PEDAGOGICAL OPTIONS FOR FOCUS ON FORM: MOVING TOWARD A MORE COMMUNICATIVE GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

MOHAMMAD GOLSHAN*; DR. C. S. RAMACHANDRA**

*Department of Studies in Linguistics,
University of Mysore.
**Department of Studies in Linguistics
University of Mysore.

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that integration of grammar into a communicative context can benefit second language learners and as a result the past decade has witnessed a fundamental shift in approaches towards grammar teaching. This article introduces a number of effective methodological options which can be adopted for communicative grammar instruction and the relevant activities that the teacher can use in communicative classes. These methodological options include (1) Processing Instruction (2) Textual enhancement (3) Discourse analysis (4) Corrective feedback (5) Consciousness-raising tasks and (6) Collaborative output tasks. This article also makes an attempt to relate the empirical findings in the literature to each of these options and concludes with some recommendations for language teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The recent theoretical and empirical developments in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have brought about changes in pedagogical approaches toward the role of grammar in second language instruction. For a long time, it was believed that language was composed of grammar rules and learners just needed to acquire those rules to master the language. With the advent of communicative approaches in 1970’s, which was the result of developments in linguistics and sociolinguistics in Europe and North America (Savignon, 2001), language pedagogy moved beyond a mere focus on the knowledge of rules and structures towards emphasizing commutative ability in real-life encounters. Not only did the teachers start to think of grammar instruction as old-fashioned and uninteresting (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011), but also a number of researchers argued that grammar instruction had no effect on second language development and thus had to be abandoned (e.g. Krashen, 1985; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

This view of grammar as an unnecessary component in language pedagogy has been questioned in recent years. Schmidt’s (1990,1993, 2001) noticing hypothesis which posited that some degree of awareness is required for language learning to occur as well as the empirical findings that lent support to the failure of totally communicative teaching approaches (Harley & Swain, 1984; Lapkin, Hart & Swain, 1991) along with the research findings that instructed second language learning can affect the rate and ultimate level of SLA (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991) inspired the researchers to look into grammar instruction from a different perspective.
Failure of traditional approaches to grammar instruction that was concerned with rule presentation in isolation as well as the inadequacy of totally communicative approaches which advocated exclusive attention to meaning led to the adoption of a new approach called a focus on form. In a seminal work, Long (1996) distinguished a focus on forms, which is the main characteristic of synthetic and traditional approaches to language teaching from what he called focus on form which consisted of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher in a communicative context (Doughty and Williams, 1998). The empirical studies which have been conducted in recent years show that form-focused instruction can have the most desirable outcome when it is incorporated into a meaningful communicative context (Nassaji and Fotos, 2011).

An issue that needs careful attention and has to addressed seriously is the possibility of integrating form and meaning without sacrificing one for the other. Teachers’ misinterpretation of focus on form may lead them to be some much concerned with grammar in the context of communication that they fail to realize that the classroom setting is on brink of returning to a traditional grammar instruction mode. Since there is a tendency for most of the educational settings to direct their goals and policies toward developing a communicative approach to language pedagogy, a need is felt to provide teachers with the information concerning the latest developments in form-focused instruction as well the ideas and strategies that can be examined critically for integrating grammar instruction in a communicative context. This article presents a number of instructional strategies that can afford teachers the possibility of focusing on form and meaning at the same time in a communicative context. These ideas and strategies are not to be interpreted as being prescribed. In fact they are instructional options which different teachers can employ based on their relevance and the realities of their own classes.

PROCESSING INSTRUCTION

One of the techniques which can be employed to teach grammar in a communicative context is processing instruction. This pedagogical intervention is based on the assumption that the input processing can be used for the purpose of acquisition. The teacher can get the learners to carry out the input-based activities which help them process form and meaning at the same time.

This technique has roots in input-processing model. According to input-processing model (Van Patten, 2002), learners process input for meaning before they process it for form. When learners are exposed to input, they usually pay attention to content and as a result the redundant forms in the input are not processed for acquisition and the form-meaning connection which is a requirement for learning is ignored. A case in point is when learners understand the past tense in a structure based on adverbs like “yesterday” and “last week” without paying attention to the regular or irregular forms used in the input. therefore this technique aims to change the “default” processing strategies that learners take to the task of comprehension and help them to make better form-meaning connections (Ellis, 2003).

In processing instruction, the teacher utilizes structured input - the activities that are designed to contain input that forces learners to focus on form and process it for meaning- to teach a target form. The teacher first provides the learners with some short explicit information about a target form in order to draw the their attention to the form-meaning relationship. Then, he goes on to explain why that linguistic form usually escapes learners’ attention in input or
provides them with information about processing strategies and finally the learners are engaged in a number of input-structured activities that are specifically designed to process the target form along with meaning. The prominent characteristic of these tasks is that paying attention to both content and form is necessary for successful performance and completion of the task.

As far as structured input activities are concerned, care should be taken to ensure that 1) the primary focus is on meaning 2) one single linguistic item is addressed in each activity 3) both oral and written input are used 4) students should perform a task in response to the provision of the input instead of just being exposed to input 5) structured input must be designed based on students’ ineffective processing strategies, that is to say, the learners’ ineffective strategies such as too much reliance on time adverbials for comprehension, should be identified and relevant structured activities to draw the learners’ attention to grammatical morphemes should be designed.

A number of empirical studies which have been conducted on the effect of processing instruction have revealed positive results. Some have shown processing instruction to be an effective technique in teaching a linguistic form (Cadierno, 1995; Van Patten & Cadierono, 1993) especially when the development of comprehension abilities is concerned (Farly, 2001). However it should be noted that this type of technique may have desirable effects on acquisition if the type of linguistic form, the length of testing time and learner’s proficiency are all taken into consideration (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

**TEXTUAL ENHANCEMENT**

Input enrichment or input enrichment in general and textual enhancement in particular refer to various typographic devices such as bolding, underlining and italicizing in written input or using acoustic devices such as added stress or repetition in oral input to make certain linguistic features more noticeable and as a result more learnable. A good example is when all the ed’s in a text are highlighted or bolded to signal the use of past tense or when the teacher recasts the learners incorrect utterance and adds stress to the problematic part which is being corrected.

Input enhancement can also involve designing tasks in such a way that a linguistic feature is frequent (Ellis, 2003). A case in point is a narrative task in which definite and indefinite articles are frequently used. Since many SLA researchers have reached the consensus that some level of attention is required for successful language learning. (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Doughty and Valera, 1998), input enhancement is one of the mechanisms that can be employed in order to direct learners’ attention to the features of input which may not be noticed in natural everyday communication without external manipulation of input.

Input enhancement may vary in terms of explicitness and elaborateness in pedagogical contexts (Sharwood Smith, 1991). Input enhancement can be more or less explicit based on whether the learner’s attention is explicitly drawn to a particular form through metalinguistic explanation or rule presentation. Degree of elaborateness of input enhancement may also differ along a continuum with regard to how brief or intensive correction and rule explanation is. Sharwood Smith (1991) also makes a distinction between positive and negative enhancement. Positive enhancement, which is called positive evidence in SLA, refers to
making correct form salient while negative enhancement highlights the incorrect forms and informs the learner about the impossibility of certain structures in the target language.

Communicative value of focus on form through textual enhancement lies in the fact that it doesn’t involve any explicit obtrusive intervention and learners’ attention is primarily focused on meaning while his peripheral attention is directed to the visually or acoustically enhanced linguistic forms and since only the correct forms are made more salient, textual enhancement is considered to be a source of positive evidence. When a teacher decides to design a textually enhanced written form, he can go through five steps. First he has to select a particular linguistic form which is problematic for learners. This can be done through practical experience, examination of students written or oral productions as well as the contrastive analysis between the learner’s first language and the target language. Second he makes those forms visually salient through underlining, boldfacing, italicizing, capitalizing, or any other technique which he deems suitable. A point worth mentioning is that the teacher must ensure that a limited number of forms are addressed in each text because too much textual enhancement in one single text might divert the learner’s attention from meaning to form. and finally, he gets the students to interact with the text without being provided with any sort of explanation on the teacher’s part.

The findings of studies which have been conducted on input enhancement techniques are mixed. While most of the studies provide support for the effectiveness of this technique (Jourdenais et al., 1995; Alanen, 1995); there is some evidence that input enhancement may lead to just noticing and doesn’t result in the acquisition of linguistic forms (White, 1998) and the type of linguistic form and the number of enhancements may moderate the effectiveness of this technique (Simard, 2009) but as Nassaji and Fotos (2011) maintained both positive and negative evidence are essential in second language and input enhancement can be more effective if it involves negative evidence, too. Nassaji and Fotos also suggest that the efficacy of textual enhancement can be raised if it is mingled with a formal mini-lesson and a summary of the target structure usage.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Recent approaches to language pedagogy attribute great impotence to the role of context and pragmatic meaning in language instruction. Discourse refers to an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning and relates to external communicative function or purpose and a given audience (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2001). Communicative approach to teaching grammar through discourse aim at developing discourse competence and thus analyzing language as unified discourse is preferred to analysis of structures at a sentence level. The communicative value of using discourse as a means of teaching grammar can be attributed to the fact that learners are exposed to the frequent use of a linguistic forms in natural input. The frequency of learner’s exposure to target forms is an important concept in many theories underlying F on F techniques (Long and Robinson, 1998). A point which is worthy of mention is that teaching grammar through discourse is not limited to input and it can be used in output tasks too. Having students writing discourse for authentic purposes such as composing emails and letters can be enumerated as good examples of discourse-level output.

In order to make the best use of discourse for teaching grammar, a teacher should a) use both authentic written and oral discourse to familiarize the students with structure of written and
spoken English because these written and spoken mode have different forms (Nunan, 1998) b) engage learners in reading extended texts, listening to extended speech, writing an essay following the necessary organization such as an introduction, body and a conclusion, and speaking activities such as giving speeches in class.

Research has shown that learners need to learn chunks of language, formulaic utterances and collocations and a discourse level teaching of grammar can afford the learners the chance to acquire these features through repeated exposure to authentic examples (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011) Besides learners notice contextualized grammar forms which were included in real life discourse (Berry, 2004).

CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Feedback is an important part of language pedagogy because through teacher’s feedback students can know how far they have progressed and how they are doing (Good & Brophy, 2000). Corrective feedback as one type of teacher’s feedback refers to those utterances that show the learner that his or her output is erroneous (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). In the SLA literature, corrective feedback, error treatment and error correction and negative evidence have been used interchangeably, although a number of researchers prefer the term negative feedback over others (e.g. Ortega, 2011).

Coding of feedback types has usually been a great challenge for researchers conducting meta-analysis of corrective feedback because of much variation in the operationalization of corrective feedback strategies across different studies (e.g. Li, 2010; Lyster and Saito 2010). In the literature on corrective feedback, different researchers have classified and focused their attention on different broad categories of corrective feedback. Nassaji (2007) distinguished between reformulations and elicitations. According to Nassaji reformulations are those corrective feedback strategies that provide learners with the correct form through rephrasing the learner’s erroneous production while elicitations are those reactions on the part of the teacher that push the learner to self correct. These types of corrective feedback have also been referred to as input proving and out-put prompting strategies by a number of researchers (e.g. R. Ellis, 2009). A number of studies have categorized corrective feedback into two distinct categories of recasts and prompts in their studies (Lyster, 1998b, 2004; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

What an L2 teacher needs to know is to know that despite the recommendations which are provided in books (Folse 2009; Harmer, 2007), corrective feedback can be used during communicative tasks in order to teach grammar communicatively and this recommendation is in line with research findings in the last decade. The teacher can 1) design tasks the competition of which requires the use of one or two linguistic form in obligatory contexts and 2) provide corrective feedback in response to each erroneous utterance. The teacher should ensure that he addresses one or two linguistic feature at a time and avoid intensive focus on all errors which is likely to affect the communicative nature of interaction and change the task into an activity.

A large number of empirical studies have investigated the relationship between provision of corrective feedback and SLA and have found beneficial effects (e.g. Carroll and Swain, 1993, Doughty ,1994; Ellis et al., 2006 ;Sheen 2010) and overall and different types of corrective feedback are reported to have different effects. That is to say explicit corrective
feedback such as metalinguistic clues and output prompting corrective feedback types such as elicitation requests have a greater effect than implicit and input providing corrective feedback (Sheen, 2011) but the effect of corrective feedback in general may vary based on the linguistic feature (Iwashita 2003).

**CONSCIOUSNESS - RAISING TASKS**

Consciousness raising tasks refer to those tasks that require learners to communicate about grammar structures to understand a particular grammar point, how it works and so on. Consciousness raising tasks are designed mainly to lead to explicit learning and they result in awareness at the level of understanding and therefore, they are different from the other above mentioned techniques. In these tasks learners are supposed to use their linguistic resources to talk about a language point and thus they can be categorized as a kind of communicative task. In consciousness-raising tasks, a specific linguistic feature is isolated for study and then the learners are provided with data that explains the targeted form. The students work in pairs or groups to utilize intellectual effort to understand the form and in some cases verbalize a rule regarding that feature in the last step. (Ellis, 1991 as cited in Ellis, 2003). After noticing occurs, the teacher can use other communicative activities containing the target linguistic feature to help learners proceduralize their declarative knowledge or enhance noticing.

The empirical studies which have investigated consciousness-raising tasks have yielded positive results (Fotos & Ellis 1991; Sheen, 1992). Consciousness raising tasks result in developing explicit knowledge and subsequent noticing of the form as well the opportunities to communicate (Ellis, 2003). Although such communicative tasks might not be suitable for young learners (Ellis, 1991; Sheen; 1992) and may prove to be difficult for those learners who lack in meta-language (Storch, 1999), they seem to be an effective means of a teaching grammar in communicative contexts (Ellis, 2003).

**COLLABORATIVE OUTPUT TASKS**

The value of collaborative tasks as useful tools for communicative teaching of grammar has roots in output hypothesis and sociocultural theory. The importance of output in SLA can be attributed to Swain’s (1985, 1995) output hypothesis which claims that engaging in language production increases language proficiency. According to Swain (1995), output has got three functions a) noticing function b) hypothesis testing function and c) metalinguistic function and as a result pushing learners to produce language aids acquisition through these functions. Sociocultural theory also emphasizes the importance of interaction and collaborative work in the process of language learning. According to this theory, when learners collaborate with a more competent person, they can develop what they have not mastered independently.

There are a variety of collaborative output tasks that teachers can use in their classes. Some of these tasks include dictogloss, editing task, collaborative output jigsaw task. In a dictogloss task, for example, the teacher first reads a text at a normal speed and the students try to write down words related to the content, then the learners are put in pairs or groups to reconstruct the original text. After the students finish the job of recreating the text, they compare and analyze each other’s versions and the teacher can provide the learners positive or negative feedback when necessary. In editing task, the teacher uses two versions of a text: grammatically correct vs. grammatically incorrect. The students are given the incorrect version and are asked to make changes to the text as the teacher reads the correct text. Like
dictogloss, it encourages cooperative work because the students work in pairs and compare their answers to each other and the teacher provides the necessary explanations when needed.

The studies which have focused on the effectiveness of collaborative output tasks have shown positive effects on L2 learning and grammatical accuracy. (e.g., Kowal and Swain, 1994; Nabei, 1996; Nassaji and Tian, 2010). Therefore these tasks can also effective means of teaching grammar in a communicative context.

CONCLUSION

Research might not supply definitive answers to teachers about the best pedagogical technique to employ (Johnson, 1992), but it has the capacity to inform language pedagogy by subjecting existing pedagogical practices to critical scrutiny (Ellis, 2003) and provide new insights into learning and teaching (McKay, 2006). The methodological options which were discussed in this article have been supported by empirical studies and afford teachers the possibility of teaching grammar communicatively. The teachers can move from a traditional approach to the teaching of grammar toward a more communicative one through using activities the completion of which requires attention to both form and meaning. Apart from teaching grammar, these techniques can provide a myriad of opportunities for comprehension, production and interaction for learners which are said to be either necessary for or facultative of acquisition.

REFERENCES


