

Optimal Grammar Instruction in Second Language Classrooms: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives of Form-Focused Instruction

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is illuminating the theoretical and pedagogical perspectives on grammar instruction in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research and educational settings. In many educational contexts, although communicative activities have been strenuously implemented into language lessons, grammar instruction has not been appropriately integrated in the lessons. In this article, theoretical perspectives on grammar instruction will be explained and a systematic framework of grammar instruction, “form-focused instruction (FFI)”, will be demonstrated. Then an instructed model integrating FFI and communicative contexts proposed by Lyster (2007, 2017) will be illustrated. Finally, empirical findings regarding FFI will be reviewed.

1. Introduction

One of the most controversial yet crucial questions raised by SLA researchers is whether and how to incorporate grammar instruction in second language (L2) classrooms. Although many language teachers believe that grammar plays a crucial role in developing their learners' language proficiency, the effects of grammar instruction and the way of implementing the grammar instruction have not been fully discussed. In reality, some teachers' practices tend to swing from one extreme to the other: from communicative lessons, such as communicative tasks, speeches and debates, to mechanical grammar translation lessons. For these teachers, L2 grammar and communicative activities are considered as a dichotomy, rather than a harmonious merger.

To date, it has been argued that an effective way to develop L2 communicative competence is through exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) and to negotiation for meaning through task-based interaction (Long, 1991). However, many SLA researchers have agreed that mere exposure to input and participation in meaning-oriented negotiation are not sufficient, and the incorporation of systematic form-focused instructional techniques is more likely to draw learners' attention to the target forms in ways that enhance L2 development (Swain, 1985; Lyster, 1994). Consequently, form-focused instruction was conceptualized and developed (Spada, 1997; Stern, 1990, 1992). However, very little SLA research has investigated the effects of repetitive practice (i.e., repetition of same/similar linguistic features) and consistent practice

particularly in classroom-based settings. Although research has revealed the effectiveness of ‘explicit’ instruction (e.g., provision of metalinguistic rules and grammar exercises), further investigation of extended practice with explicit rule provision (e.g., form-focused practice) is required (N. Ellis, 2002). In this article, the background of grammar instruction in SLA will be explained, followed by conceptualizations and frameworks of form-focused instruction (FFI). In addition, an instructional model integrating FFI into communicative contexts proposed by Lyster (2007, 2017) will be illustrated. Finally, empirical findings regarding FFI will be discussed.

2. Grammar instruction in SLA

2.1. Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and Long’s Interaction Hypothesis

The role of grammar teaching (formal instruction) has been one of the central issues in second language acquisition (SLA) research for many years. However, the question of whether explicit grammar instruction is effective in L2 acquisition is far from resolved. Krashen (1981) initially sparked the debate regarding the role of grammar teaching when he distinguished between acquisition and learning, claiming that language should be acquired through natural exposure. For him, grammar instruction played no role in L2 acquisition as learners would automatically (subconsciously) acquire a new language by processing comprehensible input within a built-in syllabus. Long (1983) agreed with Krashen’s claim that acquisition takes place through comprehensible input, but departed from the strong input orientation in interaction and stressed the crucial role of interaction modifications. Proposing the Interaction Hypothesis, Long (1983) claimed that learners can acquire a new language when they negotiate meaning (e.g., asking for clarification, confirming comprehension) during learner-learner interactions or teacher-learner interactions. According to Long, when language is used as a tool for communication, language learning will be incidental, which means that learning will occur even though the learners are not conscious about learning the L2.

2.2. Limitations of comprehensible input

However, many SLA researchers argued that merely being exposed to comprehensible input or engaging in the negotiation for meaning is not sufficient and a large number of subsequent empirical studies have revealed that the incorporation of a form-focused approach can successfully enhance L2 development (Day & Shapson, 1991; Harley & Swain, 1984; Harley, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Lyster, 1994, 2007; Swain, 1985). For example, a substantial body of Canadian French immersion research demonstrated that after a great deal of exposure to meaningful input, the learners had difficulty in acquiring accuracy of certain grammatical structures, such as gender agreement (Swain & Lapkin, 1982). Swain (1985) then proposed the Output Hypothesis and claimed that “producing the target language may be the trigger that focuses the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully

convey his or her own intended meaning” (p. 249). Swain (1991) observed content-based teaching classrooms and pointed out that content teaching with its focus on meaning appeared to provide “unsystematic, possibly random feedback to learners about their language errors” (p. 249). She further suggested that more “carefully contrived activities, which bring into the classroom authentic language in its full functional range,” (p. 250) needed to be implemented in content-based or communicative-based classrooms.

Other researchers also claimed that more systematic form-focused activities would address the linguistic shortcomings and so should be implemented into the communicative contexts. For example, Stern (1990, 1992) suggested that “analytic” and “experiential” instructional options can be considered as complementary, not as dichotomous (also see Allen, Harley, & Swain, 1989; Allen, 1983). He recommended that analytic strategies (i.e., emphasis on accuracy and focus on linguistic features) can be systematically integrated into experiential strategies (i.e., emphasis on fluency over accuracy and authentic use of the language) in immersion contexts and content-based instruction. At the same time, he recommended more increased emphasis on experiential strategies in traditional L2 programs, which are heavily based on grammar-based approaches and the L2 is taught as a subject. Stern’s flexible instructional options were further developed in Lyster’s counterbalanced-instruction approach (Lyster, 2007; Lyster & Mori, 2006) and the conceptualization of form-focused instruction (Loewen, 2015; Spada, 1997).

3. Form-Focused Instruction

3.1. Focus on form vs. focus on forms

Although SLA research to date has demonstrated the effect of form-focused activities and attention to form in communicative contexts, how to draw learners’ attention to form during communicative activities in L2 classrooms has not reached a consensus. Maintaining the importance of meaningful context and attention to form, as discussed earlier, Long (1991) proposed *focus on form* instruction. In Long’s claim, learners have to have the opportunity to attend to form while engaged in meaning-focused language use to fully acquire the new linguistic forms. In this sense, *focus on form* can be distinguished from *focus on forms*. *Focus on forms*, like traditional mechanical grammar drills, refers to instruction that seeks to isolate linguistic forms in order to teach them one at a time without a specific context (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991). However, as some researchers claim that negotiation for meaning does not necessarily ensure learners’ full attention to form and acquisition of the target form in the limited exposure contexts (e.g., Lyster, 2007), it may be premature to claim that *focus on form* is the most effective instructional type in comparison to focus on forms and meaning.

3.2. Framework of form-focused instruction

In order to overcome the dilemma of distinguishing *focus on form* and *focus on forms*, a more flexible and systematic framework of grammar instruction, form-focused instruction

(FFI), was developed by SLA researchers. FFI refers to “any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners’ attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly” (Spada, 1997, p. 73). This can encompass direct teaching of language (i.e., through grammatical rules) and/or response to learners’ errors (e.g., Corrective Feedback [CF]; Spada, 1997). It is noted that FFI includes both traditional approaches to grammar forms and communicative approaches where attention to form is expected to occur in meaning-focused activities. This means that FFI does not predominantly consist of decontextualized grammar instruction (e.g., mechanical drills). However, the extent to which FFI should be integrated into communicative activities is still open to debate (Lyster, 2007).

Loewen’s taxonomy of FFI

Loewen (2015) divides L2 instruction into the following two main categories: meaning-focused instruction and form-focused instruction (see Figure 1). Meaning-focused instruction (in Long’s term, focus on meaning) consists of various communicative activities in which learner’s attention to form does not occur unless there is a breakdown in communication. On the other hand, in form-focused instruction, there is a range of instructional techniques with varying degrees of explicitness, from implicit (focus on form) to explicit (focus on forms) instruction.

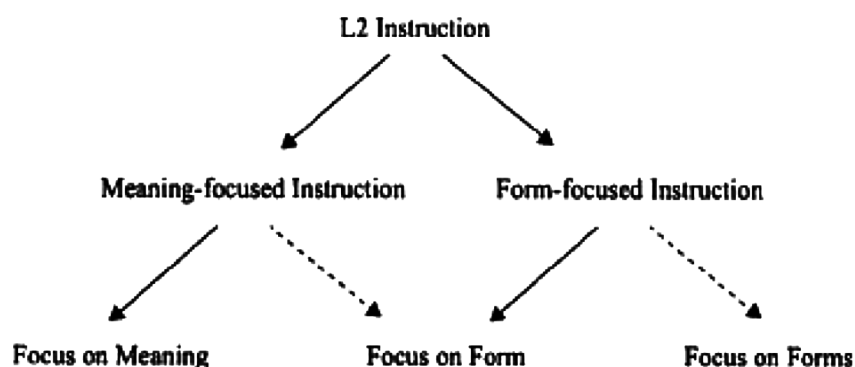


Figure 1. An abridge taxonomy of instructed SLA (adapted from Loewen, 2015, p. 58).

Although there has been much debate whether implicit or explicit instruction is superior, the research to date indicates that both approaches have the potential to foster L2 grammar acquisition (Keck & Kim, 2014; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Norris & Ortega, 2000). The degree of attention to and awareness of form during classroom communicative activities has been manipulated through the use of various types of FFI or focus on form (FonF) techniques, such as input flooding, input enhancement, recasts and prompts (CF), collaborative tasks (e.g., dictogloss), input-processing, and rule explanation (Loewen, 2015; Lyster, 2007; De Graaff & Housen, 2009; R. Ellis, 2012). As Loewen (2015) points out, “finding the optimal degree of implicitness/explicitness for instruction is a key interest in focus on form research” (p. 58).

Lyster's taxonomy of FFI

FFI can be categorized as “proactive” or “reactive” types of instruction (Lyster, 2004, 2007; R. Ellis, 2012; Doughty & Williams, 1998). On the one hand, proactive FFI refers to “pre-planned instruction designed to enable students to notice and to use target language features that might otherwise not be used or even noticed in classroom discourse” (Lyster, 2007, p. 44). The proactive approach consists of pre-planned activities drawing learners’ attention to specific grammatical structures by means of “noticing and awareness activities” followed by opportunities to use the target form during “guided and autonomous practice” (Lyster, 2017, p. 118).

On the other hand, reactive FFI refers to CF as well as other attempts (e.g., teacher questions) to “draw learners’ attention to language features in relatively unplanned and spontaneous ways” (Lyster, 2007, p. 47). Lyster and Ranta (1997) identified six types of feedback: recasts, explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, clarification request, elicitation, and repetition. Recasts and explicit correction only provide positive evidence (L2 models) to learners without asking them to produce L2 output and are therefore referred to as input-providing. In contrast, the other corrective strategies prompt learners to produce modified output without providing positive evidence and are described as output-prompting (Loewen & Nabei, 2007).

Instructional model integrating language and content

Lyster (2017) proposed a model of L2 learning and pedagogical interventions by implementing proactive and reactive FFI into content-based language teaching (communicatively-oriented) classrooms (see Figure 2). This figure is based on Gibbons’ (2015) hourglass figure presenting how teachers can focus on language during communicative (content-based) activities. Gibbons’ model indicates a progression from “learning through language” to “learning about language” and back to “learning through language” (p. 227). In

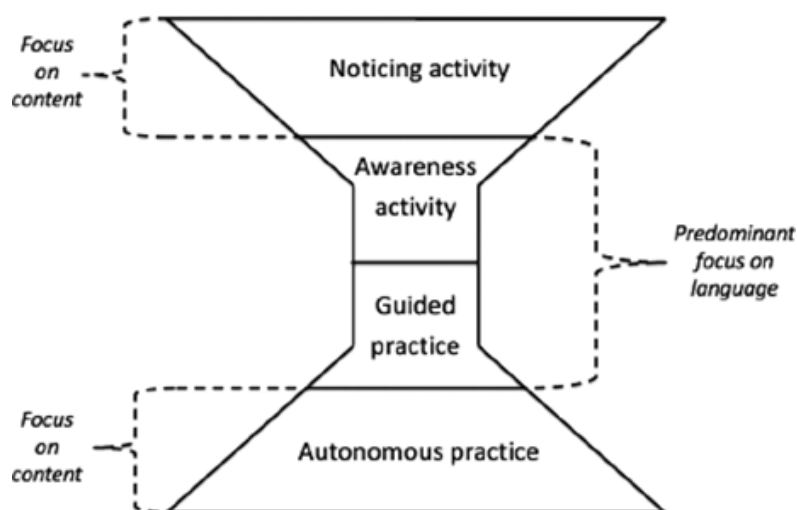


Figure 2. Instructional sequence integrating language and content (adapted from Lyster, 2017, p. 119).

Lyster's model, the instructional sequence starts with a primary focus on content in the noticing phase and then moves on to language during the awareness and guided practice phases. Finally, the primary focus is again on the content in the autonomous practice.

4. Empirical studies on FFI

To date, many SLA studies have revealed the positive effects of reactive FFI (e.g., CF provision) in both laboratory and classroom-settings (e.g., Lyster & Saito, 2010). With regard to the relative effects of prompts and recasts, while laboratory-based research found that recasts play a facilitative role in L2 development (e.g., Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009), several studies generally find prompts more effective than recasts (e.g., Yang & Lyster, 2010). Since the effectiveness of CF depends on various factors (e.g., linguistic features, developmental readiness), it seems reasonable to adopt a combination of different types of CF (e.g., prompts followed by recasts).

As reported in three meta-analysis studies (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010; Goo et al., 2015), although a general advantage for explicit FFI was confirmed in many studies, implicit FFI is also effective depending on various factors (e.g., linguistic features, age). Many studies on various types of proactive FFI in a range of contexts (e.g., French immersion, TBLT) revealed that implementation of systematic form-focused techniques (e.g., metalinguistic activities, guided task planning) along with sustained communicative activities assists learners to attend to form as well as meaning and facilitates further L2 development (e.g., Lyster, 1994; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; De la Fuente, 2006). However, in some cases (i.e., teaching a new structure or beginner-level learners), more prolonged form-focused practice activities as well as provision of metalinguistic information are required to perform well in communicative tasks (e.g., Ellis & Li, 2017). As N. Ellis (2002) stresses, repetitive practice in addition to provision of grammar rules are crucial to promote L2 learning. In this sense, the Lyster's model will be one of the potential approaches to incorporate grammar practice in communicative lessons. Meanwhile, SLA research on automatization of morphosyntactic structures investigated the effects of prolonged practice of artificial language features and L2 on decreasing error rates and reaction times mostly in laboratory-settings (e.g., DeKeyser, 1997; Robinson, 1997). To move forward, the investigation of repetitive communicative practice within the FFI framework will be required in classroom settings as well as laboratory settings.

5. Conclusion

This article reviewed the background of L2 grammar instruction in SLA and illustrated various conceptualization and taxonomies of FFI. It has been argued that mere exposure to comprehensible input and negotiation of meaning through task-based interaction may lead to optimal L2 development (Krashen, 1981; Long, 1991). However, as many researchers pointed out, classroom environments are limited in the extent to which they can provide exposure to the kind

of extensive naturalistic input that is requisite for L2 development; thus, systematic form-focused interventional techniques (e.g., FFI) were conceptualized and developed (e.g., Spada, 1997; Lyster, 2007). However, as N. Ellis (2002) and DeKeyser (2001, 2015) suggested, further investigation of extended practice with provision of explicit grammar rules is required.

Many empirical studies on reactive and proactive FFI have demonstrated the effectiveness of form-focused intervention accompanied by communicative activities (focused communication tasks) in various contexts. However, with the exception of some French immersion studies, in most previous studies on FFI and TBLT, many practice activities with explicit grammar explanation consist of consciousness-raising activities (i.e., reflection on metalinguistic rules, such as rule-discovery activities) within a short period. Hence, for the further direction, the investigation of repetitive communicative practice within the FFI framework will be required in classroom settings as well as laboratory settings.

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