

THE IMPACT OF FOCUS ON FORM IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Nguyen Pham Thanh Uyen

University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Danang; uyennpt@yahoo.com

Abstract - The benefits of focus on form instruction as “the miracle method that many teachers had always been searching for” (Poole, 2005, p.47) - has been one of the main interests in the second language teaching community to date. This article attempts to generalize findings from different empirical studies which contribute to the confirmation of the effectiveness of focus on form instruction, which can be implemented by using two typical techniques: input enhancement and corrective feedback in interaction to draw learners’ attention to formal language in the meaning-based context of learning. Five research articles descriptions and the summary of the contribution to the asserting the role of attention to form are presented and discussed, and on this base, some implications for teaching in the current context are recommended.

Key words - focus on form; grammar; attention; input and interaction; second language teaching.

1. Rationale

There have been particular concerns regarding the lack of accuracy in learners’ performance in communicative language teaching and learning. Communicative language teaching, as an innovated mode of teaching to the traditional method, also brings about unexpected results, since “some linguistic features do not ultimately develop to target-like level” and “this is so despite years of meaningful input and opportunities for interaction” (Doughty & Williams, 1998, p.2). In response to this, Long (1991) and Long Robinson (1998) put forth the approach of focus on form in second language teaching, which can be described as an incidental attention to form in the context of meaning-focused instruction. A more operational definition is that “focus on form consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teachers and/or one or more students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production” (Long, 1991, p.23). The noticeable feature is that focus on form can be initiated by learners, or set up by teachers, material designers or researcher. Learner’ attentional resources can be achieved pedagogically by various methods: input enhancement (repeated use in the input, explicit discussion of the form, enhance salience due to typographic modification - being underlined or italicized), explicit negative feedback, implicit negative feedback – with recast is an example. The second language theory underpinning focus on form is the role of attention to form in promoting second language acquisition. Attention to form plays a key role in enhancing language learning, and focusing on learners’ attention on features of the second language is a major component of focus on form. Schmidt (1995) stated that: “not all language features can be acquired when learners’ attention is focused exclusively on meaning” and “input and interaction, attention, and awareness are all crucial for learning”.

However, conceptual arguments must be tested, verified and developed in empirical studies before they can meaningfully guide major language policy and curriculum

initiatives and subsequently, have significant effects on millions of language teachers and learners. Therefore, the effectiveness of these above techniques in focusing learners’ attention to formal language and leading to successfully subsequent language production needs more support from empirical research..

2. Procedures

The studies under review were selected by considering the objectives of the empirical research and the findings with practical implications and implementation of focus-on- form instruction. To minimize arbitrariness, various measures have been taken: carefully reading the abstracts, identifying the objectives, going through the methodological descriptions, examining the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical studies and evaluating the contribution of the studies to second language teaching.

The article starts with the brief description and explanation of the key terms, i.e. focus on form versus focus on forms, the role of noticing and attention in second language instruction, followed by the description of the five empirical studies. The assessment of the studies in relation to the noticing and attention theory in second language acquisition is presented and some implications in implementing input enhancement and corrective feedback in form-focused instruction for language teaching are recommended.

3. Focus on form versus focus on forms

Focus on form refers to an approach in which learners and teachers address formal features of language that play a role in the meanings that are negotiated. In other words, focus-on-form emphasizes meaning in communication and form of language is inadvertently noticed. This is contrasted with a focus on formS, which **emphasizes** formal aspects rather than meaningful activities (Carter and Nunan, 2001). Focus-on-forms **focuses** on form of the language and draw learners to memorizing **plenty** of rules. Long (1991) have encapsulated the differences of these two extremes in grammar instruction: focus on form refers to drawing students attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or **communication**. **Meanwhile**, focus on forms is equated with the traditional teaching of discrete points of grammar in separate lessons. The comparison of the features of these two approaches is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus on form vs Focus on Forms

Focus on form	Focus on Forms
Triggered by perceived problems in comprehension or production	Pre-selected in the syllabus
Linguistic features are explored in contexts.	Forms are taught in isolation

Commented [A1]: Trích dẫn nguyên văn cần có số trang.

Commented [A2]: focuses?

Commented [A3]: Informal language: much, many

Commented [A4]: Nguồn?

Analytical approach	Synthetic approach
The word form refers to language in form in general	Forms refers to discrete, isolated, specific language forms.
Learners first engage in meaning, then explore some linguistic features.	Primary attention to form
Occasional shift of attention to form.	Most attention to form

(Carter and Nunan, 2001; Long, 1995)

4. Noticing and attention in SLA

The central role of attention in naturalistic and instructed second language acquisition has been identified in the research of SLA. The naturalistic view stresses leaners’ attention to meaning in communication in the process of learning. The view of focusing on form emphasized role of attention in language learning, together with input and interaction. There will be no learning without attention, and attention is required for learning (Schmidt, [1994]).

Fine-grained analysis of attention states three components of attention: alertness, orientation and detection. Alertness represents an overall, general readiness to deal with incoming stimuli or data, orientation facilitates detection, which is the process that selects, or engages, a particular and specific bit of information (Schmidt, 1995).

Different types of attention that learners may pay to language form are: noticing, understanding and awareness. Noticing is the process of bringing some stimulus into focal attention and is the necessary and sufficient condition of input to intake for learning, therefore, more noticing leads to more learning (Schmidt, 1995). Differently, Tomlin and Villa (1994) maintained that detection, not awareness, is the minimally necessary component of attentional process in second language learning. Irrespective of the discrepancy about the presence of conscious registration in addition to focal attention, there is an agreement that noticing, or being aware of certain forms, requires focal attention processing to internalise input into intake.

The hypotheses illustrates the role of attention and noticing in second language acquisition are the Interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), consciousness raising and the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1995). The Interactional hypothesis holds the view that conversational interaction promotes second language acquisition, and negative feedback during interaction draw learners’ attention to the form, and consequently causing learners’ notice the gap between their own output and the target model. Learners’ attention specifically to the formal structures of the target language can be enhanced by consciousness raising, with the assistance of input enhancement (typographical modification, intonational focus...) (Sharwood Smith, 1993).

Findings from empirical studies have provided insights about the roles of input and interaction in drawing learners’ attention to form and consequently promoting success in language learning.

5. Description of the five studies

The first article under review is “Does textual enhancement promote noticing? A think-aloud protocol analysis” by Jourdenaise, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson and Doughty, 1995. This empirical research was done with the purpose to determine whether input enhancement technique (textual modification) can make target language forms more noticeable and affect learners online processing. The study took place in Georgetown University, with 14 native speakers of English in Spanish class. The target form was “the preterit” (past tense) (Jourdenaise et al, 1995) and imperfect verbs. Think aloud protocols were collected during a subsequent task in which participants wrote a picture-based narrative similar to that presented in the same text. The results of the study were that more episodes related to selection and conjugation of the target verbs were found in enhancement participant protocol than the comparison participants, and enhancement participants produced more target features in their production. The logical interpretation for the results is that textual enhancement promotes noticing of the target second language form and has an effect on learners’ subsequent output.

Another study focusing on the effects of manipulating and enhancing input in drawing learners’ attention to form is executed by Joanne White in 1998. The context of the study is an elementary school near Montreal, Canada with three intensive grade 6 ESL classes and the target forms were the possessive determiners and third person singular pronouns. Three different groups received three treatment conditions: group E (N=27) with typographically enhanced input plus extensive reading and listening, group E (N=30) with a typographically enhance input flood, and group U (N=29) with a typographically unenhanced input flood. Data were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed involving frequency counts and accuracy ratios as well as a stage analysis of the learners’ development. The findings from this study also confirm the efficacy of input enhancement in speeding up acquisition of a language feature, but it rasied a question that drawing learners’ attention to a linguistic feature is “not adequate in cases involving L1-L2 contrast, they need more explicit instruction in more advanced developmental stages” (White, 1998, p.106).

The above insight leads to the consideration of another form-focused technique in promoting learners’ success in language learning. One small-scale study on the impact of recast on learners’ second language production was carried out by Zhaohong Han in 2003, in which eight adult learners of English were divided into two groups (recast and non-recast) and produced written and oral narratives prompted by cartoon strips with the target from was the tense consistency in learners’ output. The methodology adopted a pretest and posttest and delayed posttest design, with eight regular sessions between pretest and posttest for the recast group and eight regular sessions for the non-recast. The study concluded that recast was successful since it raised learner awareness and led to considerable improvement in learners’ performance in the target form.

Commented [A6]: ?

Commented [A5]: Nguồn trích dẫn cũ quá!

The effect of recast was also the focus in the laboratory study done by Leeman in 2003 with the subjects were 74 adult learners of Spanish and the target form was noun-adjective agreement. Different aspects of recasts were investigated by providing four different treatments on the subjects: negative evidence alone, enhanced salience alone, recasts (as a combination of negative evidence and enhanced salience) and the control group receiving ordinary models of the target form. The result was that group exposed to input with enhanced salience and recasts group performed better than the group exposed to unenhanced input. This suggests that "enhancing the salience of certain forms certainly led learners to attend to those forms,...and interactional features, recasts among them, can lead to greater development by highlighting specific forms in the input" (Leeman, 2003, p.57),

The impact of input salience and interaction remains a concern of second language researchers. In a study carried out in Midwestern University on 110 English speaking learners of Spanish at the age of 17-36 with an average of 3.5 years of Spanish instruction, Gass Torres (2005) investigated the effects of input and interaction separately and in combination. The language focuses were gender agreement, and *estar* + location and seven vocabulary items. The effects of input and interaction were examined in four different conditions: material focused solely on input, material focused solely on interaction, input-focused material followed by interaction, and interaction-focused material followed by input. The findings suggested that input and interaction in combination resulted in greater improvement than input or interaction alone. Besides, the study interpreted the differential effects of input and interaction on different grammatical areas for the complexity and abstractness of those grammatical features.

6. Evaluation of the studies in relation to the noticing and attention theory in SLA

The five studies under review shed some light on the efficacy of input enhancement and interaction as the typical techniques for focusing learners' attention to form, which is vital in promoting second language acquisition. The role of input enhancement is highlighted in the study done by Journeuse et al (1995), which asserts that typographical modification may lead to better subsequent second language production of the form. In the process input-intake conversion, textual enhancement was a driving factor for the process taking place.

However, the role of typographical modification as a technique to enhance salience of input is not a single powerful tool for directing learners' attention to the target form. White (1998) claimed from her study that input enhancement is necessary, but not sufficient in speeding up language acquisition, especially when involving complexity and contrast between the first and second language. Language development requires the assistance of explicit instruction and, the role of interaction cannot be underestimated. The small-scale study by Han (2003) and the laboratory study by Leeman (2003) on recasts as component of interaction provide insights about the

significant function of attention for second language uptake. While Han (2003) spotlights the success of recasts in heightening learners' awareness and leading to considerable improvement in the target form, Leeman (2003) concentrates on the ambiguous status of recast, which make up of negative evidence alone, enhance salience alone, and negative evidence and enhance salience in combination. The underscoring suggestion from her study is that the saliency of the new form within the recast is the most helpful in catching learners' attention and facilitates the process of input-intake conversion. Negative evidence alone is of minor importance in accelerating this process. The findings strengthen the view held by many interactionists such as Long (1996) and Pica (1994) that interaction foster the environment for developing second language processing capacity with the presence of selective attention as an essential factor.

The value of interaction in promoting second language acquisition is highlighted by Gass and Torres with the conclusion that "interaction, as an attention-drawing device, followed by input, as a forum for data gathering, is the most powerful of the externally driven enhancement" (Gass & Torres, 2005, p.24). The study provides further support on the role of attention in second language acquisition, and states that combination of treatments (input followed by interaction but not interaction followed input) yields better learning rates than one treatment alone. One important rider in this study is that level of attention may vary according to the complexity and the nature of each language area, i.e. vocabulary, syntax or morphosyntax requires different levels of attention.

To sum up, the five studies contribute to the tenet about the role of attention in language learning in second language theory and confirm the distinct effectiveness of input enhancement and recasts as a form of interaction in improving learners language output. This also places the focus on form instruction in a highly valuable position in second language teaching, and serves as the fundamental support for other empirical studies on the effectiveness of form-focused instruction in different learning conditions.

7. Implications for teaching

The studies above bring about some thoughts on innovation in our teaching context, regarding improving learners' accuracy in the second language performance.

Firstly, it is proposed that implementing focus-on-form would be productive with the combination of different techniques, highlighting the target forms in the input (input enhancement) and recast as a type of interaction (and many other types such as clarification request, confirmation check, etc.) Among which, the ordering input-interaction proves to be the most effective.

Secondly, the complexity and properties of a linguistic feature should be taken into account in selecting and designing a focus-on-form task.

Thirdly, salience of target forms in the input is very important in catching learners' attention, even in corrective feedback. Teachers should provide learners the salience target form, which enables learners noticing their errors

and doing uptake.

Finally, the studies also inspire further research in investigating the effectiveness of form-focused instruction among which, learners' attention to form is the essential factor triggering language development.

8. Conclusion

Focus on form instruction with the goal of accelerating learners noticing to form is gaining cogency in second language teaching and learning. Its role as "a cognitive focusing device or advance organizer for learner attention" is emphasized by many researchers such as R. Ellis (1993). Schmidt and Frota (1986) and Sharwood Smith (1991). It is now widely recognized that a pure meaning-focused approach to second language teaching is not promising and fruitful. Ellis (1994, cited in Schmidt, 1995, p.47) maintained that "there are many possible ways to combine exposure to input and communicative practice with a focus on form and consciousness raising". Schmidt was very optimistic about the "theoretically interesting and practically important research ahead" which may provide answers to the question of integrating form-focused instruction into communicative language teaching. The empirical studies under review in this article partly accomplish the confirmation of the role of form focus instruction stills needs more evidence from empirical research in diverse instructional practices of different cultural and educational settings. Personally, I think this is a good place for teachers to begin their study on focus on form instruction to enhance the effectiveness of second language learning and teaching.

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