

How to Focus on Form in Our Classes

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Abstract

A current concern of applied linguistics is about the degree to which teachers need to direct learners' attention to understanding grammar whilst retaining the focus on the principles of communicative language teaching and the need to communicate. On one hand, there are experts who advocate no interruption in communication and on the other hand there are those who advocate separate grammar instruction (Sheen, 2002). These two extremes were moderated by Long (1991) who made a distinction between "focus on form" and "focus on forms". Thus focus-on-form instruction came into being which keeps the principles of communication at the core, and allows the teacher to interrupt only if form-based problems bring about communication misunderstandings and problems. The major points of debate include whether, how, and when we should integrate grammar instruction. In this article, experts' orientations towards meaning-based and form-based instruction are reviewed, the problems of each orientation are discussed, and at the end some hints are suggested for teachers to consider when teaching language forms.

Keywords: Focus-on-form instruction, Focus-on-meaning instruction, Explicit/implicit instruction, The facilitative position, The zero position

1. Introduction

With the introduction of the communicative approach to the teaching corpus there appeared a strong tendency to focus on communication and hence meaning. It was believed that children who are acquiring their first language learn the language without any explicit instruction as how to put the words together grammatically to express their ideas, so there is no need for grammar instruction in second language acquisition too. This is what Widdowson (1990) refers to as Pure Education, i.e., non-intervention way of teaching. There are also studies (e.g. VanPatten, 2004; Wong, 2001) which show that when learners attend to form, their comprehension suffers, and that sometimes meaning and form compete for learners' attention. The advocates in this camp which is called the Zero Position favor the abandonment of formal instruction because early work in L2 acquisition provided evidence of a 'natural' route of development. They believe that language learning will proceed more effectively if learners are allowed to construct their interlanguage naturally through communication. They (e.g. Krashen, 1982) believe in a non-interface hypothesis, stating that learning does not become acquisition and that formal instruction does not contribute to the development of implicit knowledge needed for normal communication. They reject any kind of intervention whether it is planned intervention by means of presentation and practice of different items or rules or it is unplanned intervention in the form of error correction. On the other hand, some state that in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching situations mere exposure to language input and focusing on meaning is not sufficient if learners want to achieve native-like competence, and that a totally message-based or meaning-based approach is inadequate for the development of an accurate knowledge of language. They believe that older children and specially adults who understand abstract concepts better can learn much of an L2 grammar while focusing on meaning or communication, if adequate opportunities and attention are given to language as object. There are studies (e.g. Hulstijn, 1989) which show that attention to form even helps implicit and incidental learning; this can be a response to the experts who believe that explicit learning cannot be converted to implicit learning. The advocates of this position, known as the facilitative position, believe that formal instruction helps learning particularly by speeding up the process of natural

acquisition. There are four major versions of the facilitative position. One is the Interface Hypothesis which claims that learners can 'control' specific structures by practicing, i.e., explicit knowledge can gradually turn into implicit knowledge. Another version is Variability Hypothesis according to which instruction can directly affect a learner's ability to use some structures but not some others, and that the effect of instruction is mainly evident in the learner's careful style. The third version is Teachability Hypothesis which, based on Pienemann's view about processability, claims that instruction can promote language acquisition if the interlanguage is close to the point when the new structure is acquired in a natural setting. And finally the fourth one, the Weak Interface Hypothesis, states that formal instruction helps with the internalization of rules by making learners 'notice' them; it provides learners with tools that help them recognize those interlanguage features which need modification through a process called noticing the gap. It is believed that while instruction may not be necessary for L2 learners, it helps them acquire L2 more quickly (Ellis, 2008).

2. Focus-on-form vs. Focus-on-forms Instruction

The debate between the non-interventionist and the interventionist positions raises yet another important issue: How much of the grammar should be incorporated in the teaching process? Some advocate focus-on-forms instruction in which the aim is the mastery of grammatical items rather than learning and using language as a mechanism for communication. In focus-on-forms instruction emphasis is on the formal aspects of language rather than meaningful activities. It is believed that in classroom settings language competence is best achieved by a return to discrete-point grammar teaching in which most of the class time is spent on isolated linguistic structures in a sequence predetermined by a syllabus designer or textbook writer and typically involves intensive and systematic treatment of these linguistic elements. It is a teacher-centered and synthetic approach, i.e. learners gain language elements discretely and then try to combine them to produce language. It is based on the assumption that classroom foreign and second language learning derives from general cognitive processes and hence entails the learning of skills and forms. It is believed that awareness of and attention to language forms adds to learning as learners – specially adults – can use their metacognitive skills to aid the process. This type of instruction which is the characteristic of the syllabuses of methods like Situational Language Teaching or Audio-lingual Method evaluates progress based on learners' mastery of some sequentially presented grammatical structures; this kind of instruction is non-communicative because it does not foster L2 development that enables learners to engage in real-life communication and there is usually a lack of correspondence between the forms practiced and their use in real discourse. On the other hand, there are experts who advocate focus-on-form instruction, a kind of instruction that both admits the importance of communicative language teaching principles such as authentic communication and student-centeredness, and maintains the value of occasional explicit study and focus on L2 grammatical forms. In focus-on-form instruction meaning and communication are adhered to, with periodic focus on language forms which cause problems. It is a student-centered and analytical approach to teaching in which the sequence of explicit forms to be discussed – briefly of course – is determined by learners' internal syllabuses, current processing capacity, and learnability constraints. It tries to foster meaningful learning and draws students' attention to linguistic elements only if they are problematic. It derives from an assumed degree of similarity between first and second language acquisition stating that they are both based on an exposure to comprehensible input arising from natural interaction (Long, 2009; Sheen, 2002; Lee, 2008; Gu, 2007; Poole, 2005; Long, 1991).

3. Why Should We Teach the Form?

Although the main reason for teaching any language is to enable learners to communicate meanings, focus-on-meaning instruction suffers from some problems which can only be solved if we attend to the problematic forms. For example, in comparison with little children acquiring their L1, older children and adults fail to achieve native-like competence because of lack of opportunity, motivation, and innate abilities; on the other hand, they can learn abstract concepts easier than little children. Also, inevitable interference of the first language makes the task of learning the second language more difficult. The best thing to do in this case is to explain the L2 form and how it is different from the L1 form. Because of these problems, a periodic focus on language form is advocated by most pedagogy experts. Form-focused instruction is beneficial to learners in modifying their interlanguage grammar, thereby leading to improved linguistic accuracy in language use (Laufer-Dvorkin, 2006; Long, 2009; Lier, 2001; Genc, 2009). There are also studies (e.g. Samuda, 2001) which show that explicit feedback on problematic forms helps learners internalize the target forms and utilize them independently later.

4. When Should We Focus on the Form?

One of the most important issues regarding focus on form is timing. Two approaches have been offered in this regard: proactive and reactive. In the proactive approach which is also known as preemptive focus, teachers and students make a conscious decision to make a particular aspect of form a part of the discourse before practicing any task or undertaking any assignment. This approach chooses to anticipate problems and focuses on the students' abilities to uptake a particular form and to incorporate it into their speaking and writing. In the reactive approach, the teacher draws the students' attention to

linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons. So there is no predetermined language form or element to be discussed and what happens in the class is crucial here. Genc (2009) suggested a third approach called the postactive approach; it involves drawing learners' attention to the form after the task has been completed. The teacher observes students during the process of communication in L2 and gives them the chance to complete the task without intervention from the teacher or the peers and writes down the learners' errors and pervasive forms. Then he/she organizes a session for focus on form to discuss the problematic forms. Although some experts believe that the reactive approach is more compatible with the principles of communicative language teaching, definitive results have not been suggested on the kind of approach to use (Genc, 2009; Long, 2009).

5. How to Focus on Form

Whether you decide to use the proactive, reactive, or postactive approach, you can use any or some of the following ways for focusing on form based on the specific teaching situation, level of the class, the item under scrutiny, and the students you have.

1- Conscious reflection: You can ask the students to determine the grammar rules from the evidence presented in the text or task. You can also directly explain the form and ask the learners to think about the form and find examples in the texts or tasks.

2- Typographical or visual input enhancement: You can italicize, enlarge, underline, color, or write the problematic items in bold face so that students know which items they must be careful about. This can be done before the class activity starts or at the end to show students' mistakes.

3- Noticing the gap: It refers to the need for language learners to notice the differences between the language they produce and the target language. You can show the difference between the correct and incorrect use, or using and not using an item by giving examples which illustrate the difference, hence showing them the information or communication gap in their work.

4- Meta-talk: You can explain the different functions a form may have in great detail; this can be done after the activities are finished even in students' native language. The goal is to make them understand clearly after all.

5- Recasting: Recasting is reacting to ungrammatical forms produced by learners by repeating the idea back to them in a rephrased form, that is, the sentence structure is changed somehow but it still refers to the central meaning intended by the learner. You should repeat the problematic form and wait for the student or his/her classmates to correct the error.

6- The garden path technique: You can introduce a grammatical rule and then lead the learners into situations in which they should apply the rule correctly.

7- The language experience approach : It is a technique in which learners dictate to the instructor, in English, something they would like to be able to say. The instructor then writes students' messages in correct grammatical English and gives them to the students (Swain, 2009; Baker and Nelson, 1984).

6. Points a Teacher Should Consider when Focusing on Form

1- Focus-on-form instruction is highly individualistic, which is against the goal of teaching and learning a language, i.e. to interact and communicate with others, and to participate actively in daily activities. So teachers must be careful as how, when, and how much they intervene between classroom activities; They should stay away and let the students themselves help and even correct each other more (Xiaotang, 2009; Poole, 2005).

2- Grammatical points can be taught both deductively and inductively. You can teach the points explicitly and then give your students lots of examples and exercises; in this case you have adopted a deductive approach to teaching grammar. Or you can give your students some examples and sample sentences first and ask them to infer the rules or points themselves; in this case your approach is inductive. The question is which approach is better. The answer is that you should choose an approach which best conveys the point, one which is easiest for both you and your students. Some grammatical points lend themselves easily to a deductive approach and some vice versa, although many experts adhere to the inductive approach because it is similar to problem-solving and riddles and hence more interesting for students.

3- Teaching any grammatical point must be done in two stages if you choose proactive or postactive approaches: First ask your students to listen to and cooperate with you without taking any notes. Second, give the students the required time and let them take notes and write the examples. So, when you are in the process of teaching grammatical points, never allow your students to write anything.

4- Move from simple to complex. Students will learn more if they are given the opportunity to master simple concepts first (Willis, 1981). For instance, you should teach the structure of "statements" before teaching "interrogative sentences" or

one-verb sentences before teaching two-verb sentences, and simple sentences before teaching compound or complex sentences. This principle is also true for designing tests; tests must start with easier questions so that the anxiety which is normal for any test is relieved when students can answer the first questions. A review of Chomsky's generative grammar and markedness theory can help you in this regard.

5- Always teach from known to unknown. When explaining a new rule, review related grammatical rules previously learned by the students; this helps activate the students' background knowledge.

6- Review previously learned and related points. If, for any reason including the shortage of time or the low level of your students' knowledge, you cannot teach all the related points together, divide the points into two or three logical parts and teach them in separate sessions. Don't forget to review the previous parts before teaching the new part. Cyclical teaching of grammar can improve students' learning of grammatical concepts and forms.

7- When students make problematic mistakes and correction is needed, the priority is for self-correction by the student who has made the mistake, then for peer correction, and finally, if no correct response is offered, teacher correction. Students can learn from their mistakes, so we should give them the chance to correct themselves if they can. We should not forget a simple truth, that students need practice not teachers.

8- Focus-on-form instruction places a big burden on the shoulders of the teacher. He/she must have native-like linguistic competence to be able to recognize the students' form-based errors and provide them with the correct ones; this is a big problem specially when students are practicing orally. So teachers must learn the grammar very well to be able to fulfill their duty.

9- Sometimes textbooks and materials form the basis for important evaluations such as university entrance or employment exams which are not under the control or even the influence of the teachers. Here the teachers feel obligated to spend the majority of their time helping students prepare for such exams and hence deviating from the whole class practice. In these situations, it is better to keep to the textbook and hold extra or remedial sessions for more practice on forms and tests on forms.

10- Linguistic grading may lead to artificial and stilted classroom language. The goal of class activities is language use not language usage. Teachers should not use simplified language as this affects the level of the input students need to be exposed to.

11- As learners come to English classes with varying communicative needs, motivations, learning styles, and preferences, teachers may teach too much or too little, which may be discouraging to the learners. Knowing your students and doing a simple in-class needs analysis will help you decide as how and how much to teach to cover most of the students' needs.

12- Students may experience difficulties when attempting to attend to more than one aspect of the L2. So, teachers had better focus on grammar when teaching grammar. For instance, when giving examples to clarify grammatical points, teachers must use examples containing words and expressions which are already known by the students so that they remain focused on the grammar point.

13- Focus on form tends to produce boring lessons, declining motivation, and students' distracted attention, but grammar can be fun. Many students enjoy puzzles; they enjoy looking for patterns, looking for similarities, sorting, pairing, and other typical puzzle activities. They feel a sense of satisfaction at solving a puzzle, but at the same time there is a very little feeling of failure if they cannot do the puzzle. You can also use gimmicks to combat popular mistakes (Long, 2009; Willis, 1981).

14- Don't overload your students with extra information if you have to teach a specific book based on which the final exam will be administered. Refer interested students to other sources as their extensive homework.

15- Some traditional grammar-oriented teachers take form-focused instruction as a justification to return to grammar and mere grammar-translation method practices (Xiatang, 2009). This is a bad recourse to the past.

16- If an exercise has different acceptable answers, tell your students to write the most common answer down in their notebooks while admitting other correct answers.

17- For your examples use ones which are compatible with outside realities in the world. If you say, for instance, a new car will cost you 100 dollars, students will interrupt your teaching arguing that it is impossible to find such a cheap car! Also, when you use your students for simulating or creating a situation, use positive adjectives. For example, if you compare two students to be "short" and "shorter", they may get embarrassed.

18- Terminology is not important. Don't make the students sensitive to technical grammatical terms (eg: dangling structures, causative sentences, conditional sentences, voice, etc.). These terms are good for university English majors. The form and the function are the most important aspects to work on.

7. Conclusion

Both the extreme interventionist focus on forms and non-interventionist focus on meaning suffer from some problems. Focus-on-form instruction maintains a balance between the two in that it calls on teachers and learners to attend to form only when necessary without interrupting the communicative atmosphere of the class. Focus-on-form instruction is likely to meet its objectives in settings in which the following factors are observed: we have principles of communicative language teaching reflected in class activities and assessments, small size classes for teachers to be able to easily communicate with all students, and proficient teachers and motivated students to increase teacher-student, student-teacher, and student-student interaction in the classroom; it is more effective within a context of meaningful learning activities and tasks that provide the learners with ample opportunities to practice the forms in their production (Rodriguez, 2009; Poole, 2005; Lowen, 2005). And the final fact to be considered is that teachers' perceptions of local instructional needs and realities as well as contextual factors are sometimes more powerful than pedagogical theories, research findings, and L2 teaching methods. A good teacher is one who can compromise between different factors which may play a part in his/her teaching environment.

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