The Integration of Form-focused Instruction within Communicative Language Teaching: Instructional Options

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Abstract—The strong versions of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) undermine the role of formal instruction in language learning and may even consider it detrimental. According to proponents of the strong CLT versions, learners pick up the language from interactions that focus on the semantic aspect of the language rather than its formal characteristics. Hence, teaching language forms is not recommended. This position has, however, faced harsh criticism over the last three decades. Compelling evidence (e.g., Millard, 2000) has showed that the sole focus on meaning may produce fluent learners who lack language accuracy. This evidence, supported by other significant hypotheses (e.g., Schmidt's noticing hypothesis) and models (e.g., VanPatten's Processing Model) called for the re-introduction of formal instruction, but within a CLT framework. The present paper supports this relatively recent direction. The paper provides an overview of the developments that have led to the re-introduction of formal instruction in second language (L2) learning. The paper also surveys different lines of support for the integration of the approach known as Form-Focused Instruction within Communicative Language Teaching. Finally, the paper surveys various useful pedagogical techniques to support the successful FFI-CLT marriage in the English language classroom. The techniques are categorized under Ellis's (1998) classification of instructional intervention.

Index Terms—communicative language teaching, form-focused instruction, instructional options, English language learning, second language acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since its introduction in the 1970s, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has gained enormous popularity and has been considered the preferred way English as a second language (L2) should be taught (Savignon, 1991). The earlier decades of traditional language teaching which failed to produce fluent L2 users triggered a warm welcome to the CLT. The new approach promised successful language learning if teaching emphasizes the semantic and communicative aspects rather than the formal characteristics of language. This comes in line with the CLT philosophy that language is an instrument of social interaction, and, hence, learning to communicate must be the focus of language teaching and learning.

The adoption of the CLT philosophy has largely influenced L2 teaching. First, the structure of language teaching is based on semantic and functional aspects of the language. Course books, for example, are composed of units titled "globalization," "education," "making requests," "apologizing," making suggestions," "applying for a job," etc. This is in stark contrast with the units of traditional books that were titled after formal aspects of the language including tenses, types of clauses, etc. Second, CLT teachers involve learners in communicative situations where they will be interacting in the target language. Focus here is on the exchange of messages and fluent use of the language, rather than language accuracy. Learners are encouraged to communicate with other speakers and negotiate meaning to achieve successful interaction. Errors are expected and accepted as part of the learning process. Finally, and most relevant to the present paper, the Approach cast doubt on the role of formal language instruction in L2 classes. Explicit teaching of forms, particularly grammar, was seen as old-fashioned and unnecessary (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Some have even gone to the extreme that grammar teaching could be detrimental to language learning.

The CLT Approach received support from various hypotheses. Initial support came from Krashen (1981)'s distinction between language acquisition and language learning. For Krashen, language acquisition happens through natural use of the language in meaningful interactions and communicative situations. Learners acquire the language unconsciously and can, hence, later produce it automatically. Unconscious learning, which happens through natural language exposure, supports spontaneous language production. While giving full support to unconscious acquisition, Krashen (1981) called for abandoning the formal instruction of language features. According to him, this form of conscious learning can never be internalized. Learning a L2 through conscious strategies will hinder fluency as learners will experience difficulty retrieving language in natural communication.

In addition to his learning/acquisition distinction, Krashen (1985) further supported the CLT approach with his comprehensible input hypothesis, which postulates that formal features of the language can be automatically acquired from the positive evidence provided in comprehensible input. In this case, the input needs to be at a conveniently higher

level than the language competence of the learner. The speaker needs to use all possible means to ensure that the input can be understood by the learner, who should be allowed to enjoy rich, sufficient input for long periods. Learners, thus, do not need to produce language right away. They can take their time to process and absorb the comprehensible input before being expected to produce fluent speech. Language here is again acquired through natural exposure, not formal language instruction.

Additional support came from the interactionist hypothesis (Long, 1983). According to this hypothesis, interaction with competent speakers of the second language largely contributes to language acquisition. Facilitation to language learning is derived from the naturally occurring modifications in discourse, including questions, comprehension checks, clarification requests, etc. Such conversational and linguistic modifications provide the learner with much-needed understanding of the input and draw the learner's attention to how his/her own language production is different than the output of competent speakers. Hence, the interactionist hypothesis in its early version followed the same line of thought as that of the input hypothesis, disregarding the role of formal language instruction. The interactionist hypothesis supported the premise of the input hypothesis that learners can acquire language from comprehensible input, but added that communication and interactional modifications are necessary for the input provided by competent speakers to be comprehensible.

This extreme position of excluding any instruction of formal language features in the L2 classroom did not survive long. Some voices soon called for a role for formal instruction within a communicative language teaching framework. Integrating formal instruction with CLT was seen as a plausible solution that will further facilitate acquisition. Interestingly, some of the voices came from the CLT proponents, such as the father of the interactionist hypothesis. In 1996, Long revised his earlier version of the hypothesis allowing room for formal instruction. In his updated version, comprehensible input and meaningful interaction were still imperative for learning. However, it was also recognized that the CLT framework offers an excellent opportunity for instruction on formal language features within a meaningful and interesting context. It is this idea of integration that proves appealing for the writer of the present paper. A focus on semantic and communicative aspects of language does not have to lead to the exclusion of formal instruction. Accuracy needn't be sacrificed for fluency. There must be ways for training L2 learners to communicate their ideas fluently and accurately.

II. THE INTEGRATION OF FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Further support for the integration came from both empirical studies and recent hypotheses about L2 acquisition. Millard (2000) surveys a number of studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s which shed the light on the limitations of the exclusive focus on communication in L2 classrooms. Some evidence came from immersion classrooms in Canada, which are largely considered an excellent example of CLT. The immersion programs produced fluent L2 speakers, but consistently failed to produce students with native-like abilities after years of instruction. Likewise, Millard (2000) surveys a number of studies that highlight the relatively poor grammatical command of L2 learners in CLT-based intensive English language learning programs. The learners were more fluent than their counterparts in traditional classrooms, but their lack of grammatical accuracy has been noted. For a survey of relevant studies favoring a role for formal instruction in L2 classrooms, see Ellis (1997).

In addition to empirical findings, key figures in L2 acquisition also highlighted the importance of integrating formal instruction in the L2 classroom. Schmidt (1990) noted that learners often miss important formal language features that arise in the input. That is, they fail to turn the input into intake that can influence their learning. This led him to propose that "noticing" is essential for language learning. Learners need to "notice" the unlearned L2 forms in the input to start internalizing it. This hypothesis is contradictory to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis as it distinguishes between input and intake. Mere comprehensible input, according to the "noticing" hypothesis may not suffice for L2 learning. Along the same lines came Van Patten (2002)'s input-processing model. It has been noted that L2 learners pay great attention to meaning rather than form while processing input. In other words, they focus on the content of the message, and so often miss the form-meaning connections in the text. For example, a listener may not notice the "ed" past in a sentence that starts with "yesterday" since the latter word already conveys the past meaning. Hence, according to the input-processing model formal instruction will serve L2 learning well as it will help the L2 learner notice important form-meaning connections in the language.

With these hypotheses in mind, Ellis (1990) introduced form-focused instruction (FFI) as an approach to L2 learning that helps learners to notice formal features of the target language. In 2001, he defines the approach as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms," (pp. 1-2). According to him, FFI raises the learner's consciousness of unlearned language features so that the learner can notice these features in subsequent communicative input. Borrowing Schmidt (1990)'s terminology, it is this "noticing" that will facilitate and reinforce L2 learning. It is worth noting that FFI is in reconciliation with CLT. As El-Dakhs (2014) puts it, FFI "emphasizes relating forms to their communicative functions, noticing forms during communicative interaction and retrieving forms in communicative contexts," (p. 6).

Voices in support of FFI came from different directions. Examples include Doughty & Williams (1998) who listed various advantages for formal instruction including accelerating the rate of learning, leading to long-term accuracy and raising the ultimate level of attainment. Likewise, Izumi & Bigelow (2001) commended the approach for overcoming

the problems of traditional teaching which solely focuses on language forms and also the problems of meaning-based teaching which ignores the important role of formal instruction. Similarly, Doughty (2001) praised the approach because it encourages learners to focus on form, meaning and use in one cognitive event. Likewise, studies on the progress achieved by L2 learners in different parts of the world have contributed to the support. In Colombia, for instance, Sanchez and Obando (2008) claim that FFI is "the most effective way to combine meaning and accuracy and to allow learners to discover grammar through real life examples, rather than memorizing sterile rules," (p. 186).

It is worth mentioning that FFI leaves room for varied choices by the L2 teacher. First, the teacher has to choose appropriate language forms to address. Issues related to the salience of the form in the input, its communicative function, the inherent difficulty of the rule and the student's developmental readiness will need to be considered. Second, the teacher needs to adopt a suitable approach; whether reactive or proactive. In a reactive approach, the teacher observes students' output and develops FFI activities in response to students' linguistic difficulties. A pro-active approach, however, relies on the teacher's anticipation of the students' difficulties and the prior design of relevant activities. Third, the FFI techniques vary in how explicit/implicit they are. It is the teacher's discretion that can help make the right choices among the various techniques available (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

Spada & Lightbown (2008) identify an additional choice for teachers to make; whether FFI is taught in isolation or integration with CLT. They define these terms as "isolated FFI is attention to forms in separate lessons that occur within a program that is primarily communicative in orientation…… Integrated FFI includes both reactive and proactive FFI," (p. 193). Spada & Lightbown (2008) identify a number of variables that would support one form of FFI than the other. For instance, they assume that isolated FFI is particularly useful in cases of strong L1 influence on L2, simple formal features that are not salient in oral language and language forms that rarely occur in the CLT classrooms. Integrated FFI, however, may be more beneficial with complex language features that have difficult rules, errors that may lead to communication breakdowns and language features that have started to emerge in learners' interlanguage. The choice may also depend on the type of learners. Isolated FFI is recommended for older learners, especially if they are experienced language learners, whereas integrated FFI is preferable with learners that score high on language aptitude tests or possess good metalinguistic knowledge.

In addition to the abovementioned choices, teachers, most importantly, need to select among varied instructional options. In other words, what techniques is the teacher going to use, and at what stage of processing will the intervention occur? It is interesting to note a quote that was made almost 15 years before the writing of the present paper that holds true up till the moment. Nassaji (2000) stated, "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," (p.241). The remaining part of the present paper is dedicated to explore varied instructional options that can be used to implement FFI within a CLT context.

III. FFI INSTRUCTIONAL OPTIONS

The FFI instructional options presented in this section are not exhaustive. They only represent a humble attempt at identifying relevant techniques and listing them for L2 instructors' convenience. The options are categorized in accordance with Ellis's (1998) classification of the stages where instructional intervention can occur; namely, the input stage, the processing stage, the production stage and the feedback stage.

A. The Input Stage

According to El-Dakhs (2014), the input stage "involves learners in processing input that has been especially designed to highlight the form, meaning and use of a given structure. Minimal production of the target structure is required by learners. Yet, their attention is drawn to the form and the meaning/ use it serves,"(p.5). One interesting activity at this stage is the "input flooding task." Learners are consistently and recurrently exposed to the target language feature to facilitate its acquisition. For example, the following task includes many instances of present participle vs. past participle when used as adjectives:

Do you agree or disagree with these statements?
1. Quiet people are boring.
2. I am bored when someone tells a joke.
3. People who gossip a lot are very irritating.
4. I get irritated with small talk.
5. It is interesting to talk about yourself.
6. I am interested in people who always talk about themselves.

The task draws the learners' attention to the target form within a meaningful task that perfectly fits with CLT. The learners are concerned with the meaning of the sentences in order to take decisions which they may later have to defend. Meanwhile, the recurrent use of the present vs. past participle makes the form notable and relates the form to its function.

Another activity that can be used for intervention at the input stage is the "input enhancement task." In this task, the teacher highlights the target language feature through typographic (e.g., underlining, emboldening, etc.) or oral (e.g.,

added stress, repetition, etc.) enhancement. This makes the form more noticeable to the learner without explicit formal instruction on the teacher's part. Below is an example extracted from McCarthy et al. (2010):

Listen. Are these statements about manners true in your country? Check (√) true or false.

1. **Eating food** on a subway or bus is bad manners.
2. It's rude to **cut in line**.
3. You should try to **keep your voice down** in public.
4. You can offend someone by not **shaking hands** when you meet.
5. People might stare at you for **walking around barefoot**.
6. **Having an argument** in public is considered bad manners.
7. It's impolite to walk into someone's home without **taking off your shoes**.
8. **Showing affection** in public – **holding hands** or touching – is inappropriate.

In this task, attention is drawn to recurrent expressions in the target language through typographic enhancement. The learners practice listening, think about the statements and take authentic decisions in relation to their countries. Discussions may even ensue to compare notes among learners. The whole task is perfectly communicative. However, students' attention is simultaneously drawn to form.

A third activity is known as the "structured-based input task." This type of task can be done orally or in writing. It pushes students to process sentences correctly and notice the target form. For example, the following task suggested by Neupane (2009) pushes students to notice the use of causative verbs.

Listen to the statements and answer the questions.
John made Rama clean the room.
The teacher made the student do his homework.
John made an omelette.
The teacher made a diagram.
a. Who cleaned the room?
b. Who did the homework?
c. Who made an omelette?
d. Who made a diagram?

After listening, the students are pushed to consider the meaning of causative verbs carefully through answering the questions below the sentences. Again, form is highlighted simultaneously with the processing of meaning. It has been noted that in this task some instructors precede the sentences and questions with explicit instruction of the form to ensure that learners' attention will be drawn to the required direction.

B. The Processing Stage

During the processing stage, the L2 teacher can intervene through direct or indirect instruction. In direct instruction, the teacher explicitly explains the target language features whether orally or in writing. The learner can interact with the explanation through questions, requests for clarification, seeking repetition, etc. In indirect instruction, however, the L2 teacher provides learners with the sufficient modified input for discovering the target language features and the learners work out the rules for themselves.

One common technique for intervening at the processing stage is the statement of the rule accompanied by metalinguistic explanation. The following example from medical English is adopted from Spada & Lightbown (2008):

Decide whether the following statements are True (T) or False (F).

1. Freud developed a method for examining mental processes known as psychoanalysis.
2. Pencillin was discovered by Alexander Fleming in 1928.

After marking True or False, the teacher starts asking questions like "What is given more emphasis in the first sentence- Freud or psychoanalysis? What about the second sentence?" Through these and similar questions, the rule is explained using meta-language. The activity directly targets the processing stage through explicit, direct instruction. The meaningful context is still provided through the statements which learners evaluate and which are very relevant to their field of expertise.

Another useful technique is known as "consciousness-raising." In such tasks, learners are provided with sufficient data to help them discover the target rules. Learners often work in pairs or groups and use their intellectual effort to comprehend the target structure and, perhaps, state the rules orally or in writing. The following example, from Ellis (1998), sets a good example:

1. Underline the time expressions in this passage.

I made an appointment to see Mr. Bean at 3 o' clock on Tuesday the 11th of February to discuss my application for a job. Unfortunately, he was involved in a car accident in the morning and rang to cancel the appointment. I made another appointment to see him at 10 o'clock on Friday the 21st of February. However, when I got to his office, his secretary told me that his wife had died at 2 o'clock in the night and that he was not coming into the office that day. She suggested I reschedule for something in March. So I made a third appointment to see Mr. Bean at 1 o'clock on Monday the 10th of March. This time I actually got to see him. However, he informed me that they had now filled all the vacancies and suggested I contact him again in 1998. I assured him that he would not be seeing me in either this or the next century.

2. Write the time phrases into this table.

At	In	On
at 3.00 o'clock		

3. Make up a rule to explain when to use *at, in* and *on* in time expressions.

After the learners have completed the tasks, the teacher will often try to engage them in activities that will turn their declarative knowledge as illustrated in their rule-formation, into procedural knowledge through various production activities. It is worth noting that the students worked out the rule after reading through a meaningful short story. Hence, meaningfulness and communicative competence are maintained and addressed.

A last illustrative technique is called the "grammar problem task." In such a task, the learners are provided with a list of grammatical sentences focusing on a certain grammatical pattern. They are asked to discover the rules through meaningful interaction with their classmates in pairs or groups. In order to formulate the rules, the learners are involved in discussions and negotiations. An example is the following list of sentences:

Formulate a grammatical rule underlying these sentences:
- If I were a millionaire, I wouldn't work.
- They would be happier if they were rich.
- They could communicate faster if they used what'sapp.

The sentences should allow the student to work out the rules related to the use of conditionals in English. The student is, hence, involved in a problem-solving task to work out the grammar rule.

C. The Production Stage

According to El-Dakhs (2014), the production stage "requires learners to integrate their knowledge of the target grammar rules into their production. The demands of the production tasks vary a great deal, between highly controlled text-manipulation exercises (e.g., a substitution drill) and freer production tasks where learners can create their own sentences," (p.8). Tasks in this stage may have their roots in Swain's output hypothesis which calls for engaging learners in production activities to support their L2 acquisition. According to Swain (1995), pushing students to put their knowledge of the L2 into production will help them notice gaps between their output and the target language. Identifying gaps and discrepancies helps learners improve their language. In addition to the noticing function, Swain postulates that the output aids learners with hypothesis testing and improving their metalinguistic knowledge. Hence, due to these functions, and others that may be suggested, teachers are generally interested in targeting the production stage.

One useful production technique that is highly controlled is the "text manipulation task." In such a task, a text is manipulated in a way that the target structure is frequently practiced. For example, the following example, adopted from Ellis (1998), forces learners to produce prepositions of time in different expressions. The sentence itself in meaningful, but the learners' output is highly constrained.

Fill in the blanks in this sentence:
Mr. Short was born _____ 1944 _____ a Tuesday _____ May _____ two o'clock _____ the morning.

Another less constraining production technique is known as the "task-essential language." In this task, learners are required to perform a task which entails the use of a particular language feature. The task provides learners with frequent opportunities to use the target form, and hence, internalize knowledge of the rule. Below are two relevant examples. In the first one, the learner needs to use the comparative forms of the language to compare between the two cities. In the second example, the use of "there is" and "there are" in affirmative and interrogative forms is necessary.

1. Compare Riyadh and Jeddah. You will need to use comparative forms.
2. Identify differences in the pictures. You can ask your colleague questions using "is there" and "are there."

A third production technique is the "dictogloss." In this task, the teacher reads a short test twice while the learners listen attentively and take down as many notes as they wish. This is followed by learners working together in pairs or groups to reconstruct the text. The discussions include negotiations, meta- talk and exchange of ideas. After the text is re-constructed, the learners are allowed to compare their constructed text with the original one to compare and analyze the different versions. In addition to the benefit of the discussions, the comparison of the two versions proves extremely beneficial as it allows learners to identify gaps in their knowledge and discrepancies between their production and native speakers' output.

The editing task is yet another interesting activity for production. Similar to the dictogloss, two versions of the same text are used. The teacher hands over an incorrect version to the learners and reads aloud the correct version inviting learners to correct the erroneous texts at their hands. The learners first listen to the teacher attentively. Then, they are allowed to discuss their corrections with their classmates. The discussions involve cooperation, negotiation and reflection, all necessary components for learning. After sufficient interaction, the teacher provides the learners with the correct version to analyze and compare with their own. Explanation of certain language features can be provided as deemed necessary.

A final production technique to be shared here is the "garden path task." The following example is a good illustration (Nation & Newton, 2008):

Teacher   Here is a sentence using these words: *think* and *problem*. I thought about the problem. Now you make one using these words: *talk* and *problem*.
Student   We talked about the problem.
Teacher   Good. *Argue* and *result*.
Student   We argued about the result.
Teacher   Good. *Discuss* and *advantages*.
Student   We discussed about the advantages.
Teacher   No. With *discuss* we don't use *about*.

It must be clear that the teacher allows the student to make various correct production attempts before facing the challenge of an exception. This technique allows the teacher to only explain the general target rule without the exceptions. Then, through this structured task, the learner is encouraged to over- generalize the rule, and this is when the teacher intervenes to clarify the restrictions on use. It is hoped that this technique will make the restrictions on the rule more memorable.

D. The Feedback Stage

Negative feedback "shows learners which of their utterances are incorrect. This can encourage learners to compare their deviant utterances with correct ones and identify their errors. Again, form is examined in meaningful activities that promote the development of communicative interaction," (El-Dakhs, 2014, p. 5). Different strategies have been devised to address the feedback stage. An interesting technique is the provision of explicit feedback with metalinguistic terminology. The following example is extracted from Spada & Lightbown, 2006 (cited in Spada & Lightbown, 2008, p.187):

Guessing game
Student: Is George is in the living room?
Teacher: You said "**is**" two times, dear. Listen to you-you said, "**Is** George **is** in…. Look on the board. "**Is** George in the …." and then you say the name of the room."
Student: Is George in the living room?
T: Yeah
Student: I win!

In the above example, the students engaged in a guessing game. The teacher highlights a deviant repetition of the copula. The student is directed to the board to use the correct structure. Once, he produced the correction, the guessing game continues and he expresses excitement for winning. The correction was done within a meaningful, communicative context.

Another well-known technique at the feedback stage is known as the "recast." The recast is a reformulation of erroneous utterances by the learner. Instead of saying that the learner's utterance is incorrect, the teacher reformulates the incorrect form into a correct one indirectly. This is intended to make the learner notice the gap between their incompetent language use and more fluent language use. An example is as follows:

Student: The girl did a major mistake.
Teacher: Oh, she made a major mistake.
Student: Yes, she made a major mistake.

"Output enhancement" is another useful technique. The teacher promotes students to produce output including specific language forms that may not have been internalized in their production yet. To this end, the teacher seizes opportunities to highlight the erroneous production by students without giving a direct correction. This can be done through requests, repetition, metalinguistic cues and elicitation. For instance, if a student produces "He speak English very well." The teacher can repeat "speak" perhaps with a rising intonation or say "what about the third person singular?"In this way, the teacher invites the students to re-consider their erroneous production and provide corrections themselves. Noticing the erroneous production and correcting it support language learning.

Last, but not least, the technique of "interaction enhancement" may also be useful. This technique guides students to focus on form by providing interactional modifications. The technique implements several strategies including requests for repetition, output enhancement, input enhancement, etc. For instance, the example below starts with a teacher's question inviting output enhancement. Then, the student produces incorrect output, and the teacher requests repetition. Upon the student's successful modification, the teacher repeats the correct statement providing an excellent chance for input enhancement. This is followed by topic continuation.

T: And any other problem?
S: …. I saw rat
T: You saw what?
S: A rat.
T: Uh-huh, you saw a rat in your room. That's terrible.
(Muranoi,H., 2002, cited in Yu, M., 2013, p. 25)

IV. CONCLUSION

Communicative Language Teaching is widely regarded as the most effective approach to L2 teaching. However, its earlier exclusion of formal instruction has not proved as effective (e.g., Millard, 2000). Hence, in later versions, CLT has accommodated some approaches of formal instruction that can adapt to the CLT's major focus on meaningful communication. A famous approach is the Form-Focused Instruction that aims to address language forms within a communicative context. The integration of FFI within a CLT context has gained increasing support (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 2008; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Numerous studies have examined its implementation in L2 classes and its effect on L2 development (e.g., Farrokhi & Talabari, 1989; Izumi & Bigelow, 2001).

The present paper, however, took a different approach. After surveying the different CLT versions and the evidence in their favour or disfavour, the paper placed special focus on the FFI approach detailing its definition, philosophy and supporting findings. The compatibility between the FFI and CLT is highly emphasized to encourage their integration in L2 classrooms. The paper also provided L2 teachers with various FFI techniques that can be directly implemented in the L2 CLT classroom. The techniques are classified into four stages of instructional intervention; (1) input, (2) processing, (3) output and (4) feedback.

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