Focusing on the future of grammar instruction: Focusing on form

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Abstract

This paper reviews the implicit/explicit division that has dominated the language-teaching profession's treatment of second language (L2) grammar for over a century. Following an examination of the two extreme positions, an overview of focus-on-form (FonF) theory and techniques is presented as an intermediary position.

Résumé

Les pages suivantes examinent la division qui existe entre les deux pôles traditionnels du traitement de la grammaire pédagogique dans les cours de langue étrangère : implicite et explicite. Après un examen de chaque pôle, une discussion des techniques dites « FonF » (Focus-on-Form) est offerte comme compromis.

Introduction

Most second language (L2) research on pedagogical grammar has produced conflicting results supporting either an explicit or an implicit approach to grammar instruction,

> Although by no means the only important issue underlying debate over approaches to language teaching down the years, implicit or explicit choice of the learner or the language to be taught as the starting point in course design remains one of the most critical. (Long and Robinson 1998:15)

Even today, decades into the communicative competence revolution, we are still debating whether and how to treat grammar in the L2 classroom. This article examines the implicit and explicit extremes of the pedagogical grammar continuum

and concludes with an outline of the focus-on-form (FonF) movement, which offers instructors a more temperate climate for grammar instruction.

Our Pedagogical Past

Some theorists have advocated formal and systematic attention to isolated linguistic features via rules, drills, error correction, memorization, and translation. Others have rejected such techniques in favor of natural language exposure similar to that of young children acquiring their first language. In addition to a general division among researchers and methodologists, teachers are also "split into two camps, those who believe that classroom learners will develop all the grammatical competence they need from exposure to appropriate input [. . .] and those who insist that some explicit discussion of structure is necessary" (Garrett 1986:134).

Although both the terminology and the techniques may vary from year to year and from practitioner to practitioner, the burning question remains the same: Does grammar instruction help second language learners gain competence and proficiency in the target language? A more temperate discussion of the debate allows for sub-questions such as: What type of grammar instruction (if any) is best? At what point (if at all) should grammar instruction come into play? and Should grammar occupy a position subordinate to, equal to, or superior to, that of meaning? (Gascoigne 2002).

According to Doughty and Williams (1998), the implicit/explicit debate has a rich history. Specifically,

> responses to the suggestions that second language teaching that is primarily meaning-focused could be improved with some degree of attention to form have been heated, especially among classroom teachers. These responses have ranged from outright rejection by teachers whose orientation is wholly communicative, to an eager, if misguided, embrace by others as justification for a return to explicit, discrete-point grammar. (2)

The Explicit Extreme

Proponents of explicit language teaching view language as a series of distinct linguistic elements arranged in a particular order according to a finite set of rules. A

purely deductive explicit approach, such as grammar translation, assumes that language is neither more nor less than the sum of its parts,

> Pedagogical attention to language form is rooted in a conception of language whose formalism is directly manifested in discrete entities such as the familiar bound morphemes, parts of speech, verb tense, clausal units, sentence types, and so forth. It is therefore relatively easy to let such entities constitute points of focus in the teaching syllabus, or units to be mastered [. . .] Underlying this approach is usually the tacit assumption that successful language learning is equivalent in large part to the cumulative mastery of sequentially introduced units. (Rutherford 1988:232)

Moreover, the standard explicit technique emphasizes rules of grammar and syntax and employs the native language (L1) as both a reference system and a medium of instruction, "the nature of language should be studied from the point of view of general grammar. We then learn to compare the grammatical phenomena of our own language with those of other languages" (Sweet 1899:5).

The Implicit Extreme

For Rutherford (1988), the implicitly-oriented language teacher views language as a means of communicating ideas, rather than a static system. Moreover, Rutherford argues that for the radical adherent, "classroom attention to language form is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for learning to take place. . . [and] grammar will, so to speak, take care of itself, as it does in the learning of a first language" (172).

Implicit grammatical instruction comprises contexts, methods, and techniques that expose the language learner to grammatical and lexical principles through natural language experience. Implicit techniques emphasize the semantic and communicative dimensions of language over its rule-governed systematic nature. In fact, many proponents of implicit language teaching/learning model their beliefs concerning second language acquisition after what we know about first language learning:

> It is quite reasonable to assume that since in acquiring a first language the child seems to focus more on being understood than on speaking grammatically, then second language acquisition might be allowed to proceed in this manner. Furthermore, since in first language acquisition most parents and peers seem more interested in finding out what a child has to say than in how he/she says it, then the second language teacher might assume a similar role to provide a more natural context for second language learning. (Canale and Swain 1988:63)

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The essential belief among noninterventionists is that adults, like children, learn best not by formally studying a second language, but by using it as a medium of communication.

FonF: Moving toward a Middle Ground

A recent increase in the quantity and quality of classroom-centered research has called into question the contemporary dominance of communicative competence. For example, findings from immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies have suggested that when instruction is entirely meaning-focused, command of certain linguistic features remains flawed (Doughty and Williams 1998). This, coupled with a growing dissatisfaction with either extreme, has lead to a series of studies supporting a combination of meaning- and form-focused instruction. Potential compromises seeking to reconcile extreme implicit and explicit positions include focus-on-form instruction (Long 1991) and its predecessor, consciousness-raising (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith 1985).

Just as the communicative competence revolution was getting underway, Sharwood Smith's pedagogical grammar hypothesis suggested that,

> Instructional strategies which draw the attention of the learner to specifically structured regularities of the language, as distinct from the message content, will under certain specified conditions significantly increase the rate of acquisition over and above the rate expected from learners acquiring that language under natural circumstances where attention to form may be minimal and sporadic. (cited in Rutherford and Sharwood Smith 1988:109)

The pedagogical grammar hypothesis and its consciousness-raising techniques are the undeniable forefathers of focus-on-form theory and techniques. However, whereas Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1988) define consciousness-raising as "the deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language" (107), focus-on-form entails a prerequisite engagement in meaning before attention to form can be expected to be effective (Doughty and Williams 1998:3).

Not wishing to confuse practitioners and cause a return to extreme explicit techniques, Long (1991) distinguishes between "focus on formS" and focus-on-form. Focus on formS refers to traditional explicit, decontextualized, discrete-point grammar instruction and techniques. During focus on formS activities, meaning is

not stressed, and in some cases, may not even exist. Focus-on-form, on the other hand, infuses explicit aspects into meaningful activities. There is, however, a distinct emphasis placed on meaning during focus-on-form instruction. According to Doughty and Williams (1998),

> Focus on formS and focus-on-form are not polar opposites in the way that form and meaning have often been considered to be. Rather, focus-on-form entails a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on formS is limited to such a focus, and focus on meaning excludes it. Most important, it should be kept in mind that the fundamental assumption of focus-on-form instruction is that meaning and use must already be evident to the learner at the time that attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across. (4)

Focus-on-form activities can take a variety of shapes. For example, attention may be drawn to a target form via typographical means such as underlining, color-coding, or bolding target structures that appear within a meaningful setting. Another way to encourage a focus on form is through implicit, negative (or corrective) feedback, also known as recasts (Long and Robinson 1998). Doughty and Williams (1998), however, raise the immediate and important question: "at what point does focus-on-form cross over into linguistic isolation?" Or, when does focus-on-form revert back to an explicit focus on formS? They conclude that it "is a very fine line indeed" (244). Nevertheless, part of the solution to potential crossover involves "the requirement that somehow and at some point, learner attention to meaning and form must be connected" (244).

Focusing on the Future

This brief examination of our pedagogical past illustrates that the language teaching profession has been enamored with extremes such as form versus function, implicit versus explicit techniques, communication versus linguistic accuracy, and meaning versus rules. Even if quiet and small at times, the struggle between poles has been a constant one. There has always been opposition among educators supporting the absolute or the relative extremes of the implicit/explicit continuum. Related to a perpetual struggle on a personal level, the profession as a whole has also been characterized by distinct and pervasive trends. We have inherited the remains from ages of form-focused instruction followed by decades of communicative language teaching. Indeed, the "complete pedagogical swing from language in isolation to language as communication may have been inevitable in overcoming the constraints

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of the traditional environment that made the classroom perhaps the worst place to acquire competence in an L2" (Doughty 1998:134). Thus far, the form/function extremes have been tested and tried and both have left teachers and learners longing for something more (Gascoigne 2002).

Given the shortcomings of each extreme, it is reasonable to suggest, as many already have, that instruction encourage students to focus on form within a communicative context. However, focus-on-form, need

> not represent a return to isolated grammar teaching, nor [must it] imply that student output be restricted. Instead, emphasis needs to be placed on helping students 'notice' language forms that might not be in focus within a meaning-based curriculum. This [. . .] differs radically from the more traditional present-practice-more practice form-focused communicative activities where learners' attention is focused on language as preparation for a later, more communicative phase. (Heilenman 1995:142)

Although focus-on-form techniques and theory represent a long-awaited middle ground appealing to the scores of educators who never fully submitted to either extreme, we must not blindly jump aboard without posing critical questions and awaiting further research (Gascoigne 2002). In fact, for Doughty and Williams (1998) four significant questions (concerning timing, forms, context, and design) remain to be answered before focus-on-form should be fully embraced:

1) When should focus-on-form occur in the overall curriculum?
2) Which structures are most amenable to focus-on-form attention?
3) Is focus-on-form likely to be equally beneficial in all settings?
4) Can tasks and techniques be designed during which problematic forms are likely to arise so that an opportunity to focus on form can be provided? (5)

Doughty and Williams also warn that there is "considerable variation in how the term focus-on-form is used" (5). For Long and Robinson (1998) it can take many shapes and sizes, it can be implemented "more or less concisely or elaborately and with greater or lesser explicitness and intensity" (17). Implicit focus-on-form techniques, for example, can include input floods, task-essential language, and typographical and intonational input enhancement (White 1998)[1]. Relatively moderate techniques include corrective recasts, whereas explicit focus-on-form

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[1] Among implicit focus-on-form techniques, input floods imply exposing the learner to large quantities of a target structure within a text or activity, task-essential language requires a learner to use a target structure in order to complete a given activity, and input enhancement involves the highlighting of a target structure within a text or activity.

techniques include garden path activities (Tomasello and Herron 1989), and input processing (VanPatten 1992)[22.]

Albeit on a much smaller scale, the implicit/explicit schism continues. However, focus-on-form has made great strides in attenuating the poignancy of either extreme and narrowing the gulf separating language educators. Although still awaiting definitive answers to our pedagogical grammar questions, bearing our professional past in mind as we continue to examine the role of pedagogical grammar will help us move closer to our heretofore elusive goal. At the very least, a look back on the role of grammar in L2 research and methods, gives us a clearer understanding of our current situation (Gascoigne 2002).

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[2] Among explicit focus-on-form techniques, garden-path activities encourage students to form their own hypotheses or explanations of a target structure and subsequently revise their hypotheses based on additional information or examples. Input processing (see VanPatten, 1992 for a detailed explanation) stresses the careful manipulation and presentation of target structure input, rather than placing sole emphasis on student production.

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