

THE FEASIBILITY OF INTEGRATING FORM AND MEANING IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT. Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in form-focused instruction in foreign language pedagogy and there is a growing realization that a certain degree of emphasis on formal aspects of the target language is necessary if learners are to achieve high levels of accuracy (e.g. Doughty and Williams 1998; Ellis 2001). In the view of second language theorists and researchers, one of the ways in which this kind of emphasis can most profitably be accomplished is by drawing students' attention to linguistic forms as they are engaged in primarily meaning-focused activities (cf. Long and Robinson 1998). Such a dual focus on form and meaning can, for example, result from the provision of explicit or implicit negative feedback targeting the forms that turn out to be problematic.

The paper will discuss the findings of a research project which investigated the feasibility of integrating form and meaning during naturally occurring secondary school English lessons. Thirty 45-minute lessons were tape-recorded, parts of the lessons which were largely communicative in nature were identified and transcribed, and the exchanges with a dual focus of the kind described above were pinpointed and subjected to qualitative analysis. The analysis showed that it is in fact possible to integrate form and meaning during communication-focused activities, that focus on form of that kind can be used to address not only grammatical problems but also those related to lexis and phonology, and that it may be beneficial for the learners' interlanguage development.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a revival of interest in form-focused instruction and there is a growing realization among theorists and methodologists that a certain degree of emphasis on the formal aspects of the target language code is indispensable if learners are ever to achieve high levels of accuracy (cf. Doughty and Williams 1998; Ellis 2001). Such a change of heart, however, should not be interpreted as justification for a return to the practice of traditional grammar teaching based on a synthetic syllabus, or a *focus-on-forms*, but, rather, provides support for instruction, where attention to the linguistic features takes place in the course of lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication (cf. Long 1991; Doughty 1998). It is argued that such a dual focus, also known as *focus-on-form* (cf. Long 1991; Doughty and Williams 1998), will not only

help students to acquire the ability to use new linguistic features communicatively, but will also provide them with opportunities to attend to the forms they produce, which seldom happens in spontaneous communication, and, being compatible with the processes of L2 acquisition, will aid learners in overcoming persistent developmental errors (cf. VanPatten 1990; Long 1991; Seedhouse 1997; Ellis et al. 2002).

Although most SLA researchers tend to agree that integration of form and meaning is beneficial to language development, they are much less unanimous as to how it should best be accomplished in the language classroom, with some of them postulating the use of such unobtrusive techniques as *input flood* or *input enhancement*, which help learners to notice the target form rather than produce it, and others seeing a place for explicit grammar explanations and production practice. The present paper discusses one way in which such a dual focus can be ensured, namely the provision of reactive focus-on-form (Ellis et al. 2002), or explicit and implicit corrective feedback targeting linguistic forms that turn out to be problematic when students are engaged in performing a communicative activity. First, some distinctions concerning negative feedback are presented and, subsequently, the findings of a research project investigating the feasibility of employing it to accomplish integration of form and meaning in the foreign language context are discussed and serve as a basis for pedagogical recommendations.

2. Reactive focus-on-form as a way of integrating form and meaning

Ellis (2001) makes an important distinction between *planned focus-on-form*, which involves the pre-selection of a specific linguistic form and designing tasks which elicit the use of this form in a meaningful context, and *incidental focus-on-form*, where students are requested to produce general samples of language rather than specific language features and a number of problematic forms can be attended to. This distinction also applies to reactive focus-on-form, which can be planned or incidental depending on the teacher's pedagogic agenda. In the former case, the teacher could, for instance, use his or her experience or recordings of classroom discourse to identify the forms that are particularly difficult for the learners, prepare a number of meaning-focused activities necessitating the use of those forms, and provide negative feedback whenever they are used incorrectly. In fact, there is some research which suggests that such focused corrective feedback can lead to greater accuracy not only in the use of morphosyntax but also in the pronunciation of particular words (cf. Doughty and Varela 1998; Pawlak and Pospieszynska 2003; Pawlak in press). The present paper, however, will mostly focus on incidental focus-on-form,

where the teacher does not decide in advance to concentrate on a specific language feature, but, rather, chooses to draw learners' attention to a number of different forms for only a brief period of time. Undoubtedly it is this kind of reactive focus-on-form that is the most frequent in language classrooms, where teachers typically treat errors involving a variety of language forms representing different subsystems of language.

Table 1: Options in reactive focus-on-form (negative feedback)
(adapted from Ellis et al. 2002:429)

Options	Description
1. Negotiation	
<i>a. Conversational</i>	The response to the error is triggered by a failure to understand what the student meant. It involves 'negotiation of meaning'.
<i>b. Didactic</i>	The response occurs even though no breakdown in communication has taken place; it constitutes a 'time-out' from communicating. It involves 'negotiation of form'.
2. Feedback	
<i>a. Implicit feedback</i>	The teacher or another student responds to a student's error without directly indicating an error has been made, e.g. by means of a recast.
<i>b. Explicit feedback</i>	The teacher or another student responds to a student's error by directly indicating that an error has been made, e.g. by formally correcting the error or by using metalanguage to draw attention to it.

As can be seen from *Table 1*, reactive focus-on-form can take on the form of *negotiation* or *feedback*¹. Negotiation, which is typically initiated by means of a confirmation check (i.e. repeating the problematic utterance with or without reformulating it, e.g. *many more taller than you?*) or a clarification request (the use of a formulaic expression, e.g. *sorry?*) can further be subdivided into *conversational* and *didactic*. While in the former case, the error causes a genuine communication breakdown which needs to be resolved for communication to proceed, in the latter the teacher has no difficulty comprehending a student's utterance but chooses to draw his or her attention to it for instructional pur-

¹ It must be pointed out that the typology used in the present article is one of many that have proposed to classify the different ways in which teachers deal with learners' errors. Other classifications can for example be found in Spada and Lightbown (1993), Lyster and Ranta (1997) or Lyster (2001).

poses, thus engaging in negotiation of form rather than meaning. As far as feedback is concerned, it involves situations where the teacher either corrects an error immediately or informs the student of its occurrence, location or character in the hope that he or she will be able to self-correct. This can be done *implicitly* by means of a *recast*, where the whole or part of the learner's deviant utterance is reformulated in such a way that the original meaning is maintained (cf. Long and Robinson 1998; Ellis et al. 2002). Alternatively, the teacher may choose a more *explicit* option such as, for example, telling a student directly that an error has been made (e.g. *That's wrong, No, etc.*), using metalanguage (e.g. *third person singular, it's the past tense, etc.*), trying to elicit the correct answer by repeating part of a student's utterance (e.g. *S. He like coffee. T. He ..., etc.*), or providing the correction and requesting a student to repeat it (cf. Spada and Lightbown 1993; Lyster and Ranta 1997; Ellis et al. 2002).

Research into incidental focus-on-form has shown that it is most frequently triggered by lexical errors and that teachers prefer to rely on implicit rather than explicit negative feedback in both form-focused and meaning-focused contexts, which may be due to their willingness to avoid embarrassing or demotivating students (e.g. Lyster and Ranta 1997; Lyster 2001; Seedhouse 2001; Loewen 2003). Since, for logistical reasons, it is difficult to design studies which would investigate the extent to which the provision of incidental corrective feedback results in more accurate production of specific forms in the long run, most of the research of this kind has been descriptive in nature and has typically evaluated the effectiveness of different corrective techniques in terms of *uptake*, or a learner's response to the information provided about a language feature, which can be successful or unsuccessful (cf. Loewen 2003)². It has been shown that students are more likely to self-correct or incorporate teacher corrections of grammatical and lexical errors following attempts at negotiation and more explicit feedback types such as metalinguistic cues or elicitation rather than recasts, which are often not perceived as corrective devices (cf. Lyster 2001). Although the results of such studies are valuable, most of them have been conducted in multilingual classrooms in the second language context and, thus, it is not at all clear that their results are applicable to situations, where students and teachers share the same mother tongue and out-of-class exposure is extremely limited, which are two contextual factors characterizing the learning and teaching of English in Poland and other foreign language settings.

² One of the few studies which aimed to determine the effect of incidental focus-on-form on the accuracy of use of the forms attended to was conducted by Loewen (2002). He found that individual students benefited from error correction in the context of communicative activities, as evidenced by their scores on tailor-made tests administered from one to three days after the intervention as well as two weeks later.

3. Research design

In order to investigate the incidence and character of reactive focus-on-form, 30 transcripts of English lessons conducted in Polish secondary schools were analyzed. 20 of the transcripts came from the recordings of naturally-occurring English lessons which were made for the purpose of the present study and the remaining 10 were derived from other research projects undertaken by the author (e.g. Pawlak and Pospieszynska 2003; Pawlak in press). The lessons were conducted by 15 Polish teachers with university degrees in English and teaching experience ranging from 2 to 24 years. As for the students who participated in the classes, they attended grades one through four, represented diverse proficiency levels, and had only very limited out-of-class exposure to the target language.

The lessons varied greatly in terms of their instructional goals and the methodology utilized, with some of them focusing exclusively on introducing and practicing language forms, and others being characterized by quite long stretches of interaction which had many of the characteristics of real-life communication. Since the aim of the study was to investigate only those instances of negative feedback where the focus was on both meaning and form, the parts of the lessons where meaning-focused activities predominated were pinpointed and analyzed. Following Pica et al. 1993 and Loewen 2003, such activities were defined as those designed to get students to exchange information rather than to develop their conscious knowledge of specific language forms or provide them with practice in their use. Such communication-centered parts of the transcripts were subjected to mostly qualitative analysis, which involved identifying focus-on-form episodes (FFE), or stretches of discourse which were connected with the specific linguistic structure being the focus of attention (cf. Ellis 2001 et al.), determining the language areas they typically involved and investigating the nature of the corrective techniques that triggered them. Attention was also paid to the effect of such focus-on-form episodes on the learners' language production as measured by the extent to which specific corrective techniques led the learners to self-correct or include the corrective information about the language they produced in their subsequent output, or the occurrence of successful uptake (see above).

4. Research findings

At the very outset it has to be pointed out that although there were examples of meaning-focused activities during all of the lessons, in most cases they were very short and only in 6 out of 30 transcripts could longer periods of genuine information-exchange be identified. A closer analysis of such stretches of dis-

course showed that FFEs did occur in the transcripts with an average of 4 per lesson, but, not surprisingly, they were not evenly distributed between the classes and, in fact, the 6 during which the most meaning-centered activity occurred accounted for the vast majority of reactive focus-on-form in the data. There was also a lot of variation between the teachers in this respect, which is evidenced by the fact that some of them taught very traditionally and the negative feedback they provided never occurred in the context of communicative activities, and there were also a few who ensured lengthy periods of meaning-centered activity but were extremely reluctant to treat the errors committed by their learners. Such differences notwithstanding, the analysis of the transcripts showed that integration of form and meaning by means of reactive feedback provided in the context of a genuine exchange of ideas is feasible in the foreign language context on condition that teachers choose to include meaning-focused activities in their lessons and to react in some way to the incorrect language productions of their learners.

The analysis also showed that it is possible to achieve a dual focus on form and meaning in response to errors involving different areas of language. Somewhat in contrast to the findings of previous research (e.g. Lyster 2001; Loewen 2003), it was grammatical errors that were the most likely to trigger FFEs, closely followed by those involving lexis and pronunciation. As for the type of incidental focus-on-form the teachers employed, the least frequent were instances of conversational and didactic negotiation, with the former taking place only a few times and the latter occurring somewhat more often but only in the lessons conducted by 3 out of the 15 teachers. Such a paucity of negotiated sequences can be ascribed to the fact that the participants' shared mother tongue was often employed to resolve communication breakdowns, and that when a pedagogic intervention was required, the teachers tended to rely on feedback rather than clarification requests or confirmation checks to provide it. It is also interesting that even when negotiation did take place, it usually failed to get the students to self-correct and the teacher typically had to resort to more direct forms of negative feedback for successful uptake to occur.

The points discussed above are illustrated in examples (1)-(3) below. In (1) the teacher responds to a grammatical error with a confirmation check trying to negotiate the form of the utterance, but, since the student does not respond, he switches to explicit feedback and directly questions the accuracy of what the student has said. This is followed by peer-correction, which the student does not have the time to incorporate as the teacher moves on to the next question. A similar situation takes place in (2), except that here the teacher is much more insistent on getting the student to self-repair her utterance, and the peer-correction that follows results in successful uptake. Finally, (3) illustrates one of the few examples of conversational negotiation, where the teacher appears to have real difficulty understanding what the student has said. He uses a confir-

mation check to resolve the communication breakdown, but, there being no response, finally supplies the correct vocabulary item herself.

(1) S1: *In a strict school... students learn more and... they want to be the best... so everyone learn more and they are wise and... very intelligent*

T: *Everybody learn more? ... (2) is it correct?*

S1: *...yes*

S2: *learns*

T: *everybody learns more yes, OK ... right ... and any other advantages of such schools*

(2) S1: *Music don't play ... a lot of [important T. Music] can you repeat?*

S1: *music*

T: *don't play?*

S1: *don't play*

T: *don't play!?*

S1: *don't play*

T: *No*

S2: *doesn't play*

S1: *...doesn't play important the most important place in my life ... but sometimes (...)*

(3) S: *(...) people loved his ... unusual paints ... because*

T: *paints?*

S: *... ah*

T: *... (2) painTINGS*

S: *paintings*

T: *OK (...) how did he paint?*

Reactive focus-on-form employed during meaning-focused activities most often took the form of explicit or implicit feedback, but, in contrast to other research findings (e.g. Lyster and Ranta 1997; Lyster 2001), it was the former rather than the latter that occurred the most often. Similarly to the findings other studies, direct indications that an error has been made rather than unobtrusive recasts were much more likely to lead to successful uptake regardless of the type of error that initiated the FFE. Although, as mentioned above, this could be reflective of the fact that implicit feedback was interpreted by the learners as a comment on the content of what they had said rather than its form, an equally plausible explanation is that having employed implicit feedback, the teachers often proceeded immediately to another point or asked a follow-up question, thus failing to provide the learners with ample time to incorporate the correction. Excerpts (4) and (5) below are examples of FFEs, where the teacher drew upon implicit feedback to react to a learner's grammatical and pronunciation error respectively, but immediately followed her corrective move with another solicit

and a request for explanation with the result that no uptake could occur. As for (6), it illustrates one of the rare situations, where the teacher's implicit feedback was incorporated despite being immediately followed by another question.

(4) S: *and then I really frightened*

T: *I'm really frightened, OK, what about ... can anybody think of a situation when they are frightened?*

(5) S: *...nuclear power stations should be ah ... built in remote /rimote/ areas*

T: *...they should be built in remote areas OK ... so, I mean so that they are far way from people, right?*

S: *yes ... and we also should (...)*

(6) S: *(...) when I listen to (rock) music I am thinking some in different way [I don't know*

T: *I think in a different way and do you feel anything else?*

S: *I think in a different way ... and I thinking about some things and it's ... it's*

In the case of more explicit corrective techniques, which typically involved some metalinguistic comment, elicitation or the provision of the correct form, the students were fully aware of the pedagogic nature of the teacher's intervention and there was more pressure on them to self-correct or at least incorporate the corrective feedback provided. Equally importantly, the teachers expected uptake of some kind on the part of the learners and they deliberately provided them with space and time in which they could produce it. Obviously, the occurrence of successful uptake could hardly be equated with the acquisition of a particular language form having taken place, but, rather, was only indicative of the fact that the students had noticed the gap in their interlanguages and that the FFE had become intake for their language processing mechanisms. This was clearly visible in the instances, where a specific form was correctly produced by the student following teacher intervention only to be used inaccurately by the very same student in a subsequent part of the lesson.

Excerpts (7)-(10) are examples of typical FFEs resulting from explicit feedback. In (7), (9) and (10), the provision of explicit feedback in the form of direct correction or an inquiry concerning the correctness of the form produced in response to a grammatical, lexical and pronunciation error leads to successful uptake of the corrective information. Example (10), by contrast, illustrates a situation, where explicit feedback following a lexical inaccuracy fails to be incorporated because the teacher does not provide the learner with sufficient time in which successful uptake could occur.

(7) S: *(...) she killed dog ... which do ... which did very often mess in her house ... and I would ask her why she ... (2) killed a dog*

T: *the dog*

S: *the dog ... and I would tell her (...)*

(8) S: *children go to school six ... ah day a week but in Polish*

T: *...(2) do we say in Polish?*

S: *in Poland*

T: *OK*

S: *...children go to school... six... ah five (...)*

(9) S: *Schools in Polish and in Jap ... in Poland and Japan /dżapan/ are ... very different ... ah because in Poland and in Japan /dżapan/ is a different kind of education and ... ah ... and ah Poland and ... Japan /dżapan/*

T: *JaPAN*

L: *Japan school was very different*

(10) S: *a long time ago... an asteroid in hit Siberia... and it caused destroy*

T: *destruction... disaster... like what?*

S: *in... in thirty miles... people's clothes were burnt and (...)*

Interestingly, although there were cases of students providing reactive feedback on something their classmates said following the teacher's attempts at negotiating form (see excerpts (1) and (2) above), there were very few situations where the learners initiated the FFE episode by themselves during meaning-focused activities. What has to be noted, however, is the fact that peer-corrections, irrespective of whether there were self-initiated or came after the teacher's corrective move, invariably led to successful uptake on the part of the learners. This indicates that the corrections provided by their peers were somehow more salient to the students and provides a strong argument for encouraging peer-correction during meaning-focused activities. On the other hand, there is a possibility that the salience of peer-corrections may have been the outcome of its scarcity in classroom discourse and thus excessively increasing its incidence might in fact reduce its effectiveness, not to mention the fact that not all the students are always happy about being corrected by other learners rather than the teacher.

5. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

Generally speaking, the findings of the study show that even in the foreign language context there are stretches of classroom interaction which are largely communicative in nature, it is feasible to integrate form and meaning during such activities by means of incidental reactive focus-on-form, such a dual focus can be employed to highlight different areas of language, and it can lead to suc-

cessful uptake. Although such findings are partly in line with those generated by previous research, there are also some differences involving the incidence of FFEs, their focus and the correction techniques employed, which might be due to important contextual differences between second and foreign language settings. It should also be remembered that there was a lot of variation between the lessons conducted by different teachers in terms of the amount of meaning-centered activity, the incidence of incidental focus-on-form, the areas it targeted as well as the particular options selected, which indicates that the feasibility and ultimately usefulness of incidental focus-on-form is not only a function of the educational setting but also of teacher and student characteristics.

Obviously, the fact that incidental focus-on-form can be accomplished in the foreign language classroom and can in many cases have a positive effect on learner output does not mean that formal aspects of language should or even can be taught entirely in this way in the Polish educational context. In fact, it is the belief of the author that the limited exposure to the target language both in the classroom and outside, the students' and teachers' deeply-ingrained preferences and expectations as well as the numerous external requirements in the form of examinations all point to the necessity of basing instruction on some version of a structural syllabus, and teaching language forms much more systematically and explicitly. What is important from a pedagogical point of view, however, is that teaching grammar does not always have to follow the route from presentation to production and involve so much traditional explanation and decontextualized practice, particularly when the learners are at a slightly higher level of proficiency and are already familiar with a range of forms. Instead, the teacher can set up more meaning-centered activities during which the learners' attention can be drawn to the linguistic features they find problematic, thus allowing them to notice gaps and holes in their interlanguages by contrasting what they say or want to say with the target language version (Saxton 1997; Swain 1998). Such a dual focus on form and meaning is a powerful pedagogic tool for teachers who do not have to design separate activities for developing accuracy and fluency and can economize on valuable classroom time. In the case of forms that are particularly problematic or those that the teacher wishes to review, incidental focus-on-form can be supplemented with planned interventions, where tasks calling for the use of a particular structure are designed and the students' attention is drawn to it whenever they produce it incorrectly (see above). It can reasonably be assumed that the utilization of such activities is more likely to foster the acquisition of the targeted features than having students perform endless completion or transformation exercises.

Useful as incidental reactive focus-on-form might be in the foreign language classroom, its occurrence is by no means guaranteed as is evidenced by the fact that in many of the lessons analyzed for the purpose of this study, meaning-focused activities were relatively infrequent and the teachers varied greatly

in the frequency with which they employed reactive focus-on-form, the linguistic features they targeted and the corrective techniques they utilized. The main reason for such variation most likely lies in the teachers' beliefs regarding the role of communicative activities as well as the place and type of formal instruction and negative feedback in the language classroom. Thus, it appears that teacher training programs should place much more emphasis on how focus on fluency and accuracy can profitably be combined and the usefulness of different corrective techniques depending on the type of error committed, the pedagogic focus of the lesson and the characteristics of the learners. The analysis of the data has shown, for instance, that it is sometimes necessary to provide students with sufficient time and space to incorporate the correction rather than immediately make a comment or ask a follow-up question, and that implicit error correction often has to be accompanied by intonational focus or contrastive information for successful uptake to occur. Equally important appears to be learner training which should aim to teach learners both how to recognize signals initiating negotiation sequences and how to actively negotiate form and meaning, as this would serve the dual purpose of increasing the incidence of self-correction and making learners more effective in attaining their communicative goals.

Although reactive focus-on-form is never likely to replace more planned and explicit ways of teaching formal aspects of language in our educational context, it undoubtedly constitutes a valuable pedagogic option that can lead to greater fluency and accuracy in the use of the target language. Therefore, training teachers how best to provide this kind of negative evidence and teaching learners how to recognize and interpret corrective information, and most profitably respond to it is definitely a goal worth pursuing.

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