A Dual Focus on Form and Meaning in EFL Communicative Instruction

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Abstract

This paper examines an issue concerning the relative merits and drawbacks of focusing on form (accuracy) as opposed to focusing on meaning (fluency) in foreign language teaching. An example with the dual focus on the combination of form and meaning-based instruction by applying a grammar-based communicative approach is presented. Then, strategies in correction used by teachers when EFL learners make errors in their oral production are discussed. It is concluded that as long as teachers can find a proper balance between exercises that help EFL learners come to grips with grammatical forms, and tasks for exploring the use of those forms to communicate effectively, EFL learners are able to learn a great deal from teachers with respect to the accuracy of the foreign language, as well as promote the development of communicative ability.

Keywords: Meaning-based instruction; form-based instruction; grammar-based communicative approach

Introduction

The past 20 years have seen a debate in foreign language (FL) teaching concerning the relative merits of focusing on form (accuracy) as opposed to focusing on meaning (fluency). The proponents of audio-lingualism argue that grammar is the main focus in FL teaching and immediate error correction is essential. On the other hand, the theorists of natural approach such as Krashen and Terrell (1998) insist that explicit grammar instruction and error correction should be regarded as peripheral factors in the total FL instruction. They maintain that overemphasizing on grammatical forms will interfere with the communicative purposes. Considering these two theoretical extremes, both theories have their own merits and deficiencies. Teachers who place too much emphasis on grammar-based instruction may sacrifice learners' fluency. However, if teachers only focus on meaning-based instruction, then learners will not attain accuracy in their FL oral produc-
tion. It is now the crucial issue for FL teachers to develop effective teaching strategies to balance and combine both form and meaning. In the following section, the merits and drawbacks of these two theoretical approaches (form vs. meaning-based instruction) will be analyzed. Then, an example with the dual focus on grammar-based communicative approach will be presented. Finally, strategies used by teachers when EFL learners make errors in their oral production will be discussed.

Two Extremes: Form vs. Meaning-based Instruction

Form-based Instruction
The proponents of form-based and grammar-based instruction maintain that foreign language should be taught on the basis of pieces of grammatical parts, and learners have to put each part together by deductive learning; then they try to apply the rules to oral production (Nishimura, 2000). Grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods are typical examples. Students are required to memorize grammatical rules and repeat the teacher’s model as accurately as possible by substitution and transformation drills (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Furthermore, language learning is viewed as a process of habit formation, and preventing learners from making errors is essential. However, Krashen and Terrell (1998) and Fotos (1998) state that teaching grammatical rules usually fails to develop the ability of learners to communicate effectively. In addition, Seedhouse (1997) argues that the extreme form-focused classroom activity is unnatural because such transformation sequences do not occur outside the classroom.

Meaning-based Instruction
The other teaching strategy, meaning-based approach, is based on the way in which almost all children can naturally learn their first language successfully, and the proponents of this theory insist that even adults should be able to master their second/foreign language if they follow the natural principles of first language learning (Long & Robinson, 1998). The natural approach and direct approach are typical examples. The characteristics of these approaches maintain focus on meaning and natural communication itself rather than on grammatical forms. In addition, teachers are able to be tolerant of learners’ linguistic errors and error correction is rarely made in the teaching process (Nishimura, 2000). However, the fact that teachers accept every interlanguage form produced by the learner without correction will result in fossilized errors (Seedhouse, 1997). For example, the beginning EFL Taiwanese speaker often makes the syntactic error such as “I very like you.” As Lightbown and Spada (1990) point out that this type of error may not cause breakdown in communication, but the problem is that learners are often unaware of the existence of errors. “There is increasing evi-
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dence that learners continue to have difficulty with the basic structures of
the language in programs which offer no form-focused instruction” (103).
According to Fotos (1998), purely communicative instruction alone is
equally inadequate as long as grammatical instruction is neglected.

A Dual Focus: Combination of Form and Meaning-based Instruction

There are clear advantages and disadvantages, then, to an extreme focus in
either instruction. According to Van Lier (1988), the traditional grammatic-
ical pedagogy is out-of-date and teaching grammatical forms in isolation
does not lead to successful development in using forms communicatively.
“The middle way, covering both form and meaning, accuracy and fluency,
would seem to be the most sensible way to proceed, and indeed there cur-
cently appears to be a general consensus that it is unwise to neglect either
area” (p. 276). Fotos (1998) therefore proposed a new syllabus; communica-
tive language instruction itself is important, but grammatical instruction
should be implemented in context. Lightbown and Spada (1990) also men-
tion that a higher level of grammatical accuracy in oral production is ex-
pected in combination of form-focused and meaning-focused teaching.
How, then, can teachers ensure that form and accuracy are covered to-
gether with meaning and fluency? According to early communicative ap-
proaches to foreign language teaching, such instruction can be conducted
in two main ways. The first one is based on the fact that “…… learners
should be able to notice, then process, linguistic structures which have been
introduced to them within purely communicative contexts” (Fotos, 1998, p.
302). In other words, FL learners should attend to the target language
structures by exposure to numerous examples of communicative input.
This is called implicit grammatical instruction (Nishimura, 2000). The other
approach is called explicit grammatical instruction in conjunction with
communicative activities. Fotos (1998) reports that such type of instruction
has its own advantages because after awareness of grammatical structures
has been developed by formal instruction or some type of implicit fo-

cus-on-form treatment, many learners tend to notice the target structures
in subsequent communicative input. Such repeated acts of noticing are sug-

gested to promote the learners’ comparison of the correct forms with their
own interlanguage forms, triggering the cognitive processes, involved in re-
structing the learners’ internal linguistic system, and thus facilitating
acquisition (p. 303).

In Taiwan or other Asian countries, English is a foreign language, so
students have few opportunities for communicative use outside the class-
room. It is therefore nearly impossible to get implicit exposure for
communicative input. As a result, explicit grammar-based instruction is still
dominant. Fotos (1998) suggests that “if focus-on-form approaches are modified to permit formal instruction before the communicative activity and feedback afterwards, they offer considerable promise” (p. 304). Now it is an important issue to find out how grammatical rules can be explicitly taught in communicative activities. It is, however, a big challenge to focus on accuracy and fluency, on form and meaning simultaneously. Ellis (1994) proposes two approaches: “First, activities can be devised that require learners to communicate while also focusing their attention on specific formal properties; second, teachers can elect to provide feedback on learners’ errors during the course of communicative grammar activities” (p. 639).

Using the above criteria, I will illustrate an example of the grammar-based communicative approach adapting to EFL Taiwanese adult learners (on the intermediate level of English) below.

**Example: Grammar-based Communicative Approach (50 minutes)**

1. **Teaching point:** To help students learn the usage of the grammatical rule – present perfect continuous tense – through explicit grammatical instruction in conjunction with communicative activities.

2. **Objectives of the lesson:**
   
   (1) To practice the usage of the newly-learned grammatical rule in communicative activities.
   
   (2) To be able to use the grammatical rule in real-life situations.

3. **Procedure:**
   
   **Step 1:** To present the structural pattern in a context. For example,
   
   John: Hi! Tom. How are you? What’s up?
   
   Tom: I am washing my car.
   
   John: How long have you been washing your car?
   
   Tom: I have been washing my car for 3 hours.
   
   John: You have been washing your car for 3 hours? You’re slow!
   
   Tom: I have a very nice car, so I must take good care of it.

   **Step 2:** To ask some comprehension questions to make sure that students understand the model pattern. For example, “What is Tom doing? How long has Tom been washing his car? If you have a very nice car, will you also wash your car for 3 hours?”

   **Step 3:** To write the grammatical pattern from the dialogue on the board and ask students to find the other examples of the same pattern. For example, “I have been doing my homework for 2 hours,” or “I have been studying for 4 hours.”

   **Step 4:** To ask students what rules (combination of forms) are the same in the examples. For example, have/has + been + V-ing (present participle)
Step 5: To have students do some mechanical drills with the same pattern. For example, “Our daughter ____________ (wear) lipstick since she was sixteen,” or “It ____________ (rain) steadily for three days now.

Step 6: To give an open-ended sentence or an open dialog (e.g., “Have you ever been in the hospital? Why were you there? What happened?” or “Have you ever been very embarrassed? What happened?”), and ask students to complete it with their partner and then act it out in class.

Correction

The objective of the task is to require students to communicate with their partner while also focusing on the correct usage of present perfect continuous tense. It is, however, essential for teachers to monitor whether students can use the appropriate and correct form or not, and give corrective feedback to the whole class if some particular errors are to be noticed. The focus in step 5 is on accuracy and the grammatical form, in that teachers should correct all errors of the linguistic form before getting into step 6. In step 6, the main objective is to keep the conversation going. No matter what kind of errors students make, teachers should give corrective feedback unobtrusively so that the flow of conversation will not be hindered. How do teachers achieve such unobtrusive repair? According to Iles (1995), experienced teachers often engage in “camouflaging” of repair. This plays down the activity of repair so that it is less obtrusive and prominent. Seedhouse (1997) further mentions that some of the features of camouflage are as follows: “The teacher produces the target form for adoption by the learner without any overt or explicit negative evaluation or indication that an error has been made” (p. 342). In other words, teachers should fit the repair as unobtrusively as possible into learners’ utterances so that the repair does not obtain prominence and does not become the interactional interruption. For example,

S1: What did you do last weekend?
S2: I stayed in home.
T: At home.
S2: On Sunday I stayed at home and watch TV. What did you do on Sunday?
S1: On morning, I ........
T: In the morning
S1: In the morning, I ate ........

According to Seedhouse (1997), if the corrections interrupt the flow of the interaction, such disrupt communication may, by contrast, require learn-
ers to stop and think, or may require more extensive teacher intervention.

**Conclusion**

It is now agreed that it is not sufficient for EFL learners to acquire accurate communication skills only by “input flooding” (Nishimura, 2000). It is crucial to deal with both fluency and accuracy in foreign language instruction. To achieve such objective, Nunan (1998) suggests that teachers should keep an appropriate balance between formal instruction that helps learners acquire grammatical forms and communicative instruction that helps facilitate acquisition. It is believed that the grammar-based communicative approach which combines both form and meaning can “significantly increase learner awareness of the target structure and improve accuracy in its use, as well as providing opportunities for meaning-focused comprehension and production of the target language” (Fotos, 1998, p. 307).

Through the use of modified focus-on-form activities, traditional EFL pedagogy aimed at developing formal knowledge of English structures and rules should now include a strong communicative component which provides examples of grammar used in meaningful contexts (Fotos, 1998). As long as teachers can find a proper balance between exercises that help EFL learners come to grips with grammatical forms, and tasks for exploring the use of those forms to communicate effectively, EFL learners are able to learn a great deal from teachers with respect to the accuracy of the oral production, as well as promote the development of communicative ability.

**References**


