Special Extended Teaching Note

Understanding and Utilizing Form-Focused Instruction in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

ESL/EFL teachers can face several challenges when it comes to a focus on language forms in the classroom. How should teachers integrate the instruction of structural language forms with meaning-based activities? How necessary is a focus on form for student language learning? In what contexts is an explicit focus on form in the classroom most appropriate? This article explores the answers to these questions and others. The article begins by looking at some relevant background on the use of Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) in the language classroom, and it considers FFI's relevance for today's learners. The paper also provides pragmatic examples for how to make use of FFI in practical and meaningful ways. In the end, the article argues that a theoretical and pedagogical awareness of FFI should be part of a teacher's repertoire of tools to enhance student learning in certain classroom contexts.

Key Words: *Form-Focused Instruction, FFI, Grammar instruction, Focus-on-Form, Focus-on-Meaning*

Introduction

English language teachers working in both ESL and EFL contexts are often faced with a pedagogical dilemma centered around the longstanding debate over how and when to include focused grammatical instruction in the classroom. Should teachers explicitly focus learners' attention on grammatical forms? If so, how and when should such explicit instruction occur? Alternatively, should teachers simply focus on creating classroom contexts where grammatical forms can be practiced in meaningful and authentic ways? Does a focus on authentic communicative language in the classroom necessarily preclude direct grammatical instruction?

These questions are not new to the field, nor have definitive answers been established. Decisions about the extent to which teachers ought to focus clearly on grammatical instruction in the classroom are largely contextual and vary from one class

type to another. This paper argues that teachers have a responsibility to understand and engage with the debate around Form-Focused Instruction (FFI), and to develop their pedagogic skill set to include ways to translate FFI theory into classroom teaching practice.

This paper will provide a working definition of FFI and a general overview of the various theoretical positions surrounding form-focused grammatical instruction. It will also consider the different contexts in which FFI might or might not be appropriate in the classroom, and present practical classroom applications of FFI as examples.

Definitions and Types of FFI

Collins (2012) identifies FFI as "any pedagogical practice undertaken by second language (L2) teachers with the goal of drawing their students' attention to language form" (p. 2187). Language forms in this case may refer to spelling conventions, punctuation, grammatical structures, or a range of other possibilities. Spada and Lightbown (2008) make the distinction between *integrated* and *isolated* forms of FFI. In integrated FFI, students' attention is drawn to language forms during communicative activities, whereas in isolated FFI, form-focused lessons are conducted independently and place meaning in a secondary role. As Spada and Lightbown argue, if learners are beyond early childhood and have exposure to English only in the classroom where learners share the same L1, both integrated and isolated FFI can be valuable.

Evidence suggests that FFI helps learners pay attention to forms in the input, and without the explicit focus, learners may fail to notice and take up new forms in the language (Ellis, 2001; Ellis, 2016; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). Form in this case can be lexical (phonological and orthographic), grammatical, or pragmalinguistic (Ellis, 2016). There have been numerous attempts to distinguish FFI types, one of which is the distinction made by Long (1998) who argues there are three types: *(1) focus-on-forms, (2) focus-on-meaning, (3) focus-on-form* depending on the way attention to form or structure is approached in the classroom.

In differentiating between these three focal types, Long (1998) notes that *focus-on-forms* is now considered the traditional approach to grammatical instruction whereby teachers and course designers create lessons, materials, and textbooks centered on structural components of the language (phonemes, sentences patterns, grammatical structures, etc.). Classroom instruction and practice emphasize student understanding of the forms themselves and their related rules. Focus-on-forms instruction, where learning a preselected target form is the primary focus, has options of *explicit* and *implicit* instruction. Explicit focus-on-forms can be done deductively and inductively; the rule is presented by a teacher deductively, or learners inductively analyze the input and discover the rule by themselves (DeKeyser, 2003; Ellis, 2001, 2016). DeKeyser (1995) noted that

implicit learning allows students to infer and acquire rules without awareness. Focus-on-forms can include a structured input approach (Ellis, 2001), with which learners are exposed to sufficient examples of the target structure and asked to be engaged in the tasks to notice and use the target structure. It is similar to the notion of *isolated FFI* and can be incorporated as preparation for a communicative activity.

Focus-on-meaning, on the other hand, represents "a radical pendulum shift: a shift of allegiance to Option 2, and an equally single-minded focus on meaning" (Long, 1998, p. 38). While a focus on meaning in the classroom has helped enable a transition toward more communicative-based approaches to language instruction, it has also created challenges, not the least of which is research suggesting that L2 learners progress more quickly in their language development when emphasis is placed on specific language forms (Ellis, 1994; Long, 1988).

The compromise then is what Long (1998) has termed focus-on-form. This approach avoids the binary choices inherent in the form-meaning debate, and instead emphasizes the act of drawing students' attention to specific language forms within the context of communicative and meaning-based activities. This might mean, for example, following up an information gap activity with a focused discussion of a grammatical form that emerged as a challenge during the activity. This approach allows for a level of responsiveness to student needs in the classroom that is not possible when materials are designed to address certain forms in isolation from one another. By embedding form-focused instruction within communicative activities, instructors encourage students to attend to both meaning and form. This focus-on-form can be either pre-emptive or reactive. Reactive focus-on-form can occur as corrective feedback, such as recast, clarification request and repetition. Pre-emptive focus-on-form instruction about what form to use can be introduced briefly before communicative activities. Both focus-on-form (pre-planned and incidental) correspond to integrated FFI (Spada & Lightbown, 2008), which draws learners' attention to language form when they are engaged in communicative activities.

Effectiveness of FFI

One of the pervasive findings from numerous studies is that the explicit use of FFI can promote language learning (DeKeyser, 1998, 2003; Ellis, 2001; Norris & Ortega, 2001; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). In Norris and Ortega's (2001) meta-analysis, effect sizes were calculated based on a review of 49 research studies looking at explicit and implicit instruction of language forms. The effect size of explicit instruction (both focus-on-forms and focus-on-form) was shown to be significantly larger than that of implicit instruction (both focus-on-forms and focus-on-form). In addition, Norris and Ortega illustrate that the difference of the effect size between explicit focus-on-forms and explicit focus-on-form instruction is small, which might suggest that any type of explicit

FFI works. Contrarily, according to Spada and Lightbown (2008), instruction in which attention is drawn to both forms and meaning is the most effective. Taken as a whole, the effectiveness of types of FFI depends on variables such as the difficulty of the target structures (complexity, salience, variation from learner's L1, etc.) and the learners' proficiency level and language aptitude (DeKeyser, 2003; Spada & Lightbown, 2008).

As Ellis (2016) emphasizes, FFI is not an approach but a procedure or task design feature. Therefore, teachers do not necessarily have to choose one specific FFI type, but they should choose the appropriate one according to the contexts and sometimes combine more than two types in one lesson. DeKeyser (1998) even argues that teachers should avoid using exclusively either forms-focused instruction or meaning-focused instruction. Form-and-meaning association should be made by making explicit knowledge proceduralized and, in the end, automatized through both forms-focused and meaning-focused instruction.

Research conducted by Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, and Doughty (1995) showed that "enhanced input" such as highlighting forms can help learners notice forms and subsequently use them. More explicit input enhancement is thought to facilitate learning more than less explicit input enhancement (Norris & Ortega, 2001; Takimoto, 2008). Ellis (2016) also states that if text enhancement is combined with other techniques, its effectiveness can be increased. Inductive rule discovery is especially beneficial because older learners can use their analytical ability better (DeKeyser, 2003), and the explicit knowledge acquired through inductive instruction is considered to be more accessible in communicative activities (Takimoto, 2008).

Conditions Affecting FFI Selection

There are conditions under which specific FFI types are considered to be more effective. Simple but non-salient forms can be taught more efficiently in explicit and isolated FFI because learners do not easily notice those forms in the input (DeKeyser, 2003; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). On the other hand, forms that are more complex and difficult to describe can be taught more effectively in integrated FFI with the context (DeKeyser, 1998, 2003; Spada & Lightbown, 2008).

In Norris and Ortega's (2001) study, the review of both short and long-term FFI interventions found short-term FFI to have a slightly greater impact on retention than long-term FFI. In this sense, short-term, intensive FFI can be appropriate before using the target structure meaningfully in a communicative activity. According to Jean (as cited in Spada & Lightbown, 2008), vocabulary learning can be better enhanced if it is taught in communicative activities. N. Ellis (1994b) also highlighted the value of implicit learning as beneficial for vocabulary. In addition, other factors that can affect the effectiveness of

FFI types are the learner's developmental stage and age, the nature of target structure (DeKeyser, 2003; Ellis, 2001; Spada & Lightbown, 2008), and the materials (Ellis, 2001).

Another important consideration in the effectiveness of FFI is the sequencing of tasks, both within a classroom lesson and across units or textbooks. As Ellis (2016) argues, the focus-on-meaning, focus-on-form, and focus-on-forms types are not isolated entities but more of a continuum of FFI. Thornbury (1999) and Doughty and Williams (1998b) note that fluency activities (focus on meaning) should come before accuracy activities (focus on forms). Ellis (2016) suggests that focus-on-form is at the center of task-based language and teaching (TBLT). Focused communicative tasks are meaning-focused, have a goal to attain, and have a real-world relationship (Ellis, 2001). Ellis (2016) emphasizes that pre-teaching the target structures before a task can allow learners to be aware of the forms while engaged in the communicative tasks, which can facilitate more learning.

A final point in task sequencing is the notion of Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007). This theory notes the inherent similarities in adult learning processes. At the outset, adults begin the learning process through primarily explicit means, and, with practice and time, can begin to internalize rules and move toward implicit mastery. This can also be thought of as a progression from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge, with the later constituting an unconscious awareness of how an activity is completed.

Classroom-Based Examples of FFI

To better understand how variations of FFI can be practically applied in classroom settings, it can be helpful to consider a couple of real-life activities. The following two examples each incorporate an FFI component in different ways. In the first example, a jigsaw reading focuses students on meaning first, and this is followed-up by form-focused and attention-raising activities. In the second example, FFI is integrated into communicative discussion activities to enhance the students' abilities to fully participate.

Example 1: Jigsaw reading to FFI (from meaning to form)

One example is a set of classroom activities whose task sequencing starts with a top-down focus (on meaning) first through a jigsaw reading, and then shifts to a bottom-up focus (on forms) afterwards. In the jigsaw reading, students read an allotted passage in groups with guided questions provided by a teacher. Each group reads a different portion of the overall text. They discuss the meaning of the passage in a group, individually create a short summary of the passage, and peer assess their summary with a checklist in groups. Then students form a new group with students who read a different allotted passage. Each expert explains their part to other members, using the summary they created. They confirm the understanding of the members, using guided questions. After

all the experts report their parts and students have the whole picture of the reading, the teacher asks comprehension questions and each group answers them. Throughout the whole jigsaw reading activity, *student attention is drawn to meaning*.

After this, students are given a homework handout that directs their attention to the forms from the reading. For homework, students read numerous examples which include the target structure (e.g., *wherever/whenever/however* structures), and they make sentences using the structure and/or draw pictures describing the meaning. Example sentences and sample pictures were given in the handout (e.g., *Whenever you go out, it always rains in the fall in Oregon*). Then, in the next lesson, students in groups give a quiz to each other showing pictures and have other members guess the sentence. Since this form (wherever/whenever/however SV) is salient but hard to explain and comprehend, the form-focused activity is contextualized with pictures and student-created sentences, which helps students' comprehension. Although students' attention is on the target structure, they are also engaged in the meaning, which gives the activity both FFI and communicative components. At this point, the teacher may also wish to provide some focused examples of the target forms as well. Finally, students have an opportunity to read the passages again to solidify their comprehension of both meanings and forms.

In example 1, meaning is foregrounded in the lesson, but the incorporation of FFI is clear as well. Students are not so much explicitly taught rules related to the target forms, but rather they are allowed to identify the forms independently and contextualize them within their own writing and drawing. The activities are primarily student-centered, allowing them to take some ownership of the learning process.

Example 2: Topic selection for presentation (FFI integrated into communication)

One example in classroom practice where FFI is integrated into Communicative Language Teaching is a ranking activity conducted as students prepare to give a presentation. In this activity, students are placed into groups and each group is required to select a topic for a future group presentation. A ranking activity for choosing a topic for the group presentation requires students to brainstorm, express their opinions, discuss and negotiate meaning, and reach consensus in groups. It involves higher order thinking skills such as analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing information.

For many students, it can be less challenging to brainstorm possible topics and explain them because this is primarily a unilateral form of communication; students are simply asked to share their own ideas and opinions. However, when it comes to discussion, negotiation of meaning and reaching consensus, this bilateral form of communication may be more challenging for some groups of students. This is particularly true for students at the intermediate proficiency level and below who may

have limited discourse competence in their L2. Learners at this level can benefit from having a fixed set of communicative structures as part of their overall repertoire.

These types of fixed structures are sometimes referred to as sentence frames or communication frames. For example, students in this context might want to be aware of the value of softening “I disagree” to “I’m not sure I agree.” To integrate FFI into this component of the lesson, the teacher would simply monitor the group discussions and take notes on common forms and structures that students are struggling with. After several minutes of group discussion, the teacher might wish to pause the activity and give a five-minute lecture on three or four forms that students could incorporate into their discussion. Even after they learn useful chunks and expressions for discussion for the first time, students should be reminded of them before discussion every time until they are automatized. These forms might be placed on the board or projected onto the screen so students can refer to them during subsequent conversation.

FFI of this nature, integrated as it is into discussion group activities, has the obvious benefit of being responsive to student needs. The structures themselves are adaptable depending on the activity and the students’ performance during that activity. Also, as the presentation of the forms is necessarily short, the students are still allowed a significant amount of time to internalize the new structures and begin to incorporate them into their own productive language use.

Conclusion

FFI comes in a range of styles and approaches, and teachers should be aware of how different types of FFI can be integrated into their teaching practice to best meet the needs of their learners. As with most aspects of English language teaching, FFI does not present a one-size-fits-all approach for teachers. Instead, decisions about how and when to incorporate FFI into the classroom experience are context-based and impacted by a wide range of factors including the students age and language proficiency level, the teacher’s comfort level with instruction in specific forms, the lesson content, and the background knowledge and experience of the students.

As was highlighted by the two examples given here, FFI’s advantages in the classroom can be numerous. In a well-balanced pedagogical approach, students can be encouraged to focus on both form and meaning in a given activity, and the form-focused instruction can be customized to student needs and may only take a limited amount of class time. Another advantage is that, in many EFL contexts in particular, there often exists a tension between focus on meaning and focus on form. Many countries now have a nationalized English language curricula that encourages communicative language learning and an emphasis on meaning; however, these same countries continue to assess students’ language proficiency based primarily on knowledge of the form and structure of

the language. FFI can provide a middle ground here, as it allows teachers and students to develop their communicative skills in parallel with development of their knowledge of specific language structures and forms.

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