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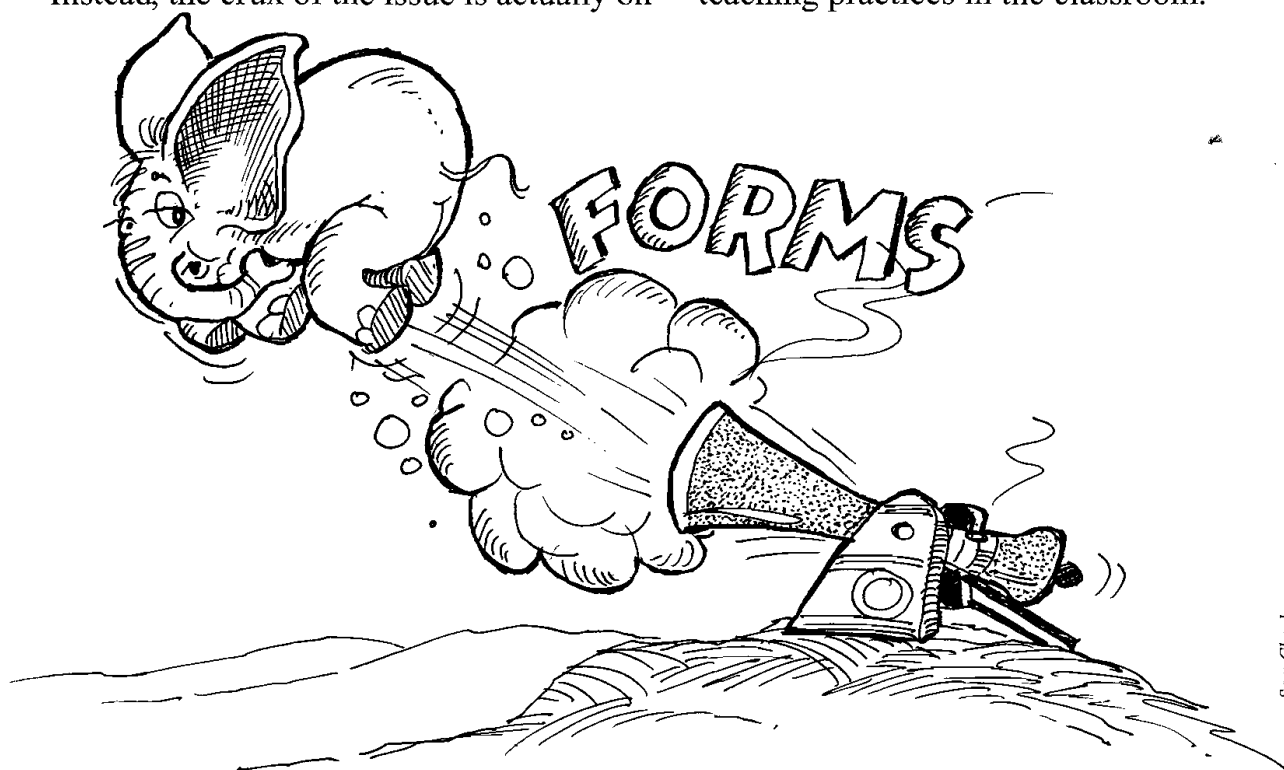
# SHOOT THE WHITE ELEPHANT WITH A CANNON? THE ROLE OF FORM-FOCUSSED INSTRUCTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Review by Lawrence Jun Zhang

## INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of the Communicative Approach to the teaching of language, second language teachers have tended to neglect explicit teaching of the formal properties of the language, for example, grammar, to varying degrees. This has been partly attributed to the adoption of a “strong version” of the Communicative Approach, which is exclusively defined in terms of the provision of meaningful input with no attention to form or error correction, and partly because of some practitioners’ misconceptualizations of what the Communicative Approach superficially entails. As a matter of fact, the Communicative Approach, in principle, does not object to the idea of focussing on form (Johnson, 1982; Oxford, 1997). Instead, the crux of the issue is actually on

how various activities, conducive to learners’ attention to form, should be organized to enhance learners’ improvement in acquiring and using the language. With a revived interest in this area in recent years, the issue of form-focussed language teaching and learning has been brought to the research agenda again, producing results which indicate that directing learners’ attention to form is beneficial for their language development towards not only fluency but also accuracy. In response to a government initiative to emphasize accuracy in language production, that is, the “Speak Good English” movement, this article briefly reviews research conducted along this line in relation to language learning and teaching practices in the classroom.



## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

### Focus on Form and Focus on Forms

In second language research literature, two terms are outstanding and need defining—*'focus on forms'* and *'focus on form'*. In Long's (1991) definition, the term *'a focus on forms'* means that the teacher teaches grammar in the classroom through traditional approaches, that is, in an isolated manner. This *'focus on forms'* usually includes a discrete-point presentation and practice of grammatical items: *A focus on form'*, in comparison, is meant to incorporate the teaching of grammar, that is, *'focus on forms'*, within a more meaning-based instructional approach. Long and Robinson's (1998, p.23) recent definition of *'focus on form'* reflects their more clarified position on what is involved in conceptualizing the term. In contrast to *'focus on forms'*, *'focus on form'* involves *"an occasional shift in attention to linguistic code features—by the teacher and/or one or more students—triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production"*. Spada (1997) uses *'form-focussed instruction'* (FFI) to generally refer to the pedagogical effort which is intended to draw learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly. This might include teachers' direct teaching of grammatical rules and their conscious reactions to students' errors in their language production activities. Clearly, Spada's definition of FFI is more inclusive of what are dichotomized as two independent entities in the literature—*'focus on forms'* and *'focus on form'*. Similarly, students' attention to, or awareness of form(s), can be equally regarded as one way of their metacognition about the language tasks being processed (Zhang, 1999).

### Benefits of Form-Focussed Instruction (FFI)

Along the line of FFI, abundant research has been conducted in relation to instructional practices and materials used, though more recent research has begun to investigate learner-generated attention to form (e.g. Williams, 1999). This body of research, which can be broadly termed as "attention/consciousness" or "awareness" studies (Schmidt, 1990), has produced results showing that learners benefited most when they received form-focussed instruction which was operationalized as a combination of metalinguistic teaching (explicit instruction) and corrective feedback provided within an overall context of communicative language learning and teaching (Spada and Lightbown, 1993).

Doughty (1991) investigated two groups of adult L2 learners learning of English relative clauses within the context of a computer-assisted reading lesson. Her findings showed that increasing the salience of linguistic forms in language learning tasks was equally successful as providing explicit metalinguistic statements in fostering the acquisition of the structures of relative clauses. She also found that the meaning-oriented group improved significantly more than the rule-oriented group and the control group, in the comprehension of the text read during the experiment, on a post-test administered immediately after the instruction. She interpreted her findings as evidence to endorse Richard Schmidt's (1990) *"noticing hypothesis"* and his claim that getting learners to attend to forms in the input is the basic prerequisite for L2 learning. Doughty's findings also lend support to the argument that there are different ways to get learners to "notice" linguistic forms in

context to enhance their success in language learning (e.g. Ellis, 1995).

VanPatten's (1996) research focussed on the role of input in SLA. He reported that instruction which enabled learners to "process information" via comprehension practice might be more effective than that which required learners to engage in premature language production. He regarded "processing" instruction as more effective because it provided a more direct route for the learner to convert input into intake. The findings from his studies and those conducted in collaboration with colleagues on the comparison of the effects of traditional instruction (i.e., production practice) and processing instruction on the acquisition of object pronouns and preterite verbs, showed that learners receiving processing instruction outperformed the other two groups on a comprehension task and did equally well as the group receiving traditional instruction on a production task.

Long (1996) takes the view that instruction that includes focus on form has at least two advantages over purely meaning-focussed instruction. It can increase the salience of positive evidence, and it can provide essential negative evidence, in the form of direct or indirect negative feedback, and there is a converging support both from laboratory-based and non-laboratory based research for this view, as discussed by Ellis (1995) and Spada (1997). More recently, Leow (1998, p. 51) claimed that there was greater facilitation of intake and improved accuracy with what he called "learner-centered exposure" to grammatical form, which he defined as "*learners' participation in a problem-solving task that is carefully constructed to promote noticing the form or structure in the L2*". In comparison, when the teacher directed and

controlled students' attention to form, facilitation of intake was less obvious. He also found that learners who were exposed to verbs with irregular morphological changes by means of a cross-word puzzle did better than those who had a more traditional teacher-fronted presentation of the same material. Successful completion of the cross-word puzzle required that participants figure out the irregular morphology.

Previous research has focussed on the effects of instruction and materials used on learners' production accuracy. Williams' (1999) latest research, however, focussed on learner-generated attention to form. Her findings showed that the degree and type of learner-generated attention to form were related to proficiency level and the nature of the activity in which the learners were engaged and that learners overwhelmingly chose to focus on lexical rather than grammatical issues because learners were less likely to pay attention to form without teachers' explicit instruction or emphasis. This was also because, according to Williams, learners' attentional resources were limited. However these limitations played an essential role in L2 speech processing, and the mechanisms in language processing were only partially automatic and required conscious control, that is, attention (Schmidt, 1990). Likewise, Harley's (1994) position is that in content-based classes, which are arguably the most meaning-focussed of all second language classrooms (e.g. Singaporean students learning chemistry in English), learning tends to be lexical-oriented and meaning-based, with learners noticing phonologically salient, high-frequency lexical items. Learners usually fail to notice morphosyntactic features—morphological, structural and syntactical features, which

may lack salience and are not essential for comprehending or meaning-making. This tendency of prolonged neglect of morphosyntactic aspects in language production might tend to continue in the second language users' speech or writing long after they are proficient in using the language for meaningful exchanges.

By analyzing the distribution and frequency of self-repairs and the correction rate of errors in the speech of 30 Hungarian learners of English at 3 levels of proficiency and of 10 native speakers of Hungarian, Kormos (2000) investigated the role of attention in monitoring second language speech production. Her findings indicate that the amount of attention paid to linguistic forms of the utterance did not vary at different states of L2 competence and that the distribution of attention in monitoring for errors was markedly different in L1 and L2. L1 speakers corrected a considerably higher proportion of their errors than did L2 learners, but they differed in that L2 speakers corrected a similar proportion of their lexical and grammatical errors, whereas L1 speakers corrected almost twice as many of their lexical errors than their grammatical errors.

## DISCUSSION

In general, recent studies have suggested that the incorporation of some attention to form into meaning-centered instruction can lead to students' improvement in processing input and increasing accuracy in language production (Long & Robinson, 1998). The results suggest that language learning activities which are solely experiential and focussed on communicative exchanges are unable to facilitate learners' development of some linguistics features which are characteristic of target-like accuracy (Ellis,

1994; Spada, 1997). Even many years of meaningful, comprehensible input and ample opportunities for interaction cannot effectively intervene in assisting them to achieve target-like accuracy. Recent studies have also suggested that some degree of focus on form in classes that are primarily focussed on meaning and communication is particularly helpful in promoting accuracy in SLA. This argument seems to be pertinent to a multilingual context such as Singapore, where bilingual language-education policy functions as a regulator and English is defined as the L1 (first language) in the school curriculum. However, in fact, for the majority of school pupils in Singapore, English is a language, which is, if not foreign, at least secondary to their mother tongues (Gopinathan, 1998).

Therefore, the role that the linguistic environment and types of linguistic input play also becomes conspicuous (Long, 1996). If students speak with one another in a "besilectal" form and write in this besilect (i.e., a colloquial sub-variety, or simply, "Singlish") without knowing how to code-switch up to an "acrolect" (the prestige sub-variety serving as the official or unofficial standard, which reflects a person's education level and language maturity) and without realizing the severe consequences of sustained use of the besilect in formal or academic encounters where such lectal forms are not permissible, then, the aftermath could be unfavorable to the speaker (see Platt & Weber, 1980, p. 20ff, for explanations of these terms). Therefore, it can be expected that without teachers' implicit or explicit emphasis on language form, students' persistent use of the besilect would continue, and it would take a much longer time for students themselves to become consciously attentive to form than is the case when students are

given such instruction. This is also because the goal of L2 learning in Singapore is to develop fluency as well as accuracy and complexity and that form-focussed activities in the context of communication may encourage students' conscious learning of an of the formal properties of an L2. These consciously learned formal-properties, *viz*, forms and rules, can be easily retrieved from memory for use by students when they are in need in future in similar contexts.

On a par with researchers' attention to form-focussed instruction is a growing concern for increasing learner autonomy in the language learning process and the learner-centered approach to learning and teaching, generally known as collaborative or cooperative learning and teaching (e.g., Adams & Hamm, 1996; Oxford, 1997). FFI in language learning does not contradict this idea and teachers can still maintain a learner-centered classroom while focussing on form. In effect, recent empirical research shows that collaborative learning activities in which there is some degree of focus on form have produced students who are more functionally proficient.

In the Singapore context, reverting to traditional grammar teaching is not a well-informed choice. It might be more useful to extend collaborative learning activities to include some degree of emphasis on learners' taking more responsibility in their learning process, with teachers being their mentors and resourceful chaperons. This suggestion would allow for a more natural emergence, among students, of a kind of consciousness of the importance of accuracy in language production which would be made possible by their attention to form. This, in turn, can be expected to have some effects on students' improved

performance in speaking and writing proper English.

## CONCLUSION

Ellis (1995) maintains that the role of explicit and implicit teaching and learning of language should be stressed, and that the two different modes of teaching and learning "*interact in interesting ways ... [and] demonstrate that a blend of explicit instruction and implicit learning can be superior to either just explicit instruction or implicit learning alone*" (p. 136). The selective review of the studies here supports the view that form-focussed instruction is beneficial to SLA. Furthermore, the results suggest that explicit FFI may be particularly effective in L2 classrooms which are communicatively-based and/or whether the L2 is learned via subject-matter instruction, as is the case in Singapore, where all the courses except the mother tongues and the Good Citizen series are taught in English.

My review of research into a relatively broad strand of form-focussed SLA also shows that researchers and language educators have come to some kind of consensus that the objectives of language learning are not only to achieve fluency but accuracy as well (Johnson, 1982; Eong & Robinson, 1998). Research also shows that language learning activities in which teachers draw attention to the formal aspects of the language have enhanced accuracy in students' language production and are beneficial to SLA. Nevertheless, research findings also suggest that learners tend to focus more on lexical rather than on morphosyntactic meanings (e.g., Harley, 1994; Williams, 1999). Henceforth, a '*filter*' approach is proposed to increase students' awareness of the language so that they themselves will become conscious

monitors of their language-use events not only at the lexical level but also at the morphosyntactic level. Metaphorically, students' grammar mistakes are here alluded to as "white elephants" which should be

eliminated piecemeal through various language awareness tasks and activities based on recent research into form-focussed instruction and on collaborative and cooperative learning theories.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS**

### ***1. Focus on meaning and form in interactive/collaborative learning.***

- Form-meaning relationships should be regarded as relative, as 'form' includes a stress on the structural side of the language, while "meaning" accentuates its content to semantic aspects.
- Focussing not only on the accuracy in the use of lexical meaning but also on morphosyntactic features should be part and parcel of language production activities. This means that teachers' instructional practices should incorporate a dual emphasis both on meaning and form in order to increase the accuracy and appropriateness of pupils' expression.

### ***2. Integrate grammar into various cooperative or collaborative learning tasks, with comprehensible feedback given to pupils.***

- Organizing classroom activities around a certain theme in meaning-based contexts, with an explicit objective of focussing on form in mind, might help pupils cope with challenges that come from their lack of knowledge about the language.

### ***3. Learn language both as a linguistic system and a tool for human communication.***

- Helping pupils understand how language is rule-governed and the way language functions in human communication using metalanguage to consolidate their awareness about the language as a system could be equally beneficial for pupils.

### ***4. Tutor pupils to become conscious about morphosyntactic meaning and its importance for accurate language production.***

- This implies that teachers have to teach grammar in one way or another, either inductively or deductively. Relevant activities in this direction can be broadly epitomized in various language tasks designed for developing pupils' speaking, listening, reading and writing abilities.

**5. Enhance pupils' awareness about the importance of not only the meaning but also the accuracy in language production.**

- Pupils' attention needs to be directed to the formal aspects of the language in communicative or collaborative learning contexts not only in language classrooms but also in content-based learning, as studies have shown that learners do not spontaneously attend to form as frequently as expected. This kind of instructional enhancement should persist in pupils' continual development in the language until automaticity in accurately using the language becomes the norm.

**6. Reinforce pupils' responsibility as learners and ameliorate teacher-pupil interaction in the classroom.**

- Research shows that it is less likely for low-proficiency pupils to attend to form, even if urged to do so; therefore, if teachers leave too much responsibility to pupils, they may not achieve desired results. However, giving proper instruction to pupils on what it really means to be a responsible learner would reinforce their stronger claim for responsibility. In this process, teachers' negotiation with pupils for their possible willingness to take responsibility for themselves might not work for some pupils whose motivation is low and whose performance is not as good as expected. In such cases, teachers need to have talks with pupils and establish good relationships to implement worthwhile teacher-pupil interaction.

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