



The importance of focus on form in communicative language teaching

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Abstract

Long (1991) distinguished two approaches to language teaching, which he called ‘focus-on-forms’ and ‘focus-on-form’. In this article I discuss ‘focus-on-form’ from both a theoretical perspective by outlining the psycholinguistic rationale for this type of instruction and from a practical perspective by identifying the strategies that students and teachers can use when doing focus-on-form. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of including a focus-on-form in communicative language teaching in order to facilitate incidental language learning and thus reject the commonly held view that teachers should not ‘interfere’ when students are performing a communicative task. I also suggest that ‘focus-on-forms’ and ‘focus-on-form’ should be seen as complementary rather than oppositional approaches to teaching.

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1. Focus-on-forms and focus-on -form

Form-focussed instruction is of two basic types; (1) planned attempts to intervene in interlanguage development and thereby to cater to intentional language learning and (2) attempts to attract learners’ attention to forms in the course of instruction that is not explicitly designed to teach them and thereby to cater to incidental acquisition. Long (1988; 1991) has labelled these two types of form-focussed instruction ‘focus on forms’ and ‘focus on form’.

Focus on forms, according to Long (1988) consists of the teaching of discrete grammar points in accordance with a synthetic syllabus, such as a structural syllabus. Krashen (1982) refers to this as ‘the structure-of-the-day’ approach. Such an approach is premised on a view of second language (L2) acquisition as the accumulation of discrete items and is closely associated with ‘PPP’, a methodological sequence consisting of the presentation of a linguistic feature, followed by first controlled practice and subsequently free production involving contextualized

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grammar activities of the kind illustrated in Ur (1988)). The criterial features of focus-on-forms are (1) the pre-selection of a linguistic target for a lesson, (2) awareness on the part of teacher and students of what the linguistic target for the lesson is, and (3) the opportunity for intensive exposure to or practice of the target structure.

Focus on form is defined by Long (1991; 45-46) as follows:

Focus on form ... overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they rise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication.

There are a number of assumptions here. The first is that focus-on-form refers to pedagogic, not to mental activity. Thus it takes place interactionally and involves observable behaviour. The second assumption is that teacher and learners are both primarily focused on using language communicatively, not with trying to learn the language. The third is that, despite this focus-on-meaning, occasions arise when the participants need to or choose to focus on form. A final assumption is that focus-on-form is necessarily occasional and transitory, as otherwise it would supplant the primary focus-on-meaning. Thus focus-on-form can be seen as involving these criterial features;

1. it is observable (i.e. occurs interactionally),
2. it arises incidentally,
3. it occurs in discourse that is primarily meaning-centred and
4. it is transitory.

2. The psycholinguistic rationale for focus-on-form

The psycholinguistic rationale for a focus-on-form draws on a number of claims:

1. Meaning-focused instruction, while effective in developing fluent oral communication skills, does not result in a high level of linguistic or sociolinguistic competence.
2. Form-focused instruction consisting of a focus-on-forms may not result in learners being able to restructure their interlanguages.
3. Form-focused instruction consisting of a focus-on-form can enable learners to develop fluency along with accuracy because it creates the conditions for interlanguage restructuring to take place.

I will examine each of these claims.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that learners are successful in learning how to communicate fluently and confidently as a result of content-based instruction (see, for example, reviews of the Canadian immersion studies in Genesee (1987) and Swain 1985)). Even in less favourable ESL or EFL learning contexts, instructional programmes designed to expose learners to the target language through communication of one kind or another have produced very favourable results. Lightbown (1992), for example, reports that eight-year children in New Brunswick,

who participated in an experimental programme in which they worked entirely on their own for thirty minutes each day with various reading and listening materials designed to provide them with comprehensible input, demonstrated considerable oral ability at the end of the first year, greater in fact than that achieved by students taught through a traditional, focus-on-forms approach. Clearly, meaning-focused instruction that supplies learners with plentiful input that they can understand is effective in developing oral skills. However, there is also evidence to suggest that such instruction is not successful in enabling learners to achieve high levels of linguistic and sociolinguistic accuracy, suggesting, as claimed by Higgs and Clifford (1982), that there are limits to what can be achieved through ‘natural’ learning. French immersion students, for example, typically fail to learn marked verb forms. For example, they do not acquire the distinction between *passé composé* and *imparfait* (Harley 1989) or conditional forms (Day and Shapson 1991). They also fail to master sociolinguistic distinctions, such as that between *tu* and *vous* (Lyster 1994).

Why do learners fail to learn basic tense and sociolinguistic distinctions even after hundreds of hours of meaning-focused instruction? One possibility is that they develop a high level of strategic competence that enables them process input and output in the L2 without the need to attend closely to linguistic form. Indeed, the very nature of the instruction they experience, with its emphasis on processing language for meaning, may encourage the use of top-down strategies based on schematic knowledge and context at the expense of bottom-up strategies directed at decoding and encoding linguistic form. Schmidt (1994; 2001) argued that acquisition cannot take place unless learners actually ‘notice’ linguistic forms in the input - a process that he suggests is necessarily conscious. Meaning-focused instruction does not encourage such noticing. Furthermore, it may actually inhibit it. VanPatten (1990) suggested that learners, especially those with a low level of proficiency in the L2, have limited processing capacities, such that they cannot easily attend to both meaning and form at the same time and thus opt for whichever pays them the greater dividends. In the case of meaning-focused instruction this is obviously meaning. In short, what is good for developing the ability to process language for meaning in context may not be effective for developing advanced linguistic competence.

This has led researchers to look for ways of complementing meaning-focused instruction with some kind of form-focused instruction. One possibility is to include focus-on-forms lessons that complement content-based or task-based instruction with planned form-focused lessons designed to address the particular linguistic features that have been found to be problematic to learners. There is now ample evidence that focus-on-forms instruction is effective in enabling learners to develop communicative control over the grammatical features targeted by the instruction especially if the approach adopted is a ‘functional’ one (i.e. involves activities that teach form in relation to communicative activity) - see Ellis, 2015.

Nevertheless, there are strong theoretical reasons, grounded on empirical studies (e.g. Pienemann 1989), to suggest that focusing on forms is problematic because learners can only benefit from form-focused instruction directed at a specific form if

they are developmentally ready to acquire it. Several studies (e.g., Pica 1983; Ellis, 1989) have shown that classroom learners follow the same order and sequence of acquisition as naturalistic learners, suggesting that interlanguage development may be impervious to direct intervention through instruction. These studies, however, have also shown that learners who have received form-focussed instruction learn more rapidly and generally advance further along the interlanguage continuum than naturalistic learners. It would seem then that where rate and ultimate level of learning are concerned, a focus-on-forms may be of some benefit. Nevertheless, whether a particular group of learners is ready to acquire a particular feature is bound to be a hit-or-miss affair. Also, focus-on-forms seems to work best when the instruction is intensive, involving repeated activities performed over a period of time, several weeks in the case of some of the studies referred to above. This necessarily limits the number of features that can be effectively treated. For these reasons, the other form-focused teaching option is worthy of consideration.

Focus-on-form is compatible with an information-processing theoretical view of L2 acquisition. As I have already noted, L2 learners experience problems in directing their attention simultaneously to meaning and form, opting for whatever focus is compatible with their immediate goals. A focus-on-form provides learners with the opportunity to take 'time-out' from focusing on message construction to pay attention to specific forms and the meanings they realize. It thus helps to alleviate the processing problems they experience. It also provides an antidote to the kind of top-down processing that L2 learners adopt to cope with communicative demands by forcing learners, from time to time, to engage in bottom-up processing. Furthermore, such an approach enables teacher and students to attend to problems that are demonstrably problematic to learners (i.e. focus-on-form episodes are triggered either by something problematic in a learner utterance or by the learner's or teacher's wish to clarify understanding of a linguistic feature). In this way, focus-on-form is inherently remedial and, for that reason, pedagogically efficient.

A further rationale for focus-on-form can be found in the kind of skill-building theory advanced by Johnson (1988; 1996). Johnson argues that skill-development occurs when learners obtain feedback. He suggests, however, that feedback is most effectively utilized by learners when it is provided under 'real operating conditions' (i.e. in natural contexts in which learners are trying to actually perform the skill). Such feedback enables learners to carry out a cognitive comparison between their own output, which reflects their current interlanguage system, and the negative evidence and models of target language forms provided through the feedback. In this way, learners have the opportunity to 'notice-the-gap' (Schmidt and Frota 1986). Long (1996), drawing on Pinker (1989), however, argues that it is not sufficient to show that negative evidence can remedy learners' linguistic problems but that negative evidence must also be shown to (1) exist, (2) exist in a usable form, (3) be used by learners and (4) be necessary for successful acquisition. He presents theoretical and empirical reasons for believing that all these conditions can be met. Together, Johnson and Long offer a clear psycholinguistic rationale for focus-on-form; it

provides learners with the negative evidence they need to develop their interlanguages in a manner that is usable.

Focus-on-form can also contribute to acquisition in another way – it provides the impetus for what Swain (1985; 1995) has termed ‘pushed output’, i.e. output that stretches the learner’s competence through the need to express an idea in language that is accurate and appropriate. When teachers respond to student errors through feedback they potentially create conditions for students to attempt to produce the correct forms themselves. Doing so may help to foster the acquisition of these forms so that on subsequent occasions the students are able to use the correct forms without prompting.

The arguments supporting focus on form are summarized in Table 1 below. They underscore the importance of the incidental learning that can take place when learners are engaged in communicating and have their attention attracted to specific linguistic forms.

Table 1. The psycholinguistic rationale for focus-on-form.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To acquire the ability to use new linguistic forms communicatively, learners need the opportunity to engage in meaning-focused language use 2. However, such opportunity will only guarantee full acquisition of the new linguistic forms if learners also attend to form while engaged in meaning-focused language use. Long (1991) argues that only in this way can attention to form be made compatible with the natural processes that characterize L2 acquisition and thereby overcome persistent developmental errors. 3. Given that learners have a limited capacity to process the second language (L2) and have difficulty in simultaneously attending to meaning and form they will prioritize meaning over form when performing a communicative activity (VanPatten, 1990). 4. For this reason, it is necessary to find ways of drawing learners’ attention to form during a communicative activity. As Doughty (2001) notes ‘the factor that distinguishes focus on form from other pedagogical approaches is the requirement that focus on form involves learners’ briefly and perhaps simultaneously attending to form, meaning and use during one cognitive event’ (p. 211). |
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3. Doing focus-on-form

If focus-on-form is important, teachers need to know how to do it. In this section I draw on research by Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2002) that examined how attention was drawn to linguistic form while students were engaged in performing communicative tasks. Interestingly, the focus-on-form episodes occurred quite regularly in the lessons we observed – approximately once every 1 and half minutes – but the teachers themselves remained unaware that they were engaging in it. It

would seem that for some teachers at least focus-on-form' constitutes a natural kind of behaviour when working 'communicatively' with their students.

Two basic types of focus on form can be distinguished:

1. Reactive focus on form

This occurs when the teacher or another student responds to an error that a student makes in the context of a communicative activity.

2. Pre-emptive focus on form

This occurs when the teacher or student makes linguistic form the topic of the discourse even though no error has been committed.

Each of these two types of focus-on-form can be realized by means of a number of discursual strategies. For example, reactive focus-on-form can be conversational or didactic. Conversational focus-on-form occurs when the attention to form arises in the course of dealing with a communication problem resulting in the negotiation of meaning as in example 1 below. Here the teacher fails to understand the name of S1's group because the student fails to pronounce 'best' clearly. The problem is resolved when the teacher requests confirmation that pushes S1 to articulate 'best' more distinctively.

Example 1

S1: my group has a name.

T: what name?

S1: Bes.

T: Bess' group?

S1: best

T: oh, best, okay

S2: best

T: best, not group three, the best, that's a lovely name

Didactic focus-on-form occurs when the attention to form arises even though no communication problem has occurred. In this case, negotiation of form rather than negotiation of meaning takes place. Example 2 below occurred in an activity where the students had to make up alibis to explain why they could not have committed a crime. The focus on form centres on the student's utterance 'I was in pub', which is missing the definite article. The teacher clearly understands what the student meant but still reacts by recasting the utterance in the form of a confirmation check ('In the pub?'). It should be noted that even though the teacher is behaving didactically, the exchange overall maintains its communicative flavour, in part because the teacher's intercession is very brief.

Example 2

T: What were you doing?

S: I was in pub

(2)

S: I was in pub

T: In the pub?

S: Yeh and I was drinking beer with my friend.

Reactive focus on form can differ in another important way. It can be implicit or explicit. Implicit focus-on-form occurs when the teacher recasts the whole or part of a student's utterance or requests clarification in order to establish the student's meaning. Explicit focus on form occurs when an interlocutor directly signals an error has occurred, makes a metalinguistic comment or explicitly corrects the error. The focus on form in both of the above examples is implicit in nature. In both cases it takes the form of a request for confirmation. Example 3 below illustrates more explicit focus on form. Here, the teacher intervenes directly to explain that it is better to use the word 'cinema' rather than 'theatre' to refer to the place where movies are shown. Teachers will need to make a decision about whether to employ implicit or explicit focus-on-form strategies. Implicit strategies detract less from the communicative flow of an activity but explicit strategies may sometimes be needed to ensure that learners do attend to the teacher's feedback.

Example 3

S1: in the theatre (3.0) you can't watch movie at the theatre

S2: two movies?

(2.0)

T: a better word here, S2, is cinema

S1: [cinema?

S2: [cinema?

T: cinema, [yeah

S1: [cause in the cinema you can watch two uh movies

T: that's right, yep

Pre-emptive focus-on-form can also take a number of forms. It can be student-initiated as when a student asks a question about a linguistic form (see Example 4) or it can be teacher-initiated. In this latter case the teacher may pre-empt by means of a query to check whether students know a particular linguistic form (as in Example 5) or the teacher may directly advise students to take care that they use a particular linguistic feature correctly as, for example, by advising them to use the past tense in an activity involving the reporting of an accident. It should be clear that teacher-initiated focus on form is very didactic in nature, often leading to the kind of initiate-respond-feedback exchanges that are typical of focus-on-forms instruction. However,

they are a natural feature of pedagogic discourse, they need not intrude greatly into the communicative flow of an activity and they can be effective,

Example 5

S: I have a question. I met one of my friends who WAS or who IS from Thailand?

T: IS from Thailand.

S: ah

T: because it's always true she's from Thailand.

Example 6

T: what's the opposite of landing?

S: take off

T: take off

Ss: take off

Table 2 below summarizes the different ways of doing focus on form. If teachers are to make effective use of focus-on-form they need both knowledge of these strategies and the ability to deploy them skilfully in their interactions with students. The strategies constitute an essential element of communicative language teaching. Ideally, therefore, teacher training programmes should raise teachers' awareness of these strategies and provide opportunities for teachers to practise their use and to reflect on their practice.

Table 2. Strategies for doing focus-on-form (based on Ellis, 2002).

Options	Description
A. Reactive focus-on-form 1. Negotiation a. Conversational b. Didactic 2. Feedback a. Implicit feedback b. Explicit feedback	<p>The teacher or another student responds to an error that a student makes in the context of a communicative activity.</p> <p>The response to the error is triggered by a failure to understand what the student meant. It involves 'negotiation of meaning'.</p> <p>The response occurs even though no breakdown in communication has taken place; it constitutes a 'time-out' from communicating. It involves 'negotiation of form'.</p> <p>The teacher or another student responds to a student's error without directly indicating an error has been made, e.g. by means of a recast.</p> <p>The teacher or another student responds to a student's error by directly indicating that an error has been made, e.g. by formally correcting the error or by using metalanguage to draw attention to it.</p>

B. Pre-emptive focus-on-form	The teacher or a student makes a linguistic form the topic of the discourse even though no error has been committed.
1. Student initiated	A student asks a question about a linguistic form.
2. Teacher-initiated	The teacher gives advice about a linguistic form he/she thinks might be problematic or asks the students a question about the form.

4. Conclusion

Some teacher educators have suggested that teachers should not intervene when students are performing a communicative task as this will detract from the main purpose of such tasks, namely to develop fluency. Hedge (2000) noted that teachers' notes accompanying course books frequently instruct teachers to leave correction until the end of fluency activities. Scrivener (2005) supported a similar position:

If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is likely to be useful; if the aim is fluency, then lengthy, immediate correction that diverts from the slow of speaking is less appropriate (p. 299)

These views are based on the assumption that 'fluency' and 'accuracy' work need to be kept separate. This is, however, a mistaken view. First, the purpose of communicative tasks is not just fluency development. Performing communicate tasks can also contribute to linguistic development. However, this will not occur automatically. It requires focus-on-form. Thus, teachers need to be encouraged to make full use of reactive and pre-emptive focus on form when in their communicative teaching. Of course, the focus on-form strategies I have described need to be applied skilfully to ensure that the primary orientation while students are performing a task remains on meaning-making rather than on accuracy. If teachers overuse focus-on-form strategies, students will rapidly realize that they need to treat language as an object rather than as a tool for communicating and the whole purpose – to create the conditions for incidental language learning – will have been subverted.

Much of what goes on in the name of language teaching is directed at intentional learning through focus-on-forms instruction. Linguistic items or language skills are explained to students and then practised with a view to automatizing them. Students know what it is they are supposed to be learning and are invited to learn them intentionally. There is no doubt that in a classroom context, intentional language learning is both natural and desirable, especially for older learners. However, there are limits to how much of a language can be learned intentionally as Krashen (1982) pointed out. Language is comprised of complex phonological, lexical, grammatical and pragmatic systems and it is self-evident that it is not possible to teach everything about all of them. Furthermore, language learning is not a linear, incremental process of mastering discrete elements but an organic and dynamic process. It is for these reasons that so much of language learning is necessarily

incidental. Learners ‘pick up’ new linguistic forms through exposure and develop control of them through their attempts to use them in communication. Language teaching, therefore, needs to cater not just to intentional learning but to incidental learning by ensuring that learners have access to adequate L2 input and, crucially, by having their attention drawn to linguistic features that otherwise they might fail to attend to. This is the role of focus on form. Through the reactive and pre-emptive strategies illustrated in the previous section, learners can have their attention drawn to problematic linguistic features. The fact that this occurs while they are primarily focused on meaning facilitates the form-function mapping that lies at the heart of the language learning process.

The distinction between ‘focus-on-forms’ and ‘focus on form’ is often presented as oppositional. Theoretical arguments are advanced to support one or the other. Advocates of focus-on-forms claim that in many teaching contexts there is no time to rely on incidental learning and thus it is necessary to intervene directly through explicit instruction that caters to intentional learning. They point to research that shows that intentional learning is more effective than incidental learning. Advocates of focus-on-form claim that instruction that caters to incidental learning through activities that encourage attention to form are more compatible with how learning takes place and are more effective because they ensure that what is learned is available for use in communication. This has led to studies that have sought to compare the two approaches (e.g. de la Fuente, 2006; Shintani, 2012; Sheen, 2007) with a view to identifying which is more effective. The studies have produced mixed results, some suggesting that focus-on-form works best and others that focus-on-forms is more effective. There is, however, no need to view these two instructional approaches as oppositional. Clearly, learners can benefit from intentional learning but equally clearly much of learning will have to be incidental. A curriculum that incorporates both approaches is surely desirable. But this does not mean a return to the ‘accuracy/fluency’ dichotomy. It demands recognition of the dual purpose of communicative activities and of the importance of focus-on-form for facilitating incidental learning.

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