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The Effect of Explicit and Implicit Focus on Form

(F on F) on Improving the EFL Learners' Writing Skill

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Abstract

Task- based teaching as the most suitable version of CLT for EFL situations is intimately associated with fostering fluent L2 speech distant from native -like accuracy. Also, consciousness-raising (C-R), focus on form (F on F), and attention to form in the input now seems to have found their way into second language acquisition and it is strongly recommended that learners' consciousness should be raised for learning to occur and become intake. Of all the methodological options recommended for accounting for accuracy problem of meaning- first approaches to language teaching, explicit and implicit focus on form (Fon F) has been explored in this study. But the extent to which any of these two methodological options can be helpful for two different age groups was the matter of utmost importance. To this end, 20 female highschool students and 20 female university students were chosen and divided into four groups of ten students. Group one consisted of ten highschool students who were taught through explicit focus on form (Gh1). Second group included other ten highschool students who were taught through implicit focus on form (Gh2). Other two groups each included ten university students. The students of one of these two groups were taught through explicit focus on form (Gu1) and students of next group were taught through implicit focus on form (Gu2). These 40 students were assured to be homogeneous in terms of their English proficiency. All these groups took part in a five-session English course separately. Their L2 production was analyzed through a test. The collected data were put into a two- way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) which revealed that the explicit focus on form results in more accurate language than implicit focus on form for both age groups, and this was true for all four groups. Pedagogical implications have also been discussed.

Key words: Explicit Focus on Form, Implicit Focus on Form, Two- age Groups, EFL Learners' Writing Skill

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Chapter one

Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

Cycles of changing winds and shifting sands in the realm of language teaching lead to the appearance of various approaches each focusing on specific aspect of linguistic performance. A brief glance through the past decades of language teaching shows that traditional approaches to language teaching such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM), focused on flourishing accuracy at the cost of fluency. These traditional methods fell into disfavor due to their mere focus on fostering grammatical forms or accuracy , so to speak, while turning a blind eye to fluency and the ability to communicate .

In the course of time, when one methodology turns out to be of little use , it is more likely to be replaced by a new one .So dissatisfaction with the methods which failed to account for getting meaning across, led to the appearance of a more seemingly complete methodology to cater for the demands of language teaching. To this purpose, in the hope of addressing communicative concerns of language learners, the PPP approach (Presentation, Practice, and Production) was the dominant second language acquisition approach in the 60's and 70's . This approach led learners from controlled towards automatic use of new linguistic features of the language (Ellis , 2003a), and enjoyed a number of advantages , such as being teacher-friendly ,i.e., it was too easy to be run on the part of the teacher.

The proponents of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (e.g., Brumfit & Johnson, 1979) and second language theorists (e.g., Long & Crookes, 1992), questioned the PPP approach . Furthermore the underlying theory was called into question and the claim that focus on a particular form could lead to learning and automatization was played down in its entirety . Based on Wendel (1997, cited in Ellis, 2003a), The PPP approach puts premium on accuracy assuring that fluency will come out of accuracy . In fact, through PPP , there is no sign of real communicative use of language and the learners intellectual involvement .

Since the deficiencies of PPP approach became clear, various approaches such as Silent Way, Suggestopedia , Total Physical Response, and others came into existence. But none of them

appeared to fulfill the communicative concerns which were sought by L2 learners and practitioners. Communicative Language Teaching came onto the stage of language teaching in the mid 1970s to meet the demands which had not been met by the previous methods. The main explicit goal in Communicative Language Teaching was to develop communicative competence, but emphasis on meaning did a disservice to the accuracy of utterances.

Contrary to the traditional approaches to language teaching , communicative syllabuses are not designed around grammar, rather subject matters , tasks , projects, or semantic notions and pragmatic functions are the main units of syllabus design (Celce -Murcia, 1991).

Brown and Yule (1983) considers two general purposes for real communication , which is the ultimate goal of second and foreign language teaching in the communicative approach: the interactional function in which language is used to service contact and the transactional function in which language is used to exchange information . Communicative Language Teaching provides learners with the opportunity to communicate interactionally and transactionally in the second language.

Communicative Language Teaching was hoped to account for the second language acquisition needs, but it was not free from its drawbacks. For example studies on immersion program (Harley & Swain, 1984; Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1982), where learners attend to the subject matter through the L2 , indicated that learners developed conspicuous fluency and confidence in L 2 production while accuracy remained as a challenge . Swain maintained that in addition to comprehensible input , learners need opportunities so that they can mobilize their emerging grammatical competence. Based on the findings of the above -mentioned studies, Communicative Language Teaching came to be critiqued for failing to foster native -like accuracy .

Over the years a great deal of attention has been taken toward the connection between form and meaning . There is no doubt that total attention toward structure teaching to the virtual exclusion of meaning is doomed to failure from the very outset. But attention to meaning to the virtual exclusion of form has also failed to bring about satisfactory connection between form and meaning.

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Proponents of pure versions of communicative approach like Krashen and Terrel (1983) have emphasized the independence of communicative approach from every kind of form instruction . They do believe that through exposure to one specific language the learner would be able to acquire that language without any formal instruction. Findings of a great many researchers (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Vignola & Wesche, 1991) downplay the adequacy of pure versions of communicative approach in developing second language acquisition to the target- like level and demand for the inclusion of some sort of focus on form.

Instruction now seems to be a sin quo non, if not an indispensable part of second language acquisition (Burgess & Etherington, 2002). Its effectiveness has long been proved (long,1983; Long & Crookes , 1992). Even its effects have been reported to be durable and stable (Norris & Ortega , 2000). And there is now unanimous consensus that instruction can promote the acquisition of L2 implicit knowledge (Spada, 1997; Ellis, 2002). These results and findings notwithstanding, the role of instruction in the promotion of second language acquisition is still a matter of debate . On the one hand, there are non -interventionists who strongly oppose any intervention of instruction in the process of second language acquisition and who claim that the only necessary and sufficient condition for acquisition to occur is through comprehensible input and that instruction plays a peripheral and monitoring role (Krashen , 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1994) . Acquisition, he argues, is all unconscious . On the other hand, it has been shown that instruction can speed up the rate of learning , the ultimate level of attainment , and target - like accuracy (Long& Crookes, 1992; Doughty& Williams, 1998a) and that " without any focus on form or consciousness raising . . . . . . formal accuracy is an unlikely result " (Ellis , 2002: 175) .

How can we resolve this paradoxical theoretical failure of instruction and empirical working of it? Ellis (2002: 225) proposes two solutions : a) instruction only contributes to explicit knowledge with no effect on implicit knowledge and b) instruction can only be effective when " it consists of a focus on form". It is the latter that we will take into account in this study and it will constitute the central theme of our study.

Although there is an overall agreement over incorporating focus on form within classes which are run primarily through focus on meaning there is little consensus over how this focus on form is going to be operationalized . While Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) deny any explicit form instruction as focus on form, Dekeyser (1998) reasons that a "skill-based treatment of explicit knowledge" will be necessary and useful along with meaningful communication.

According to Long (1991) explicit form instruction would break down the rules which are associated with focus on form . But it should be emphasized that this is a kind of orthodox view toward language teaching . This kind of form -phobia can hardly benefit second language classes in EFL classroom setting. An explicit focus on form along with meaningful communication is not only beneficial but also necessary for enriching form- meaning connection (Fotos, 1998).

1.2. Statement of the problem

As mentioned before , central to second language acquisition concerns has been the status of form versus that of meaning. Should form be the focus of attention in language teaching or the meaning? Are forms to be presented in a preplanned order in the hope of being synthesized for communication purposes (type A syllabus) or meaning is to be negotiated to foster the communicative ability of the latter (type B syllabus)? There is a striking consensus among second language acquisition researchers (i.e., Long & Crookes,1992 ;White, 1988) as to the failure of type A syllabi in holding promise in regard to fostering the communicative ability of L2 learners . On the other hand, type B syllabi might strike the right balance between accuracy and fluency.

While Communicative Language Teaching has been established as the most effective alternative to different approaches to language teaching practiced to date (e.g., Jacobs & Farell , 2003), accuracy problems have always hunted the proponent of this well- established approach to language teaching . Relying on purely task -based language teaching , which is taken as a version of CLT , has failed to elicit structurally accurate language from language learners. Under real time pressure exercised by pressing need to get a message across, learners can hardly attend to both fluency and

linguistic accuracy simultaneously. Such a striking drawback associated with task -based language teaching , in particular, and CLT in general calls for some methodological interference which can result in L2 production with higher degrees of accuracy without sacrificing fluency.

These approaches , I mean CLT and task-based instruction , fail to fulfill the accuracy concerns along with fluency ones. In the realm of practice, learners of task -based instruction cannot develop native- like performance . The right balance , so to speak, does not appear to be struck between accuracy and fluency. Put differently, one extreme i.e., fluency turns out to overweight the other extreme ,i.e., accuracy. Language learners can communicate fluently resorting to communicative strategies but lack of accuracy is the outstanding shortcoming .

In addition to sacrificing accuracy to fluency , lack of stretching the interlanguage is another problem which learners of task-based language teaching are prone to. Willis (1996) claims that one of the prominent characteristics of task-based approach is providing learners with 'rich input' . This assumption has no base mainly because task-based instruction puts emphasis on output rather than input . Since learners are trained to use language in order to solve their communicative problems , they have less time at their disposal to spend on attending to new language input .Thus a serious weakness which is attributed to task-based language teaching is that contrary to traditional approaches to second language acquisition , it provides learners with less new language (Swain, 2005).

A task -based approach over- emphasizes the importance of performing the task at the cost of language development which is the aim of language pedagogy . As a result, instead of triggering interlanguage development, it leads learners towards fossilization . Integrating language form with task- based language teaching has been proposed. Doughty and Williams (1998) puts forward providing corrective feedback to make a distinction between acceptable and non- acceptable target language.

The alternative way that is proposed to solve the related problems of communicative language Teaching and task - based approach is giving planning time along with task performance . Skehan

(1996) claims that task -based instruction should be implemented in the way that avoids learners from focusing on form at the cost of meaning or meaning at the expense of form but instead encourages a focus that shifts attention between form and meaning . He suggests that in order to trade off form and meaning ,or accuracy and fluency , learners should be given time before performing the task.

Focus on form as a version of communicative approach to language teaching , has, since Long's (1991) introduction into the literature been a characteristic of immersion and ESL settings in which learners focus on content or theme -based courses (Spada, 1997) and little has been done to incorporate focus on form into EFL settings. There are a large number of studies (VanPatten & Sanz, 1995; Salabery, 1997; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998 ; Muranoi, 2000) which have striven to accommodate focus of form introduced by Long. Hence, the results have not been so illuminating and insightful.

The original focus on form is not suitable and conductive for EFL situations as in Iran in which English is taught as a foreign language. Every attempt to incorporate focus on form into EFL settings without any modification and revision is destined to failure.

Given the conflicting perspectives concerning the definition and implementation of focus on form in immersion , ESL, and EFL settings , this study opts for the distinctive features of two particular types of focus on form , namely " explicit focus on form " and " implicit focus on form".

1.3. Significance of the study

Findings of immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies suggest that , despite years of meaningful input and opportunities for interaction and in contrast to natural first language acquisition when classroom second language learning is entirely experiential and meaning-focused, some linguistic features do not ultimately develop to target- like levels (Harley ,1992; Harley & Swain, 1984; Vignola & Wesche, 1991) . Findings of classroom research have begun to indicate , however, that pedagogical interventions embedded in primarily communicative activities can be

effective in overcoming classroom limitations on second language acquisition. Also responses to the suggestion that second language teaching that is primarily meaning-focused could be improved with some degree of attention to form have often been heated, especially among classroom teachers.

In most EFL situations, teaching methodology centers on Communicative Language Teaching in general and task- based approach in particular. Both suffer from similar shortcomings ; learners fail to achieve native- like accuracy because of too much concern about fostering fluency. They only make an attempt to convey meaning and interact with each other resorting to communicative strategies. From the point of view of learners' time allocation , simultaneous focus on accuracy and fluency will not be an easy task. In order to strike a healthy balance between these two features of language production focus on form can be called on as a working methodological option. In this way learners can collect their resources, overcome stress and make use of their declarative knowledge to formulate correct utterances. In this study, an effort is made to explore the effects of explicit and implicit focus on form on two age groups.

1.4.   Research questions and research hypotheses

This study made effort to seek answers to the following questions:

1.   What is the effect of explicit focus on form on the acquisition of English grammar by younger and older EFL learners?

2.   What is the effect of implicit focus on form on the acquisition of English grammar by younger and older EFL learners?

3.   Which of the two mentioned methods work better for these two age groups?

The following research hypotheses were motivated and generated following the research questions:

Hypothesis one (H1) : Explicit form- focusing will finally result in better FL development for both younger and older learners.

Hypothesis two (H2) :Implicit focus on form will also result in FL development, regarding both groups.

Hypothesis three (H3) : Explicit form instruction through F on F is much more helpful in FL development than implicit one for both mentioned age groups.

1.5 Organization of the study

This study has been organized into five chapters. Chapter one introduces the overall skeleton of study in miniature. Chapter two has been devoted to the review of the related literature which makes an attempt to piece together different discussions related to the issue. Chapter three covers the methodology and design of the research. Chapter four makes an attempt to give a clear picture of the quantitative data analyses and results of the study. In chapter five the discussion and conclusion have been presented. It also covers pedagogical implications of the study. The list of references and the appendices follow in the end.

1.6 Definition of key terms

1.6.1. Accuracy: the capacity to produce well- formed utterances.

1.6.2. Explicit Knowledge: conscious knowledge of language rules that learners posses and can be verbalized.

1.6.3. Fluency: the speaker's capacity to produce the language in real time pressure with pauses and hesitations which are not dissimilar to those of native speakers.

1.6.4. Focus on form: is a term which refers to the incorporation of implicit grammar instruction within communicative ESL learners.

1.6.5. Implicit knowledge: the intuitive and highly proceduralized knowledge that learners posses to manifest in performance

1.6.6. Planning time: the opportunity given to learners to reflect on both content and form and be prepared to perform the task.

1.6.7. Task: a piece of real- life classroom activity that learners are engaged into propel the process of learning by using the target language for communicative purposes(J. Willis, 1996).

Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

2.0. Introduction

The view that formal instruction is important for raising learners' consciousness of language structures and forms has become prominent recently. In this regard, through this chapter the theoretical and empirical background to our study will be discussed. This part examines arguments for "focus on form", a term referring to the incorporation of implicit grammar instruction within communicative ESL/ EFL lessons. Here also definitions of major issues like form- focused instruction, consciousness raising (C-R) , Schmidt's noticing hypothesis are given and the roles of attention to form, input enhancement and different types of feedback in SLA are discussed . A distinction is also drawn between explicit and implicit focus on form, and the importance of communicative input is presented.

Concepts such as focus on meaning, tasks, acquisition, and types of knowledge are also explained .And the rest of the chapter is devoted to task- based language teaching (TBLT), theoretical rationale and empirical supports to TBLT , and planning time.

2.1. The origins of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

This part looks briefly at the beginning of what has come to be known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) . Communicative Language Teaching is seen to be not a British, European or U.S. phenomenon, but rather an international effort to respond to the needs of present day language learners in many different contexts of learning. The changes in the British language teaching tradition dating from the late 1960s are to be mentioned as the origins of Communicative Language Teaching.

CLT was partly a response to the sorts of criticisms the prominent American linguist Noam Chomsky had leveled at structural linguistic theory in his book *syntactic structure* (1957) . Chomsky had demonstrated that the current standard structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristic of language – the creativity and uniqueness of

individual sentences. Alternatively , British applied linguists such as Christopher Candlin and Henry Widdowson, who advocated the view that there is a need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures, drew on the work of British functional linguists (e.g., John Firth, M.A.K. Halliday), American work in sociolinguistics (e.g., Dell Hymes), as well as work in philosophy (e.g., John Austin and John Searle) .

The inadequacy of a four -skill model of language use was now recognized and the shortcomings of audiolingual methodology were widely acknowledged. There were general acceptance of the complexity and interrelatedness of skills in both written and oral communication and the needs for learners to have the experience of communication, to participate in the negotiation of meaning. Second language acquisition researchers faced similar problems. Examination of the learning process from a communicative perspective has meant looking at language in context, analysis of learner expression and negotiation.

With the increasing interdependence of European countries came the need for greater efforts to teach adults the major languages of the European Common Markets. The council of Europe , a regional organization for cultural and educational cooperation , examined the problem and the need to develop alternative methods of language teaching was considered a high priority.

In 1971, a group of experts used studies of the needs of European language learners , and in particular a preliminary document prepared by a British linguist ,D. A . Wilkins (1972) , which proposed a functional or communicative definition of language that could serve as a basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching. Wilkins' contribution was an analysis of the communicative meanings that a language learner needs to understand and express . Rather than describe the core of language through traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary, Wilkins attempted to demonstrate the systems of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of language . He described two types of meaning : notional categories (concepts such as time , sequence, quantity, location, frequency) and categories of communicative function (request, denials, offers, complaints) .