

# “Focus on Form” and the Communicative Classroom

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## Abstract:

Much has been written about ‘focus on form’ and the idea that some kind of form-focused activity needs to be incorporated into L2 communicative contexts. Less has been written, however, on how this aim can be accomplished. This paper will discuss the need to incorporate form-focused activities into communicative classes from both the pedagogical and the cultural standpoint. Then strategies and examples of tasks that may help realize this goal will be offered.

## “Focus on Form” And The Communicative Classroom

Over the last half century second language acquisition (SLA) pedagogy has experienced a decidedly Hegelian dialectic. The thesis of this movement is the traditional notion that teaching should concentrate on the elements of grammar in isolation from context or communicative activity. The antithesis is communicative language teaching (CLT), which is meaning-focused, has a strong tendency to de-emphasize linguistic forms, and consequently downplays the status of grammar teaching. The synthesis - the approach I will be discussing in this paper - is form-focused instruction, commonly referred to as “focus on form” (FonF). FonF asserts that meaning-focused second language teaching could be improved with some attention to grammatical form. In this article, I will discuss the arguments for including FonF activities in the second language (L2) classroom. I will then suggest strategies and provide examples of tasks to help realize this goal in practice.

## “Focus on Form” vs. “Focus on FormS”

In traditional structure-based instructional activities (such as, grammar translation and audiolingualism) the focus is on the language itself, rather than on the information conveyed by the language. The teacher’s goal is to see to it that the students learn

vocabulary and grammar rules. These approaches are based on the assumption that language learning is the result of the development of formal rule-based knowledge; they emphasize controlled learning and rule practice as the most effective pedagogical endeavor. CLT, on the other hand, advocates the naturalistic use of language by emphasizing meaningful and message-based activities. The basic assumption underlying this approach is that second language learning is like first language acquisition: it develops principally out of experience with real-life communication and meaningful situations. This perspective on L2 learning was supported by Krashen's (1982) distinction between acquisition and learning, as well as the idea that language should be acquired (through natural exposure to language), not learned.

CLT has dominated ESL/EFL teaching for the better part of forty years. By regarding language as something other than an aggregation of abstract grammatical rules - as having applications in real, social contexts - CLT has served the language teaching profession well. It is difficult to imagine any language teacher, anywhere, arguing against this. In recent years, however, theoretical perspectives on language teaching and learning have changed. When second language pedagogy discovered the weaknesses of the grammar based methodology and the strengths of the naturalistic approach, there may have been an over-reaction. Everything about the traditional methods was disdained and the baby was thrown out with the bath water. Error correction, the use of L1, the explicit teaching of grammar, and other techniques that might have a place - albeit a limited place - in the classroom, were completely rejected. With "focus on form" the baby is back. It is a much different baby, though.

FonF does not amount to traditional explicit formal instruction. According to Long (1991), it is an attempt to draw the student's attention to linguistic forms as they arise in activities whose primary focus is on meaning. With this distinction Long draws a line between "focus on form" and what he calls "focus on formS," the more traditional grammar based methods. To quote Long: "focus on form... overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991, pp. 45-46). In strict FonF instruction, the syllabus remains communicative, with no preplanned L2 forms to be learned. However, when a particular form is perceived to be problematic, the teacher

and/or other learners may address it explicitly in a variety of ways, such as through direct error correction, rule explanation, modeling, and/or drilling.

Focus on form instruction has arisen for two reasons. First of all, there was a need to balance the form-centered, and generally non-communicative kinds of instruction found in traditional methods with more communicative approaches. While FonF, with its emphasis on authentic communication, leans more towards CLT, it validates the occasional incorporation of non-communicative elements because experience has revealed that repetition, drilling, and error correction can aid in learning. A second reason for the rise of FonF is that, as Swain (1985a) contends, although receiving “comprehensible input” is central to L2 acquisition, learners also need to use forms correctly - difficult ones, in particular - in order to acquire them. According to Swain, when output is forced, learners can analyze it, which not only exposes errors, but also helps students automatize particularly difficult forms (see Jensen, 2006 for more on automatizing skills). That is, FonF encourages students to use language not only for practice and for the automatization of structures, but also to help identify and overcome errors.

### **Theoretical Justification**

Teachers hoping for a language acquisition theory that will give them insight into language teaching practice are often frustrated by the lack of agreement among the “experts.” The complexities of SLA, however, represent a puzzle that will not soon be solved, and agreement on a “complete” theory of language acquisition is probably a long way off. Simply stated: the nature of language learning and teaching is too complex to be accounted for by one theory. We need, therefore, to broaden our view of what we can do in the classroom by drawing on the insights of different theories. This is what Hossein Nassaji calls a “theory of practice,” (Nassaji, 2000). Accordingly, I will draw on insights from various theoretical perspectives.

### **Research Supporting Focus on Form**

A number of empirical studies have revealed that FonF can promote second language development beyond that achieved by less focused approaches. Harley and Swain (1984), for example, have shown that in spite of the fact that immersion students

are exposed to meaningful language, they continue to have serious problems with certain grammatical forms. These researchers hypothesized that the inclusion of FonF instruction in the communicative context of their program might be more effective.

Spada (Lightbrown & Spada, 1997), for example, examined the effects differences in instruction had on forty-eight adults enrolled in a six-week intensive course. It was a communicative class, but some teachers focused more on grammar than others. Tests showed that the learners who received more grammatical instruction not only performed better on the grammar test, but also on the listening, speaking, and discourse tests as well. Spada concluded that SLA instruction works best when it focuses primarily on meaning but allows for a focus on form within meaningful contexts. Another study conducted by Spada and her colleagues, (White, Spada, Lightbrown and Ranta, 1991), showed that students who received instruction in adverb placement dramatically outperformed the learners who did not receive instruction.

Roy Lyster (1994) carried out a study which examined the effects of form-focused instruction on the knowledge and use of social-linguistic style variations in three classes of young French immersion students. He found that the students who were given explicit instruction in socio-stylistic variation, engaged in guided practice activities, and received corrective feedback significantly outperformed learners in the groups that did not receive such instruction.

The results of a study by Muranoi (1996), in which a teacher provided learners with form-focused feedback during a communicative task, suggested that providing such feedback is effective for guiding L2 learners to modify their interlanguage systems. Error analyses revealed that L2 learners who received corrective feedback decreased errors with their article usage. Muranoi claims the positive effects of focus on form instruction may be due to the fact that such a treatment makes the connections between forms and functions more salient. This, he believes, confirms that formal instruction provided within meaning-oriented instructions beneficial for L2 learning.

Finally, the positive effects of form-focused feedback in the form of clarification requests were reported by Takashima (1994), who provided Japanese students with form-focused feedback aimed at modifying their output. Results of his experiment support the facilitative effects of his output-oriented treatment on the learning of the target

grammar, in this case past-tense forms.

These are but a few of the studies that support the hypothesis that form-focused instruction within communicative second language programs can improve learners' use of grammatical features. These studies, along with other effect-of-instruction studies, strongly indicate that a timely combination of form-focused instruction and communication-oriented instruction is beneficial to L2 learners. Although this is a complicated matter with often conflicting results (see Lightbrown & Spada, 1997), there is increasing evidence that learners continue to have trouble with basic structures of the language in programs which offer no form-focused instruction. Research like the above has demonstrated that certain aspects of linguistic knowledge and performance are not fully developed in programs that do not focus on linguistic form.

### **The Cognitive Perspective**

Theoretical developments in the field of cognitive psychology have yielded important insights into the nature of the language learning process. Cognitive theories conceptualize second language learning as a complex cognitive skill the acquisition of which involves several cognitive stages. Schneider and Shiffrin (1997) distinguish two cognitive stages in all skill acquisition processes: controlled processes and automatic processes. In their view, any complex cognitive skill is first learned through the frequent use of controlled processes which become automatic, attention-free processes after frequent use. Controlled processes are not-yet learned ones; they require a large amount of processing capacity and more time for activation. Automatic processes, on the other hand, are quick and demand relatively little processing capacity. Anderson (1987) offers a three-stage model of the skill-learning process: the declarative stage, the procedural stage, and the automatized stage. In the declarative stage, learners acquire knowledge of "what," that is, knowledge that can be described or declared. In the procedural stage, learners acquire knowledge of "how," or knowledge that makes them capable of doing something under certain circumstances. Procedural knowledge develops as a result of recurrent use of declarative knowledge, which then becomes fully routinized after frequent use in a particular context. According to Anderson and Fincham (1994), although not all procedural knowledge starts out as declarative knowledge, research

suggests that declarative knowledge “is a major avenue for the acquisition of procedural knowledge” (p. 1323). That is to say, things consciously learned can come to be unconsciously used. This is the opposite of what Krashen claims and supports the notion of explicit learning advocated by FonF.

### **The Culture Factor**

There has been some discussion about the cultural appropriateness of CLT for Asian learners (Ellis, 1996 and Yoon, 2004). The discussion centers on the fact that CLT is drastically different from what most Japanese students have been exposed to. It is not about problems with the method, but of applying the method to a particular group of students. A number of authors have identified various cultural issues, ultimately supporting an adapted version of CLT, which take local conditions into account.

A common complaint is that the students' shyness makes CLT difficult to implement. Also in Asia, as Kim (2004) points out, a fear of losing face and a reluctance to question the teacher are important factors working against the implementation of CLT. Kim also shows that there is an overwhelming preference among Asian students for a deductive teacher-centered learning style. This is what they are used to, what they expect, and this expectation clearly raises questions about the relevance of some of CLT's central tenets. The demands of the examination system also work against the implementation of CLT.

It can be argued that language students learn best in teaching and learning environments that are harmonious with their learning styles and expectations. The classes that Japanese students have experienced as language learners are mainly grammar-focused and teacher-centered. Skills such as speaking, listening, writing and reading are put on the wayside in order to make room for grammar and translation. Even if students are exposed to “actual language,” it is almost never in a natural context. Japanese students, the above-mentioned articles make clear, are often the products of the traditional form-centered methods. CLT, that is to say, is at odds with all of their past language learning experiences.

To be very clear, this paper is not calling for the abandonment of CLT. The point being made is simply that being explicit in regards to teaching points, more explicit than

CLT theory dictates, might be appropriate in the Japanese context.

### **Implicit and Explicit Learning In SLA**

There have been two opposing views among researchers concerning the role of conscious learning in SLA, one claiming its necessity and the other its unimportance. Krashen has long maintained that language acquisition is a subconscious process. As already noted, he distinguishes language *acquisition*, a subconscious process achieved as a byproduct of a focus on meaning, and language *learning*, a conscious effort to learn about language. He claims that conscious learning serves only a very limited function. (Krashen,1982). For him, conscious attention to form is not only unnecessary, but is not helpful for language acquisition. This notion is one of the cornerstones of CLT.

At the other end of the spectrum in relation to the role of consciousness in language learning is Schmidt who introduced the idea that conscious attention to form is necessary for language learning. His idea was later named the “Noticing Hypothesis” and proposes that “noticing” is both necessary and sufficient for learners to process linguistic input for language acquisition. Schmidt (cited in Harley, 1998) defines the conscious experience of noticing as the “registration of the occurrence of a stimulus event in conscious awareness and subsequent storage in long term memory” (p. 179). He also points out that it is now conventional wisdom that “target language forms will not be acquired unless they are noticed and that one important way that instruction works is by increasing the salience of target language forms in input so that they are more likely to be noticed by learners” (p. 195).

For Schmidt, then, instruction plays an important role in helping learners to notice particular features. He proposes that failure to learn is due either to insufficient exposure or failure to notice the items in question. This is in direct opposition to Krashen who denies that there is any benefit to be derived from explicit teaching. Krashen’s position is that language is best learned subconsciously (without intention) and implicitly. While much, perhaps most, learning occurs in the way Krashen describes, there is, as we have already seen, empirical evidence supporting Schmidt’s claims.

## Focus On Form in Communicative Contexts: Strategies and Activities

The research suggests that it is useful to include some kind of FonF activity in communicative contexts. The question that then arises - how best to integrate FonF into meaningful communication in classroom contexts - is the topic of the rest of this article. I will discuss general strategies that help make this integration possible, but first there are some issues that should be considered.

It should be pointed out that there are various conceptions of "attention to form." Doughty and Williams (1998) point out that FonF has led to a range of reactions - from rejection by wholly communicative teachers to espousal by those who want to return to a more traditional grammar instruction. In short, it has become a widely used notion that many teachers have employed with different meanings and interpretations. To repeat myself, since this is a critical point: FonF attempts to draw the student's attention to linguistic forms as they arise in activities whose primary focus is on meaning. It is this idea of FonF in communicative contexts that is currently supported by both theory and research.

Some teachers will be concerned that an emphasis on form may have negative effects on learners trying to express meaning. To encourage meaningful interaction, they believe, focus on form and focus on communication should be treated as separate learning activities. I think the best way to address this problem is to consider activities that result in attention to form while maintaining meaningful communication. The first strategy, then, would be to design communicative activities that cannot be completed unless the students use some specific form.

Another thing to consider is that FonF is a re-valorization of error correction after years of neglect at the hands of CLT purists. A correlate of Krashen's naturalistic theories is that correcting student errors is of no help. FonF brings error correction back into the classroom. The catch, however, is that the lesson - and the recuperative activity if possible - should retain an overriding focus on meaning.

Long and Robinson (1998) make a distinction between reactive and pre-emptive focus on form. Reactive FonF is error correction - what occurs when an error leads to discourse on the correctness of student production. Consider what pre-emptive FonF implies. In its strictest form, FonF is an unprepared response to student's needs. Pre-



emptive FonF, however, is attention to form that is initiated even though no problem in production has arisen. This takes full advantage of an experienced teacher's ability to anticipate student's needs. Educators who teach the same level or the same class a number of years in succession can foresee the problems the material will cause. For this reason, the strategies and activities offered in this paper can either be adapted for use at the spur of the moment - to work on something a class is having trouble with - or they can be prepared in advance.

One last thing to consider before discussing specific activities is the "follow up" to a meaning-based exercise. Although often neglected, the follow up can be used to facilitate the integration of FonF and meaning-based communication by encouraging the process of "noticing the gap" (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). That is, after students have completed a meaning-based activity, they should be given a correct version with which they can compare their output. This promotes "noticing" as the students see the differences between what they produced and what is correct. This kind of attention, moreover, can be paid not only to grammatical and lexical accuracy, but also to such things as the appropriateness of lexical choices.

### *Adapting Common Tasks*

Turning to specific types of activities, many CLT exercises only need some conscious attention, some monitoring, and appropriate feedback to become FonF. Which is to say, FonF does not necessarily imply radical departures from current teaching practices. For example, "picture difference" tasks, in which learners are grouped in pairs and asked to communicate with each other to identify or define differences, can be FonF. Completion of these tasks requires, first, communicative interaction, and second, because of the nature of the tasks, frequent use of certain grammatical forms or structures. This frequent use of a particular form makes it salient, which should make the students notice the form used (Long & Robinson, 1998). Communicative activities of this nature are very strongly form-focused because the students cannot complete them without using the intended grammatical knowledge. During such exercises, the teacher can watch as students complete the task to see if they make any common errors. If the students do make errors, the teacher can try to draw their attention to the erroneous forms

produced, either during the task or after it has been completed.

Other common tasks, which can be adapted for FonF purposes are grammar problem tasks. For example, learners can be put in pairs or small groups and asked to analyze and learn about a particular linguistic problem through meaningful communication. Examples of such tasks can be found in Ellis (1995) where learners were presented with a list of grammatical sentences with a particular structural pattern and instructed to interact with each other to induce and formulate the grammatical rules underlying the sentences. They can then be asked to discuss and negotiate their results in small groups. Ellis found that these tasks provide opportunities for communicative interaction comparable to pure communicative tasks as well as promoting noticing.

One important way of integrating focus on form with communication is to use collaborative tasks that require learners to get involved in cooperative comprehension and production of the language. For this the “dictogloss” is tried and true.

### *Dictogloss*

The dictogloss is a classroom procedure introduced by Wajnryb (1990). In this technique, the teacher reads a short text two or three times at a speed that makes it impossible for students to catch every word. The students are warned that they will not catch the entire text, and are instructed to write down as much information as they can. They are then divided into small groups and asked to work together to reconstruct the text to the original version. The students are asked to compare and analyze the different versions they have produced and are finally given a correct version to which they can compare. During the small group reconstruction of the passage, the students come to notice their grammatical weaknesses and then try to overcome them when attempting to co-produce the text. To do so, they consciously and unconsciously get involved in decision-making and hypothesis-testing procedures, through which they “refine their understanding of the language they used” (Wajnryb, 1990, p. 5).

### *Dialogs*

In the mid 1980's, when CLT was still a newly emerging approach, Merrill Swan claimed in two landmark articles (1985a and 1985b) that input is insufficient to the

language acquisition process unless it is matched by an obligation to produce output. Swain (1995) further claims that output promotes “noticing” (1995, p.125) and that “when learners encounter difficulties in producing the target language, they ... engage in thought processes of a sort which may play a part in language acquisition” (p.130).

For Swain, having students collaborate in creating a dialog is a kind of problem solving and hence builds knowledge. When students collaborate, as each participant speaks, their statements provide objects for reflection. Through speaking and reflecting on what is said, students focus on certain aspects of their production and new knowledge is constructed. As Swain put it: “Through dialog the participants reach a deeper understanding of the language in context than they would have been able to reach individually. Through dialog, knowledge is co-constructed and a degree of language learning takes place” (Swain, 2000, p.113).

The dialog creation activity described below is FonF for a number of reasons. First, the students are forced to use specific forms and second because the teacher gives feedback. Dialog creation also promotes output production, which as Swain (1998) hypothesized, promotes *noticing*. There are, however, different levels of *noticing*. Learners may notice a form due to its saliency or frequency. Also, as Schmidt points out, learners may notice that the target language is different from their own interlanguage. A third way students may notice a linguistic form - that is become conscious of an L2 form - is by becoming aware of the fact they cannot say what they want to say in the target language. According to Swain, this “may trigger cognitive processes that might generate linguistic knowledge that is new for the learner” (p. 67).

The following dialog activity starts with the teacher writing a paradigm for a conversation on the board. In pairs, the students must write and then orally perform the dialog they have created. The very first functions students learn are greetings and closing conversations, and other functions or grammatical points are added as the syllabus dictates, or as the teacher finds necessary. Students must answer in full sentences, so they are pushed to produce accurate and challenging language. A simple example of the paradigm might be:

Situation: Two students are talking about the weekend.

A: Greet B

B: Greet A

A: Ask a “did” question

B: Ask for repetition

A: Repeat the question

B: Answer

A: Ask a “Wh- did” question

B: Answer / Change the subject / Ask a “did” question

A: Answer

B: Ask “Wh-did” question

A: Answer

B: Close the conversation

A: Close the conversation

The grammatical and functional demands of the conversation can be simple, as in the example above, or more complicated with cues eliciting suggestions, advice, etc. Creating the cues offers the teacher an opportunity to practice scaffolding, that is, the teacher can gradually pass more and more responsibility on to the learners as they become more confident and competent. For example, the teacher might write, “By the way,” instead of “Change the subject” until students master the phrase and its use. It is important, however, that the students be pushed to speak up to their level and beyond. To balance the level of difficulty with time constraints, seven or eight lines per student seem to be a good length.

After writing the paradigm on the board, the teacher gives a line-by-line explanation of appropriate language choices and grammatical forms. These are used repeatedly so as to become familiar to students. The line-by-line explanation is followed by a model conversation supplied by the teacher. Students then write their dialogs in notebooks they are expected to bring to class each week. They practice the dialog until they can recite it fluently, but do not have to memorize it. They can refer to their notebook during their recital, but they have to look at their partner when speaking.

## Final thoughts

SLA researchers who support focus on form argue that exposure to language is not enough. They claim that some kind of form-focused activity needs to be incorporated into communicative classroom contexts. It is not necessary to choose between form-based and meaning-based instruction, however. The challenge, rather, is to find the best balance of the two.

In this paper I have outlined an approach that proposes an integration of focus on form into meaningful communicative activities. I have also included pedagogical suggestions for activities that link form and communication. It is hoped that language teachers will explore these strategies and use them as an impetus for the exploration of other techniques that will facilitate the incorporation of attention to form and communication in their classrooms.

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