There is increasing consensus that form-focused instruction helps learners in communicative or content-based instruction to learn features of the target language that they may not acquire without guidance. The subject of this article is the role of instruction that is provided in separate (isolated) activities or within the context of communicative activities (integrated). Research suggests that both types of instruction can be beneficial, depending on the language feature to be learned, as well as characteristics of the learner and the learning conditions. For example, isolated lessons may be necessary to help learners who share the same first language (L1) overcome problems related to L1 influence on their interlanguage; integrated instruction may be best for helping learners develop the kind of fluency and automaticity that are needed for communication outside the classroom. The evidence suggests that teachers and students see the benefits of both types of instruction. Explanations for the effectiveness of each type of instruction are drawn from theoretical work in second language acquisition and cognitive psychology as well as from empirical research.

In the 1970s, a new pedagogy of communicative language teaching (CLT) and a new theoretical view of second language acquisition (SLA) emphasized the importance of language development that takes place while learners are engaged in meaning-focused activities. Teachers and methodologists developed language classroom activities that featured interaction among learners, opportunities to use language in seeking and exchanging information, and less attention to learning metalinguistic rules or memorizing dialogues and practicing patterns (Brumfit, 1984; Howatt, 1984). One type of CLT that has become especially widespread is content-based instruction (CBI) in which the new language is a vehicle for learning subject matter that is of interest and value to the
It has been hypothesized that in CBI “language learning may even become incidental to learning about the content” (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1992, p. 28). However, some researchers have observed that good content teaching may not always be good language teaching (Swain, 1988), and since the introduction of CLT and CBI, debates have continued about whether and, if so, how attention to language form should be included in approaches to language instruction that are primarily meaning-focused.

**THE ROLE OF FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION**

Some individuals, especially those who begin learning as young children, acquire high levels of second language ability without form-focused instruction (FFI). This outcome supports the hypothesis that FFI is not necessary for SLA. However, it is rare for students in second or foreign language classes to reach such high levels. Some claim that this failure to master a new language is due to physiological changes that occur with age. Others point to the limitations inherent in classroom contexts. Whatever the reason, learners who begin learning when they are beyond early childhood, especially those whose exposure to the target language occurs primarily or exclusively in classrooms where other students share the same L1, appear to benefit from FFI that helps them make more efficient use of their limited exposure to the sounds, words, and sentences of the language they are learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

One thing is certain: Language acquisition is not an event that occurs in an instant or as a result of exposure to a language form, a language lesson, or corrective feedback. It is an evolving and dynamic phenomenon that is perhaps better characterized by the word development (suggesting ongoing change) than by the word acquisition (if this is taken to mean that the language user has complete and irrevocable possession of some linguistic knowledge or behavior).¹

Some SLA researchers have hypothesized that when instruction focuses on the language itself, it is beneficial only in marginal ways and may even have a negative impact on language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 1994; Truscott, 1996, 1999). They argue that, at most, explicit FFI alters language performance but does not change learners’ underlying grammar, which develops only through exposure to the language in natural interaction. In their view, instruction may allow second language (L2) users to acquire metalinguistic knowledge, but this kind of knowledge is processed and stored separately from language that is acquired through

¹ See Norris and Ortega (2003) for a review and discussion of definitions and measurements of second language knowledge and skill.
interactive language use (Schwartz, 1993; Sharwood Smith, 2004; see Ellis, 2005, for review).

Some of the empirical work investigating the kind of knowledge that is acquired during form-focused instruction has shown that FFI can play a role in helping classroom learners in CLT and CBI use their L2 with greater fluency and accuracy (e.g., Spada & Lightbown, 1993; Lyster, 2004) and to use language forms that represent more advanced developmental levels (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998). In these studies, efforts were made to develop tasks that elicited samples of spontaneous oral production. In a meta-analysis of the instructed SLA research, Norris and Ortega (2000) also report benefits for FFI, in particular the positive effects of explicit instruction on L2 learning. However, the majority of studies included in the meta-analysis used discrete-point, metalinguistic tests as measures of instructional effectiveness. This bias has led to the call for more studies to examine the benefits of instruction on implicit knowledge (Doughty, 2003; Ellis, 2002a; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Improvements in language performance may reflect learners' ability to make appropriate use of units of language that they have learned as whole unanalyzed chunks during form-focused practice or to use metalinguistic knowledge they have acquired during grammar lessons to monitor their output. When learners produce language under conditions of time pressure or competing demands on attention, they may reveal that the underlying internal grammar of their interlanguage has not been substantially affected. Even if this is the case, however, learners' ability to use language with greater accuracy and fluency—at least in some circumstances—can contribute to language acquisition in several ways. For example, in producing monitored or unanalyzed chunks of language, learners can create for themselves a sort of input and feedback loop that provides them with samples of the language that may be incorporated into their underlying grammatical systems later, when they are developmentally ready (Lightbown, 1998; Sharwood Smith, 2004). Another possible advantage of this ability to produce more correct or advanced language is that the contextually appropriate use of unanalyzed and/or monitored language allows learners to keep interactions going, thereby increasing their access to language input (Krashen, 1982). Further, the ability to use unanalyzed chunks of language may free cognitive resources for use in attending to external input (Ellis, 2005). Some language acquisition theories assume a more direct relationship between metalinguistic or formulaic knowledge and spontaneous language use. Skill acquisition theorists hypothesize that language learned first as metalinguistic knowledge can, through repeated meaningful practice, eventually become so well incorporated and automatized that the language user forgets the metalinguistic information and may forget having learned it in the first place (DeKeyser, 2003).
The value of FFI within instruction that is primarily meaning-focused has been demonstrated by research conducted in CLT and CBI programs over the past 20 years. In addition, teachers who have experience with the strong version of CLT—an exclusive focus on meaning with no attention to language form (Howatt, 1984; Spada, 2006a)—have observed that, without FFI, some language features never emerge in learners' language, and some nontarget forms persist for years. Experience with CLT and CBI shows that meaning-based exposure to the language allows L2 learners to develop comprehension skills, oral fluency, self-confidence, and communicative abilities, but that they continue to have difficulties with pronunciation as well as with morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic features of the L2 (see, e.g., Harley & Swain, 1984; Lyster, 1987). Research in CLT and CBI classrooms shows that the introduction of FFI has contributed to changes in learners' knowledge and use of certain language features (e.g., Day & Shapson, 1991; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Harley, 1989; White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991; Lyster, 2004; Sheen, 2005). Advocates of CBI have increasingly emphasized the importance of planning lessons that have both content objectives and linguistic objectives (Échevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Pica, 2002; Schleppergrell, Achugar, & Oteíza, 2004).

Thus, both research and teaching experience have led to a growing consensus that instruction is most effective when it includes attention to both form and meaning. As a result, the most engaging questions and debates in L2 pedagogy are no longer about whether CLT should include FFI but rather how and when it is most effective. This article compares the role of FFI in lessons that are isolated from communicative or content-based interaction with that of FFI that is integrated within activities where the primary emphasis remains on meaning (e.g., in tasks or content-based lessons). Some teachers and students have strong opinions about this question (see Barkhuizen, 1998; Yorio, 1986), but researchers have not directly compared the effects of integrating or isolating form-focused and meaning-focused practice in CLT and CBI programs.

There are theoretical and pedagogical arguments for both isolation and integration of form and meaning in L2 instruction. In our view, theoretical and pedagogical arguments for both isolation and integration of form and meaning in L2 instruction.

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2 These studies differ in several ways, including the degree of explicitness of instruction. Nonetheless, they can all be categorized as studies of FFI using the broad definition of FFI as proposed by Ellis (2001). This includes the primarily metalinguistic instruction associated with more traditional approaches to L2 teaching as evidenced in Sheen (2005) as well as instruction that is more implicit in nature, drawing learners' attention to form in functional and meaning-based contexts as evidenced in Harley (1989).

3 We thank the anonymous TESOL Quarterly reviewer who reminded us that all grammatical forms have meaning and that a simple binary distinction between form and meaning is problematic. We agree and use this terminology as a kind of shorthand referring to an emphasis on the structural or semantic properties of language.
making a choice between integrated and isolated FFI is not necessary (or advisable). Rather, the challenge is to discover the conditions under which isolated and integrated FFI respectively are most appropriate. These conditions are likely to involve a number of factors, including the nature of the language feature (e.g., its complexity, and its frequency and salience in the input), learners’ developmental levels in the acquisition of the feature, and the relationship between comparable features in the learners’ L1 and the L2. Other important factors include teachers’ and learners’ preferences for how to teach/learn about form, learners’ literacy and metalinguistic sophistication (especially in their L1), and their age and overall L2 proficiency.

**ISOLATED AND INTEGRATED FFI**

Johnson (1982) made a distinction between what he called the *unificationist* and *separationist* positions on the teaching of language use and language structure. He described the separationist position as one with “structure being taught first (through a structural syllabus) followed by a second communicative stage at which use is taught and where structures are ‘activated’ or ‘recycled’” (p. 129). According to Johnson, the *separationist* position implies “a divorce between the teaching of forms and uses, though other kinds of related separation are often also being implied—as between knowledge and its ‘activitation,’ between correctness and fluency” (p. 129). In contrast, from the *unificationist* perspective, “the divorce of form and use is seen as undesirable and probably also untenable on linguistic and psycholinguistic grounds. The position argues for a communicative framework from the very beginning” (p. 129).

Other writers have used different labels to distinguish different types of FFI. Long (1991) has made a distinction between *focus on forms* and *focus on form*. *Focus on forms* refers to lessons in which language features are taught or practiced according to a structural syllabus that specifies which features are to be taught and in which sequence. Focus on forms might involve teaching approaches as varied as mimicry and memorization or grammar translation, but all are based on the assumption that language features should be taught systematically, one at a time. In contrast, Long’s *focus on form* refers to instruction in which the main emphasis remains on communicative activities or tasks but in which a teacher intervenes to help students use language more accurately when the need arises. Originally, Long (1991) defined focus on form as reactive and incidental. That is, it was limited to those classroom events in which the teacher responded to a difficulty that arose as students engaged in communicative activities or tasks. The language feature that
required focus was not determined in advance. More recent interpretations of focus on form have expanded the definition to include instruction in which teachers anticipate that students will have difficulty with a particular feature as they engage in a communicative task and plan in advance to target that feature through feedback and other pedagogical interventions, all the while maintaining a primary focus on meaning (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998).

In this article, we have chosen to use the terms isolated and integrated to describe two approaches to drawing learners’ attention to language form in L2 instruction. Isolated FFI is provided in activities that are separate from the communicative use of language, but it occurs as part of a program that also includes CLT and/or CBI. Isolated FFI may be taught in preparation for a communicative activity or after an activity in which students have experienced difficulty with a particular language feature. In isolated FFI, the focus on language form is separated from the communicative or content-based activity. This approach differs from Long’s focus on forms, which refers to language instruction and practice organized around predetermined points of grammar in a structural syllabus, that is, form-based instruction that is not directly tied to genuinely communicative practice.

In integrated FFI, the learners’ attention is drawn to language form during communicative or content-based instruction. This definition corresponds to focus on form (both planned and incidental) as defined by Ellis (2002a) and by Doughty and Williams (1998). That is, although the form focus occurs within a communicative activity, the language features in focus may have been anticipated and planned for by the teacher or they may occur incidentally in the course of ongoing interaction.

Before discussing the role we see for each approach, a few comments are in order on how the distinction between isolated and integrated FFI is related to other contrasts in L2 research and pedagogy, such as intentional versus incidental learning (Hulstijn, 2003) and explicit versus implicit instruction (DeKeyser, 2003).

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4 One reviewer suggested that the term isolated carries “a clearly negative connotation.” We understand that interpretation and agree that the term certainly has had that connotation in much writing about language teaching. Nevertheless, we have chosen to retain this term because it allows us to emphasize the importance of instruction in which teachers and students focus their attention on language features that are almost impossible to perceive or acquire when they occur in ordinary communicative interaction, either because they are acoustically imperceptible (e.g., most grammatical morphology in English) or redundant and unlikely to affect comprehension (e.g., word order in English questions). We suggest that it is sometimes necessary to isolate such forms—much as one might place a specimen under a microscope—so that learners have an opportunity to perceive these features and understand their function in the language they encounter in communicative interaction. As we have stated previously, learners cannot be expected to benefit from brief, integrated focus on form if they do not understand what the teacher is calling their attention to (Lightbown, 1998, p. 194).
Isolated FFI is the provision of instruction in lessons whose primary purpose is to teach students about a particular language feature because the teacher believes that students are unlikely to acquire the feature during communicative activities without an opportunity to learn about the feature in a situation where its form and meaning can be made clear. From the teacher’s perspective, isolated FFI always implies intentional learning and explicit instruction. However, classroom observation research shows that even in traditional classrooms in which grammar lessons are based on a structural syllabus, students are not always sure of the teacher’s intended focus (Slimani, 1992). That is, the explicitness and intentionality that the teacher has in mind may not be recognized by the students.

Integrated FFI occurs in classroom activities during which the primary focus remains on meaning, but in which feedback or brief explanations are offered to help students express meaning more effectively or more accurately within the communicative interaction. Some writers seem to assume that drawing learners’ attention to form during meaning-based activities always involves implicit feedback and incidental learning, but that is not necessarily the case. Again, the perceptions of teachers and learners may be different. Adult learners sometimes show that they interpret the teacher’s implicit feedback (e.g., in the form of recasts) as explicit guidance, creating an opportunity for intentional language learning (e.g., Ohta, 2000; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen 2001). However, even when they recognize the teacher’s implicit feedback as relevant to language form, learners may not correctly identify the object of the teacher’s attention (see Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000, for a related study).

Both isolated and integrated FFI can include explicit feedback on error, metalinguistic terminology, the statement of rules, and explanations. Consider the following example of explicit, integrated FFI. The context is a communicative activity. Grade 6 students are playing a game in which they have to correctly guess the location of different dolls in a doll house to gain enough points to win the game. Note that, in preparation for the game, examples of appropriate questions had been written on the board.

**Student:** Is George is in the living room?

**Teacher:** You said “is” two times, dear. Listen to you—you said, “Is George is in . . . Look on the board. “Is George in the . . .” and then you say the name of the room.

**Student:** Is George in the living room?

**Teacher:** Yeah

**Student:** I win! (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 167)
In this example, the teacher provided explicit corrective feedback to a student when he made an error of form, even though the meaning he conveyed was comprehensible. First, she drew attention to the error, providing information as to what the error was. Although she explicitly focused on form, and the student appeared to understand and use the feedback, it seems that this did not interfere with his continuing interest in the ongoing game. Such FFI is thus both integrated and explicit. From the teacher’s perspective, the focus on question forms was also intentional: She had prepared for the activity with an isolated lesson on question forms, writing examples of appropriate questions on the board.

Another example of integrated FFI, one that includes the statement of rules and metalinguistic explanations, is an activity in which pairs of students respond to true–false (T/F) statements about medical history using a timeline showing names, dates, and descriptions of discoveries. Some of the T/F statements are expressed in the active voice while others are in the passive (e.g., *Freud developed a method for examining mental processes known as psychoanalysis; Penicillin was discovered by Alexander Fleming in 1928*). The focus is on content and meaning. As students discuss their responses to the questions, the instructor selects the two T/F statements above and asks the students to examine them with the following questions in mind: “What is given more emphasis in the first sentence—‘Freud [the subject] or psychoanalysis [the object]?’” “What is more prominent in the second sentence?” This leads into a brief explanation (5 or 6 minutes) of active/passive sentences, how they are formed and how they function, using one or two other examples. The teacher then asks students to return to responding to the T/F questions using the information on the timeline to assist them. (See Samuda, 2001, for an example of integrated FFI targeting the use of modal auxiliaries.)

One final note is essential before we discuss the different roles of isolated and integrated FFI. For purposes of the discussion, we present these approaches as if they were entirely distinct. It is clear, however, that they are really the ends of a continuum, especially as we are examining their role within CLT and CBI contexts for teaching and learning. That is, we do not see isolated and integrated FFI as being in competition with each other; rather, we see them as complementary parts of a complete language learning environment. Although we are convinced that there is a role for isolated FFI, we see it as occurring within instruction that is primarily interactive and communicative. Ultimately, the ability to use language automatically in communicative settings requires experience in doing exactly that. Providing integrated FFI in CLT and CBI contexts is the instructional model that has the greatest potential for facilitating the development of fluent and accurate language that is available for use outside the classroom. We concur with DeKeyser (1998), who, in his critique of rote drill in audiolingual language teaching, commented that
practice is valuable for language learning when it involves practice in “conveying personal meanings” (pp. 53–54).

The Role of Integrated FFI

In the pedagogical literature, there is considerable support for integrating form focus within communicative activities as well as considerable skepticism about the effectiveness of instruction that separates form focus from meaningful interaction (see, e.g., Calvé, 1994). Celce-Murcia (1991) argues that “grammar should never be taught as an end in itself but always with reference to meaning, social factors or discourse—or a combination of these factors” (pp. 466–467). Brumfit (1984) asserts that “teachers should not prevent learners . . . from combining a concern with language use with worry about formal accuracy in terms of specific language items” (p. 53). Brumfit’s assertion may be taken as evidence that, for some learners at least, feedback that comes during communicative interaction may have a positive effect on motivation.5 Knowing that help is available when it is needed may respond to the expectations and preferences of students—especially adult students—in language classes (see Cathcart & Olsen, 1976; Schulz, 1996, 2001).

Theoretical support for integration comes from both SLA and cognitive psychology. Long (1991) has argued that focus on language form should be fully integrated into ongoing communicative interaction. In fact, as noted earlier, in some of his writing, Long (e.g., 1991) argued that teachers should provide focus on form only on those language features that occur naturally in the course of a task or activity in which students are using the language in meaningful interaction. In his revised interaction hypothesis, Long (1996) states that while comprehensible input and meaningful interaction provide the raw material for language acquisition, they also provide the ideal context for spontaneous (i.e., integrated) attention to language form. Other SLA concepts such as negotiation of form (Lyster, 1994a, 1994b) and metatalk (Swain & Lapkin, 2002) also point to the benefits of reflecting on language form during communicative language use. There are differences among these theoretical constructs, but all of them are compatible with the hypothesis that while instruction may not directly alter learners’ underlying language systems, it can help them notice features in the input, making it more

5 It is important to note that we do not equate integrated FFI with CLT. As evident in the research literature and in classroom practice, CLT has many different meanings, some of which include no attention to language form (i.e., the strong version of CLT) and others that include attention to form, albeit in different ways (see Howatt, 1984 and Spada, 2006a for discussions of the evolution and interpretations of CLT).
likely that they will acquire them (Gass, 1997; Lightbown, 1998; Schmidt, 1990).

One theoretical approach that has recently been used to explain the possible benefits of integrated FFI is transfer appropriate processing (TAP). According to TAP, learners retrieve knowledge best if the processes for retrieval are similar to those that were used in the learning condition (Blaxton, 1989; Franks, Bilbrey, Lien, & McNamara, 2000; Morris, Bransford, & Franks, 1977). In addition, the situation, objects, and events that are present at the time of learning are connected through a network of associations. Therefore, retrieval is likely to be easier when learners find themselves using similar processes or in the presence of the same objects or situations.

TAP has only recently begun to receive attention in the SLA literature, but research on bilinguals’ memory for lexical items provides some indications of what SLA research may reveal. In these studies, bilingual participants are consistently more successful in retrieving the words they learned when the testing tasks are similar to the learning tasks (Basden, Bonilla-Meeks, & Basden, 1994; Durgunoglu & Roediger, 1987). Research on the learning and retrieval of more complex units of language remains to be done. However, it seems that TAP would predict that language learned during communicative activities in which learners’ attention is briefly drawn to form (i.e., integrated FFI) would be more easily retrieved in communicative situations than, say, on decontextualized tests. In contrast, L2 knowledge learned outside communicative activities in isolated FFI would be more difficult to retrieve in communicative situations outside the classroom (Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal, & Tharp, 2003; Segalowitz & Gatbonton, 1995; Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999). This hypothesis is consistent with the observation of many teachers and researchers: Students who perform well on tests are not necessarily fluent users of the test items in spontaneous speech, just as many fluent speakers whose language acquisition has taken place primarily outside the classroom perform poorly on tests requiring metalinguistic knowledge or the retrieval of individual language features outside a communicative context.

Although support for integrated FFI comes primarily from theoretical extrapolations and pedagogical principles, there is also some evidence of its effectiveness in classroom-based studies of CLT and CBI. In our research in intensive ESL classes that were almost exclusively meaning-focused, young students were successful in acquiring certain language features when their teachers provided ongoing, integrated FFI on a limited number of these features (Lightbown, 1991; Lightbown & Spada, 1990). Those receiving integrated FFI were substantially more likely to acquire these features than students in classes where there was never any attention to form. Research in French immersion programs (Day &
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Shapson, 1991; Harley, 1989, 1998; Lyster, 1994a, 1994b, 2004) and in other content-based and communicative classrooms with child and adult ESL learners (Doughty & Varela, 1998; R. Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Williams & Evans, 1998) also supports the hypothesis that attention to language form within the context of communicative practice can lead to progress in learners’ language development. Although this progress has been observed in the short term for most studies, long-term improvement has also been reported (e.g., Spada & Lightbown, 1993). However, the research in CLT and CBI classes was not designed to directly investigate the different roles of integrated and isolated FFI. That is, none of the studies compared the outcomes of L2 learners receiving isolated FFI with learners receiving integrated FFI.

Jean’s (2005) study of French as a second language (nonimmersion) in a Canadian secondary school provides some related evidence of the effectiveness of integrated FFI. Jean designed an experimental study in which learners either (a) practiced target forms in mechanical drills that were separate from the communicative activities in which the forms were expected to be used later or (b) received FFI during ongoing meaning-based activities. She found no difference in the two groups’ ability to use the target forms on subsequent measures of accuracy. However, she found that students whose FFI had been integrated with meaningful communicative activities used the forms with a greater variety of vocabulary. Jean concludes that, at least for the verb morphology targeted in her study, isolated mechanical drills were not a necessary step in L2 teaching and that integrated FFI was an effective way of teaching certain verb forms. She also found that the high school students in her study did not express a clear preference for one type of instruction over the other.

The Role of Isolated FFI

Stern (1992) asserted that although “communicative activities are an essential component of a language curriculum, there is a still a place for a separate analytic language syllabus” (p. 180, emphasis added). More recently, Ellis (2002b) has argued that “we [should] teach grammar separately, making no attempt to integrate it with the task-based component (except perhaps, methodologically through feedback)” (p. 32). One frequently heard argument in support of isolating FFI is related to maintaining learners’ positive motivation. The concern is that learners will become discouraged or disinterested if their attention is drawn to form while they are trying to engage in communicative practice (see, e.g., Raimes, 2002). Thus, it is sometimes suggested that teachers make note of problems that arise during interaction activities and then bring them up for instruction and explanation in separate isolated activities,
outside the communicative activity. As noted earlier, however, there is relatively little evidence that language learners themselves object to FFI that occurs during communicative activities.

Some pedagogical and theoretical arguments to support the separation of form and communicative practice include the assumption that FFI should precede communicative use of a new language feature. There is a long and strong tradition in the field of L2 teaching that the first phase in a lesson is the presentation of a specific language form. This presentation phase is followed by controlled practice (pattern practice, structural drills, etc.), and only later by activities that permit more spontaneous use of language. In a controversial article, Higgs and Clifford (1982) argued that “the premature immersion of a student into an unstructured or ‘free’ conversational setting before certain fundamental linguistic structures are more or less in place is not done without cost” (pp. 73–74).

More recently, drawing on research in cognitive psychology, specifically in the early work of Anderson (1982) on skill acquisition theory, DeKeyser (1998) has argued that “grammar should first be taught explicitly to achieve a maximum of understanding and then should be followed by some exercises to anchor it solidly in the students’ consciousness in declarative form so that it is easy to keep in mind during communicative exercises” (p. 58). In the framework of this article, DeKeyser’s first two phases (explicit instruction and anchoring exercises) represent isolated FFI, although our definition of isolated FFI includes the possibility that such instruction may occur after students have discovered the need for certain language features during communicative activity.6

Further support for isolated FFI comes from information processing theory, which argues that because the human mind has limited processing capacity, it is difficult for learners to focus on form and meaning at the same time (Ellis, 1997). VanPatten (1990) suggested that noticing some aspects of language form (e.g., verb morphology) while trying to grasp the meaning of a text may be particularly problematic for beginning learners. VanPatten and his colleagues have shown how isolating specific features of the target language in the input can help learners change the way they process certain form–meaning mappings (VanPatten, 1996, 2004; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993).

Recent studies by Barcroft (2002) and Trofimovich (2005) also illustrate situations in which isolated FFI may be beneficial to students. In these studies, students were exposed to the material to be learned either in contexts where they needed to focus on form while also processing semantic aspects of the language to be learned or where some formal feature was itself the primary focus. Both Barcroft and Trofimovich

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6 Doughty and Williams (1998) refer to the work by DeKeyser and Lightbown regarding the sequencing of FFI as sequential focus on form.
found that attention to meaning was associated with poorer recall of formal features such as the spelling or pronunciation of words. They interpreted their findings in terms of the TAP hypothesis. As noted earlier, according to TAP, the best predictor of success in retrieving information is the degree of similarity between the conditions and processing demands present during learning and those present during retrieval. Thus, a learning task in which cognitive effort is devoted to semantic features of a word is not a good preparation for a test in which learners need to retrieve information about perceptual or formal features of the word. If the assessment task requires learners to recall or recognize the correct spelling or pronunciation of a word, the learning task should create conditions in which learners can devote more processing capacity to those features. To be sure, the goal of most language learning is ultimately to be able to use language forms correctly in communicative contexts that include multiple demands on attention. However, what the research by VanPatten, Barcroft, and Trofimovich shows is that such contexts may not be conducive to the initial perception and interpretation of certain language features.

To our knowledge, no empirical classroom-based research directly compares the effects of isolated and integrated instruction. It is important to keep in mind that our definition of isolated FFI is attention to form in separate lessons that occur within a program that is primarily communicative in orientation. In that sense, it is not the same as Long’s definition of focus on forms, which is associated with traditional discrete-point metalinguistic instruction provided in a context where little or no meaning-based instruction or practice occurs. Similarly, our definition of integrated FFI is not the same as Long’s original definition of focus on form, which includes only reactive FFI whereas integrated FFI includes both reactive and proactive FFI. In this way, our definition of integrated FFI is similar to Ellis’s (2001) definition of planned and incidental focus on form.

7 A reviewer argues that such studies do exist and points to Sheen (2005) as an example. While Sheen’s study does show the benefits of instruction in helping young francophone students make more accurate use of questions and the placement of adverbs in English sentences, it is not a comparison of integrated and isolated FFI as we define them in this paper. As we read the report of that research, it seems to show that the students in the comparison group received almost no FFI at all. It is important to emphasize, again, that integrated FFI is not simply a synonym for CLT with little or no attention to language form. Integrated FFI includes brief explanations, corrective feedback, explicit elicitations of correct forms, and input enhancement provided within the context of meaning-based instruction. Sheen’s description of the comparison class in his study indicates that the instructor did not make any special attempt to integrate FFI related to questions and adverbs in his regular classroom activities. In the experimental class, students received instruction that is best described as focus on forms not as isolated FFI. The distinction between the two is that isolated FFI is provided in separate lessons that are directly related to the activities within a communicative or content-based syllabus whereas focus on forms lessons typically occur within a structural syllabus that is not closely linked to the ongoing communicative activities.
This review of the theoretical, pedagogical, and empirical support for integrated and isolated instruction indicates that there are arguments on both sides and that the choice between the two is likely not an absolute one, but rather a choice that is dependent on other factors. In the next section, we outline some of those factors.

**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE CHOICE OF ISOLATED OR INTEGRATED FFI**

SLA research shows that some linguistic features are acquired *incidentally*, that is, without intentional effort or conscious awareness by learners or guidance from teachers. However, it is also evident that some language features develop very slowly, or not at all, in the absence of guided attention and that some types of FFI can increase the likelihood that learners will make progress in learning these features (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Some language features develop according to a natural sequence of stages that is not altered by instruction. (For overviews, see Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Mitchell & Myles, 1998.) However, while instruction may have only a limited effect on the path learners follow through developmental sequences, it may affect the rate at which learners pass through a sequence (see, e.g., Ellis, 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Pienemann, 1989; Spada & Lightbown, 1993). Several factors may influence the relationship between instruction and learning outcomes. These factors are dynamic, changing over the course of learners’ language acquisition and within different teaching contexts.8

**L1 Influence**

One hypothesis is that isolated FFI is particularly useful when the L1 has a strong influence on L2 forms. Errors caused by L1 influence can be problematic in classrooms where learners share the same first language and reinforce each other’s L1-based errors (Lightbown, 1991; Lyster, 1987). In situations like these, isolated FFI may be needed to clarify misleading similarities between the L1 and L2. Harley (1993) points to the distinction between French *avoir/être* and *have/be* in English as an example. Isolated FFI may also help in those cases where learners have developed, based on L1 influence, an interlanguage rule that is more

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8 We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for emphasizing the dynamic nature of the factors that influence instructional choices.
general than the related rule in the L2. White (1991) discusses this problem with specific reference to differences between adverb placement in French and English subject-verb-object sentences and advocates isolated FFI as a way of helping learners perceive those differences.

Salience in the Input

Isolated FFI may be beneficial with features that are relatively simple to explain or illustrate but are not particularly salient in oral language. Drawing attention to them in isolation may help learners see/hear language features they have not been noticing in the input, the first step on the path to acquisition. Although some studies have reported benefits of input enhancement, that is, increasing frequency and/or salience of language features in the input (Alanen, 1995; Doughty, 1991), others have reported partial or no benefits (Spada & Lightbown, 1999; Trahey & White, 1993; White, 1998). These conflicting findings appear to be related to differences in the kind of enhancement. More explicit enhancement appears to lead to more L2 progress than less explicit enhancement (Norris & Ortega, 2000). This finding suggests that isolated FFI might be useful for creating the necessary salience to help learners notice language forms that occur frequently but are semantically redundant or phonologically reduced or imperceptible in the oral input. Such forms could include, for example, third-person -s in English and adjective agreement morphology in French.

Input Frequency

Isolated FFI may also help ensure that students have opportunities to learn forms that are rare or absent in the language they are exposed to in the CLT or CBI classroom. Lyster (1994b) reports findings to support this idea in his investigation of the effects of FFI on the learning of the sociolinguistic distinction between second-person pronouns tu and vous in French immersion classrooms. Students were familiar with the singular/plural distinction between these two words, but the social dynamics of the classroom in which they were learning French did not give them opportunities to observe the politeness distinctions that are signaled by the different pronoun forms. Lyster developed an instructional interven-

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9 It may also be that explicit instruction seems to have some benefits because the assessment measures used favor explicit knowledge (see Doughty, 2003 for discussion). Norris and Ortega (2000, p. 501) themselves acknowledge this possibility but argue that their findings cannot be explained by this single variable.
tion that included opportunities for isolated FFI. Drawing students’ attention to this distinction probably prepared them to notice the use of the forms in the communicative and integrated FFI activities that followed, and their ability to use these forms improved significantly.

**Rule Complexity**

It has been suggested that integrated FFI may be a more appropriate approach to instruction for language features that are complex and have rules that are difficult to describe. However, although there is some intuitive agreement about a distinction between *hard* and *easy* rules, it is not always clear what is meant by these terms (see Hulstijn, 1995; Hulstijn & DeGraaff, 1994, for useful attempts to define them). Furthermore, as DeKeyser (2003) points out, in addition to the inherent difficulty of a form or a rule, there is also subjective difficulty: “Rule difficulty is an individual issue that can be described as the ratio of the rule’s inherent linguistic complexity to the students’ ability to handle such a rule—a rule of moderate difficulty for one student may be easy for a student with more language learning aptitude or language learning experience” (p. 331).

A fairly widespread assumption in the SLA literature is that while *easy* rules can be taught, *hard* rules are by their very nature too complex to be successfully taught in isolated instruction and thus are difficult to learn through traditional explanation and practice pedagogy that is isolated from communicative use of the language. Thus, integrated FFI may be more suitable for complex/abstract features, such as the article system in English. In laboratory studies to investigate the learning of simple and complex morphosyntactic rules, DeKeyser (1995) and Robinson (1996) provide some support for this idea. Participants in those studies learned simple morphosyntactic rules better under conditions of explicit-deductive learning and more complex rules better under implicit-inductive conditions. Conclusions drawn from these studies remain controversial, however, and are perhaps best seen as hypotheses in need of further study.

**Communicative Value**

Integrated FFI may also be particularly useful with features in which errors are more likely to lead to communication breakdowns (e.g., English possessive pronouns *his* and *her*). Lightbown (1998) suggests that L2 learners at various levels of proficiency are more likely to be able to focus on form and meaning at the same time when the “form in focus ( . . . )
is an important carrier of the meaning in focus” (p. 192). However, when errors do not interfere with meaning (e.g., the absence of inversion in questions such as *What she is reading?*), isolation from communicative interaction may be necessary if learners are to notice the difference between what they say and the correct way to say what they mean (Spada, Lightbown, & White, 2005). The relative importance of using the right word as compared with using the right grammar is also reflected in Schwartz’s (1993) observation that instruction and feedback are more likely to lead to changes in learners’ knowledge and use of lexical items than of morphology and syntax. Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000) have observed that recasts, a typical characteristic of integrated FFI, are more likely to be noticed when the element being recast is a lexical item than when it is a morphosyntactic element (see also Lyster, 1998).

**Learners’ Developmental Level**

Once a language feature has emerged in learners’ interlanguage (see Pienemann, 1998), more fluent and accurate use of that feature may best be encouraged through integrated FFI. Several studies on FFI have reported that L2 learners benefit most from FFI when they are at a developmental level in their language acquisition that enables them to compare their use of particular forms with that of native and more proficient speakers (Mackey & Philp, 1998; Spada & Lightbown, 1999). Related to this finding is the observation that learners’ receptive and productive abilities do not develop in the same way or at the same rate. However, recent research investigating the effects of both input- (i.e., comprehension) and output- (i.e., production) based practice on L2 development indicates that both comprehension and production improve as long as the practice is meaningful and learners are encouraged to make form–meaning connections (Morgan-Short & Wood Bowden, 2006; see also DeKeyser, 1998).

As noted earlier, learners may need isolated FFI, such as VanPatten’s processing instruction, to help them detect and understand form–meaning relationships for language features that have low salience, low frequency, or low communicative value. Once the features have emerged in the interlanguage or once the form–meaning connections have been made, the development of greater fluency is likely to be favored by integrated FFI. Ammar and Spada (2006) found that French-speaking children who were already more proficient in using possessive determiners *his* and *her* were able to take advantage of integrated instruction, whether in the form of recasts (where the teacher provides the correct form) or prompts (where the teacher elicits a correction from the student). However, students who were less proficient benefited more from
prompts than recasts, suggesting that they had greater difficulty recognizing the purpose of the feedback.

**Learners’ Age**

In general, older learners, especially those with experience in the study of their own or other languages, are more receptive to isolated grammatical instruction (see, e.g., Barkhuizen, 1998). Outside the classroom, in environments where they are completely immersed in the target language, very young learners often acquire L2 proficiency with little or no FFI. Older children, adolescents, and adults, however, appear to benefit from instruction and may even depend on it because of the ways in which their language-learning abilities differ from those of young children (Bley-Vroman, 1988; DeKeyser, 2000), especially if their contact with the language is limited to the second or foreign language classroom.

Research in CLT and CBI contexts has shown that children do not always recognize integrated FFI (including enhanced input and implicit recasts) as responses to language form rather than meaning (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997). However, they do respond to integrated feedback which is explicit (e.g., through the use of emphasis, prompting, and elicitation as well as other nonverbal signals; see, e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Lyster, 2004) or which is provided within the context of language teaching where the overall orientation includes a strong focus on language form (Lyster & Mori, 2006). Adult learners, in a variety of language learning contexts, have been shown to be more aware of integrated FFI as feedback on language form (see, e.g., Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Ohta, 2000).

**Language-Learning Aptitude**

Learners who perform well on language aptitude tests or have more metalinguistic knowledge and skill in their L1 may be better able to notice and focus on language form within a communicative context than those with poorer aptitude and metalinguistic ability. It has been hypothesized that learners with poor metalinguistic skills in their own language may require more explicit (possibly isolated) instruction to help them identify some form–meaning connections (Ranta, 2002). Mackey, Philp, Egi, Fujii, and Tomoaki (2002) found that adult learners with higher scores on tests of working memory were more likely to report that they noticed interactional (integrated) feedback in the form of recasts (see also Robinson, 2002).
Learner and Teacher Preferences for How to Teach or Learn About Form

Research on students’ beliefs and opinions about FFI (i.e., instruction and corrective feedback) has revealed that teachers’ and students’ views often differ. In two large-scale studies, Schulz (1996, 2001) found that virtually all students expressed a desire to have their errors corrected, but very few teachers felt this was desirable. In addition, students were more likely than teachers to say that formal study of the language is “essential to the eventual mastery of a [foreign language]” (2001, p. 247). Mismatches like these have long been reported in the literature (Cathcart & Olsen, 1976; Yorio, 1986). The effects of matches and mismatches on L2 learning have also been investigated (e.g., Spada, 1987; Wesche, 1981), and there is some evidence that learners benefit most from instruction that suits their preferences (see Dörnyei, 2005, for summary and discussion).

Other factors such as individual learning styles and previous experience learning languages can also lead to different preferences for learning. As indicated earlier, some L2 learners who have learned languages via traditional structure-based approaches often have strong preferences for continuing to learn via isolated grammar practice. Other L2 learners who have learned languages informally may respond more positively to FFI that is integrated with meaning. What is clear is that characteristics such as these can interact with type of instruction in complex ways, leading to more or less successful learning (Skehan, 1989).

It is not only learners who have different preferences for isolated and/or integrated FFI. So do teachers. Research on teacher cognition has revealed that L2 teachers often teach grammar in the way in which they were taught it themselves (Borg, 2003; Farrell, 1999). There is also evidence of a direct relationship between what teachers know about grammar and how they teach it. That is, the extent to which grammar is taught deductively depends on how much metalinguistic knowledge teachers possess (Borg, 2001; Brumfit, Mitchell, & Hooper, 1996). Of course, there are L2 instructors who do not believe that grammar instruction is useful. In a study comparing second (English) and foreign (French) language instruction, Mitchell and Hooper (1992) observed that the English teachers rarely focused on language or explicit grammar work but the foreign language teachers regularly did so. When interviewed about this finding, the English teachers expressed the opinion that this type of activity was not of primary importance for developing students’ linguistic ability—a response that is not atypical of L2 instructors who have adopted the strong version of CLT.

It is often observed that teachers who are teaching their own native language may not have as good a grasp of the formal grammar of the
language as those whose learning has included form-focused L2 instruction. In a study of teachers' practices, Borg (1998) observed that decisions to include explicit formal instruction are not always based on teachers' belief that grammar instruction works but rather on their belief that students expect it. He also observed that when teaching grammar, teachers do not necessarily adhere exclusively to one particular approach (e.g., deductive or inductive) but will combine and alternate between them. Similarly, in a study of 48 teachers’ attitudes to explicit or implicit teaching of grammar in an English for academic purposes (EAP) program, Burgess and Etherington (2002) report that the majority of teachers believed that it is useful to integrate grammar within authentic texts rather than teach it explicitly using a grammatical syllabus. At the same time, however, they also expressed the belief that not all grammatical knowledge can be learned implicitly and thus advocated explicit instruction as well. In our research investigating the preferences of teachers and adult learners for integrated or isolated FFI, we have found that neither group expresses a consistent preference for one over the other. They value both (Spada, 2006b).

**CONCLUSION**

Research and theory suggest that there is a role in CLT and CBI for both isolated and integrated FFI. Each type of instruction may play a different role in promoting language acquisition. Research and experience in CLT and CBI affirm that not all language features need to be taught in isolated lessons. Instead, the current research on classroom learning shows that incidental learning allows students to acquire a great deal of language while focused on meaning in CLT and CBI. The addition of integrated FFI can contribute to the automatization of language features that have emerged in students' language but that are not used reliably when there are competing demands for attention.

Integrated FFI includes a wide range of approaches, including the kind of implicit feedback that occurs as the need or opportunity arises, as well as the kind of planned interaction that requires the repeated, but natural, use of a particular language form. Nevertheless, isolated lessons may be useful, or even essential, in promoting the acquisition of some language features. These features include those that are hard to perceive in the normal stream of communicative speech, those for which there is a misleading similarity to the L1, and those that are unlikely to cause communication breakdown. We are currently designing quasi-experimental studies to explore the contributions of both types of FFI.

The importance of isolated lessons will be determined by differences
in the specific language feature that is being taught as well as by differences in learners’ and teachers’ characteristics, abilities, and preferences. We find no evidence to support a suggestion that isolated grammar lessons without opportunities for communicative language use should again become the dominant approach to language instruction. Isolated lessons are a starting point or a follow-up for communicative or content-based activities. Above all, they should not be expected to result in students’ immediate incorporation of the feature in focus into their communicative language use. Nevertheless, such lessons can prepare students to make the best use of opportunities for continuing their language acquisition in meaning-focused activities and integrated FFI when it occurs.

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