Focus on form in Task-Based Language Teaching
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Abstract

Given adequate opportunities, older children, adolescents and adults can and do learn much of an L2 grammar incidentally, while focusing on meaning, or communication. Research shows, however, that a focus on meaning alone (a) is insufficient to achieve full native-like competence, and (b) can be improved upon, in terms of both rate and ultimate attainment, by periodic attention to language as object. In classroom settings, this is best achieved not by a return to discrete-point grammar teaching, or what I call focus on forms, where classes spend most of their time working on isolated linguistic structures in a sequence predetermined externally by a syllabus designer or textbook writer. Rather, during an otherwise meaning-focused lesson, and using a variety of pedagogic procedures, learners' attention is briefly shifted to linguistic code features, in context, when students experience problems as they work on communicative tasks, i.e., in a sequence determined by their own internal syllabuses, current processing capacity, and learnability constraints. This is what I call focus on form. Focus on form is one of several methodological principles in Task-Based Language Teaching.

Option 1: Focus on forms

Option 1 is today considered the traditional approach, although it has not always been viewed that way. Course design starts with the language to be taught. The teacher or textbook writer divides the L2 into segments of various kinds (phonemes, words, collocations, morphemes, sentence patterns, notions, functions, tones, stress and intonation patterns, and so on), and presents these to the learner in models, initially one item at a time, in a sequence determined by (rather vague, usually intuitive) notions of frequency, valency, or (the all-purpose and question-begging) "difficulty". Eventually, it is the learner's job to synthesize the parts for use in communication, which is why Wilkins (1976) called this the synthetic approach to syllabus design. It is not just the syllabus that is synthetic in this approach, however. Learners are typically encouraged to master each linguistic item in synthetic syllabuses one at a time, to native speaker levels using synthetic materials, methodology and pedagogy. Synthetic syllabi (lexical, structural, and notional-functional, for example), are accompanied by synthetic "methods" (Grammar Translation, ALM, Audio-Visual Method, Silent Way, Noisy Method, TPR, etc.), and by the synthetic classroom devices and practices commonly associated with them (e.g., explicit

grammar rules, repetition of models, memorization of short dialogs, linguistically "simplified" texts, transformation exercises, explicit negative feedback, i.e., so-called "error correction", and display questions). Together, they result in lessons with what I call a focus on forms. Focus on forms lessons tend to be rather dry, consisting principally of work on the linguistic items, which students are expected to master one at a time, often to native speaker levels, with anything less treated as "error", and little if any communicative L2 use.

Focus on forms suffers from at least six major problems:

1. There is no needs analysis to identify a particular learner's or group of learners' communicative needs, and no means analysis to ascertain their learning styles and preferences. It is a one-size-fits-all approach. This usually results in teaching too much - some language, skills and genres learners do not need - and too little - not covering language, skills and genres they do need. This is discouraging to students and inefficient.

2. Linguistic grading, both lexical and grammatical, tends to result in pedagogic materials of the basal reader variety - "See Spot run! Run, Spot, run!" - and textbook dialogs and classroom language use which are artificial and stilted - "Hello, Mary. Hello, John. Are you a student? Yes, I'm a student. What are you doing? I'm reading a book, etc." - captured nicely in David Nunan's example of simplified Shakespeare - "Stab, Hamlet, stab!", and in classroom input that is functionally restricted and "impoverished" in various ways. In other words, a focus on forms often leads to what Widdowson (1972) called language usage, not to realistic models of language use. "Simplification" is also self-defeating in that it succeeds in improving comprehension by removing from the input the new items learners need to encounter for the purposes of acquisition. (Input elaboration can usually achieve comparable comprehension gains without this disadvantage and without bleeding a text semantically. See, e.g., Long and Ross, 1993.)

3. Focus on forms ignores language learning processes altogether or else tacitly assumes a long discredited behaviorist model. Of the scores of detailed studies of naturalistic, classroom and mixed L2 learning reported over the past 30 years, none suggests anything but an accidental resemblance between the way learners acquire an L2 and the way a focus on forms assumes they do, e.g., between the order in which they learn L2 forms and the sequence in which those forms appear in externally imposed linguistic syllabuses. Synthetic syllabuses ignore research findings such as those showing that learning new words or rules is rarely, if ever, a one-time, categorical event, and that learners pass through developmental stages, as well as the fact that many of the target items students are expected to master separately are often inextricably bound up with other items. As Rutherford (1988) noted, SLA is not a process of accumulating entities. Yet that is precisely what a focus on forms assumes.

4. Leaving learners out of syllabus design ignores the major role they will play in language development, nonetheless. Research by R.Ellis (1989) and Lightbown (1983), for example, shows that acquisition sequences do not reflect instructional sequences, and while results are more mixed here (see Spada and Lightbown, 1993), work by Pienemann (1984 and elsewhere), Mackey (1995), and others suggests that teachability is constrained

by learnability. The idea that what you teach is what they learn, and when you teach it is when they learn it, is not just simplistic, it is wrong.

5. Despite the best efforts even of highly skilled teachers and textbook writers, focus on forms tends to produce boring lessons, with resulting declines in motivation, attention, and student enrollments.

6. The assertion that many students all over the world have learned languages via a focus on forms ignores the possibility that they have really learned despite it (studies of language acquisition in abnormal environments have found the human capacity for language acquisition to be highly resilient), as well as the fact that countless others have failed. A focus on forms produces many more false beginners than finishers.

Option 2: Focus on meaning

A typical response to frustration with Option 1 has been a radical pendulum swing: a shift of allegiance to Option 2, and an equally single-minded focus on meaning. This position is implicit in much of the writing of Corder, Felix, Wode, Allwright, and others, in Prabhu's procedural syllabus, in part of the rationale for French immersion programs in Canada, in Newmark and Reibel's Minimal Language Teaching Program, and more recently in Krashen's ideas about sheltered subject-matter teaching, and Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach.

Unlike Option 1, the starting point in Option 2 is not the language, but the learner and learning processes. While the rationales and terminology have differed greatly, advocates of Option 2 typically invoke one or more of the following in support of their proposals: (i) the alleged failures or irrelevance of Option 1; (ii) (more positively) the repeated observations of putatively universal "natural" processes in L2 learning referred to above, reflected, among other ways, in relatively common error types and developmental sequences across learner age groups, L1 backgrounds and (naturalistic, instructed and mixed) learning contexts; (iii) the futility of trying to impose an external linguistic syllabus on learners; and (iv) the belief that much first and second language learning is not intentional, but incidental (i.e., while doing something else), and implicit (i.e., without awareness). L2A, in other words, is thought to be essentially similar to L1A, so that recreation of something approaching the conditions for L1A, which is widely successful, should be necessary and sufficient for L2A. Accordingly, Option 2 lessons with a focus on meaning are purely communicative (in theory, at least). Learners are presented with gestalt, comprehensible samples of communicative L2 use, e.g., in the form of content-based lessons in sheltered subject-matter or immersion classrooms, lessons that are often interesting, relevant, and relatively successful. It is the learner, not the teacher or textbook writer, who must analyze the L2, albeit at a subconscious level, inducing grammar rules simply from exposure to the input, i.e., from positive evidence alone. Grammar is considered to be best learned incidentally and implicitly, and in the case of complex grammatical constructions and some aspects of pragmatic competence, only to be learnable that way.

Although arguably a great improvement on Option 1, a focus on meaning suffers from at least five problems:

1. While not inevitable, in practice there is usually no learner needs or means analysis guiding curriculum content and delivery, respectively.

2. In the view of many (but not all) researchers, there is increasing evidence for the operation of maturational constraints, including sensitive periods, in (S)LA (for review, see, e.g., Curtiss, 1988; Long, 1990, 1993; Newport, 1990). The jury is still out on this, but a number of studies suggest that older children, adolescents and adults regularly fail to achieve native-like levels in an L2 not because of lack of opportunity, motivation or ability, important though all these clearly are in many cases, but because they have lost access to whatever innate abilities they used to learn language(s) in early childhood. If so, it will be insufficient for later L2 learning simply to recreate the conditions for L1A in the classroom.

3. Although considerable progress in an L2 is clearly achieved in Option 2 classrooms, as evidenced, e.g., by the ability of some graduates of Canadian French immersion programs to comprehend the L2 at levels statistically indistinguishable from those of native-speaker age peers, evaluations of those programs have also found that even after as much as 12 years of classroom immersion, students' productive skills remain "far from native-like, particularly with respect to grammatical competence" (Swain, 1991), exhibiting, e.g., a failure to mark articles for gender. Such items have been in the input all the time, but perhaps not with sufficient salience, and with inadequate sanction (e.g., negative feedback) on their accurate suppliance. Similar findings of premature stabilization have been reported in studies of adult learners with prolonged natural exposure by Pavesi (1986), Schmidt (1983), and others.

4. White (1991 and elsewhere) has pointed out that some L1-L2 contrasts, such as the grammaticality of adverb-placement between verb and direct object in (L1) French , but its ungrammaticality in (L2) English (*He closed quickly the door), appear to be unlearnable from positive evidence alone, i.e., simply from exposure to the input. English speakers should have no trouble learning that in addition to 'Je bois du cafe tous les jours' (I drink coffee every day), it is possible to say 'Je bois toujours du cafe' (*I drink every day coffee), which is ungrammatical in English. It should be easy because the learners will hear plenty of examples of each structure in the French L2 input, i.e., positive evidence. The reverse is not true, however. French speakers trying to learning English in an Option 2 classroom will be faced with the task of noticing the absence of the alternative French construction in the input. Worse, the deviant structure (*He opened carefully the door) causes no communication breakdown, making it likely that learners will remain unaware of their error. Positive evidence alone may suffice to show the learner what is grammatical, but not what is ungrammatical.

5. A pure focus on meaning is inefficient. Studies show rate advantages for learners who receive instruction with attention to code features (for review, see Ellis, 1994; Long, 1983, 1988). As I have argued for many years, comprehensible L2 input is necessary, but not sufficient.

Option 3: Focus on <u>form</u>

Both the extreme interventionist focus on forms and non-interventionist focus on meaning have problems, which often lead to further pendulum swings, as advocates mistakenly see flaws in the rival position as justifications for their own. There is a viable third option, however, which attempts to capture the strengths of an analytic approach while dealing with its limitations, and which I call focus on form (not forms) (Long, 1991, to appear; Long and Robinson, in press). Focus on form refers to how attentional resources are allocated, and involves briefly drawing students' attention to linguistic elements (words, collocations, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns, and so on), in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication, the temporary shifts in focal attention being triggered by students' comprehension or production problems. The purpose is to induce what Schmidt (1993, and elsewhere), calls noticing, i.e., registering forms in the input so as to store them in memory (not necessarily understanding their meaning or function, which is a question of how new items are organized into a linguistic system, and which may not occur until much later, and certainly not necessarily with metalinguistic awareness). In other words, to deal with the limitations of a pure focus on meaning, systematic provision is made in Option 3 for attention to language as object. Unlike in Option 1, however, which forms are targeted, and when, is determined by the learner's developing language system, not by a predetermined external linguistic description. Focus on form, therefore, is learner- centered in a radical, psycholinguistic sense: it respects the learner's internal syllabus. It is under learner control: it occurs just when he or she has a communication problem, and so is likely already at least partially to understand the meaning or function of the new form, and when he or she is attending to the input. These are conditions most would consider optimal for learning - the psycholinguistic equivalent of worker control of the means of production.

Focus on form should not be confused with 'form-focused instruction'. The latter is an umbrella term widely used to refer to any pedagogical technique, proactive or reactive, implicit or explicit, used to draw students' attention to language form. It includes focus on form procedures, but also all the activities used for focus on forms, such as exercises written specifically to teach a grammatical structure and used proactively, i.e., at moments the teacher, not the learner, has decided will be appropriate for learning the new item. Focus on form refers only to those form-focused activities that arise during, and embedded in, meaning-based lessons; they are not scheduled in advance, as is the case with focus on forms, but occur incidentally as a function of the interaction of learners with the subject matter or tasks that constitute the learners' and their teacher's predominant focus. The underlying psychology and implicit theories of SLA are quite different, in other words. Doughty and Williams capture the relationships among all three approaches very well in their forthcoming book (Doughty and Williams, in press-a): "We would like to stress that focus on formS and focus on form are not polar opposites in the way that 'form' and 'meaning' have often been considered to be. Rather, a focus on form entails a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on formS is limited to such a focus, and focus on meaning excludes it. Most important, it should be kept in mind that the fundamental assumption of focus-on-form instruction is that meaning and use must already be evident to the learner at the time that attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across." (Doughty and Williams, in press-b, p. 4)

Task-Based Language Teaching

Some examples would probably be useful at this point, so let us see how this would work in a particular kind of communicative classroom, one implementing Task- Based Language Teaching (TBLT). There are several lines of "task-based" work in the applied linguistics literature, and a flurry of commercially published textbook materials. Most really involve little more than the use of 'tasks' in place of 'exercises' as carriers of either an overt or a covert grammatical syllabus; they should not be designated 'task- based' at all, therefore, since they are grammatically based, not task-based. The task- based approach referred to here deals with grammar, but without recourse to a fixed grammatical syllabus, through focus on form.

As described more fully elsewhere (see, e.g., Long, 1985, 1997, to appear; Long and Crookes, 1992), recognizing the psycholinguistic problems with synthetic linguistic syllabuses, the syllabus and methodology for TBLT are analytic, and employ a non- linguistic unit of analysis, the task, at each of seven steps in designing and implementing a TBLT program (see Figure 2). It is steps 1 to 5 which concern us here with respect to the treatment of grammar in a communicative classroom.

Figure 2: Stages in TBLT

1. Task-based needs analysis to identify target tasks.
2. Classify into target task types.
3. Derive pedagogic tasks.
4. Sequence to form a task-based syllabus.
5. Implement with appropriate methodology and pedagogy.
6. Assess with task-based, criterion-referenced, performance tests.
7. Evaluate program.

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1. Conduct a task-based needs analysis to identify the learners' current or future target tasks. These are the real world things people do in everyday life: buying a bus pass, asking for street directions, attending a lecture, reading a menu, writing a laboratory report, and so on. Four of many target tasks for a tourist, for example, might be to make or change a hotel, plane, restaurant or theater reservation.

2. Classify the target tasks into target task types, e.g., making/changing reservations. This temporary shift to a more abstract, superordinate category during syllabus design is made for several reasons, including the frequent lack of sufficient time to cover all the target tasks identified in the needs analysis separately in a course, and as one way of coping with heterogeneous groups of students with diverse needs (for an example and details, see Long, 1985).

3. From the target task types, derive pedagogic tasks. Adjusted to such factors as the learners' age and proficiency level, these are series of initially simple, progressively more complex approximations to the target tasks. Pedagogic tasks are the materials and activities teachers and students actually work on in the classroom. A false beginners class

of young adult prospective tourists, for instance, might start with the following sequence: (i) intensive listening practice, during which the task is to identify which of 40 telephone requests for reservations can be met, and which not, by looking at four charts showing the availability, dates and cost of hotel rooms, theater and plane seats, and tables at a restaurant; (ii) role-playing the parts of customers and airline reservation clerks in situations in which the airline seats required are available; and (iii) role-playing situations in which, due to unavailability, learners must choose among progressively more complicated alternatives (seats in different sections of the plane, at different prices, on different flights or dates, via different routes, etc.).

4. Sequence the pedagogic tasks to form a task-based syllabus. As is the case with units in all synthetic and analytic syllabus types, sequencing pedagogic tasks is largely done intuitively at present. The search is on, however, for objective, user-friendly criteria and parameters of task complexity and difficulty, and some progress has been made (see, e.g., Robinson, to appear; Robinson, Ting and Erwin, 1995).

5. Implement the syllabus with appropriate methodology and pedagogy. The way I conceive TBLT (and LT in general), there is a meaningful distinction to be drawn between potentially universal methodological principles, preferably well motivated by research findings in SLA and cognitive science, and desirably particular pedagogical procedures that realize the principles at the local level, choice among the latter being determined by such factors as teacher philosophy and preference, and learner age and literacy level. 'Provide negative feedback' is an example of a methodological principle in TBLT (and most other approaches and "methods" in language teaching); whether it is delivered in a particular classroom through use of an explicit rule statement, in oral, manual, or written mode, explicitly via some form of overt "error correction" or implicitly, e.g., via unobtrusive recasts of learner utterances (see, e.g. Doughty and Varela, in press; Ortega and Long, in press), and so on, are local pedagogical decisions best left to the teacher. 'Focus on form' is another methodological principle in TBLT. As an illustration of how it might occur, let us imagine that while working in pairs on the third pedagogic task outlined above, a number of learners are repeatedly heard to use a form considered insufficiently polite, e.g., 'I want X seats' for 'I'd like X seats', to ignore key words like 'window' and 'aisle', and 'coach' and 'business', or to employ singular 'seat' when plural 'seats' is required. One way focus on form might be achieved is through corrective feedback built into the materials themselves, e.g., through the output of task (iii) being rejected as input for task (iv) in a travel simulation, thereby alerting students to the existence and/or identity of error. Alternatively, the teacher might briefly interrupt the group work to draw students' attention to the problems, perhaps by modeling one member of a pair of forms and asking the class if it is good or bad, perhaps by explaining the difference between the pairs of target forms, or perhaps simply by pointing to the words on the board. As always in TBLT, the methodological principle is the important thing; the optimal pedagogy for implementing that principle will vary according to local conditions, as assessed by the classroom teacher. He or she is the expert on the local classroom situation, after all, not someone writing about language teaching thousands of miles away in an office in Honolulu or a commercial materials writer sipping martinis on a beach in the Bahamas.

Some useful sources on focus on form

There is much more to be said about these issues, but I will close by indicating four useful new sources on focus on form. The first two are comprehensive reviews of laboratory and classroom studies of form-focused instruction (including focus on form) by the British psychologist, Nick Ellis (1995), and by Nina Spada (1997). Ellis concludes that the research shows a blend of explicit instruction and implicit learning to be superior to either one alone. Spada, similarly, finds broad empirical support for the view that form-focused instruction (including focus on form) is beneficial for SLA. Third, two Ph.D. students at the University of Hawai'i, John Norris and Lourdes Ortega, are currently (Fall, 1997) conducting a statistical meta-analysis of all studies of focus on form to date. Their findings are expected in the next few weeks (your prayers are welcome).The fourth concerns a crucial issue for teachers and researchers alike, namely pedagogical choices in focus on form (see Figure 3). Catherine Doughty and Jessica

Figure 3

	Unobtrusive Focus on Form ———————— Obtrusive Focus on Form
Input flood	X
Task-essential language	X
Input enhancement	X
Negotiation	X
Recast	X
Output enhancement	X
Interaction enhancement	X
Dictogloss	X
CR tasks	X
Input processing	X
Garden path	X

Williams have recently completed editing a book for Cambridge University Press: *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition*, due out in February, 1998, which contains several new empirical studies documenting the efficacy of focus on form with children and adults in a variety of classroom settings. One chapter in the book, written by the editors themselves (Doughty and Williams, in press-c), focuses on the six decisions and options for teachers and materials designers in this area:

1. Whether or not to focus on form,
2. Reactive versus proactive focus on form,
3. Choice of linguistic form,
4. Explicitness of focus on form,
5. Sequential versus integrated focus on form, and
6. The role of focus on form in the curriculum.

In meticulous detail, Doughty and Williams review the options available to teachers at each juncture, and what the research conducted at Georgetown, Hawai'i, Urbana-Champaign, Chicago Circle, OISE, Michigan State, Concordia, McGill, Penn, Edith Cowan, Bangor, Thames Valley, and elsewhere has to say about those options. With regard to decision (4), for example, since a major research issue concerns the relative utility of explicit or implicit procedures for different target structures and different kinds of learners, Figure 3, one of several from the Doughty and Williams chapter, ranks 11 procedures for delivering focus on form from least to most obtrusive, and reviews the research findings on each: input flood, task-essential language, input enhancement, negotiation, recast, output enhancement, interaction enhancement, dictogloss, consciousness-raising tasks, input processing, and the garden path technique. Besides providing a service to teachers and researchers alike, this work by Ellis, Spada, Norris and Ortega, and Doughty and Williams, offers the basis for a serious research program on the role of grammar in TBLT and other forms of communicative language teaching for the next decade.

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