

# **FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: THEORETICAL PROPOSALS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**María Elvira Barrios Espinosa**

Dpto. de Didáctica de la Lengua y la Literatura  
Universidad de Málaga

## **INTRODUCTION**

The role of form-focused instruction in promoting linguistic and communicative competence among second language (L2) learners is a much-debated issue.

Some theorists (most notably Krashen (e.g. 1982, 1985)) advocate that the teaching of grammar is of minimal effect in that conscious 'learning' cannot be converted into the fundamental process of L2 'acquisition'. Instead of teaching grammar, teachers should provide learners with extensive amounts of comprehensible input. In Krashen's terms, acquisition - as opposed to learning- is the subconscious process of picking up the language, which is *"similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language"* (1982:10). Learners will therefore induce the rules from this 'comprehensible input'.

However, most language teachers' classroom practice presents a markedly different reality, with plenty of focus on the formal aspects of the language. In addition, a growing number of specialists shares the view that the way in which instruction may work in second language learning (SLL) is through its role as a cognitive focusing device. The development of procedural knowledge would thus be facilitated by causing learners to pay attention to formal features of the language and notice the gap between these features and those in their interlanguage (e.g. Schmidt 1990, Ellis 1993 and 1994, VanPatten & Cadierno 1993a and b, VanPatten 1994, Nunan 1994).

In the first part of this article, the most relevant and productive theoretical proposals that bear upon the debate over form-focused instruction in SLL will be presented. Next, the SLL research findings within the frameworks referred to in the first section will be described. A final conclusion where the main points in the discussion are summarised will close the article.

## **THEORETICAL PROPOSALS**

### **Consciousness-raising**

The term 'consciousness-raising' as first used by Sharwood Smith (1981) and in subsequent works by Rutherford & Sharwood Smith (1985) and Rutherford (1997) refers to increased awareness of particular linguistic forms. This deliberate intent to focus on form can be carried out by the teacher, or it can be initiated by the learner her/himself. A lot of

research into the effectiveness of some kind of instructional approach has claimed to be inspired by this consciousness-raising proposal.

The umbrella term consciousness-raising includes a number of quite different teaching techniques which share the common objective of making the target forms perceptually salient to the learner. As Harley (1993) notes, even features that occur relatively frequently in classroom language may still fail to be perceptually salient to the learner. Slobin (cited in Schmidt 1990:143) also mentions perceptual salience "as a basic determinate of L1 acquisition"; in addition, he reports that grammatical morphemes that are bound, contracted, asyllabic, unstressed or varying in form pose particular difficulty to children.

### **Input enhancement**

In an interesting refinement of the notion of 'consciousness-raising', Sharwood Smith (1991) proposes its replacement for the safer term 'input enhancement'. The recognition that the teacher can deliberately manipulate the linguistic material but not the learners' processing mechanisms led him to conclude that externally created salience does not guarantee by itself internal salience: "although learners may notice the signals, the input may nevertheless be non-salient to their learning mechanisms and hence have no effect on development" (p. 121). This idea is also implicit in Schmidt (1990) when, while acknowledging that noticing is a necessary preliminary step for subsequent language processing, he concedes that it is not sufficient for learning.

It is important to point out that input enhancement is not a method of language teaching in itself. According to Sharwood Smith (1991), input enhancement may vary along two dimensions: explicitness and elaboration. He represents this as four possibilities (more or less explicitness combining with more or less elaboration). Colour marking of the English third person -s, asking the learners a clarification question after a mistake has been made or providing the learners with explicit instruction on a complex rule by means of abstract meta-language are all examples of input enhancement activities.

### **'Noticing'**

In the domain of SLL, it is widely acknowledged that there are mediating internal processes between the input that is (or is made) available to the learner and the stored data that can be used for her/his subsequent linguistic development (or 'preliminary intake' according to Chaudron 1985). Schmidt (1990) makes a distinction between perceived information, or input, and information that is noticed by the learners, or intake. According to Schmidt, attention controls access to conscious awareness and gives rise to the subjective experience of 'noticing', which is the 'necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input to intake' in SLL.

Although no conclusive evidence derives from his study (Schmidt and Frota 1986, reported in Schmidt 1990) as to noticing as a sufficient condition for learning, studies within an information processing framework provide Schmidt (1990) with the evidence for the claim that noticing is a primary condition for storage in memory. Experimental research

cited by Schmidt (1990:141) seems to indicate that material can be processed in long term memory when the opportunity exists to selectively attend and notice it. In short, memory requires attention and awareness.

How, then, is the frequently reported phenomenon of incidental learning (considered as synonymous with 'unattended learning') explained? From an information processing perspective, Schmidt (1994) argues that although the primary focus of attention can be elsewhere (e.g. on comprehending the meaning of an utterance or written text), at least some attention (or 'peripheral attention') must be allocated on language form. Otherwise, learning will simply not occur. If learning is to take place, then the primary task cannot deplete all the attentional capacity, which is known to be a limited resource.

In a later development of his theoretical proposal, Schmidt (1994) qualifies his previous claim that noticing is the sufficient and necessary condition for the conversion of input to intake for learning on the grounds that all demonstrations of detection without conscious registration (e.g. subliminal perception) exclusively proves the processing of what is already known, not learning. However, he concedes that due to the fact that it may be impossible to achieve an agreed upon operational definition of noticing that will allow falsifiability of this hypothesis, it may be wiser to replace the 'zero-position' claim that no learning will occur without noticing with a modified hypothesis in line with Baars (1988) that more noticing is conducive to more learning.

### **Attention to form and attention to meaning**

A question that has been raised in the literature is whether or not learners can direct (conscious) attention to form while they process input for meaning (e.g. VanPatten 1990, 1994).

In their effort to establish form-meaning connections while communicating, learners have to simultaneously attend to more than one thing during the course of on-line processing. VanPatten argues that referential meaning is processed before anything else when learners take part in communicative events. If we accept that learners acquire grammar by attending to meaningful input, and that attention is a limited resource, which explains why it is difficult to engage in similar mental processes at the same time, then the debate over consciousness in SLL could be reformulated by the following question: "What gets attended to in the input and what does not?" (VanPatten 1994:28). Research must therefore address the issues of the nature of attention in SLL and how learners attend to surface features in the input.

For VanPatten (1994), since comprehension and acquisition are inseparable processes, investigations on attention must take this fact into account. This implies that research must investigate whether "a learner can attend to form while attending to meaning when processing input, if so, what kind of form, and under what conditions this is and is not possible" (p.33). Only research that fulfils this requisite will be directed at investigating the role of attention in the development of an internal linguistic system where meaning-form links have to be established.

### **A production-based theory: The comprehensible output hypothesis**

In introducing comprehensible output to L2 acquisition theory, Swain (1985) argues that comprehensible input, although it may well be important for SLL, it is however insufficient to attain advanced levels of grammatical proficiency. This could only be achieved if the learner has the opportunity to use her/his linguistic repertoire in meaningful situations.

However, opportunities to speak may be insufficient. A fundamental idea in this theoretical proposal is that if production is to contribute to acquisition, the learner has to be pushed to achieve grammatical accuracy.

Swain (1985:248-9) assigns three roles to output:

1. The learner is encouraged to make use of her/his closest target-like linguistic resources in the process of negotiating meaning; the learner is therefore 'pushed' to make her/his input comprehensible.
2. The learner is provided with opportunities to try out the efficiency of her/his hypotheses.
3. Production promotes the progression from semantic to syntactic processing since it forces the learner to pay attention to the means by which meaning is conveyed.

To summarise, Swain proposes that production on the part of the learners in a meaningful context pushes them to produce utterances that are precise and appropriate, probably by encouraging them to select those interlanguage variants which are more target-like. As will be discussed below, this theory has been questioned on the grounds that it is by a continuous process of restructuring the interlanguage systems that languages are learned, and not by output practice (see, e.g. VanPatten 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Ellis 1993, 1995). Besides, there seems to be little evidence in support of the output hypothesis; however, as Ellis (1994:284) points out, although it is difficult to hold that new linguistic features can be learnt via output practice, 'pushed output' may contribute towards the development of greater control over features that have already been acquired. It is precisely this interpretation in terms of proceduralization of knowledge that led us to include an output practice component in the present study experimental treatment whereby subjects were pushed to produce correctly formed questions.

### **Processing instruction**

Traditional explicit instruction heavily emphasises learners' production of a given structure or form. The underlying idea is that explicit knowledge can turn into implicit knowledge as a result of practice. This position has been questioned (e.g. by VanPatten 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Ellis 1993, 1995) on the grounds that explicit declarative knowledge cannot directly become implicit procedural knowledge. A 'strong interface' position thus ignores the possibility that explicit declarative knowledge becomes proceduralized and then automatized through successive stages of production practice, as skill acquisition theory claims (e.g. Anderson 1982).

By focusing the SLL issue on language production, then, the consciousness debate is

reduced to a problem of language output, which is obviously contradictory. However, it is generally agreed in SLL circles that the learner's development of a linguistic system over time proceeds as a product of 'input processing and accommodation of intake' (VanPatten

1994:28) -or restructuring of their interlanguage system in McLaughlin's (1990) terms- but not of output practice.

Whereas traditional explicit grammar instruction focuses on the manipulation of learner output, the pedagogical intervention in processing instruction centres on the processes responsible for the conversion of input to intake. Processing instruction of L2 grammar thus implies i) noticing the target form or structure, and ii) comprehending the meaning of that target form or structure (i.e. establishing form-meaning connections).

This concept of processing instruction has been developed and researched under the terms 'input processing' (VanPatten and Cadierno 1993a, 1993b, VanPatten 1994) and 'interpretation' (Ellis 1993, 1995).

## **Universal Grammar**

Although Universal Grammar (UG) theory concerns itself with L1 acquisition, SLL research within this linguistic model has been set up in order to find out whether the principles and parameters of UG are still accessible to the L2 learner.

Conflicting results have led to speculate as to the role and varying effectiveness of formal instruction in relation to different aspects of the language. The position adopted by Bley-Vroman (1986) and White (1991) claims that negative evidence in the form of correction triggers the resetting of a parameter to its L2 value. In contrast, Schwartz (1993), drawing on Fodor's modular view of language as an encapsulated system of knowledge, argues that only 'primarily linguistic data', i.e. contextualized target language utterances, can be used by the L2 learner for grammar development. Negative data and metalinguistic information, on the other hand, can only be used for item-learning (lexicon and the inventory of morphological paradigms of inflection). In short, Schwartz suggests that the lexicon, syntax and morphology are learned differently. Extending this argumentation to the topic of consciousness, one could hypothesise that some aspects of language are learnable via conscious attention and that others are not.

Sharwood Smith (1993) also reframes the notion of 'input enhancement' in terms of a modular view of language and language learning. According to this view, language learner behaviour does not reflect a single mechanism, but a battery of quite different systems obeying different principles. For example, learning how to form complex syntactic structures is driven by one system, while speaking appropriately as well as accurately is ruled by another system. When considering the possible effect of the different kinds of input enhancement one should bear in mind -he argues- that we are engaging different processing mechanisms. In line with Schwartz (1993), Sharwood Smith concludes that results obtained from input enhancement research should not be used to generalise across modules. This implies that the selection of linguistic items for research must be considered in light of the different components of grammar and the relationship of these components to UG.

## **The teachability hypothesis**

A somewhat different perspective on the role of form-focused instruction has been taken by Pienemann and his colleagues (Pienemann 1985, Meisel, Clashen & Pienemann 1981, Pienemann, Johnston & Brindley 1988), who have hypothesised that certain linguistic structures develop along a particular developmental path which is essentially unalterable by instruction. The existence of these developmentally acquired sequences is explained, at least partly, with reference to principles of cognition (i.e. learners' developing ability to process certain elements in the stream of speech they hear) (see Pienemann 1984).

Question formation in English is one of those linguistic structures that develop along a particular developmental path (see Spada and Lightbown's (1993:223) tentative stages for question formation in ESL and Lightbown and Spada's (1994:63) adaptation of the developmental stages for question formation proposed by Pienemann, Johnston & Brindley (1988)). Similarly, Ellis (1990:142) calls interrogatives, together with negatives, 'transitional structures' since they are learnt "in a series of stages with the target-language structure as the final stage." Each stage thus constitutes a necessary stepping stone to the next stage.

The instructional implication of this proposal is that it may be useless to introduce learners to items which are developmentally beyond their current stage of development. This implication, however, has recently been questioned mainly on pedagogical grounds. Nunan (1994) reports a study of questions formation teaching in action aimed at providing evaluative data on the teachability hypothesis. While admitting that question formation learning follows a developmental route, he concludes that, if a communicative approach is adopted in class, question forms are bound to turn up from an early stage. Besides, he argues, there seems to be strong indications that language acquisition evolves out of utterances that are learned as formulae in the first place, which adds further support to the inclusion, of, for example interrogative structures, at an early stage of the learners' proficiency.

## **Connectionist models and implicit learning**

Research on artificial grammar and structure sequence learning provides evidence that a different amount of attention is required for learning 'unambiguous sequences', or sequences that are locally determined, versus 'ambiguous sequences', which are determined by elements at a distance. DeKeyser (1994) draws on this evidence to suggest that knowledge about word endings (particularly in the case of irregular verbs or nouns, what specific endings correspond to a given root) does not require attention to the form of an utterance; however, such attention may be necessary in order to acquire the more abstract, syntactic knowledge required to link an ending to a functionally related but distant sentence element (e.g. the subject and the correct verb ending).

This argumentation links the issues of instruction and implicit learning with connectionist proposals. According to the connectionist paradigm, implicit learning is possible, but it is best characterised as the gradual accumulation of associations between frequently co-occurring forms rather than the unconscious abstraction of abstract rule systems. Learning is, therefore, 'environmentally-driven', since it takes place as a result of experience, in response to the frequency of examples encountered in the input.

According to DeKeyser (1994), implicit learning mechanisms as defined by connectionist models are specially efficient for the acquisition of probabilistic generalizations based on similarities to prototypes, such as the irregular past tense in English. A rather similar stance is adopted by Hulstijn & De Graaff (1994), who mention the explanatory power of connectionist models to account for what they call 'item learning' -or items that have been individually stored in memory- as opposed to 'rule learning'.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

There is a considerable amount of research into the effects of a focus-on-form approach to language teaching (see, e.g. Long 1983 and Ellis 1990). The following discussion, however, will be limited to recent studies (from the mid-late 80s to our days). Since it is often claimed that research findings should not be used to make generalizations across linguistic domains -and even across aspects within the same domain-, the following account will include the specific target structure(s) under investigation.

### **Form-focused instruction and corrective feedback**

Recent empirical studies on classroom second language learning seem to show that focusing students on forms and correcting their errors is more effective than merely providing them with exposure to the target structures (i.e. implicit learning).

Harley (1989) investigated the effects of a functional approach to grammar teaching on the linguistic development of elementary school anglophone learners of French. The targeted item was the different use of the imparfait and the passé composé. Findings indicate that there are no significant differences between the experimental and the control groups on delayed post-test measures, although results are attributed to the fact that the control group received instruction directed at those structures after the study treatment.

Spada (1987) investigated the L2 development of adults in ESL programmes that were essentially communicative but differed in terms of the proportion of time devoted to explicit grammar teaching. In this study, learners who received more form-focused instruction performed as well or even better than on grammatical measures and just as well on communicative measures as learners who received less form-focused instruction. As learners in this context had plenty of opportunities for informal contact outside the classroom, the implication is that learners need both formal instruction and informal exposure and that the combination of both is more effective than either on its own.

In a study on adverb placement involving francophone ESL learners (age:10-12), White (1991) obtained controversial results, since some of the positive effects of input enhancement were short-lived and they disappeared on the delayed post-test. The students did learn that adverbs could go between subject and verb and not after the verb. However, they were rejecting adverbs after the verb, not only before objects, but also before prepositional phrases. In a further study on adverb placement, Trahey and White (1993) investigated the effect of simply increasing the frequency of exposure to adverbs for a 2-week period. Results indicate a significant increase in the use of adverbs before the verb. However, subjects failed to notice that adverbs in English can not be placed between verb and object.

In sum, the overall results of these studies suggest that classroom instruction can have a positive effect on learners' interlanguage development.

### **- Form-focused instruction, corrective feedback and UG**

Results from studies on the effect of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback have been interpreted in UG terms. However, interpretations of the same results may vary widely. So, White (1991) interprets her research results as evidence that adverb placement rules in English -which are typically not acquired by learners whose L1 lacks them (for example, Spanish and French)- can be successfully learnt through formal instruction. On the contrary, Schwartz and Gubala-Ryzak (1992) reanalysed the data from White (1991) in order to argue that formal instruction had not brought about a restructuring of the learners' internalised language system at all, but rather it had involved the development of explicit L2 knowledge exclusively.

### **- Form-focused instruction and question formation**

One of the first researchers to link the investigation into the effects of formal instruction on L2 question formation and developmental readiness was Rod Ellis (1984). Instruction took place at a time when learners were considered to be developmentally ready to acquire wh-question inversion rules. Group results showed no significant effect for instruction, although some individual learners showed a marked individual increase. One of the suggested explanations for these results suggested by Ellis (1984:151) refers to the possibility that the learners had not yet developed the necessary processing requisites for the instruction of such structural content.

However, in a study by Brindley (1991, reported in Ellis 1994:632) learners made substantial progress in question formation. As indicated by the researcher, instruction on this occasion was carefully tailored to the learners' developmental stage, which adds support to the teachability hypothesis.

In the study involving francophone ESL learners (age:10-12) that the present investigation set to replicate, White et al. (1991) found that subjects who were exposed to input enhancement activities in question formation outperformed the uninstructed learners as measured by two paper-and-pencil tasks and one oral communicative task.

Spada and Lightbown (1993) report a study aimed at investigating the contribution of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback in the context of a communicative programme to the development of interrogative constructions in the oral performance of ESL learners (age: 10-12) in Canada. Results seem to lend further support to the hypothesis that classroom instruction of a kind similar to that adopted in our study has a positive effect on learners' proficiency both in the short and the long (5 months) term.

### **Research on the comprehensible output hypothesis**

As noted above, research studies in support of the comprehensible output hypothesis are scarce. The three following studies, however, can throw some light on this theoretical



proposal. Pica (1988), in a study involving one native speaker (NS) and ten non-native speakers (NNS) set out to investigate whether the latter showed improvements in grammatical accuracy when the NS signalled difficulty to understand them. She concluded that the negotiated interaction provided learners with models of what the comprehensible output could have been like, rather than opportunities for their own production of comprehensible output. Consequently, Pica's conclusions lent greater support to the comprehensible input hypothesis than to the comprehensible output hypothesis. In a subsequent study, however, Pica et al. (1989) concluded that "comprehensible output was alive and well and was very much an outcome of linguistic demands placed on the NNS by the NS in the course of their negotiated interaction" (p.83) since it was found out that learners were more likely to modify their output in response to clarification requests than they did in response to confirmation requests. Some evidence in favour of the comprehensible output hypothesis was thus established.

More recently, Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) investigated whether pushing learners to produce accurate past tense forms in information-gaps tasks resulted in an improved performance. While 2 out of 3 experimental learners improved the accuracy of their production in response to requests for clarification, and maintained this improvement one week later, none of the three control subjects showed any improvement on either occasion.

To sum up, despite the small scale nature of the experimental studies on the role of comprehensible output in SLL, there seems to be some indications -albeit timid so far- that some learners may benefit from being pushed to produce more accurate language.

### **Research on 'noticing'**

Investigations which specifically focuses on the role of noticing in SLL are rare, mainly due to the difficulties inherent to operationalize 'noticing' for research purposes.

Schmidt and Frota (1986, reported in Schmidt 1990) examined one learners' diary to determine which input features he had consciously attended to. The learner was Schmidt himself and the data were collected while he was learning Portuguese in Brazil. They also analysed Schmidt's output to see to what extent the forms that had been noticed appeared in his oral production. In almost all cases, the forms that Schmidt produced were precisely those that he noticed people saying to him. Conversely, features that were available in the input did not show up until they had been noticed. Schmidt and Frota suggest that for noticed input to become intake, learners have to carry out a comparison between what they observe in the input and what they produce on the basis of their interlanguage system. This 'noticing the gap' -they argue- is a conscious process.

In Fotos' (1993) study, 160 Japanese university EFL learners were asked to complete a number of consciousness-raising activities directed at three grammatical structures: dative alternation, adverb placement and relative clauses. The investigation set to compare the effectiveness of two kinds of focus-on-form approaches (traditional teacher-fronted grammar instruction and an interactive grammar problem-solving task) in increasing the rate of subsequent noticing in the input. Both techniques were found to be similarly effective in the promotion of noticing. Low but significant positive correlations were also established between noticing frequencies and final proficiency test scores.

In summary, preliminary research findings suggest a tentative link between the amount of noticing and emergence of the structures in learner output. Investigative methodology in this area seems to be in need of refinement and improvement. Besides, a wider range of forms must be investigated before a solid relationship can be claimed.

### **Attention to form and attention to meaning**

VanPatten (1990) investigated to what extent it is possible to simultaneously pay attention to form (lexical items, articles and verb endings) and comprehend the input. A total of 202 university students of Spanish served as subjects in this study. VanPatten concluded that, for early and intermediate stage learners, simultaneous attention to 'non-communicative grammatico-morphological' forms in the input negatively affects comprehension of content. However, he suggests the possibility that the ability to consciously process for meaning and form may develop over time.

### **Processing instruction**

Although it is a relatively recent development, research seems to be accumulating in support of a focus-on-form approach based on processing instruction. As mentioned above, instruction within this framework focuses on those strategies and mechanisms that promote establishing form-meaning links during comprehension.

In a laboratory study, Doughty (1991) investigated the effects of instruction on adult learners' acquisition of relative clauses. The instruction was designed as a computer-assisted reading lesson, based on a text specially designed to include examples of the target structure. One group was given help in understanding the text by means of expansions or clarifications of sentences containing relative clauses. A second group was given instruction on relative clauses. A third, control group was simply exposed to the text. Both the first and second (i.e. the experimental) groups significantly improved their ability to produce relative clauses accurately. Besides, the first group outperformed the second and third groups in a test that measured overall comprehension of the text. In other words, the meaning-oriented instruction aimed at making sentences containing the target structure comprehensible seemed to work best because it led both to acquisition and comprehension.

VanPatten and Cadierno (1993a and b) compared the effects of two instructional treatments, one directed at manipulating learners' output by means of focused practice to bring about change in their developing interlanguage system, and the other aimed at changing the way the learners perceived and processed input. The target structure was Spanish word order rules with clitic object pronouns. The 'input processing group' performed better in the immediate and the two delayed post-tests not only in comprehension tests but, most surprisingly, also in a production task. Commenting on these results, Dekeyser (1994) points out that the structures under investigation are morphologically very simple, which makes them easier to produce and more difficult to notice in comparison with most grammatical morphemes. This could account for the fact that instruction for 'processing' (i.e. comprehension) was more effective than instruction for production.

The above studies provide preliminary support for the claim that teaching that promotes form-function mappings by helping learners to notice and interpret grammatical features -or more precisely some aspects of grammar- in the input is an effective way of teaching grammar. In addition, they suggest that this approach may be more effective than production-based instruction.

### **Second language learning research within a connectionist paradigm**

Second Language Learning research within a connectionist paradigm is still at its infancy. DeKeyser (1994) summarises a pilot study where he set to investigate the hypothesis that the effectiveness of explicit vs. implicit learning could only be assessed if a distinction is established between categorical rules and prototypes. Although an artificial linguistic system designed for the experiment -and not a natural language in an L2 context- is made use of, the findings may throw some light on the issue of implicit L2 learning. Explicit learning was found to be more effective than implicit learning for categorical rules; however, no clear evidence was obtained concerning the hypothesis that implicit learning was similarly effective or more effective than explicit (and deductive) learning for prototypes.

Tanaka (1987) found that Japanese learners of English were most likely to use the NP NP dative construction when the object was semantically prototypical, whereas the NP PP construction was preferred when the object was less prototypical. In a study on the acquisition of the 'be easy to V' structure, Yamaoka (1989) concluded that Japanese learners of English acquired it in semantically prototypical sentences before they learned to interpret them in more ambiguous contexts.

In spite of the preliminary stage of research within a connectionist paradigm, findings so far suggest that connectionism can provide valuable insights into the learning of particular aspects of an L2.

### **Summary from research**

In general, the research that has investigated the role of grammar instruction in SLL vary enormously in the kind of treatment, subjects, and overall design and theoretical inspiration. Given the different orientations of research now available, it is difficult to arrive at a general picture. However, there is some evidence to support the following:

- a focus-on-form approach geared towards encouraging learners to pay attention to specific properties of the input may facilitate learning.
- there seems to be a link between noticing a certain form in the input and the emergence of such structure in learner production.
- attention is a limited capacity; when participating in communication, learners must establish form-meaning connections simultaneously. It is therefore of fundamental importance to determine what gets attended by the learner in the input.
- not all aspects of a language are learnt in the same way. Different processes may be responsible for different aspects of language. Even within the morphosyntactic subdomain,

the effectiveness of making particular features perceptually salient seems to vary according to the specific feature. Although research is scarce, preliminary results seem to confirm this.

### **Implications of research findings for L2 classroom instruction: a cautionary note**

It is widely agreed in SLL circles that advocating instruction that enhances the opportunities for noticing a particular feature in the input should not be seen as a call for a return to traditional language teaching methods (i.e. decontextualized grammar explanation, extensive amounts of meaningless drills and stress on error-free production). It must be taken into account that attention is essentially an internal mechanism; consequently, drawing the learners' attention cannot be equated with explanation and type of practice.

### **CONCLUSION**

This article has reviewed research and theoretical proposals concerning a focus-on-form approach to L2 teaching and learning, which can be regarded as a matter of great theoretical and practical importance and a core issue in the field of L2 pedagogy.

As to the instructional implications that can be derived both from theoretical proposals and research findings, we must be extremely cautious in reaching conclusions. Although most current positions appear to agree on the idea that SLL can best be viewed from some kind of interface position, there is evidence to believe that different aspects of a language are learnt differently.

### **REFERENCES**

- ANDERSON, J. 1982. *"Acquisition of cognitive skill"*. Psychological Review 89:369-406.
- BAARS, B. J. 1988. *A cognitive theory of consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BLEY-VROMAN, R. 1986. *"Hypothesis-testing in second language acquisition theory"*. Language Learning 36:353-376.
- CHAUDRON, C. 1985. *"Intake: on models and methods for discovering learners' processing of input"*. Studies in Second Language Acquisition 7/1:1-14.
- DEKEYSER, R. M. 1994. *"How implicit can adult second language learning be?"*. AILA Review 11:83-96.
- DOUGHTY, C. 1991. *"Second language instruction does make a difference: evidence from an empirical study on SL relativization"*. Studies in Second Language Acquisition 13:431-69.
- ELLIS, R. 1984. *"Can syntax be taught? A study of the effects of formal instruction on the acquisition of Wh-questions by children"*. Applied Linguistics 5:138-55.

ELLIS, R. 1990. *Instructed Second Language Acquisition: Learning in the Classroom*. Oxford: Blackwell.

ELLIS, R. 1993. "The structural syllabus and second language acquisition". *TESOL Quarterly* 27:91-113.

ELLIS, R. 1994. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: University Press.

ELLIS, R. 1995. "Interpretation Tasks for Grammar Teaching". *TESOL Quarterly* 29:87-105.

FOTOS, S. 1993. "Consciousness-raising and noticing through focus on form: grammar task performance versus formal instruction". *Applied Linguistics* 14:386-407.

HARLEY, B. 1989. "Functional grammar in French Immersion: a classroom experiment". *Applied Linguistics* 19:331-59.

HARLEY, B. 1993. "Instructional strategies and SLA in early French immersion". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15:245-259.

HARLEY, B. 1994. "Appealing to consciousness in the L2 classroom". *AILA Review* 11:57-68.

HULSTIJN, J. & R. DE GRAAFF. 1994. "Under what conditions does explicit knowledge of a second language facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge?". *AILA Review* 11:92-112.

HULSTIJN, J. & R. SCHMIDT. 1994. "Guest editors' introduction". *AILA Review* 11:5-10.

KRASHEN, S. D. 1982. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

KRASHEN, S. D. 1985. *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman.

LIGHTBOWN, P. and N. SPADA. 1994. *How Languages Are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LIGHTBOWN, P. M. & M. PIENEMANN. 1993. "Comments on Stephen D. Krashen's 'Teaching Issues: Formal Grammar Instruction'. Two readers react..." *TESOL Quarterly* 27:717-22.

LONG, M. 1983. "*Does second language instruction make a difference? A review of research*". *TESOL Quarterly* 17:359-82.

MCLAUGHLIN, B. 1990. "Restructuring". *Applied Linguistics* 11:113-28.

MEISEL, J., H. CLASHEN, AND M. PIENEMANN. 1981. "*On determining developmental stages in natural second language acquisition*". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 3: 109-35.

NABUYOSHI, J. AND R. ELLIS. 1993. "Focused communication tasks and second language acquisition". *ELT Journal* 47:203-10

NISSEN, M. & P. BULLEMER. 1987. "Attentional requirements of learning: Evidence from performance measures". *Cognitive Psychology* 19:1-32.

NUNAN, D. 1994. "Linguistic theory and pedagogic practice". In T. Odlin (ed.) *Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

PICA, T. 1988. "Negotiated interaction as an aid to learner output". *Language Learning* 37:471-93.

PICA, T. L.HOLLIDAY, N. LEWIS and L.MORGENTHALER. 1989. "Comprehensible output as an outcome of linguistic demands on the learner". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 11:63-90.

PIENEMANN, M. 1984. "Psychological constraints on the teachability of languages". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 6:186-214.

PIENEMANN, M. 1985. "Learnability and syllabus construction". In K. Hyttenstam & M. Pienemann (eds.) *Modelling and assessing second language acquisition*. Clevelon: Multilingual Matters.

PIENEMANN, M, M. JOHNSTON, AND G. BRINDLEY. 1988. "Constructing an acquisition-based procedure for assessing second language acquisition". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 10:217-43.

RUTHERFORD, W. 1987. *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching*. London: Longman.

RUTHERFORD, W. & SHARWOOD SMITH, M. 1985. "*Consciousness-raising and universal grammar*". *Applied Linguistics* 6:274-82.

SCHMIDT, R. 1990. "*The role of consciousness in second language learning*". *Applied Linguistics* 11:129-58.

SCHMIDT, R. 1994. "Deconstructing consciousness in search of useful definitions for applied linguistics". *AILA Review* 11:11-26.

SCHWARTZ, B. 1993. "On explicit and negative data effecting and affecting competence and linguistic behavior". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15:147-164.

Schwartz, B. & B. Gubala-Ryzak. 1992. "Learnability and grammar reorganization in L2A: against negative evidence causing the unlearning of verb movement". *Second Language Research* 8:1-38.

SHARWOOD SMITH, M. 1981. "Consciousness raising and the second language learner". *Applied Linguistics* 2:159-68.

SHARWOOD SMITH, M. 1991. "Speaking to many minds: on the relevance of different types of language information for the L2 learner". *Second Language Research* 7:118-32.

SHARWOOD SMITH, M. 1993. "Input enhancement in instructed SLA". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15:165-79.

SPADA, N. 1987. "Relationships between instructional differences and learning outcomes: a process-product study of communicative language teaching". *Applied Linguistics* 8:137-61.

SPADA, N. & P. M. LIGHTBOWN. 1993. "Instruction and the Development of Questions in L2 Classrooms". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15:205-24.

SWAIN, M. 1985. "Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development". In S. Gass and C. Madden (eds.) *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

TANAKA, S. 1987. "The selective use of specific exemplars in second language performance: the case of the dative alternation". *Language Learning* 37:63-88.

TRAHEY, M. & L. WHITE. 1993. "Positive evidence and preemption in the second language classroom". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15:181-204.

VANPATTEN, B. 1990. "Attending to form and content in the input". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 12:287-301.

VANPATTEN, B. & CADIerno, T. 1993a. "Explicit instruction and input processing". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15:225-43.

VANPATTEN, B. & T. CADIerno. 1993b. "Input Processing and Second Language Acquisition: A Role for Instruction". *The Modern Language Journal* 77/1:45-57.

VANPATTEN, B. 1994. "Evaluating the role of consciousness in second language acquisition: Terms, linguistic features and research methodology". *AILA Review* 11:27-36.

WHITE, L. 1991. "Adverb placement in second language acquisition: some effects of positive and negative evidence in the classroom". *Second Language Research* 7:133-61.

WHITE, L., N. SPADA, P. M. LIGHTBOWN & L. RANTA. 1991. "Input Enhancement and L2 Question Formation". *Applied Linguistics* 12/4:416-32.

YAMAOKA, T. 1989. "A semantic and prototype discussion of the 'be easy to V' structure: a possible explanation of its acquisition process". *Applied Linguistics* 9:385-401.