Towards Integrating Form-Focused Instruction and Communicative Interaction in the Second Language Classroom: Some Pedagogical Possibilities

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Towards Integrating Form-Focused Instruction and Communicative Interaction in the Second Language Classroom: Some Pedagogical Possibilities

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The MLJ article to appear in the CMLR, 56, 4, 2000 is “Investigating Experienced ESL Teachers’ Pedagogical Knowledge” by Elizabeth Gatbonton (MLJ, 83, 1, 1999, pp. 35-50). The Editors of both journals hope their readers will find this sharing of scholarship to be interesting and beneficial.

Much has been written, on both theoretical and empirical levels, about the idea of focus on form and the suggestion that some kind of form-focused activity needs to be incorporated into second language (L2) communicative contexts. However, much less work has been published on how this aim can be pedagogically fostered. This article will first elaborate on the need to incorporate form-focused activities within an integrative approach to L2 teaching. Pedagogical possibilities and strategies will then be suggested, and examples provided of tasks that may help to realize this goal in classroom contexts. Relevant empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such tasks will be presented and discussed.
INTRODUCTION

The field of second language pedagogy is witnessing an increasing interest in the idea of focus on form and the suggestion that attention to form should be encouraged in second language classrooms (see Doughty & Williams, 1998). This approach has developed as a reaction against a communicative approach which advocates the exclusive use of meaning-focused activities in language classrooms (e.g., Prabhu, 1987). Indeed, with the introduction of the communicative approach in second language teaching and learning, there appeared a strong tendency not to focus on linguistic forms and a consequent downplaying of the status of grammar teaching.

In the last 10 years, however, theoretical perspectives on language teaching and learning have changed dramatically. New perspectives advocate a principled, form-focused approach to L2 learning, arguing that a totally message-focused approach is inadequate for the development of an accurate knowledge of language. However, despite this theoretical shift, much less is being written about how to foster this tendency in classroom contexts. In this article, I will elaborate on the necessity of including form-focused activities in an integrative approach to L2 learning. I will then suggest strategies and provide examples of tasks that help to realize this goal in practice. Relevant empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such tasks will be presented and discussed.

DILEMMAS AND RESOLUTIONS

Dewey (1938) observes that mankind tends to think in terms of either-or, but that in the realm of practice, one will realize that compromise is inevitable. In commenting on the role of real world experience, Barnes (1988) remarks that although schooling should be brought closer to the real world experience, theoretical and formal knowledge should not necessarily be abandoned as a result. Barnes contends that learners need to be able to analyze as well as to act and that it is necessary to reconcile the experiential knowledge needed for action with the formal analytic knowledge necessary to enhance analytic reasoning. Extending the argument to pedagogical contexts, Berlak and Berlak (1983) conceptualize this contrast in terms of curriculum dilemmas, manifested as contradictions and tensions in the process of education. Berlak and Berlak identify 16 dilemmas in pedagogical settings, the most important of which relates to a tension between presenting knowledge as a body of facts and information and presenting it as a process of thinking and reasoning.

In the field of second language teaching, this dilemma appears as a debate over focused analytic versus unfocused experiential language teaching. The focused analytic approach argues that language learning is the result of the development of formal rule-based knowledge, emphasizing controlled learning and rule practice as the most effective pedagogical activity. The experiential approach, on the other hand, advocates naturalistic use of language, emphasizing meaningful and message-based activities (Allen, 1983; Stern, 1992). The basic assumption underlying this approach is that second language learning is like first language acquisition: it develops principally out of experience with real-life communication and pure meaningful activities.

For the past decade or so, the experiential approach has been dominant in second language teaching. Savignon (1983) argues that learners learn the language automatically as a result of “the opportunity they are given to interpret, to express, and to negotiate meaning in real-life situations” (p. vi). This perspective on L2 learning has been particularly strengthened by Krashen’s (1982, 1985) distinction between acquisition and learning and by the idea that language should be acquired (through experiential exposure to language), not learned—which, according to Krashen, involves a more analytic approach and has to do with conscious manipulation of language rules in formal settings.

In recent years, however, theoretical perspectives on language teaching and learning have changed. Many second language acquisition researchers now argue that exposure to language is not enough (DeKeyser, 1998; Doughty, 1991; Harley, 1998; Harley & Swain, 1984; Lightbown, 1991, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Robinson, 1996; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; Swain, 1985). These researchers advocate a more form-focused approach to language teaching, arguing that activities which focus solely on message are inadequate to develop an accurate knowledge of the language in question and that, to compensate for this inadequacy, some kind of form-focused activity needs to be incorporated into communicative classroom contexts. In particular, based on extensive empirical research in French immersion contexts, Harley and Swain (1984) and Swain (1985) show that in spite of the fact that immersion students are exposed to meaningful language use over a long period, they have serious problems with certain grammatical forms. These re-
searchers hypothesize that the inclusion of form-focused instruction in the experiential communicative context of their French immersion program might be more effective. A number of subsequent empirical studies on the role of form-focused instruction have revealed that a focus on form can successfully promote second language development far beyond that achieved by unfocused approaches (Doughty, 1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Harley, 1998; Lightbown, 1991).

However, although research suggests that it is useful to include some kind of form-focused activity in communicative contexts, this suggestion may be of little use if teachers do not know how to do so. The question that arises in this context—how to integrate focus on form with meaningful communication in classroom contexts—is the main question addressed in this article.

THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION

Before addressing the question of integrating focus on form with a communicative approach, however, I wish to provide a theoretical justification for my position by drawing on and integrating insights from two influential theoretical perspectives: interactive and cognitive theories of L2 learning.

The Interactive Perspective

According to the interactive perspective, learning a new language is a function of social and meaningful interaction (Long, 1983); the degree of language learning success depends on the quality and type of interactions between learners and teacher (Long, 1983; Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). In this view, language learning is enhanced "particularly when they [the learners] negotiate toward mutual comprehension of each other's message meaning" (Pica et al., 1993, p. 11).

Long (1983) proposes that during meaningful interaction learners use different communicative strategies, ranging from modifying and adjusting input to using facilitative strategies such as requests for clarification, requests for repetition, and comprehension checks. It is argued that these strategies promote negotiation of meaning and consequently enhance second language acquisition; they make input comprehensible and result in further opportunities for communicating thoughts in a meaningful context (Gass & Varonis, 1984; Pica et al., 1993; Swain, 1985).

The Cognitive Perspective

Theoretical developments in the field of cognitive psychology have also yielded important insights into the nature of the language learning process. Cognitive theories conceptualize second language learning as a complex cognitive skill, the acquisition of which involves several cognitive stages (e.g., Anderson, 1993, 1995; Anderson & Fincham, 1994; Bialystok, 1994; McLaughlin, 1990; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). Schneider and Shiffrin (1977) distinguish two cognitive stages in all skill acquisition processes: controlled processes and automatic processes. In their view, any complex cognitive skill is first learned through frequent use of controlled processes which then become automatic, attention-free processes after frequent use. Controlled processes are not yet learned processes and remain under the attentional control of the learner; they usually require a large amount of processing capacity and more time for activation. Automatic processes, on the other hand, are quick and demand relatively little processing capacity.

Anderson (1993, 1995) offers a three-stage model of the skill-learning process: declarative stage, procedural stage, and automatized stage. In the declarative stage, learners acquire knowledge of what, that is, knowledge that can be described or declared. In the procedural stage, learners acquire knowledge of how, or knowledge that makes them capable of doing something under certain circumstances. Procedural knowledge develops as a result of recurrent use of declarative knowledge, which then becomes fully routinized as it is used frequently in a particular context. According to Anderson and Fincham (1994), although not all procedural knowledge is first declarative, research suggests that declarative knowledge "is a major avenue for the acquisition of procedural knowledge" (p. 1323). Similarly, DeKeyser (1998) argues that learners develop declarative knowledge first through some language-based activities. They must then assimilate and internalize this knowledge through ample practice before they can use it automatically in real communication.

McLaughlin (1987) extends Schneider and Shiffrin's (1977) notions of controlled and automatic processing to second language learning. According to McLaughlin, learning a second language involves two cognitive processes: automatization and restructuring. Automatization refers to a quick and effortless response to linguistic stimuli, initiated with controlled processes which then turn into routinized and automatized responses.
through subsequent practice. Restructuring has to do with sudden moments of insight and refers to the time when the learner understands the input in a different way. It is characterized as a total, discontinuous, or qualitative change in an already existing cognitive patterning. According to McLaughlin (1990), any cognitive development and any transition from one stage of development to the next necessitates such restructuring processes.

In the restructuring view, L2 development involves much more than moving from controlled to automatized processes. It is a constant process of reorganizing, refining, and integrating new information into previous internal representations. Restructuring occurs when the learner gains control over previously learned bits and pieces of information and connects them into a unified representational structure (Karmiloff-Smith, 1986).

Central to the restructuring process in language learning is attention to form. Many second language researchers believe that attention to form plays a very important role in the cognitive process of second language development. In particular, it is argued that restructuring of “grammar” principally takes place when learners attend to and notice features in input (Schmidt, 1990). Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) argue that for L2 grammatical development to occur, learners must pay attention to form and notice gaps between the provisional state of their grammatical knowledge and the communicative demand of the context. Similarly, Gass (1988) contends that “without selective attention, grammar development does not take place” (p. 212).

However, there are certain misconceptions associated with the idea of attention to form in the literature; it has often been interpreted as explicit rule teaching. Although attention to form can be advanced in language learning situations in many different ways, the method discussed most in the literature has been the use of explicit formal instruction. In particular, most language teachers interpret focus on form as a deductive presentation of rules represented mostly by pattern drills and grammar exercises, with much of the discussion hinging around a teacher-based grammar presentation and practice sequence (Bygate, 1994).

The idea of attention to form differs from explicit formal instruction. Thus, Long (1991) distinguishes between focus on forms and focus on form. Focus on forms, according to Long, is very similar to traditional grammar teaching and has to do with activities whose primary purpose is to teach language forms in isolation. Focus on form, however, attempts to draw the student’s attention to linguistic forms as they arise in activities whose primary focus is on meaning.

Focus on Form in Communicative Contexts

It is this idea of focus on form in communicative contexts that is currently supported by both theory and research. However, many educators believe in a separation of form-focused activities from communicative activities in classroom settings (Lightbown, 1998). These people, as Lightbown observes, are concerned that attempts to emphasize form may cause negative reactions on the part of the learners who are engaged in expressing their meaning. Therefore, to encourage meaningful interaction, they believe that focus on form and focus on communication should be treated as separate learning activities.

However, one way—and, I believe, the most effective way—of addressing this problem is to consider activities that result in attention to form while maintaining meaningful communication and using form for communication. If the goal of second language learning is to develop fluency, as well as accuracy and complexity (Skehan, 1996), and if accuracy is not achieved unless learners pay attention to form, learning may be more effective if learners focus on form while using language for communication. Psychologists have long shown that learners remember things with reference to the context in which they learn them. Therefore, focus on language forms in the context of communication may encourage learning, and the forms may be much easier to remember when students need them in future similar contexts (Lightbown, 1998). The question remains, for many teachers who wish to adopt this approach, how to design activities that can integrate attention to form into communication without turning back to the principles characteristic of traditional rule presentation strategies (VanPatten, 1994). My concern in the next section is to address this question. I will discuss and present pedagogical possibilities and strategies that may help to make this integration possible and provide examples of relevant tasks.

PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES AND STRATEGIES

From a communicative perspective, the most effective way to assist language learning in the classroom is through communicative tasks: that is, activities which encourage talk, not in order to produce language as an end, but “as a means of
sharing ideas and opinions, collaborating toward a single goal, or competing to achieve individual goals" (Pica et al., 1993, p. 10). It is argued that such activities provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate input to second language learners through negotiation of meaning (Long & Crookes, 1992), thereby developing both communicative and linguistic competence (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). However, the problem is that communicative tasks are generally interpreted as being principally meaning-based classroom activities. Ellis (1982), for example, describing the features of a communicative task, states that "the focus of the enterprise must be on the message throughout, rather than on the channel, i.e., the speakers must be concerned with what they have to say rather than how they are going to say it" (p. 75). Similarly, Nunan (1989) considers communicative tasks "a piece of classroom work which involves learners on comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10). Although both Ellis and Nunan support form-focused activities in their recent writings, they define communicative tasks as activities which focus mainly on meaning. Moreover, Ellis (1982) considers communicative activities not only necessary but also "sufficient for acquisition to take place" (p. 75).

As discussed earlier, however, recent research on the role of communicative interaction suggests that communicative activities which focus on meaning alone are not adequate for learning a second language. In terms of grammatical development, in particular, the contribution of communicative tasks has been shown to be limited. What may be needed, then, are integrative activities which can integrate a focus on form into existing L2 communicative activities.

There are a variety of ways to incorporate a focus on form into communicative activities in classroom contexts. One way is by design: that is, communicative activities can be designed with an advanced, deliberate focus on form. Another method of integrating form and communication is by process: that is, by incorporating focus on form in the process of, and as it occurs naturally in, classroom communications.

The Design Method

In the design method, the teacher decides in advance what forms should be focused on. Of course, this decision is not an easy one and always differs from learner to learner and from context to context. The decision is also complicated by the fact that different forms respond differently to different degrees of form-focusedness (Robinson, 1996). However, to design such tasks, the teacher needs to know what target forms should be incorporated into his or her communicative activities. The teacher can either select these forms intuitively, based on some familiarity with the students and the general perception of the students' interlanguage needs, or select them based on systematic investigation of the areas in which the students have problems. Forms can also be selected on the basis of theoretical criteria; however, there is a great deal of controversy as to what these criteria should be. Moreover, we cannot assume that learners will learn whatever we select based on theoretical criteria; after all, it is the learner who selects, organizes, and controls the learning process, not the teacher (Kennedy, 1973). However, recourse to some linguistic and psychological accounts may be helpful. For example, the linguistic, functional, or psychological complexity of target structures may help determine at what stage they should be introduced in classroom activities.

After a formal feature has been selected, the next stage is to design the task. The teacher can either construct tasks or modify and use tasks already available in the literature. It may be much easier to modify and use tasks already available; the literature is full of communicative tasks that lend themselves very well to a focus on form. Madden and Reinhart (1987) and Ur (1981, 1988) provide good collections of such communicative tasks. Examples of activities that can very easily be turned into form-focused tasks are picture difference or picture matching tasks, in which learners are grouped in pairs and asked to communicate with each other to identify or define differences in pictures or to match pictures. Completing these tasks requires, first, communicative interaction and, second, because of the nature of the tasks, frequent use of certain grammatical forms or structures. For example, in the picture difference task, students should make frequent use of interrogative and negative sentences. This frequent use of a particular form makes it salient, which may make the students notice the form used (Long & Robinson, 1998). To increase the frequency of the features used, students may even be asked to use certain forms; for example, in the case of the picture difference task, they may be asked to use structures such as Is there. . . ? and Are there. . . ? only. Students can also be asked to try to be as accurate as possible in expressing their meaning. This strategy has been found to bring
Vroman (1993) cite an example in which the picture difference task, the task can be completed self, whereas in some other pictures he is putting prepositions such as near, next to, between, and so or to be going to. rally used more often (e.g., “You leave Toronto at 8:00 and arrive in Ottawa at 11:00”). But the use of simple present tense is not an obligatory part of the task, and the task can be completed without it. For example, in exchanging information about a travel plan, simple present tense is what is naturally used; it is not an obligatory part of the task, and the same information can be exchanged using other tenses, such as future: will or to be going to.

In the task-utility relationship, the use of the structure may help the task to be completed more easily, but is not necessary. In the example of the picture difference task, the task can be completed much more easily if the students know locative prepositions such as near, next to, between, and so on. However, the task can still be completed successfully without using these prepositions.

In the task-essentialness relationship, the task can never be completed unless the learner uses some specific form. To show how the essentialness relationship might work, Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) cite an example in which the learners are presented with pictures containing two men called “Mr Fat” and “Mr Thin.” In some of the pictures, Mr Fat is putting paint onto himself, whereas in some other pictures he is putting paint onto Mr Thin. The students are presented with these pictures along with the following sentences:

1. Mr Fat expects Mr Thin to paint himself.
2. Mr Thin believes Mr Fat will paint himself.

The students are then asked to identify the reference of the reflexive pronouns in the two sentences by determining which sentence goes with which picture. Loschky and Bley-Vroman argue that unless the learner has grasped the grammatical relationship between the verb expect or believe and their following reflexive pronouns, he or she will not be able to complete the task successfully.

The above task is a good example of what Ellis (1995) calls “interpretation tasks.” In such tasks, the target structure is focused on as the learner tries to comprehend, interpret, and process the input. There are also tasks in which forms are focused on as learners try to produce language, which I will discuss in the next section.

Loschky and Bley-Vroman’s discussion (1993) of the different types of relationships between forms and tasks should be very useful to those who wish to design classroom form-focused tasks. It will particularly help them conceptualize and further manipulate the extent to which their tasks are form-focused. For example, tasks designed with an essentialness relationship, like the interpretation tasks mentioned above, are very strongly form-focused because the students cannot complete them without using the intended grammatical knowledge. Therefore, the most focused tasks are those that meet the essentialness requirement. In contrast, if a task is designed with a utility relationship, it is much weaker in that respect, as the task may be completed without using the features on which the task is intended to focus.

Another example of tasks which integrate focus on form with communication is grammar problem tasks, in which learners in pairs or in small groups are asked to discover, analyze, and learn about a particular linguistic problem through meaningful communication with one another. Examples of such tasks can be found in Fotos and Ellis (1991) and Fotos (1993). In Fotos and Ellis, learners were presented with a list of grammatical sentences with a particular structural pattern and instructed to interact with each other to induce and formulate the grammatical rules underlying these sentences. They were then asked to discuss and negotiate their results in small groups. Fotos and Ellis found that these tasks provided opportunities for communicative interaction compara-
ble to pure communicative tasks and that they also promoted noticing.

Grammar problem tasks provide the learner with what Lyster (1994) calls *negotiation of form*. They relate mainly to negotiation about how a language system works. Therefore, such tasks can provide a good vehicle for promoting metalinguistic knowledge about the form-meaning relationship, grammatical structures, and pattern generalization, all of which must develop for language success. The advantage of grammar problem tasks is that they create a situation in which metalinguistic knowledge is generated by communicative interaction and meaningful negotiation among students, rather than by rule-presentation by the teacher.

The Process Method

Another method of integrating form and communication is *by process*. In this method, form is focused on in the process of communication and as it occurs as part of natural communication. There are different ways to enhance this situation. For example, students can be put in pairs or in small groups and asked to communicate using any kind of tasks or communicative activities the teacher wants. However, it is important that the students be grouped in such a way that at least one student in each group is more skilled than others in the group. One of the roles of the more skilled student (the teacher can also sometimes play this role as a skilled partner) is to be sensitive to the language produced by the other students in the group while they are communicating meaning. In this case, if an error is made by one of the students, the more skilled student can be advised to react to it as one would in natural communication, without breaking the flow of communication or distracting the learners from the meaning they are conveying. This can be achieved using certain communicative strategies, such as asking for repetition or asking for clarification, that have been found to attract learners’ attention to problem areas and to cause them to notice an error and then remove it in subsequent trials (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). In the following example from Nobuyoshi and Ellis, which is an interaction between a student and a teacher, the student has produced an erroneous sentence by using the verb *pass* incorrectly. The teacher then asks for clarification. This strategy forces the learner to produce the sentence again. As a result, the learner becomes conscious of the grammatical problem and consequently corrects the previous ill-formed sentence.

Learner: He pass his house.
Teacher: Uh?
Learner: He passed, he passed, ah, his sign

Another way of integrating focus on form and communication by process is to use collaborative tasks requiring learners to get involved in deliberate and cooperative comprehension and production of the language. One way to create this collaborative situation in the classroom context is through the use of dictogloss, a classroom procedure introduced by Wajnryb (1990). In this technique, the teacher reads a short text twice and at a normal speed to a group of students. The students are instructed to listen very carefully and to write down as much information as they can as they listen to the story. When the reading is finished, the students are divided into small groups and are asked to use their resources to reconstruct the text as closely as possible to the original version. Finally, the students are asked to compare and analyze the different versions they have produced. According to Wajnryb, this procedure provides a context in which learners’ grammatical competence is developed through the productive use of grammar. During the small group interaction and co-reconstruction of the passage, the students come to notice their grammatical strengths and weaknesses and then try to overcome these weaknesses when attempting to co-produce the text. To do so, they consciously and unconsciously get involved in decision-making and hypothesis-testing procedures, through which they “refine their understanding of the language they used” (p. 5).

Recently, the effectiveness of dictogloss in promoting second language grammar knowledge has been empirically examined in several studies. Kowal and Swain (1994), Lapierre (1994), and Swain (1998), for example, reported studies in which they used dictogloss to bring about focus on form in communicative contexts. Their studies provided evidence that the use of such tasks led to a great improvement in students’ knowledge of grammar, showing that as the students got involved in the production of the language through the dictogloss procedure, they noticed gaps in their language knowledge which then triggered a cooperative search for the solution, leading to grammatical improvements on the part of the learner (Swain, 1998). Kowal and Swain (1994) conclude that dictogloss provided a successful vehicle for encouraging their students to create meaning and to “process language syntactically” (p. 25).

Dictogloss can thus be used effectively to integrate focus on form with meaningful communic-
tion in classroom contexts, providing a good context for what Klein (1986) calls the matching problem, or the process of noticing the gap (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). According to Klein, learners learn by comparing their own output with what others produce, thereby developing an awareness of their language performance and its discrepancy with others'. Under these conditions, negative feedback makes sense to the learner and can lead to the restructuring of his or her interlanguage grammar.

CONCLUSION

As second language teachers, we need to explore possibilities to improve language learning; we also need to be familiar with strategies and methodologies that can translate theory into practice. Indeed, the literature on second language teaching and learning, which has focused either on theoretical discussions or on communicative activities involving the negotiation of meaning, with few suggestions about integrative activities, lacks an adequate discussion of such practical strategies. In view of this practical need in L2 pedagogy, and based on current ideas about the nature of second language learning, I have outlined an approach that proposes an integration of focus on form with meaningful communicative activities in the classroom. I have also extended the theoretical discussion of an integrative approach to include pedagogical suggestions, demonstrating the feasibility of creating activities that link form and communication in language classrooms. These suggestions offer language teachers not only a chance to explore these strategies further but also an impetus to think of other techniques to facilitate an integration of attention to form and communication in practice, and hence to provide opportunities for both communicative fluency and grammatical accuracy.

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NOTE

1 See DeKeyser (1998) for a discussion of these accounts.

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