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A Closer Look at Noticing Hypothesis and Focus on Form: An Overview

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Abstract

The teaching of language forms especially grammatical and linguistic forms has long occupied a sine qua non role in language classes and course syllabi. The emphasis on the teaching of form has sometimes emerged as the deductive instruction of grammatical structures for example, grammar translation method and sometimes has incarnated as the inductive instruction of grammar and structures for instance, Audio-lingual method (see Richards & Rodgers, 2002). The point in teaching grammar is not whether to teach it or not, but the question is how to teach it from among a wide range of pedagogical options open to language practitioners (see, e.g. Ellis, 1997., Celce- Murcia, 1991). In the last two decades the auspicious paradigm of focus on form and especially Scmidtt's noticing hypothesis (Schmidtt, 1995) have gradually superseded the former methods of grammar teaching. The present article is an attempt to take a closer look on these two models and to consider some of their most prominent features and contributions in the last two decades.

Keywords: Noticing, Focus on form, Consciousness raising, Awareness, Form

1. Introduction

Schmidtt (1995) maintains that for better second language development, learners have to notice the linguistic features in the input. Noticing induces an awareness of the target language features and this awareness in time brings about the acquisition of these features. The issue of noticing is hotly disputed with regard to the amount and depth of noticing which should take place and its subsequent effects on acquisition. Schmidtt (1994) claims that input alone is not sufficient for language acquisition, what is more important is the learners' intake out of the offered input, noticing and awareness of linguistic features induce higher amounts of intake out of the presented input. While Gass et.al (2003) claim that awareness of form alone does not cause its acquisition without the formulation of explicit rules and how these rules operate regarding the noticed form, other studies (Rosa and Leow, 2004., Leow, 1997) testify that awareness of linguistic form alone augments the amount of intake by the learner and facilitates the acquisition of linguistic or grammatical forms on spot or in subsequent future input.

Noticing is incorporated within a focus on form (FOF) framework, simply put, noticing or any other approach which makes learners pay attention to linguistic or grammatical form while engaged in meaning centered communicative activities is deemed a FOF practice. Input enhancement, input enrichment, input flooding, consciousness raising and noticing can be all considered as the off springs of FOF approach to language instruction.

Before the advent of Form focused instruction language teaching pundits were busy stressing indirect, implicit treatment of form within a message focused, content-based, meaning-centered and communicative language teaching framework. Direct explicit attention to linguistic and grammatical form was deemed unnecessary and sometimes detrimental to learners' mushrooming inter-language systems, however, in the last two decades grammar has been rehabilitated (e.g. doughty and Williams, 1998a), it is considered an essential, inseparable and integral part of language teaching, quite indispensible to the instruction of a foreign language.

There exist two major types of form-focused instruction: focus on formS (FOFs) and FOF. FOFs, the predecessor of FOF is characterized by a structuralist, synthetic approach to language teaching, where the primary focus of classroom activity is on linguistic forms rather than the meanings they convey (Burgess and Etherington, 2002) . FOFs is, in other words, a pre-planned selection of particular linguistic and grammatical forms and direct and explicit treatment of those forms in classroom. It is in layman terms, 'a pre-selection of specific features based on a linguistic syllabus and intensive and systematic treatment of those features, that is, the primary focus of attention is on the form that is being taught.' (Ellis, et al, 2002)

Quite a many researchers (Lightbown and Spada, 1990., Nassaji, 1999., Williams, 1995., Fotos and Ellis, 1991., Spada and Lightbown, 1993) have confirmed the efficacy of teaching form through FOF and noticing activities. FOF is the drawing of learners' attention to linguistic forms while doing a communicative activity, i.e. the primary focus of attention in FOF is on meaning rather than form, in FOF as Ellis, et al, (2002) maintain, ' the attention to

form arises out of meaning-centered activity derived from the performance of a communicative task.' FOF, in contrast to FOFs, pronounces the centrality of meaning in instruction and pays sporadic and peripheral attention to linguistic forms in the midst of communicative activities, to put it in a nutshell, FOF is, in fact, occasional departures from meaning centered communicative activities in order to draw the learners' attention to a particular linguistic or grammatical feature. FOF is a temporary and transitive treatment of a particular form while the focus of attention is on meaning and content.

2. Focused Tasks and Unfocused Tasks

Focused tasks are the tasks in which particular form or forms are embedded to the task before its implementation, a particular grammatical or linguistic form is pre-planned and intentionally embedded into the task to be elicited during communicative activities. Unfocused tasks, on the other hand, are designed to elicit general samples of language use with no pre-planning to embed any linguistic or grammatical feature in the task.

3. Planned and Incidental FOF

Two types of focus on from instruction can be distinguished: planned FOF and incidental FOF. In the former, focused tasks are used which are communicative tasks designed to elicit the use of a particular linguistic feature in the context of meaning centered activities i.e. the FOF is pre-embedded to the task and there is an intensive and deep treatment of a special language feature, this type of FOF is akin to FOFs instruction in that a particular linguistic or grammatical feature is per-selected and treated in the classroom, however, in FOF, in contrast to FOFs, attention is centered on meaning centered communicative activities and only peripheral or implicit attention is being paid to form. An example of a planned FOF task is a reading comprehension task flooded with reduced adjectival clauses for the learners to pick up.

Incidental FOF, on the other hand, incorporates unfocused tasks, which are communicative tasks designed to elicit content based and meaning centered language use and not a particular form. These tasks are usually performed without any attention to form, however, it may happen that students or teacher incidentally have a time out and attend to some forms while doing the task, if so, the attention to form would be extensive rather than intensive. An example of an incidental FOF task can be an information gap task designed without any intentional, pre-planned attention to form, but students or teacher arbitrarily or impromptu choose a form to discuss

Table 1. Types of form-based instruction

Type	Syllabus	Primary focus	Distribution
1. FOFs	Structural	Form	Intensive
2. Planned FOF	Task-based	Meaning	Intensive
3. Incidental FOF	Task-based	Meaning	Extensive

(Adopted from Ellis et.al, 2002)

4. Reactive FOF

Reactive FOF is concerned with dealing with learner errors. Reactive FOF is in fact, the teacher's reaction to the errors or mistakes made by learners. Based on the approach the instructor selects to address the learners' errors two major categories of reactive FOF emerge:

5. Conversational vs. didactic FOF

Learners ' errors may cause communication problems, and if they make teacher and learners engage in a dialogue or conversation in order to resolve them, this would be an example of a conversational FOF. It is in fact, a negotiation of meaning rather than form, 1 and 2 below are paradigmatic examples of conversational FOF.

Example 1: Conversational focus-on-form (Request for confirmation)

S: my group has a name

T: what name?

S1: best

T: Bess' group?

S1: best

T: oh, best, okay

S2: best

T: best, not group three, the best, that's a lovely name

Example 2: Conversational focus-on-form (Request for clarification)

S1: I'm look for a room, or

S2: I will take you

T: what?

S2: I'll take you

Sometimes learners' errors do not cause communication problems, but the teacher chooses a particular form to make the focus of instruction, this is a kind of pedagogic time-out from a meaning centered communicative activity and it can be considered didactic. It is, in fact, a negotiation of form rather than meaning. In the example below the teacher tries to teach the use of article "the" by using recast.

Example 3: Didactic focus-on-form

S: I was in pub

(2.0)

S: I was in pub

T: in *the* pub?

S: yeah and I was drinking beer

6. Input Flooding and Input Enhancement

Two types of noticing "input flooding and input enhancement" are of planned FOF type discussed in the above paragraph. Different strategies such as input flooding, input enhancement, consciousness raising, etc have been proposed for the realization of FOF in SLA, noticing which is to be achieved through input flooding or input enhancement or some other strategies has become ubiquitous and popular in recent years.

To recapitulate, there are two major types of noticing: input enhancement and input flooding, both of which are types of planned FOF and fall in the category of focused tasks in which a particular linguistic or grammatical feature is embedded into the task while designing it. In focused tasks, the task while being meaning centered and fostering a communicative activity is intentionally designed to target a particular form, that is, a linguistic or grammatical feature is pre-selected and lodged into the task prior to its implementation in classroom.

In order to implement a FOF paradigm, learners ought to pay attention to language forms, this is materialized through noticing which is, making input stand out in a way that is noticeable for the learners. Noticing as Schmidtt (1995) puts it is any procedure through which the target form is enhanced to be made more salient for the learners to notice. This noticing in turn, is claimed to trigger the acquisition of the target form. A cursory glimpse at the related literature would yield an array of various techniques used to enhance the target form (see, e.g., Simard, 2009).

7. Various Techniques for Noticing and Awareness Raising

One of the most popular ways of making learners notice the target language forms is through textual enhancement (TE) in which the target language form is enhanced through bolding, italics, under-lining, coloring or an amalgamation of the above techniques. By doing TE the saliency of the target language form is enhanced and it is more probable to be noticed by the learner, and this noticing will finally lead to the acquisition of the form. The majority of studies on TE have targeted a particular morpho-syntactic element such as semi-artificial form of Finnish (Allanen, 1995), English request forms (Takahashi, 2005), English relative clauses (Isumi, 2002), and so on and have made it more salient through bolding, underlining, capital letters, etc and have investigated the effects of these enhancement techniques on learners' noticing of the target forms. Studies on noticing divulge that making linguistic forms more salient renders them more subject to noticing and the concomitant acquisition (Wong and Simard, 2000). Plenty of studies have shown that attention to form results in the acquisition of these forms (Schmidt and Frota, 1986., Huot, 1995). Researchers have come up with different results regarding the effectiveness of TE on acquisition (e.g., Lee and Huang, 2008). Leow (1997a) found no significant effect of TE on comprehension, in another study (Leow, 2001) conducted an experiment on the acquisition of Spanish imperative forms, however he could not find any effects of TE on the acquisition or comprehension of these forms. Truscott (1998) casting doubts on the very nature of noticing hypothesis and its strong

claims regarding acquisition, asserted that foundations of the theory in cognitive psychology are weak and research does not provide a clear interpretation for it, he also mentioned that noticing might be necessary for the acquisition of meta-linguistic knowledge but not for gaining competence.

Simard (2009) investigated the effects of *different TE formats* (number and choice of different typographical cues) on the intake of plural markers in English. He prepared eight versions of the same text to allow comparisons of different TE formats on learners' noticing and acquisition, he made the target feature (English plural markers) salient by *1) italics, 2) underlining, 3) bold typing, 4) different color, 5) capital letters, 6) plural markers enhanced with the preceding five typographical cues used at the same time, 7) plural markers enhanced with the use of three typographical cues, that is bold, capital and underlined, and 8) plural markers not enhanced (control group).* His results suggested that different TE formats had different impacts on the intake of participants. Takahashi (2005) using *discourse completion test* and *role plays*, studied the effects of Japanese learners' noticing of the English request forms on their learning outcomes. The results indicated that the learners' higher awareness of these forms induced the emergence of these forms during their post-test performance.

Lee (2007) studied the effects of TE on the noticing and acquisition of passive in English, he *bolded* passive structures in the text to measure its effect on noticing and subsequent learning, he found out that while this technique enhanced the learning of passive but had deteriorating effects on the comprehension of the participants. In a study on the effectiveness of noticing on English dative alteration, Radwan (2005) *bold typed* and *underlined* the datives and their complements in the text but could not find any significant effects of TE on the acquisition of dative. In a study on the relationship between noticing and writing, Qi & Lapkin (2001) investigated the role of noticing on L2 writing improvement. they assigned a writing task and after 4 days gave back the original draft and the reformulated one to the learners and asked them to compare them while thinking aloud and the researchers recorded their *comparisons* and *think alouds*. Then, they displayed the recordings to the participants and asked them to explain in detail how and what they noticed in the comparisons. They came up with the conclusion that while composing and reformulation promote noticing, the quality of noticing that relates to L2 writing improvement is different for learners with different levels of L2 proficiency. Kuiken and Vedder (2002) studied the effects of *interaction* on the noticing of passive in English. They formed two groups of one experimental (+interaction) and one control (-interaction), They applied *input flooding* technique by making the experimental group engage in abundant interactions using passive and found that numerous instances of interaction lead to the noticing of passive. Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) investigated the effects of explicit and implicit *correction* of learners' oral productions on noticing. They asked the participants to read and retell a written text during an interview, then they corrected one group explicitly and the other group implicitly by recasts. The results revealed higher scores for explicitly corrected learners than implicitly corrected ones.

In a study on the role of recasts in noticing, Leeman (2003) studied the role of recasts in inducing noticing of Spanish noun-adjective agreement system. Recasts provide implicit positive and negative evidence and also make the positive evidence salient and ready for

noticing. He found that recasts lead to the noticing of target feature and he claimed this is not because recasts have provided negative evidence but because they have made the target form more salient for noticing. Ortega (1996) selected *planning opportunity* as the inducer of noticing, he studied the effects of planning opportunity on noticing and FOF, he asked the participants to listen to a story and look at a series of pictures moving as the story unfolds. They were then, given 10 minutes to plan their oral reproduction of the story while looking at the string of pictures moving. His results provided support for the claim that planning before doing L2 task promotes FOF by providing space for the leaner to devote conscious attention to formal features. Class room activities which prompt a focus on meaning and its subsequent noticing was the study Williams (1999) carried out to investigate and compare the effect of activities inducing FOF such as *correcting* a writing assignment and compare it with activities which prompt attention and focus on meaning rather than form such as the discussion of the news of last week. The results they obtained indicated that type and degree of learner generated attention to form is related to proficiency level of the learners and the nature of the activity. They also found that learners overwhelmingly chose to focus on lexical rather than grammatical issues.

The effect of noticing on English relative clause acquisition was the research project Izumi (2002) conducted. The project studied the facilitative effects of internal (*visual enhancement*) and external (*output*) attention drawing devices on the acquisition of relative clauses. Izumi devised reading comprehension texts with *underlined* noun phrases and the head noun was *bolded* or *shadowed* in order to augment the chance of noticing, he also used *external output induced noticing* to see whether the act of producing output induces noticing. His results showed that visual enhancement failed to bring about measurable gains in learning and those exposed to output- input activities outperformed those exposed to the same input by visual enhancement.

In Harley's (1998) study on grade 2 immersion classrooms the *noun endings* had *prolonged clues* to draw learners' attention to grammatical gender. She found that these clues assisted young learners in mastering grammatical gender of high frequency words but not for less frequent words. In an almost similar study, Lyster (2004) conducted a study on the acquisition of grammatical gender of French in immersion classes, Lyster also attempted to make learners pay attention to *noun endings* which could reliably predict grammatical gender by using *typographically enhanced texts*. He concluded that form focused instruction was more successful when combined with prompts than with no feedback or recasts.

8. The Rationale for Noticing, Awareness Raising and FOF Instruction

Learners are not capable of acquiring all linguistic or grammatical features without any pedagogical intervention (see, e.g. Ellis, 1995). Most grammatical and linguistic features go unnoticed by learners and learners never even pay the slightest attention to them. Even in the case of the forms that learners acquire without explicit heed to form that is in the context of communicative meaning centered activities, learners do not develop high proficiency levels in their production, for example, immersion program in Canada. learners without attention to form usually falter in productive skills of speaking and writing (see Swain, 1985). The

acquisition of some linguistic features, without attending explicitly to form is far from easy, for example, the acquisition of the difference between present perfect and present perfect continuous is a daunting task and a harrowing experience which cannot be achieved without direct intervention of teachers or any kind of attending to form.

Krashen (1985) claimed that comprehensible input, that is, the input slightly beyond the learners' present level of competence would suffice for language acquisition to take place, he believed that classroom activities should all be focused on content, meaning and message rather than form. He further purported that conscious linguistic knowledge functions only as a monitor system for the learner to monitor his/her output and this explicit knowledge has no contribution in fluent language production, for example, in speaking. He believed that fluent language production is the corollary of acquired knowledge rather than learned knowledge which is conscious.

Krashen's critics (e.g., see, Swain, 1985) claim that comprehensible input alone is by no means sufficient for language acquisition to take place. They pronounce the indispensible role of consciousness raising and FOF activities to make learners cognizant of target forms and concomitantly induce the acquisition of those forms. Long (1991) positing his interaction hypothesis, stresses the crucial role of interaction and negotiated input in acquisition. Swain (1985) studied the case of immersion program in Canada and observed that non-native speakers resembled indigenous speakers in terms of receptive skills, however, they lagged far behind native children in productive skills. Adducing output hypothesis, he added that output is indispensible to the process of language acquisition, since it brings about noticing, that is, learners get aware of their grammatical or linguistic shortcomings and loopholes in their inter language systems. Noticing pitfalls in their inter-language systems, brings about learners' paying attention to those forms on spot or in future input.

Output hypothesis, interaction hypothesis, allied with the scrutiny of immersion program in Canada and the failure of Krashen's input hypothesis paved the way for the advent of a novel era and an auspicious horizon in the field of language teaching. Pundits and gurus realized that the point was no longer whether to teach grammar or not, but the point was how to teach it. Schmidtt's noticing hypothesis is a compromise between modern communicative language teaching and obsolete deductive grammar instruction (Schmidtt, 1995). Research to date (e.g., Takahashi, 2005., Simard, 2009., Allanen, 1995) strongly favors noticing and attention to form by consciousness raising, input flooding, input enhancement, etc as a viable and appropriate path to the acquisition of linguistic and grammatical forms within the context of communicative, meaning centered activities. Noticing and FOF are a reconciliation of archaic deductive grammar instruction and communicative form-free practices, a rapprochement between form and meaning, a ceasefire between learning and acquisition. Ellis et al (2002) enumerate several premises on which the justification for an instructional approach based on FOF rests:

1. To acquire the ability to use new linguistic forms communicatively, learners need the opportunity to engage in meaning-focused language use (see Prabhu, 1987).

2. However, such opportunity will only guarantee full acquisition of the new linguistic forms if learners also have the opportunity to attend to form while engaged in meaning-focused language use. Long (1991) argues that only in this way can attention to form be made compatible with the immutable processes that characterize L2 acquisition and thereby overcome persistent developmental errors.

3. Given that learners have a limited capacity to process the second language(L2) and have difficulty in simultaneously attending to meaning and form they will prioritize meaning over form when performing a communicative activity (VanPatten, 1990).

4. For this reason, it is necessary to find ways of drawing learners' attention to form during a communicative activity. As Doughty (2001) notes 'the factor that distinguishes FOF from other pedagogical approaches is the requirement that FOF involves learners' briefly and perhaps simultaneously attending to form, meaning and use during one cognitive event' (p. 211).

Adopted from Ellis (2002)

9. Conclusion

FOF is a rapprochement between the obsolete deductive teaching of grammar and preposterous inductive grammar teaching within the so called communicative language teaching approach. FOF activities while keeping learners' attention on content and message, make occasional departures to the target forms and make learners cognizant of the forms and induce noticing and the concomitant acquisition of those forms. FOF can be an efficient and feasible way to teach grammatical and linguistic forms to learners while keeping their attention on meaning and content.

What seems to be clear is that noticing hypothesis and FOF can be harbingers of success for language learners and the use of activities which incorporate FOF to make the target features more salient for learners to notice can facilitate learning of language forms. The experts in the field recommend that curriculum and syllabus designers leave no stone unturned in embedding as much FOF and noticing activities as possible in language learning tasks. The majority of researchers (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 1990., Nassaji, 1999 ., Williams, 1995., Fotos & Ellis, 1991., Spada & Lightbown, 1993) found a strong relationship between enhancing target forms and learners' noticing and acquisition of those forms. What seems to be a more likely future trend in the field of language teaching and learning is the use of more extensive FOF and noticing activities in course syllabi and language tasks.

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