

Reexamining the Effect of Form-focused Instruction

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The previous research and experience in CLT and CBI affirms that not all language features need to be taught in isolated lessons. Instead, the current research on classroom learning shows that incidental learning allows students to acquire a great deal of language while focused on meaning in CLT and CBI. The addition of integrated FFI can contribute to the automatization of language features that have emerged in students' language but that are not used reliably when there are competing demands for attention.

Key Words : A deductive approach, an inductive approach, Communicative Language Teaching, Content-based language instruction, Grammar teaching approach, Isolated form focused instruction, Integrated form focused instruction

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1. Introduction

Recently, the papers which investigate the effect of the form-focused grammar instruction have been delivered (e.g., Ellis, 2006; Spada and Lightbrown, 2008; Scott and Funente, 2008; Borg and Burns, 2008). According to Spada and Lightwood (2008), there is increasing consensus that form-focused instruction helps learners in communicative or content-based instruction to learn features of the target language that they may not acquire without guidance.

Referring mainly to Spada and Lightwood (2008), this paper will reexamine the effect of form-focused instruction in ESL/EFL context.

2. A Deductive and an Inductive Approach

Thornbury (1999) states that there are two kinds of grammar teaching approach. They are deductive and inductive approaches. A deductive approach starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied. On the other hand, an inductive approach starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred.

Nunan (2005) also says that there are two basic ways to introduce a new grammar item, that is, deductively and inductively. According to him (2005) in a deductive approach, the teacher presents the grammar rule and then gives students exercises in which they apply the rule. On the other hand, in an inductive approach, the teacher presents samples of language, and the students have to come to an intuitive understanding of the rule.

The popularity of these two approaches has alternated through the years. The traditional grammar-translation approach was based on deduction. This approach was then challenged

by audiolingualism. A basic tenet of audiolingualism was that students should learn inductively. "Learning by analogy, not by analysis" was a popular motto of audiolingualism.

However, Nunan (2005) says that, in a recent published grammar textbook (i.e., *Exploring Grammar in Context* by Carter, Hughes and MaCarthy, 2000), the authors justify the adoption of an inductive approach. Carter, Hughes and MaCarthy (2000) say that grammatical rules can sometimes be best explained by means of a single sentence and a rule, which can be applied to other examples. Sometimes it is helpful to learners for the sentence to be invented or for the authentic language to be modified in order to illustrate the rules. This practice is found in *Exploring Grammar in Context*. However, the main focus of the book is on helping learners to work out grammatical rules for themselves. This inductive approach to learning grammar often involves providing lots of examples so the patterns of usage can be seen. Of course, within such patterns, certain forms are either right or wrong and rules have to be learned. However, the examples can also show that some forms are more probably used in one context rather than another, or that there are choices which depend on whether we are writing or speaking or whether we want to sound more or less formal. *Exploring Grammar in Context* helps learners of English to make choices and to understand what those choices mean. The approach in the book therefore helps learners to learn more inductively, to notice more, and to be more aware of the uses of language.

Nunan (2005) asserts that deductive teaching involves drawing learners' attention explicitly to one or more features of the linguistic system. This can be done either by describing rules or principles and then getting students to apply this in practice, or by presenting a paradigm in the form of a grammar chart and then getting students to practice the new paradigm. Thus, as Thornby (2000) says, it gets straight to the point and can therefore be time-saving. Many rules can be more quickly explained than elicited, thereby allowing more time for practice and application.

Thornby (2000) states that a major disadvantage of inductive learning is that it takes longer for the students to arrive at an understanding of a rule that has been explained to them by their teacher. Another disadvantage is that the students may in fact come to the wrong conclusion about a particular grammatical principle. However, he (2000) says that, despite these shortcomings, inductive learning is more effective than deductive learning because it requires learners to process the language more deeply than when they are simply told a rule (i.e., they are taught grammatical rules deductively).

So far, we have seen that, as to English grammar teaching, more researchers consider inductive approach to be more effective than deductive approach.

3. Communicative Language Teaching

3.1 The Rise of Communicative Language Teaching

According to Savington (2005), on the threshold of 21st century, communicative language teaching (hereafter, CLT) has become as familiar to discussions about the practice and theory of second and foreign language teaching as the *Big Mac* is to fast food. The appeal is worldwide. And while the particular characteristics may vary from one context to another, the identifiable features remain the same. The essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence. Use of the term *communicative* in reference to language teaching refers to both process and goals in classroom learning. A central theoretical concept in CLT is *communicative competence*, a term introduced in the early 1970s in discussions of language and second or foreign language learning. Competence is defined in term of the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning and looks to second language acquisition research to account for its development. The identification of learner communicative needs provides a basis for curriculum design. Terms sometimes used to refer to features of CLT include process oriented, task based and inductive, or discovery oriented.

According to Fotos (2005), many of the centralized educational agencies, particularly in Asian EFL (i.e., English as a foreign language) contexts, have recently adopted plans for the introduction of CLT, which holds that communicative competence includes both linguistic knowledge and the ability to use this knowledge for meaning-focused communication.

3.2 The Main Features of CLT

3.2.1 Types of Learning and Teaching Activities

According to Richard and Rodgers (2001), the range of exercise types and activities compatible with a communicative approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises enable learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage learners in communication, and require the use such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction. Classroom activities are often designed to focus on completing tasks that are mediated through language or involve negotiation of information and information sharing. According to Johnson (1982), these attempts take many forms. He (1982) says that Wright (1976) achieves it by showing out-of-focus slides which the students attempts to identify. Byrne (1978) provides incomplete plans and diagrams which students have to complete by asking for information. Allwright (1977) places a screen between students

and gets one to place objects in a certain pattern: this pattern is then communicated to students behind the screen. Geddes and Sturtridge (1979) develop jigsaw listening in which students listen to different taped materials and then communicate their content to others in class. Most of these techniques operate by providing information to some and withholding from others (i.e., by utilizing an information gap).

3.2.2 Learner Roles

Richard and Rodgers (2001) states that the emphasis in CLT on the process of communication, rather than mastery of language forms, leads to different roles for learners from those found in more traditional second language classrooms. According to Breen and Candlin (1980), the role of learners as negotiators—between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning—emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiation within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he/she should contribute as much as he/she gains, and thereby learn in an independent way.

3.2.3 Teacher Roles

Breen and Candlin (1980) says that the teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participants within the learning-teaching group. The latter role is closely related to the objectives of the first role and arises from it. These roles imply a set of secondary roles for the teacher: first, as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself/herself; second, as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities; third, as a researcher and a learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities. Other roles assumed for teachers are needs analyst, counselor and group process manager.

3.2.4 The Role of Instructional Materials

Richard and Rodgers (2001) assert that a wide variety of materials have been used to support communicative approaches to language teaching. They (2001) also say that practitioners of CLT view materials as a way of influencing the quality of classroom interaction and language use. Materials thus have the primary role of promoting communicative language use in CLT. Three kinds of material have been currently used in

CLT. They are labelled as text-based, task-based and realia.

3.2.4.1 Text-based Materials

According to Richard and Rodgers (2001), there are numerous textbooks designed to direct and support CLT. Their tables of contents sometimes suggest a kind of grading and sequencing of language practice not unlike those found in structurally organized text. A typical lesson of the textbook-based materials consists of a theme (e.g., relaying information), a task analysis for thematic development (e.g., understanding the message, asking questions to obtain clarification, asking for more information, taking notes, ordering and presenting information), a practice situation description (e.g., "A caller asks to see your manager. He does not have an appointment. Gather the necessary information from him and relay the message to your manager."), a stimulus presentation (in the preceding case, the beginning of an office conversation scripted and on tape), comprehension questions (e.g., "Why is the caller in the office?") and paraphrase exercises.

3.2.4.2 Task-based Materials

Richard and Rodgers (2001) points out that a variety of games, role plays, simulations, and task-based communication activities have been prepared to support CLT classes. These typically are in the form of one-of-a-kind items: exercise handbooks, cue cards, activity cards, pair-communication practice materials and student-interaction practice booklets. In pair-communication materials, there are typically two sets of material for a pair of students, each set containing different kinds of information. Sometimes information is complementary and partners must fit their respective parts of the jigsaw into a composite whole. Others assume different role relationships for the partners (e.g., an interviewer and an interviewee). Still others provide drills and practice material in interactional formats.

3.2.4.3 Realia

Richard and Rodgers (2001) describes that many proponents of CLT have advocated the use of authentic, from-life materials in the classroom. These might include language-based realia, such as signs, magazines, advertisements and newspapers, or graphic and visual sources around which communicative activities can be built, such as maps, pictures, symbols, graphs and charts.

3.3 Procedure

Savignon (1983) discusses techniques and classroom management procedures associated with a number of CLT classroom procedures (e.g., group activities, language games, role plays), but neither these activities nor the way in which they are used are exclusive to CLT classrooms. As characteristics of procedures in CLT, she (1983) rejects the notion that learners must first gain control over individual skills (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) before applying them in communicative task, that is, she advocates providing communicative practice from the start of instruction.

3.4 The Characteristics of CLT

Richard and Rodgers (2001) says that CLT refers to a diverse set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language and language learning and that can be used to support a wide variety of classroom procedures. These principles include: 1) Learners learn a language through using it to communicate; 2) Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities; 3) Fluency is an important dimension of communication; 4) Communication involves the integration of different language skills; 5) Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error.

Johnson and Johnson (1998) identify five core characteristics that underlie current application of communicative methodology: 1) Appropriateness—Language use reflects the situation of its use and must be appropriate to that situation depending on the setting, the roles of the participants and the purpose of the communication, for example. Thus learners may need to be able to use formal as well as casual style of speaking; 2) Message focus—Learners need to be able to create and understand messages, that is, real meanings. Hence the focus on information sharing and information transfer in CLT activities; 3) Psycholinguistic processing—CLT activities seek to engage learners in the use of cognitive and other processes that are important factors in second language acquisition; 4) Risk taking—Learners are encouraged to make guesses and learn from their errors. By going beyond what they have been taught, they are encouraged to employ a variety of communicative strategies; 5) Free practice—CLT encourages the use of holistic practice involving the simultaneous use of a variety of subskills, rather than practicing individual skills one piece at a time.

To sum up, as Savignon (2005) states, the essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence.

3.5 CLT as a Grammar Teaching Approach

3.5.1 The Weakness of CLT as a Grammar Teaching Approach

According to Spada and Lightbrown (2008), in the 1970s, a new pedagogy of CLT and a new theoretical view of second language acquisition (hereafter, SLA) emphasized the importance of language development that takes place while learners are engaged in meaning-focused activities. Teachers and methodologists developed language classroom activities that featured interaction among learners, opportunities to use language in seeking and exchanging information, and less attention to learning metalinguistic rules or memorizing dialogues and practicing patterns. One type of CLT that has become especially widespread is content-based instruction (hereafter, CBI) in which the new language is a vehicle for learning subject matter that is of interest and value to the learner. It has been hypothesized that in CBI, language learning may even become incidental to learning about the content. However, some researchers have observed that good content teaching may not always be good language teaching. That is, when students focus on the interaction of meaning in CLT, they do not have enough opportunity to learn about the language (i.e., English language).

According to Lightbrown (1998), CLT was based on recommendations from applied linguists. SLA researchers and theorists also encouraged teachers to allow learners to use language freely, to provide substantial amounts of comprehensible input and not to worry about the production of perfect utterance. Errors were seen as a natural part of language acquisition and they were expected to work themselves out eventually, if learner remained motivated and if they continued to have access to sufficient comprehensible input and/or opportunities for communicative interaction. Thus, even when students made grammatical mistakes, the mistakes were not corrected explicitly by teachers. As a result, students could not acquire accurate and detailed knowledge through CLT.

3.5.2 CLT and Form-focused Instruction

According to Laufer and Girsai (2008), the pedagogical approach of form-focused instruction to second language teaching can be regarded as modification of CLT, whose proponents believed that comprehensible input and meaning-oriented tasks were necessary and sufficient for language acquisition. When it became evident that second language learners could not achieve high level of grammatical competence from entirely meaning-centered instruction, applied linguists suggested that learners should also attend to form. The term *form* includes the function that a particular structure performs. For example, attention to

the 'form'-ed subsumes the realization that -ed signals an action performed in the past.

Laufer and Girsai (2008) states that form-focused instruction (henceforth, FFI) can be of two types: Focus on Form (henceforth, FonF) and Focus on Forms (hereafter, FonFs). FonF is a pedagogical approach defined by Long (1991) as drawing learners' attention to linguistic elements during a communicative activity. He (1991) says that FonF refers to instruction in which the main emphasis remains on communicative activities or tasks but in which a teacher intervenes to help students to use more accurately when the need arises. FonFs, on the other hand, is an approach equated with the traditional method, which entails teaching discrete linguistic structures in separate lessons in a sequence determined by syllabus writers. That is, FonFs refers to lessons in which language features are taught or practiced according to structural syllabus that specifies which features are to be taught and in which sequence. FonFs might involve teaching approaches as varied as mimicry and memorization or grammar translation.

According to Ellis (2001), in a FonFs approach, students view themselves as learners of a language and the language as the object to study; in FonF, on the other hand, learners view themselves as language users and language is viewed as a tool for communication. The notion of FFI was developed in the context of grammar learning and FonF can be applied to CLT for the learners to develop their linguistic competence while engaging in communicative activities.

4. Isolated FFI and Integrated FFI

4.1 The Concept of Two FFIs

4.1.1 The Concept of Isolated FFI

According to Spada and Lightbrown (2008), isolated FFI is provided in activities that are separate from the communicative use of language, but it occurs as part of a program that also includes CLT and CBI. Isolated FFI may be taught in preparation for communicative activity or after an activity in which students have experienced difficulty with particular language feature. In isolated FFI, the focus on language form is separated from the communicative or content-based activity (i.e., it is conducted before or after communicative or content-based activity). However, this approach differs from FonFs, which refers to language instruction and practice organized around predetermined points of grammar in a structural syllabus, that is, FFI that is not directly tied to genuinely communicative practice. Moreover, isolated FFI is the provision of instruction in lessons whose primary purpose is to teach students about a

particular language feature because the teacher believes that students are unlikely to acquire the feature during communicative activities without an opportunity to learn about the feature in a situation where its form and meaning can be made clear. From the teacher's perspective, isolated FFI always implies intentional learning and explicit instruction. However, classroom observation research shows that even in traditional classrooms in which grammar lessons are based on a structural syllabus, students are not always sure of the teacher's intended focus. That is, the explicitness and intentionality that the teacher has in mind may not be recognized by the students.

4.1.2 The Concept of Integrated FFI

Spada and Lightbrown (2008) state that, on the other hand, in integrated FFI, the learners' attention is drawn to language form during communicative or content-based instruction. This definition corresponds to FonF as defined by Ellis (2002) and by Doughty and Williams (1998). That is, although the form focus occurs within a communicative activity, the language features in focus may have been anticipated and planned for by the teacher or they may occur incidentally in the course of ongoing interaction. Integrated FFI occurs in classroom activities during which the primary focus remains on meaning, but in which feedback or brief explanations are offered to help students express meaning more effectively or more accurately within communicative interaction. Some writers seem to assume that drawing learners' attention to form during meaning-based activities always involves implicit feedback and incidental learning, but that is not necessarily the case. Again, the perceptions of teachers and learners may be different. Adult learners sometimes show that they interpret the teacher's implicit feedback (i.e., in the form of recasts) as explicit guidance, creating an opportunity for interactional language learning. However, even when they recognize the teacher's implicit feedback as relevant to language form, learners may not correctly identify the object of teacher's attention.

4.2 The Role of Integrated FFI

According to Spada and Lightbrown (2008) in the pedagogical literature, there is considerable support for integrating form focus within communicative activities as well as considerable effectiveness of instruction that separates from focus from meaningful interaction.

Celce-Murcia (1991) argues that grammar should never be taught as an end in itself but always with reference to meaning, social factors, discourse or a combination of these factors.

Brumfit (1984) asserts that teachers should not prevent learners from combining a concern with language use with worry about formal accuracy in terms of specific items. Spada and Lightbrown (2008) say that Brumfit's assertion may be taken as evidence that, for some learners at least, feedback that comes during communicative interaction may have a positive effect on motivation. That is, knowing that help is available when it is needed may respond to expectations and preferences of students—especially adult students—in language classes.

Spada and Lightbrown (2008) also describe that theoretical support for integration comes from both SLA and cognitive psychology. Long (1991) argues that focus on language form should be fully integrated into ongoing communicative interaction. In fact, he (1991) asserts that teachers should provide FonF, only on those language features that occur naturally in the course of a task or activity in which students are using the language in meaningful interaction. Moreover, he (1996) also states that while comprehensible input and meaningful interaction provide the raw material for language acquisition, they also provide the ideal context for spontaneous (i.e., integrated) attention to language form. Other SLA concepts such as *negotiation of form* (Lyster, 1994) and *metatalk* (Swain and Lapkin, 2002) also point to the benefits of reflecting on language form during communicative use.

Spada and Lightbrown (2008) point out that although support for integrated FFI comes from primarily form theoretical extrapolations and pedagogical principles, there is also some evidence of its effectiveness in classroom-based studies of CLT and CBT. In Lightbrown (1991), and Lightbrown and Spada (1990), the research in intensive ESL classes that were almost exclusively meaning-focused, young students were successful in acquiring certain language features when their teachers provided ongoing, integrated FFI on a limited number of these features. Those receiving integrated FFI were substantially more likely to acquire these features than students in classes where there was never any attention to form. According to Spada and Lightbrown (2008), Jean's (2005) study of French as a second language (nonimmersion) in a Canadian secondary school provides some related evidence of the effectiveness of integrated FFI. Jean (2005) designed an experimental study in which learners either (a) practiced target forms in mechanical drills that were separate from the communicative activities in which the forms were expected to be used later or (b) received FFI during ongoing meaning-based activities. No difference was found in the two groups' ability to use the target forms (i.e., the verb morphology) on subsequent measures of accuracy. However, the students whose FFI had been integrated with meaningful communicative activities used the forms with a great variety of vocabulary. Thus, in this study, the integrated FFI was more effective for the subjects than the isolated FFI.

To sum up, the previous theoretical extrapolations, pedagogical principle and classroom-based studies have demonstrated that the integrated FFI is more forcible than the isolated FFI is.

5. Conclusion

According to Spada and Lightbrown (2008), the previous research and experience in CLT and CBI affirms that not all language features need to be taught in isolated lessons. Instead, the current research on classroom learning shows that incidental learning allows students to acquire a great deal of language while focused on meaning in CLT and CBI. The addition of integrated FFI can contribute to the automatization of language features that have emerged in students' language but that are not used reliably when there are competing demands for attention. Thus, we find no evidence to support a suggestion that isolated grammar lessons without opportunities for communicative language use should again become dominant approach to language instruction.

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