2(7)]

Both T2 and T3 found negotiated interactions effective as "most of my pupils noticed the 'did not' + verb when they have to discuss with their friends and rewrite it again" [T3Q1B1(2)]. During interaction, some of the children's shared linguistic input included not only the target form, but also other information such as discourse features, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation as they attempted to reconstruct the original meaning (as indicated in the extracts on pages 54 and 56). This, as revealed in the teachers' summation of their lessons, was particularly helpful for developing children's L2 proficiency. For T1, on the other hand, the most difficult part of dictogloss was "Having the pupils sharing their story and writing it down in box B, and asking them to write what they've learned in the grammar box" [T1Q1B1(5)]. Apparently, the strategy of 'negotiating for meaning' to enable children to work out the linguistic gaps did not work in her class.

T1's observation on both counts presented an important caveat for the implementation of dictogloss. As pointed out, it is imperative for children to understand the message (and the task procedure) before they proceed to the group discussion and writing phases. Because the focus was on form, the text used for Group 1 should have been, ideally, slightly below par with their linguistic competence so as to ensure that they could afford attention on the intended structure instead of having to struggle with the semantic features. In principle, dictogloss directs children's attention to the intended form via 'noticing-the-gap', and the wider the gap (in meaning and in linguistic input), the less likely children will succeed in the reconstruction process. In the case of T1's class, most of the children may have experienced great difficulty in using negotiated interactions during the reconstruction of text due to the wide gaps they encountered in their understanding.

T1 and T3 highlighted the significance of task repetition in helping children improve in their L2 task performance, especially for lower proficiency children. After the implementation of dictogloss on Day 2, T1 commented "The lesson

went well because I think they've familiarized and understood the previous lesson taught ... I think it's good to use this activity if the pupils are familiar with the exercises and activity done in the class" [T1Q1B2(1)]. On the whole, her responses regarding the learnability, teachability and task usefulness of dictogloss were more positive on Day 2. Both T1 and T2 also noted that children in their class found the *Writing* stage on Day 2 difficult as "they tend to use the wrong tenses as they added more words on their own" [T2Q1B2(5)]. In particular for T1, it was felt that some adaptations were needed to cater for lower EPL children.

Summary and discussions

Research on focus on form (FonF) to date has given little attention to the particular qualities of FonF tasks that might give rise to learner interest or that learners might perceive to be useful in helping them shape their language performance. In this study it can be seen that while there was a general trend of positive attitudes among children towards dictogloss, variations towards preference of task features existed. The main sources of influence in children's attitudinal evaluation of the task appear to be its production load (the *Writing* stage), cognitive load (the *Noticing* stage), interaction opportunities (the *Activity* stage) and material design (the *Listening* stage). Children tended to rate the task more positively if they perceived it as one that is cognitively stimulating, yet not overly demanding, and that presented lesser production demands. They also expressed particular partiality for stories and humorous characters, which also served as additional contextual support. Some children, though not all, seemed to display a preference for working with friends during dictogloss. Teachers too highlighted cognitive load (specifically, task repetition), linguistic demands (for children to comprehend and to produce), and learner interaction opportunities as criteria that influenced their perception of the grammar task.

Proficiency appears to affect the task performance of low EPL children. This was clearly expressed by T1 in her utility of dictogloss. Dictogloss sought the use of negotiated interactions, partly to allow for opportunities to engage meaningfully in L2, and partly, to provide scaffolding via collaboration (Kowal and Swain, 1994) to fill the linguistic gaps (which, in principle, should result in children being "pushed" to higher levels of performance). Yet, in the case of Group 1, with a substantial majority of the children in the lower end of EPL, one can perceive how the supposedly aiding group work would become very demanding (for both the teacher and learners) to carry out meaningful communication in L2, let alone to obtain student-generated correct form(s) during exchanges. This, coupled with the deliberation of discovery learning of the task (in which learners were primed to notice and to formulate rules for themselves), would explain the low attainment in the grammar task among the less proficient children in Group 1. The other two teachers, whose classes which consisted of more high and middle EPL children, found the negotiated interactions helpful. These findings correspond largely with other research on the effects of FonF instruction (Williams, 2001) as well as the crucial role of attention in language learning (Schmidt, 1990; VanPatten, 2002). From a pedagogical perspective, the

findings have an important implication, in that teachers need to take into account their children's L2 proficiency level, in addition to their (mental) age and grade level, before deciding to implement FonF instruction.

As observed in the three schools, there were variations in children's EPL even though they were in the same grade level. This indicates that more research is needed to find the "right" treatment to cater for a wider range of children, as well as to find ways for teachers to adapt it to their specific classes. Additionally, this small-scale study gives significance to the affective factors of dictogloss, and this is only but one aspect of the potential effectiveness of FonF instruction. Further classroom research is needed to investigate how young learners can best benefit from this grammar instruction.

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Appendix 1**Grammar task on Day 1**

Dictogloss: What a day!

Just wondering: Have you ever had a day where you did not get to do the things you wanted to do? What happened that day?**Listening:** Your teacher is going to tell you about his or her day. Listen carefully. Tick the correct box. How many things did your teacher not get to do on that day?4 5 6 **Noticing:** Listen to your teacher again. This time try to remember the story. Write any words or sentences that you can remember in box A.*Box A: On my own***Activity:** Now, work with two other friends. Try to write exactly the story your teacher read.*Box B: With my friends*

Work with the whole class. Write the text in box C.

*Box C: With the class***Checking:** Look at your teacher's story. Check your work.**Grammar detective:** Complete the sentence.

Mimi went to the party last week but my teacher _____ .

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

Grammar task on Day 2

Dictogloss: What a day!

(The grammar task on Day 2 is similar to that of Day 1. The only variations are the protagonist in the story, and the writing task shown below which replaces 'Grammar detective' and 'Your grammar box'.)

Writing: Write about some of the things that you did not do yesterday.

Appendix 2**Dictogloss text (Day 1)**

Last week I was sick. I did not go to my friend's party. I did not eat any ice-cream. I did not watch TV. I did not play any games. I just stayed in bed the whole day.

Appendix 3**Student-attitude questionnaire**

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?

Appendix 4**Teacher-attitude questionnaire**

Please write your answer in the space provided.

1. How do you think the lesson went?

2. How do you feel about using this activity to teach grammar?

3. Rate the following statements according to the scale by writing the appropriate number in the space provided:

1 *Strongly Agree* 2 *Agree* 3 *Disagree* 4 *Strongly Disagree*

- a) The activity was useful in helping children improve their English language. _____
- b) Children enjoyed the activity. _____
- c) Children found the activity easy to understand. _____
- d) The activity helped children to understand the grammar point/s in focus. _____
- e) The activity was easy to carry out. _____
- f) The activity was time-consuming. _____
- g) I would like to have more activities like this one for the children in my class. _____

4. What did you like best about the activity?

5. What did you find most difficult about the activity?

6. If you were to teach this lesson again, would you do it differently? If so, how?

7. Please write any further comments or suggestions about this activity.

Note that most of the illustrations have been removed and the formatting condensed to save space. Researchers who wish to conduct parallel or similar studies are welcomed to contact the author for the dictogloss package used in this study.