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**Impact of attentional focus on motor performance
within the context of “early” limb regulation and “late” target control**

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Abstract

Directing attention to the effect of one's movement (external focus) has been shown to aid performance compared to directing attention to the movement itself (internal focus). This finding has been predominantly explained by an external focus promoting action planning and automatic movement control, while an internal focus acts to constrain movement (constrained action hypothesis [CAH]). In a separate line of research, the multiple control process model states that early movement phases involve anticipated and feedforward processes, while late movement phases explicitly incorporate external afferent information. We hypothesised that enhanced planning and automatic movement control would manifest from an external/distal focus compared to internal/proximal focus. The present study had participants execute fast and accurate movements to a single target using a digitizing graphics tablet that translated movements to a screen. Participants were instructed to focus on the end target location (external-distal), movement of the cursor (external-proximal), and movement of the limb (internal-proximal). It was found that the external-distal focus generated a shorter time to initiate and execute movements (indicating enhanced movement planning) compared to the external- and internal-proximal conditions. In addition, only the external proximal focus revealed a reduction in spatial variability between peak velocity and movement end (indicating greater online control). These findings indicate that advances in action planning and online control occur when adopting an external-distal focus. However, there were some benefits to online control when adopting an external-proximal focus. We propose that an external-distal focus promotes action-effect principles, where there is a greater contribution of anticipatory feedforward processes that limit the need for late online control.

Keywords: attentional focus, constrained-action, early and late control, online, aiming

1 **Introduction**

2 As early as the 19th Century (James, 1890), research has demonstrated that directing
3 attention on the effect of one's movement (external focus) is more efficacious than directing
4 attention to the movement itself (internal focus) (for a review see Wulf 2013). Indeed, the
5 benefit of an external as opposed to internal focus has been reflected in a number of domains
6 including sport (golf: Wulf & Su, 2007; pedalo racing: Totsika & Wulf, 2003; soccer: Wulf,
7 McConnell, Gärtner, & Schwarz, 2002; dart-throwing: Marchant, Clough, & Crawshaw,
8 2007; basketball: Zachry, Wulf, Mercer, & Bezodis, 2005; jumping: Wulf, Zachry, Granados,
9 & Dufek, 2007), muscular control (maximum force production: Marchant, Greig, & Scott,
10 2009; strength endurance: Marchant, Greig, Bullough, & Hitchen, 2011), and patient
11 populations and rehabilitation (Fasoli, Trombly, Tickle-Degnen, & Verfaellie, 2002; Johnson,
12 Burrige, Demain, 2013; Landers, Wulf, Wallmann, & Guadagnoli, 2005).

13 The principle explanation for the benefit of an external focus is adapted from the logic
14 of the *degrees-of-freedom problem*. Here, multiple muscles, limbs and joints may be
15 incomprehensibly utilised to deliver a single or set movement goal (Bernstein, 1967). Indeed,
16 it is suggested that an external focus accommodates automatic control processes –
17 synonymous with self-organization (Kelso, 2012; Wallace, 1996) – whereas, an internal focus
18 causes the performer to “freeze” the degrees-of-freedom. This “freezing” effect results in the
19 decomposing of individual movement elements, which inadvertently attenuates performance
20 (see also, Beilock & Carr, 2001 and Masters, 1992). This notion is referred to as the
21 *constrained-action hypothesis* (CAH) (Wulf, McNevin, & Shea, 2001).

22 Since its inception, the CAH has been heavily tested for its explanatory power. One of
23 the first studies to do so showed that undertaking an external focus during a balancing task
24 led to shorter amplitude and faster frequency iterative adjustments in movement, as well as
25 shorter probe reaction times in a secondary auditory task compared to an internal focus (Wulf

1 et al., 2001). Indeed, it was theorized that if an external focus of attention accommodates
2 automatic control processes, then there may be more reflex-like adjustments made to the
3 movement in comparison to conditions promoting an internal focus of attention (see also
4 McNevin, Shea, & Wulf, 2003; Wulf, Mercer, McNevin, & Guadagnoli, 2004). This
5 increased automaticity has been shown to result in reduced cognitive demands, and thus leads
6 to a larger pool of attentional resources that are available for a secondary task (*cf.* Poolton,
7 Maxwell, Masters, & van der Kamp, 2007). Recent evidence demonstrates how an external
8 focus may also result in a greater efficiency in the recruitment and activation of muscles
9 compared to an internal focus of attention (Marchant, Greigg, Bullough et al., 2011;
10 Marchant, Greig, & Scott, 2009, Vance, Wulf, Töllner, McNevin, & Mercer, 2004). Taken
11 together, these findings present strong support for the CAH.

12 While the peripheral motor processes underlying the CAH offer a viable explanation
13 for the differences in performance outcomes, it is prudent to consider the neuropsychological
14 processes that underpin such effects. That is, does adopting an external focus more greatly
15 accommodate automatic control via the integration of large degrees-of-freedom compared to
16 an internal focus? With this in mind, it may be useful to revisit the ideomotor principle of
17 movement control as movements being a direct consequence of their representation (James,
18 1890; see also Hommel, Müsseler, Aschersleben, & Prinz, 2001; Prinz, 1997; Wulf & Prinz,
19 2001). These representations are built-up and contingent upon the movements themselves
20 (e.g., basketball free-throw) and their subsequent consequences to the environment (e.g., ball
21 reaching the basket). Thus, once these links have been established, they can be innervated in
22 the reverse direction as the presence or attention to relevant stimulus features (e.g., basket)
23 can awaken the movement that was once responsible for interacting with these features in the
24 first place (e.g., basketball shot). This perspective is reflected by evidence of an enhanced
25 pre-potent response when in the presence of specialised stimulus features that have been

1 previously correlated with motor-execution (Elsner & Hommel, 2001; see also Heyes, 2001).
2 Although the present study does not depict the coupling between actions and their effects, it
3 is relevant to consider as a framework when explaining attentional focus effects. That is, an
4 external focus of attention may cause performers to code stimulus features (distal cues) that
5 are more readily correlated to the movements required for skilled execution. Alternatively, an
6 internal focus may cause attention to be distributed to sources of information (e.g., body-
7 centred proximal cues) that do not necessarily elicit a skilled response.

8 With this in mind, it is relevant to consider the role of attentional focus in elementary
9 visuomotor control given the potential multiple processes at-play (Elliott et al., 2018; Glover
10 & Baran, 2017). That is, the early portion of target-directed movement manifests from pre-
11 response planning, where an internal representation or motor program that models the
12 efferent and reafferent (response-produced) signals can be configured (Desmurget & Grafton,
13 2000; Wolpert & Ghahramani, 2000; Wolpert, Miall, & Kawato, 1998). During the
14 movement, and in the event of a discrepancy between the anticipated and actual efferent and
15 reafferent signals, performers can quickly adjust their movement (Grierson & Elliott, 2008;
16 see also, Cluff, Crevecoeur, & Scott, 2015; Smeets, Wijdenes, & Brenner, 2016). These
17 online adjustments unfold very early on (<100 ms) and without conscious awareness, which
18 suggests they are automatic in nature (Goodale, Pélisson, & Prablanc, 1986; Proteau,
19 Roujoula, & Messier, 2009; Slachevsky et al., 2001; see also, Cressman, Franks, Enns, &
20 Chua, 2006; Pisella et al., 2000). In this regard, the priming of a sensory-motor representation
21 when adopting an external focus may influence the early phases of movement, which
22 implicates movement planning and automatic rapid adjustments (feedforward-control).

23 At the same time, it is possible that sensory feedback may be incorporated later on
24 and enable adjustments to be made to the movement with respect to the intended target. This
25 adjustment is substantially different to the form of online control that was mentioned

1 previously as it relies on unanticipated and external sources of afferent information, which is
2 often exploited by early learners (e.g., Elliott, Hansen, Mendoza, & Tremblay, 2004; Proteau,
3 Martenuik, Girouard, & Dugas, 1987). In a similar vein, the limited priming of a sensory-
4 motor representation following an internal focus may restrict the contribution of feedforward
5 processes, and thus require deliberate and inefficient guidance of the movement (feedback-
6 control) (e.g., Mottet, van Dokkum, Froger, Gouiach, & Laffont, 2017; Welsh, Higgins, &
7 Elliott, 2007).

8 To this end, the following study aims to re-examine the influence of attentional focus
9 within the context of the multiple control processes. We consider the notion of multiple
10 control processes to be highly informative for our understanding of attentional focus effects.
11 That is, the action-effect principle may be enhanced by an external focus which promotes
12 feedforward-control (via both enhanced movement planning processes and automatic control
13 of movement), compared to an internal focus. To investigate, we had participants execute a
14 discrete target-directed movement that was translated to a computer monitor courtesy of a
15 digitizing tablet. At the same time, attention was oriented to the hand (internal-proximal) or
16 target (external-distal), which is synonymous with the standard cues adopted for an internal
17 and external focus, respectively. In addition, focus was directed toward the cursor
18 (responsible for translating the limb movement to the screen) (external-proximal), which de-
19 coupled the proximity to the body and task features. Indeed, if the benefits of an external
20 compared to internal focus are attributed to priming motor codes from task-relevant, distal
21 cues, then there should be minimal gains served by an external focus toward other, more
22 proximal, features (e.g., Bell & Hardy, 2009; Castanada & Gray, 2007; McNevin et al.,
23 2003).

24 Because the influence of an external focus is primarily attributed to the priming of an
25 embedded representation that corresponds with the distal stimulus cues, we predict that the

1 external-distal focus should elicit enhanced feedforward-control that sees a shorter time to
2 initiate and execute the movements. On the other hand, by incorporating an external-proximal
3 condition we are able to limit the action-effect principle by bringing the external focus away
4 from the intended target. Here, we predict that a more proximal focus should reduce
5 feedforward contributions, and enforce late feedback-based control that deliberately reduces
6 the discrepancy between the limb and target locations. Additionally, we incorporated a
7 control condition where there was no attentional focus instruction in order to observe whether
8 the potential changes in performance were the result of enhancing or negating said processes.

9

10 **Method**

11 *Participants*

12 Fifteen volunteers agreed to take part in the study (age range = 18-21 years). All were
13 self-declared right-hand dominant, had normal or corrected-to-normal vision and clear of any
14 neurological condition. The study was approved by the University Research Ethics
15 Committee, and designed and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki
16 (1964).

17

18 *Task and Apparatus*

19 Participants were tasked with executing a left-to-right movement toward a digitized
20 target with their right hand as fast and accurately as possible. The movements were detected
21 using a stylus-pen on a digitizing graphics tablet (GTCO Calcomp Drawing Board VI,
22 temporal resolution = 125 Hz, spatial resolution = 1000 lines per inch) and translated for
23 display on a computer screen (temporal resolution = 60 Hz, spatial resolutions = 1024 x 768).
24 A custom-written computer program was designed to draw stimuli to the screen. A single
25 home (1 cm) and target (1 cm) circle would appear left and right of the participant midline,

1 respectively. The distances between the two circles varied randomly between trials at 16, 20
2 and 24 cm (centre-to-centre). There was also a cursor circle (0.5 cm), which represented the
3 hand-stylus position. The limb movement coordinates on the graphics tablet directly
4 overlapped with the cursor movement coordinates on the screen (i.e., limb-to-cursor
5 movement ratio = 1:1).

6

7 *Procedures*

8 Each trial commenced with the presence of a home position (red). Participants
9 positioned the cursor (white) over the home position using the stylus-pen. They would then
10 indicate whether they were ready by depressing the stylus button, which following a variable
11 foreperiod (800-2300 ms; 500 ms steps), caused a target circle (green) to appear. The
12 appearance of the target circle acted as the trials imperative stimulus and informed
13 participants that they should begin the response of aiming for the target as fast and accurately
14 as possible. Upon reaching the end target location participants would again depress the stylus
15 button to progress to the next trial. In the event that participants selected to end the trial
16 without the cursor being inside the target then they were informed of the error and forced to
17 repeat the trial.

18 There were four different focus conditions contingent upon the instructional set issued
19 by the experimenter: control, internal-proximal, external-proximal, external-distal. In order to
20 avoid biasing participants' automatic or default focus-set, we issued the control condition
21 first where participants had to simply execute fast and accurate movements toward the target.
22 While it is possible that an order effect may manifest from always having the control block
23 first, it is highly unlikely due to the prior number of practice trials (see later for detail) as well
24 as the small number of total trials across the experiment. Indeed, adaptations to similar speed-
25 accuracy trade-off tasks have revealed comparatively small effects (Zelaznik, 2018) or

1 require a much larger series of days (Elliott et al., 2004) or trials of practice (Khan, Franks, &
2 Goodman, 1998; Proteau et al., 1987). For the experimental trials, participants were
3 instructed to primarily focus on the moving hand, moving cursor or end target location for
4 each of the internal-proximal, external-proximal and external-distal conditions, respectively
5 (for similar designs, see Lohse, Sherwood, & Healy, 2010; Zachry et al., 2005). In addition,
6 the stimulus screen would display text to remind participants of the designated focus-set (i.e.,
7 “FOCUS on the [HAND] / [CURSOR] / [TARGET]”) both before the first trial, and again at
8 mid-way (i.e., before trial 13) for each block of trials. In order to avoid potentially contrasting
9 sources of visual information that are associated with each of the experimental conditions
10 (Russell, 2007), while remaining consistent with standard oculomotor responses during
11 manual limb movements (Helsen, Elliott, Starkes, & Ricker, 1998; see also, Helsen, Feys,
12 Heremans, & Lavrysen, 2010), we instructed participants to retain their fixation on the target
13 once it appeared. While there are some suggestions that the initial saccade to fixate the target
14 may unfold during the early portions of the movement (before peak acceleration) (see Elliott
15 et al., 2018), the potential alteration to naturalistic oculomotor behaviour is negligible when
16 considering there is sufficient time to receive retinal and extra-retinal information from the
17 remaining portions of the limb trajectory.

18 There was an initial familiarization period where participants would move as fast and
19 accurately as possible over each of the three possible amplitudes (16, 20, 24 cm; 12 trials).
20 During the actual experiment, the different target amplitudes were presented in a fully
21 randomized order. The attentional focus blocks were delivered in a pseudo-random counter-
22 balanced order with the exception of the control block appearing first. There were 24 trials
23 per block, which accumulated to a total of 96 trials (4 blocks). Participants were issued a two-
24 minute break after each block of trials.

25

1 *Data Processing and Analysis*

2 Movement position data were processed using a second-order, dual-pass Butterworth
3 filter with a low-pass cut-off frequency of 8 Hz. Velocity was obtained by differentiating the
4 resultant position data using a three-point central difference algorithm. Movement onset was
5 defined as the first moment resultant limb velocity reached >20 mm/s, while movement offset
6 was defined as the moment velocity returned to <10 mm/s and >-10 mm/s (for examples of
7 similar procedures, see Khan & Lawrence, 2005; Lawrence, Khan, Buckolz, & Oldham,
8 2006).

9 The dependent measures of interest could be categorised into two areas: performance
10 outcomes and movement trajectory. The performance outcome measures that encompassed
11 the temporal domain included reaction time (RT; time difference between stimulus target
12 onset and movement onset) and movement time (MT; time difference between movement
13 onset and movement offset). The endpoint spatial accuracy was quantified courtesy of radial
14 error (RE; distance between movement attempt and target centre) and variable error (VE;
15 population standard deviation of radial error scores). The movement kinematic measures
16 were designed to isolate the planning and control phases of the movement by identifying the
17 moment of peak velocity. Herein, we calculated the time to, time after, magnitude and
18 displacement at peak velocity.

19 For a more fine-grained assessment of limb trajectory adjustments via feedback-based
20 control, we additionally measured spatial variability at the moments of peak velocity and
21 movement end. This measure is adapted from the logic that fast and large-amplitude
22 movements result in larger amounts of within-participant spatial variability (see Schmidt,
23 Zelaznik, Hawkins, Frank, & Quinn, 1979) meaning the presence of a delayed intervening
24 control process must assume a decline in variability between the early (peak velocity) and
25 late (endpoint) stages of the movement. More precisely, the spatial variability profiles should

1 differ in form as indicated by a variability ratio between experimental and control conditions
2 (e.g., Khan, Franks et al., 2006; Khan, Lawrence et al., 2003). That is, we separately divided
3 spatial variability for the experimental focus conditions at peak velocity and movement end
4 by the control values at the corresponding kinematic landmarks. To corroborate the spatial
5 variability findings, we calculated Fisher z-transformations of within-participant correlations
6 between the distances travelled to- and after peak velocity. Indeed, strong or robust negative
7 relations would indicate that participants accommodated for the initial limb position by
8 updating the subsequent distance required to accurately hit the target (for similar logic, see
9 Elliott, Binsted, & Health, 1999; Roberts, Elliott, Lyons, Hayes, & Bennett, 2016).

10 Statistical analysis of select performance outcomes (RT, MT, RE, VE) and movement
11 kinematics (time to, time after, magnitude and displacement at peak velocity), including the
12 within-participant correlations, involved a two-way repeated-measures Analysis of Variance
13 (ANOVA) with 4 levels of focus (control, internal-proximal, external-proximal, external-
14 distal) and 3 levels of amplitude (short, medium, long). Spatial variability ratios were
15 analysed using a three-way repeated measures ANOVA with 2 levels of kinematic landmark
16 (peak velocity, movement end), 3 levels of focus (internal-proximal, external-proximal,
17 external-distal) and 3 levels of amplitude (short, medium, long). Maunchly's test was used to
18 test the assumption of Sphericity, where in the event of a violation ($p > .05$), the Huynh-Feldt
19 correction was adopted when epsilon was $>.75$, and Greenhouse-Geisser was adopted in the
20 event epsilon was $<.75$ (original Sphericity-assumed degrees of freedom were reported
21 irrespective of a violation). Significant main effects and interactions featuring more than two
22 means were decomposed using a Tukey HSD post-hoc procedure. Significance was declared
23 at $p < .05$.

24

25 **Results**

1 Despite being incorporated into the omnibus ANOVA, the multiple target amplitudes
2 were merely designed to force the re-parameterization of movements without anticipation,
3 and thus were independent of our primary research question and hypotheses. As a result, we
4 report only statistical main effects and interactions featuring the factor of focus.

6 *Performance Outcomes*

7 As shown in Figure 1, there was a significant main effect of focus for RT, $F(3, 42) =$
8 $9.23, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .40$, with control and external-distal conditions generating shorter
9 times to initiate and execute movements compared to the internal-proximal and external-
10 proximal conditions ($ps < .05$). In a similar vein, there was a significant main effect of focus
11 for MT $F(3, 42) = 11.03, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .44$, with both the control and external-distal
12 conditions being shorter than the external-proximal condition, while the shorter times
13 compared to the internal-proximal condition only reached significance for the comparison
14 with the external-distal condition ($ps < .05$) (see Figure 2). There was also a significant main
15 effect for RE, $F(3, 42) = 5.04, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .27$, with less error generated by the
16 external-proximal condition compared to the control and external-distal conditions ($ps < .05$)
17 (see Table 1). In addition, there was a significant main effect of focus for VE, $F(3, 42) =$
18 $2.96, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .17$, although the post hoc analysis failed to reveal any significant
19 differences ($ps > .05$).

20 Further to this analysis, we distinguished the primary (x-axis) and secondary (y-axis)
21 components that contribute to VE in order gauge potential influences on the control of
22 amplitude and direction, respectively (Paillard, 1996; Khan & Lawrence, 2005). VE in the
23 primary axis revealed a significant main effect of focus, $F(3, 42) = 4.03, p < .05, partial \eta^2 =$
24 $.22$, with smaller endpoint dispersion in the external-proximal condition ($M = 4.67, SE = .51$)
25 compared to the control condition ($M = 6.18, SE = .69$). In a similar vein, there was a

1 significant main effect of focus for VE in the secondary axis, $F(3, 42) = 5.40, p < .05, partial$
2 $\eta^2 = .28$, with the external-proximal condition ($M = 2.08, SE = .32$) generating smaller
3 dispersion than both the control ($M = 2.82, SE = .31$) and external-distal ($M = 2.60, SE = .24$)
4 conditions.

5

6

[Insert Figure 1 and 2,

7

and Table 1 about here]

8

9 *Movement kinematics*

10 There was a significant main effect of focus for the time to peak velocity, $F(3, 42) =$
11 $8.43, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .38$, with the control and external-distal conditions being shorter in
12 time compared to the internal-proximal and external-proximal conditions (see Figure 2). In a
13 similar vein, there was a significant main effect for the time after peak velocity, $F(3, 42) =$
14 $8.84, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .39$, with both the control and external-distal conditions being
15 shorter than the external-proximal condition, while the shorter times compared to the
16 internal-proximal condition only reached significance for the comparison with the external-
17 distal condition ($ps < .05$). There was a significant main effect of focus for the magnitude of
18 peak velocity, $F(3, 42) = 17.01, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .55$, indicating a large magnitude
19 impulse for the control ($M = 598.34 \text{ mm/s}, SE = 34.51$), and external-distal ($M = 650.25$
20 $\text{mm/s}, SE = 34.27$) conditions compared to the internal-proximal ($M = 534.73 \text{ mm/s}, SE =$
21 44.49) and external-proximal ($M = 502.26 \text{ mm/s}, SE = 34.73$) conditions ($ps < .05$). In
22 addition, there was a significant Focus \times Amplitude interaction, $F(6, 84) = 6.44, p < .05,$
23 $partial \eta^2 = .32$, indicating differences also between the control and external-distal conditions
24 at medium and short amplitudes, and the internal-proximal and external-proximal conditions
25 at short and medium amplitudes ($ps < .05$). There were no significant main or interaction

1 effects featuring the factor of focus for the mean displacement at peak velocity ($M = 88.14$
2 mm, $SE = 1.61$), $F(3, 42) = .23$, $p > .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .02$, and $F(6, 84) = .77$, $p > .05$, *partial*
3 $\eta^2 = .05$, nor movement end ($M = 199.96$ mm, $SE = .41$), $F(3, 42) = 1.70$, $p > .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 =$
4 $.11$, and $F(6, 84) = 1.04$, $p > .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .07$, respectively.

5

6 *Online Adjustments*

7 As a principle indicator of adjustments made to the trajectory, the Kinematic
8 landmark \times Focus \times Amplitude repeated-measures ANOVA on the spatial variability ratio
9 revealed a significant main effect of kinematic landmark, $F(1, 14) = 213.59$, $p < .05$, *partial*
10 $\eta^2 = .94$, and no significant main effect of focus, $F(3, 42) = 1.19$, $p > .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .08$.
11 Most importantly, there was a significant Kinematic landmark \times Focus interaction, $F(3, 42) =$
12 6.91 , $p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .33$, indicating a significant decline in variability for the external-
13 proximal condition ($p < .05$) (see Figure 3). In order to corroborate these findings, the
14 analysis of within-participant correlations between the distances travelled to and after peak
15 velocity revealed a significant main effect of focus, $F(3, 42) = 10.90$, $p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .44$,
16 with smaller negative relations for the control ($M = -1.77$ mm, $SE = .11$) and external-distal
17 ($M = -1.84$ mm, $SE = .09$) conditions compared to the external-proximal condition ($M = -2.29$
18 mm, $SE = .12$) ($ps < .05$), which did not differ from the internal-proximal condition ($M = -$
19 2.03 mm, $SE = .14$) ($p > .05$).

20

21 [Insert Figure 3 about here]

22

23 **Discussion**

24 It has been frequently demonstrated that an external focus of attention elicits greater
25 motor performance than an internal focus; a finding that may be explained by the CAH (Wulf

1 et al., 2001). The CAH suggests that an external focus enables the performer to undertake
2 automatic control of their movement courtesy of the correspondence between stimulus
3 information and the anticipated action-effect (Wulf & Prinz, 2001). The present study
4 reasoned that this internal representation may render a greater influence during the early
5 phases of movement where the performer models the efferent and reafferent signals (Wolpert
6 & Ghahramani, 2000; Wolpert et al., 1998). Meanwhile, the latter phases of movement,
7 which incorporate external afferent information, may accommodate limb-target adjustments
8 independent of the aforementioned representation (Elliott et al., 2018). Thus, it was
9 hypothesized that focus directed toward the target (external-distal) during aiming movements
10 should manifest in a shorter time to initiate and execute responses. However, the advantage
11 served by an external focus may be overturned once external afferent information becomes
12 accessible to deliberate or conscious control (internal-proximal, external-proximal).

13 Consistent with the vast majority of the attentional focus literature (Wulf, 2013), there
14 was an advantage served by the external-distal focus compared to an internal and/or proximal
15 focus. This advantage was highlighted in the shorter time to initiate (RT) and complete (MT)
16 aimed responses, which was distributed in both the time to, and after, peak velocity. Because
17 rapid targeted movements require the succinct handling of efferent and afferent signals
18 (Woodworth, 1899), this may be taken as coarse evidence in favour of the CAH, where
19 performers adopting an external focus are more readily able to control their own movements
20 (Wulf et al., 2001).

21 Notably, the differences in attentional focus conditions were depicted by the
22 proximity of task features as opposed to the classic differentiation between internal (focus
23 directed to the movement itself) vs. external (focus directed to the movement effect). That is,
24 an external-distal focus (target) additionally rendered superior temporal performance
25 compared to its proximal counterpart (cursor movement). This finding is reflected in previous

1 other studies, which have revealed differences as a function of task features. For example,
2 focus directed to the flight or trajectory of the ball in golf (Bell & Hardy, 2009) and baseball
3 (Casenada & Gray, 2007) have respectively yielded superior spatial and temporal accuracy
4 compared to focus on the motion of the external hitting device (e.g., golf club, baseball bat).
5 As a result, it is imperative to consider that while an external focus can advance performance
6 relative to an internal focus, it is contingent upon externally focusing on distal features that
7 are somehow related to the task outcome.

8 Alternatively, nearing the end of the movement, it was found that the advantage
9 served by an external-distal focus was reversed for endpoint accuracy and precision (see
10 Pelleck & Passmore (2017) for similar other findings on the attentional focus effect in
11 endpoint variability). At first glance, this sudden enhancement in internal- and external-
12 proximal focus may seem to conflict with the frequent message to avoid such focus in motor
13 performance and learning. However, the dissociable attentional focus effects in early
14 temporal (RT, MT) and late spatial variables substantiate our claim of varying contributions
15 from feedforward- and feedback-control processes. That is, the early time to initiate and
16 reach peak velocity, as well as the larger magnitude impulse, generated by the external-distal
17 focus condition may result from the priming of an embedded sensorimotor representation.
18 The innervation of this representation is contingent upon the presence of distal stimulus cues
19 that can be closely matched to movement-execution (Elsner & Hommel, 2001; see Hommel
20 et al., 2001; Prinz, 1997). Herein, the performer may undertake feedforward-control, where
21 they can more readily control the early trajectory by comparing the anticipated and actual
22 efferent and reafferent signals (Elliott et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the more refined endpoint
23 response for the proximal focus groups (internal/external) suggests performers were less
24 reliant on priming a sensorimotor representation, and instead, undertook late online
25 adjustments that explicitly compared the limb and target locations.

1 With this in mind, it is reasonable to gauge the possibility of dual-task interference,
2 which so often plagues the attentional focus literature (e.g., Poolton et al., 2007). Indeed,
3 providing instructions that cue performers to proximal sources of information could limit the
4 resources that are required to deal with the main distal information. Meanwhile, providing
5 instructions that cue performers to the distal features may allocate resources to something that
6 is already required to be focused on. Nevertheless, the present findings of reduced error and
7 advanced endpoint control within each of the proximal focus groups would run counter to the
8 potential contaminating influence of a dual-task scenario. Indeed, previous evidence has
9 shown that a simultaneous, attentionally-demanding dual-task can increase endpoint error
10 compared to a mere single, aiming task scenario (Khan, Lawrence, Buckolz, & Franks, 2006;
11 Zelaznik Shapiro, & McClosky, 1981). Thus, the present findings could offer a more
12 definitive insight into attentional focus effects by demarcating the movement control
13 processes, and subsequently identifying dissociable influences of attention focus – a distal
14 focus manifests in more automatic feedforward contributions, whilst a proximal focus renders
15 more explicit feedback-based control.

16 Through further consideration of the spatial endpoint findings, it is relevant perhaps to
17 mention that despite the larger tendency to veer away from target centre, the margin of error
18 generated by the external-distal condition continued to fall inside the target boundaries (<5
19 mm) (see Table 1). Hence, it is more likely that the greater accuracy manifested in the
20 proximal conditions reflects an unnecessary or overly cautious attempt to avoid an error. This
21 interpretation is supported by the within-participant correlations between the displacements to
22 and after peak velocity, where it was found that the proximal conditions more negatively
23 correlated, and thus, generated more adjustments toward the end of the movement (see Elliott
24 et al., 1999, for similar interpretation). In a similar vein, an internal (proximal) focus directed
25 to the arms during golf-putting has been shown to elicit more overt adjustments to the

1 movement trajectory in an attempt to enhance performance outcomes (Lawrence, Gottwald,
2 Khan, & Kramer, 2012). Indeed, this pattern of motor behaviour is reminiscent of the short-
3 term maladaptive corrections that are evident when performers receive frequent augmented
4 feedback (see Bjork, 1988; Wulf & Shea, 2004). As a result, we may conceive the attempts to
5 correct the limb position following an internal or proximal focus as a negative effect, which
6 in turn, reinforces the constrained-action view that attentional focus negatively influences
7 automatic movement control.

8 While we have so far focused our discussion on the experimental conditions, it is
9 important to recognise the influence of attentional focus with respect to the control condition
10 (where no focus instructions were issued). Indeed, the provision of a control condition may
11 allude to an advantage or disadvantage of experimental focus conditions. In other words, the
12 typical performance benefit following an external or distal focus compared to control
13 assumes a direct benefit of this particular focus-set. Alternatively, a decline in performance
14 following an internal or proximal focus compared to control assumes an attenuation of this
15 particular focus-set. For the most part, it appeared the external-distal and control conditions
16 were equally advanced in their time to pursue the target and less proficient in endpoint
17 accuracy. These findings would appear to contest any suggestion of an order effect granted
18 the control block was always presented first, and thus we may conceive the focus directed at
19 the target as the default focus-set. Meanwhile, the differences in attentional focus throughout
20 the present study allude to alterations that were primarily imposed by the internal and
21 external-proximal focus conditions.

22 In conclusion, we have extended upon the vast attentional focus literature by further
23 elucidating the sensorimotor processes that underlie attentional focus effects. That is, the
24 focus directed toward the movement or proximal features rendered a less automatic response,
25 which primarily manifest in the early phases of movement. Following the uptake of delayed

1 afferent information, the same focus-set culminated in a more cautious approach to end the
2 movement compared to the control and external-distal focus conditions. In addition to
3 substantiating previous attentional focus effects, and the related CAH (Wulf et al., 2001), we
4 have highlighted influences of attentional focus that may be differentiated as a function of
5 early and late control processes (Elliott et al., 2018). Indeed, the early phases that are
6 attributed to efferent and reafferent processes are contingent upon a primed response evoked
7 by corresponding stimulus information (Prinz, 1997), which we believe is more greatly
8 exposed by an external focus. Alternatively, the latter phases that are attributed to delayed
9 afferent processes are more accessible to conscious intervention, which is synonymous with
10 an internal focus.

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Figure captions

Fig. 1 Mean (\pm SE) reaction times as a function of attentional focus. (*) indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$).

Fig. 2 Mean (\pm SE) movement times demarcated into the time to (*grey*) and after (*white*) peak velocity as a function of attentional focus. (*) indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$).

Fig. 3 Mean spatial variability ratio at peak velocity and movement end as a function of attentional focus. Scores <1 indicate less variability than control.

Tables

Table 1. Mean (\pm SE) scores for radial error (RE) and variable error (VE) as a function of attentional focus. Presented symbols (*, †) indicate specific pairwise comparisons where there was a significant difference ($ps < .05$).

	<i>control</i>	<i>internal-proximal</i>	<i>external-proximal</i>	<i>external-distal</i>
<i>RE</i>	4.61* (.64)	4.35 (.70)	3.56*† (.52)	4.49† (.61)
<i>VE</i>	3.51 (.44)	3.14 (.48)	2.86 (.43)	3.46 (.37)