Focus on Form Approach in Second Language Oral Production

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Abstract

Focus on form (FonF) refers to an approach which attempts to provide grammar focus. It is always done in the form of corrective feedback and only takes place in meaningful communication when learners still remain focused on meaning in the context of communicative language classroom. This paper aims at providing controversial issue of form-focused instruction, explaining strategies of focus on form, and discussing when and how to correct oral production.

Keyword: Focus on form (FonF), Strategies of Focus on Form, Oral Production

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the issue of form-focused instruction in second language acquisition has been highly controversial. Numerous researchers and educators are in favor of focusing on meaning and use while a large number of them are worried about the problem of inaccuracy in language acquisition and fossilization. Because of the concern about the significance of the role played by negative evidence in the process of second language acquisition, focus on form (FonF) has come onto the scene. Focus on form (FonF) refers to the approach of dealing with form which attempts to provide grammar focus through corrective feedback in meaningful communication, with the learner's attention remaining primarily focused on meaning in the context of a communicative language classroom. Written to explain this approach applied in L2 oral production, this paper is organized under 3 headings: controversial issue of form-focused instruction, strategies of FonF, and when and how to correct oral production.

Controversial Issue of Form-Focused Instruction

With the advent of a communicative approach in language teaching, there is a change from traditional stance of synthetic syllabus to analytic syllabus. The former divides the target language into separate linguistic items for presentation one at a time (Long & Crookes, 1992). In other words, it provides a collection of grammatical points, rules and words separately. The latter, on the other hand, values the presentation of whole chunk of the target language. There is no linguistic interference or control (Wilkins 1976, as cited in Long & Crookes, 1992). In agreement with analytic syllabus, some theories, namely Monitor Theory of SLA by Krashen (1982, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) and noncorrective approach (Rivers, 1986, cited in Long & Robinson, 1998) value the flow of communication and meaning rather than linguistic accuracy.

Nonetheless, the problem of inaccuracy in language acquisition is still discussed after the appearance of communicative views of language teaching. The question arises: to what extend do teachers underline "form-focused instruction"(FFI)? Lightbown and Spada (1999) nicely define FFI as "Instruction which draws attention to the forms and the structures of the language within the context of communicative interaction. This may be done either implicitly or explicitly". Larsen-Freeman (1986, as cited in Siyyari, 2005) is somehow against form-focused instruction and also points out that owing to this communicative approach, a tolerant attitude towards errors has taken place in language teaching, and the reason for it is that errors are a natural outcome of language acquisition. Moreover, focusing on form and error correction can interrupt the flow of communication.

However, Han (2004) states the problem of *fossilization* which refers to interlanguage patterns which seem not to change, even after extended exposure to or instruction in the target language. This problem has existed even among fluent EFL speakers, and it cannot be ignored.

The discussion, therefore, arises: how can researchers and practitioners deal with the defects of focus on form and those of mere focus on meaning? The approach of dealing with form is called focus on form (FonF) which attempts to seek the strengths of an analytic syllabus and also minimizes its limitations. Aiming to provide grammar focus, FonF is always done in the form of corrective feedback and only takes place in meaningful communication when learners still remain focused on meaning in the context of communicative language classroom. This approach is influenced by Interaction Hypothesis which states that the development of linguistic accuracy of novice language learners is promoted by face-to-face interaction and communication with more proficient speakers and reading more elaborated written texts (Long 1988a, 1991; Long & Crookes 1992, cited in Long & Robinson 1998). The other approach to deal with form is called Focus on FormS which Sheen (2002) clearly define that it is the presentation of discrete items of grammar, lexis, functions, and notions one at a time, which is equated with traditional teaching. In this paper, the interest lies in focus on form (FonF). FonF is further categorized into explicit and implicit dichotomy (Long & Robinson, 1998). Explicit focus on form refers to the fact that teachers directly draw learners' attention to the error with or without rule explanation, while implicit focus on form is indirect. The

advantage of implicit focus on form is that it does not stop the flow of communication. It involves some techniques: corrective recast, repetition, clarification request, and comprehension check.

Strategies of Focus on Form

As has been mentioned, there are two sets of strategies of focus on form: explicit and implicit ones.

2.1 Explicit focus-on-form

According to Ellis (2001) explicit strategies include directly drawing the attention of the learner to the error with or without rule explanation. In other words, explicit correction is the input in which an error is explicitly referred to, and the learner is directly told that It *is not X* but *It is Y* (Ellis, 2001). The example of explicit focus on form is shown below:

Student 1: was anything found by his body

Student 2: pardon

Student 1: was anything found. fou, fou

Teacher: watch me. Watch me. Found

Student 1: found

Teacher: found

Student 1: found

Teacher: found

Student 1: found

Teacher: ow, ow, found

Student 1: found

Teacher: found

Student: found

Teacher: found yeah

Student1: found by his body

According to Lyster and Ranta's study in 1997 (cited in Suzuki, 2004), explicit correction solely takes place 7% of the corrective feedback given in class and learner uptake of the correction is 50%. In agreement with this study, Panova and Lyster's observation (2002) reveals that uptake is relatively low, at 33% after learners' exposure to explicit correction.

2.2 Implicit focus-on-form

Implicit, or indirect, strategies range from giving facial signals to paraphrase, and recast (Ellis, 2001). There are various implicit strategies; however, this paper will put emphasis on recast, repetition, clarification request, and elicitation.

2.2.1 Recast

Among implicit strategies, recasts are seen as the most frequent kind of feedback in communicative classes, as demonstrated in Lyster and Ranta's finding (as cited in Spada & Lightbown, 1999) where they found that all teachers in content-based French immersion classes opted for recast. Recast is the teacher's reformulation of all or part of the learner's utterance (Nicholas et al., 2001, as cited in Matsumura, 2001). Lightbown and Spada (1999) define recast as the corrective feedback where the teacher repeats a student's utterance, using correct forms where the student has made an error, but does not draw attention to the error and maintains a central focus on meaning. The two educators further explain that recasts involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of students' utterances. Recasts are not introduced by "You mean", "Use this word", or "You should say". To illustrate the use of recast, an example is shown below:

Student 1: When you're phone partners, did you talk long time?

Teacher: When you phoned partners, did you talk for a long time?

Student 2: Yes, my first one I talked for 25 minutes.

Student 1: Why you don't like Marc?

Teacher: Why don't you like Marc?

Student 2: I don't know. I don't like him.

Despite a high frequency of the use of recast among teachers, learner uptake is relatively low. Panova and Lyster (2002) point out clearly that only 40% of the feedback moves with recast result in learner uptake. In agreement with this study, Lyster (1998, as cited in Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001) reiterates that recasts are ambiguous and that learners may consider them confirmation of meaning, not realizing they are feedback on form.

2.2.2 Repetition

The next implicit strategy is repetition. According to Bower and Kawaguchi (2011) repetition occurs when the interlocutor (teacher) repeats a learner's erroneous output. Teachers usually adjust their intonation in order to highlight the error. An example of repetition is shown below:

Student: He go to school?

Teacher: Go to school? (rising intonation)

Student: He goes to school.

According to Panova and Lyster's observation (2002) which aims at comparing seven types of corrective feedback in ESL classrooms, repetition is rarely used in class. It accounts for only one percent of the feedback moves. Surprisingly, from the same study, repetition could result in the highest rate of the learner repair (83%) and of course, 100% of the learner uptake.

2.2.3 Clarification Request

Another implicit strategy is clarification request which indicate to students either their utterance has been misunderstood by the teacher or that it is in an incorrect form (Spada & Lightbown, 1999). A clarification request includes phrases namely "Pardon me...", "What do you mean by..."

Teacher: How often do you wash the dishes?

Student: Fourteen.

Teacher: Excuse me? (Clarification request)

Student: Fourteen

Teacher: Fourteen what? (Clarification request)

Student: Fourteen times a week.

Nicholas et al. (as cited in Matsumura, 2001) propose that after clarification request, students will have to restate their speech. This makes them reconsider their oral production and probably self-correct their error especially if the learners are given a hint that the focus of the request centers on form, not on meaning. Referring to Panova and Lyster's observation (2002), clarification request occurred merely 11% of the corrective feedback given in class. In spite of its low frequency, clarification request plays an effective role of corrective feedback as it leads to high rate of the learner uptake.

2.2.4 Elicitation

Teachers elicit the correct form from students by asking them to reformulate their utterance (Spada & Lightbown, 1999).

Student: My father cleans the plate.

Teacher: Excuse me, he cleans the???

Student: Plates?

Lyster and Ranta's comparative study (1997, cited in Panova & Lyster, 2002) revealed that elicitation was not often implemented in phonological, grammatical, and lexical errors. However, teacher turns with elicitation led to 100% of learner uptake and 73% of learner repair.

When and How to Correct Oral Production

Henrickson (1980, as mentioned in Halušková, 2008) pointed out clearly that errors made by L2 learners fall into two categories: global errors and local ones. The former impede understanding and communication. Hence, they need correcting. The latter, on the other hand, do not have to be corrected since they do not hinder communication thanks to the context clue.

Regarding error correction, it is reported that the most effective method of error correction has not been concluded yet. Krashen and Terrell (1983, cited in Siyyari 2005) strongly believe that there should be no direct treatment of errors since it is not authentic in a real life situation and stops the flow of communication. Nonetheless, Halušková (2008) proposes that students want their errors to be corrected always. In order to establish such a balance between accuracy and fluency, Bailey (1985, cited in Halušková, 2008) suggests seven error treatment options, while each option could possibly have eight features. These options and features are outlined below:

1. To treat or to ignore

2. To treat immediately or to delay

3. To transfer treatment or not

4. To transfer to another individual, a subgroup or the whole class

5. To return or not to the original error maker after treatment

6. To permit other learners to initiate correction

7. To test for the efficacy of the treatment

Possible features are as follows:

1. Fact of error indicated

2. Location indicated

3. Opportunity for new attempt given

4. Model provided

5. Error type indicated

6. Remedy indicated

7. Improvement indicated

8. Praise indicated

It is vital that teachers develop their intuition to decide which option or combination of options is commensurate with their students at given moments (Halušková, 2008).

Siyyari (2005) also posits that teachers should first recognize the type of error whether the error is lexical, phonological, or so on. Next, they should make an effort to identify the source of that error which might be from L1 interference, teacher induced, etc. If the teacher wants to explain the error, recognition of linguistic complexity also plays a crucial role. After this stage, teachers should distinguish between global and local errors, and then it is significant to find appropriate strategies to deal with the global ones (ibid).

Conclusion

As this literature review demonstrates, merely focus on meaning might yield negative result in oral production i.e. fossilization. Focus on form, thus, came onto the scene. It is considered an attempt to capture the strengths of an analytic syllabus which emphasizes meaning and also minimizes its limitations by giving corrective feedback on grammar to learners while learners' primary attention is still on their meaningful communication. There are various strategies of focus of form. Teachers, therefore, have to select the appropriate strategies and applied them at an appropriate time so that students can develop their second language oral production.

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