

## LECTURE 9

### The Role of Formal Instruction in SLA

#### 9.1. Focus on Form (Form-Focused Instruction/ FFI)

Recall from Krashen's characterisation of the Input Hypothesis that what learners needed (at least at the early stages) was input and other forms of language modification or emphasis (for example explicit rule presentation, negative feedback) were not necessary. It soon became clear that more than input was needed, such as interaction and output. More explicitly, Ellis (2001) and Norris and Ortega (2000) among many others have argued that one needs an explicit focus on language to facilitate acquisition. This has led researchers to consider directly the effects of language focus in instruction (Gass and Selinker, 1994).

Implicit is the concept of focus on form. Long (1991) distinguished between focus on form and focus on formS. The latter refers to earlier teaching methodologies in which the main organising principle for language classrooms was the accumulation of individual language items (e.g., plural endings, passives). The former refers to a need for meaning-focused activity into which an attention to form is embedded. As Long (1991, pp. 45–46) stated, focus on form “overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose over-riding focus is on meaning or communication.” This is similar to what Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) referred to as enhanced input; that is, input that can be enhanced by an external source (e.g., a teacher) or an internal source (learners relying on their own resources). Learner-generated attention to form may not always come naturally and, clearly, may require some pedagogical training.

#### Timing

Harley (1998) investigated early focus-on-form intervention with young learners in order to determine the effect of early instructional focus on form. The learners in her study were Grade 2 students in an early French immersion program. The linguistic focus was acquisition of French gender, which in Harley's words is a “quintessentially formal aspect” of French (p. 156). There is little in the way of semantics incorporated into this feature. Gender assignment is a persistent problem for those schooled in an immersion program. Participants were pretested prior to the five-week experimental session and were post-tested following the session and again at six months following the treatment. The results indicate that focus-on-form instruction produces better results than no instructional focus, but learners do not extend their knowledge to other words. Harley suggested that “the experiment was more successful in inducing ‘item learning’ than ‘system

learning' ” (p. 168). However, in post-experiment stimulated recalls, students tended to demonstrate metalinguistic knowledge of gender and of certain generalisations. This, in fact, may be a part of (or at least a precursor to) learning. In other words, one needs to learn what needs to be learned before being able to sort out the specific facts of what is to be learned.

Lightbown (1998) reviewed a number of studies that deal with timing issues. In particular, she cautioned researchers/teachers not to take too seriously the notion of developmental sequences within a pedagogical context. In other words, while it may be the case that input on stages that may be considerably beyond the learner's current level does not lead to learning, there is no harm done to the learner. What is relevant, however, is the need for teachers to have appropriate expectations of what learners will and will not be able to take from a lesson containing input on stages well beyond their levels.

#### Forms to Focus on

It is clear that one cannot use focus on form instruction with all grammatical constructions. For example, some structures are so complex, involving movement, that it is not at all clear as to what could be focused on. Williams and Evans (1998) investigated the effect of focus on form on two structures: (a) participial adjectives of emotive verbs (I am boring vs. I am bored) and (b) passives (The dog was chased by the cat). Participial adjectives were used by the learners in this study incorrectly (e.g., My trip to Niagara Falls was really excited). Passives were used only rarely. Three groups of learners took part in this study: one group had explicit instruction and feedback, the second group received input only, and the third group served as the control. For the participial adjectives, the group that had explicit instruction and feedback outperformed the other two groups. For the passives, the results were more complex, showing only partial support for the hypothesis that the two experimental groups would outperform the control group and that there would be a difference between the two experimental groups. The overall results of this study suggest that learners' "readiness" contributes to their ability to focus on and take in new information. A second finding is that not all structures are created equal with regard to input type. For the participial adjectives, the learners had already noticed the form in the input, as is evidenced by their use of the form, albeit incorrectly. Here explicit instruction was more beneficial than providing input alone. For the passives, there was little difference between the two experimental groups. Any means of highlighting the form (input flood or instruction) serves equally to induce noticing.

In general, then, one needs to carefully consider what is being targeted to focus on and how best to relate that information to a learner's individual knowledge state and to the means by which a form is focused on.

### Input Manipulation and Input Enhancement

A significant function of language instruction is the manipulation of input. That is, teachers can provide varying degrees of explicitness in the input. A goal of SLA research is to determine the effectiveness of explicitness in terms of learners' developing grammars. The field has changed from a position in the 1970s and 1980s in which, following Krashen, what was needed to create implicit knowledge (more or less equivalent to linguistic competence) was comprehensible input. Explicit input led to explicit knowledge. In later years, the fusion of implicit/explicit input and implicit/explicit knowledge became more apparent. For example, DeKeyser (2003) suggested that explicit learning (e.g., metalinguistic explanation) can result in implicit knowledge through practice.

The concept of practice is important in pedagogical contexts. Practice, as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, is "to exercise or perform repeatedly in order to acquire or polish a skill." It is essential in understanding how explicit information might result in implicit knowledge or how declarative knowledge becomes procedural knowledge; it is essential in understanding how information might become automatised. In earlier years, practice meant little more than rote repetition and/or substitution drills. In cognitive accounts of language learning, practice takes on a number of forms, but the common ingredient is that the learner interacts with the language in some meaningful (not solely rote) manner. This can include language use (some interactive-based task) or some response to an audio prompt (answering a comprehension question following a listening or reading passage). Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) proposed a scheme for determining language demands during language use, distinguishing whether a form is natural in the task, useful to the task, or essential to the task. They used this scheme to determine the proposed effectiveness of different kinds of tasks, in terms of automatisisation, control, and whether a task relates to comprehension or production.

The concept of input enhancement highlights ways in which input is made salient to learners. As Polio (2007) notes, Sharwood Smith's focus was not on what happened in the learner's mind, but rather on what was done to the input. Input enhancement can take place in a number of ways, through drawing attention to a form (e.g., by coloring or boldfacing in written input). Underlying the importance of input enhancement is the concept of noticing discussed earlier. Given that input enhancement is a means of drawing a learner's attention to something, an

underlying assumption is that noticing is a prerequisite to processing of the input. Saliency, in Sharwood Smith's view, can come about by a learner's own internal devices (his or her own processing mechanisms) or by something that is externally created; this latter is input enhancement. Sharwood Smith refers to two variables involved in externally created saliency: elaboration (e.g., repetition) and explicitness (e.g., metalinguistic information).

## 9.2. Methodology of FFI Studies

Two kinds of instructional intervention in language learning can be distinguished: indirect and direct. Ellis (2005) defined indirect intervention as instruction that aimed at creating the conditions for learners to learn experientially through learning how to communicate in the L2, and noted that this can be achieved by means of a task-based curriculum. Indirect intervention, the instruction specifies what it is that the learners will learn and when they will learn it. That is, it is based on a prior specification of the language forms and/ or functions and their linguistic realisations to be taught. Direct intervention is based, then, on a 'type A curriculum' (White, 1988): it is a curriculum that is synthetic rather than analytic and is accuracy rather than fluency oriented. It is aimed at 'skill-getting' and constitutes 'an investment for future use' (Widdowson, 1989). The content of a type A curriculum can be specified either in linguistic terms (as a list of phonological, lexical, or grammatical items to be taught) or in notions/ functional terms and their linguistic realisations (as in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Council of Europe, 2001). Further, the direct intervention is also called 'Form-Focused Instruction/ FFI'.

The studies to be examined are experimental in nature. A true experiment requires: (1) random sampling from a well-defined population, (2) random distribution of participants into groups, and (3) a control group. In fact, in FFI research (1) and (2) have rarely been achieved as researchers have usually had to use intact classes. Thus, the studies to be presented are rather quasi-experimental. Key features of such studies are that they include a pre-test (essential if intact classes are used in order to ensure that the groups are equivalent at the beginning of the study) and both an immediate and delayed post-test in order to establish whether any immediate effects of the instruction are durable and also whether the effects only become evident after a period of time. Also, FFI studies should include a control group and, while some have, others have just included a comparison group.

Two methodological issues are of special importance in the design of FFI studies: (1) the choice of linguistic target and (2) the design of the instruments for measuring learning.

1. Choice of linguistic target: the key criterion in selecting the linguistic target is problematicity (i.e., the feature chosen should constitute a learning problem). Problematicity can be determined in different ways : remedial, grammatical complexity, acquisition sequences, linguistic theory and psycholinguistic theory (Ellis, 2008). In some studies, the choice of the target feature is based on previous empirical findings that have demonstrated the feature is problematic to learners. Or that the feature is grammatically complex and can be predicted to be difficult to learn. However, whether a particular linguistic feature is easy or difficult is relative to the learner's level of proficiency (and the learner's mother tongue). Thus, we should have knowledge of the learner's stage of language development and also some means of determining what is easy or difficult (hard) at different stages. It is for that reason that a number of researchers have sought to base their selection on what is currently known about acquisition sequences. In these studies, the choice of target feature was largely dictated by the availability of robust information about developmental sequences. Unfortunately, however similar information is not available for many other features.
2. The measurement of learning in FFI studies: in order to measure a construct it is necessary to define it carefully. Bialystok and Sharwood Smith (1985) distinguished two senses of acquisition: (1) the internalisation of completely new forms and (2) increased control over forms that have already been partially acquired. There is also a third sense: (3) progress along a sequence of acquisition (i.e., movement from an early to later stage of development in an attested sequence). The third sense of conceptualising acquisition is important because it avoids the need to base measurement on target language norms.

**Table: Methods of defining and measuring acquisition (Ellis, 2008)**

<b>Definition of acquisition</b>	<b>Method of measurement</b>	<b>Instruments</b>
Internalisation of a new linguistic feature	The presence of at least two exemplars of a structure that was not evident in the pre-test in two consecutive post-tests. This method requires production data.	The data for analysis can be collected by a variety of means but commonly a communicative task is chosen.

Increased control over use of a linguistic feature	Increased control is measured by means of a gain in accuracy from pre-test to post-test. This method employs both comprehension and production data.	A variety of instruments involving: Metalinguistic judgement, selected response, constrained selected response, and free constructed response.
Progress along an acquisition sequence	Progress is measured in terms of changes in the frequency with which learners produce different constructions for performing the target variable. This method requires production data.	A communicative task that elicits free constructed response.

### 9.3. The Effects of Formal Instruction on the Route of SLA

#### In Comparative Method Studies

The earliest research investigating the effects of FFI was ‘method’ oriented, that is, it consisted of global comparisons of language teaching methods that differed in their conceptualisations of how to teach language. At the time when a number of key studies took place (in the 60s and 70s), language pedagogy assumed that the teaching of language necessarily and essentially involved focusing on form (primarily grammatical form) and the principal debate concerned how form should best be taught. Thus, methods were distinguished in terms of whether form was to be taught deductively (as in the GTM) or inductively (as in the audiolingual method). The aim of comparative method studies is to establish which of two or more methods or general approaches to language teaching is the most effective in terms of the actual learning (the product) that is achieved after a given period of time. Many of the earlier studies were ‘global’ in nature, conducted over weeks, months, and even years. Later ones have tended to examine different resulting from shorter periods of exposure to different methods.

#### The Effects of FFI on Production Accuracy

This research was motivated by both theoretical and pedagogic considerations. On a theoretical level, the studies sought to test the claims advanced by researchers as Krashen (1981) and later Schwartz (1993) that teaching

grammar or correcting learner errors has no effect on the learner's 'acquired' system. On the pedagogical level, the studies explored whether FFI could help learners to acquire those grammatical features they had failed to acquire even after years of exposure to comprehensible input or those structures that were known to be difficult to acquire from studies of naturalistic learners. In fact, the studies that have investigated the effects of FFI on production accuracy have produced mixed results.

### Summary and Commentary

1. Instructed learners manifest the same order of morpheme acquisition as naturalistic learners (Fathman, 1978).
2. Instructed learners also manifest the same order of acquisition features comprising grammatical sub-systems as relative pronoun functions as naturalistic learners (Pavesi, 1986).
3. Grammar instruction may prove powerless to alter the natural sequence of acquisition of developmental structures as these are manifest in learner production (Pienemann, 1989).
4. Grammar instruction can be effective in enabling learners to progress a long the natural order more rapidly.