

I SPOKE ENGLISH OR I SPEAKED ENGLISH? :

ACCURACY VS FLUENCY

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Abstract

The popularity of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a dominant paradigm in English Language Teaching has now been challenged. The opponents of CLT argue that second language learning is not possible with only a focus on function (communication). They maintain that success in second language learning is also determined by a focus on form (grammar). These renewed calls for accuracy-based teaching are commonly referred to as Form-Focused Instruction (FFI).

This essay will discuss the role of form and function in teaching English as a second language. Taking the description of form and function as a beginning point, the writer will further consider a number of explanations of CLT and FFI to support the notion that both language form and function are related and complement each other in terms of second language learning success.

Introduction

As the English language goes international, the twentieth century has seen significant changes in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Despite the fact that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become the most frequently discussed approach among other major language teaching methods and approaches (Brown, 2000, p. 266), recent decades have reflected a growing awareness

of Form Focused Instruction (FFI) as a predictor of second language learning success (Ellis, 2001, p. 2). While some writers see CLT as more progressive than others, the detractors of CLT argue that it has ignored one key area of second language learning, i.e. the importance of language form instruction.

In attempting to understand the role of form and function in teaching ESL classes, it is natural to look at the definition of form and function as well as their relationship. Bos and Vaughn (2005, pp. 71-74), for example, suggests that the content of language instruction should focus on three areas of language: content, form and use. Content is usually termed as semantics, that is a branch of linguistics which study concepts and word meanings. Form refers to the sound and structure of words and is connected with three disciplines: phonology (sound rules), morphology (word formation), and syntax (word order). Another important aspect of language is use or pragmatics. Pragmatic skills deal with how a child could communicate effectively in home, community and school environments.

Another perspective of form and function is put forward by Johnson (2001, pp. 13-36). Referring to Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, he posits that a child should have the knowledge and skill of systemic, sociolinguistic and strategic competence in order to learn a foreign language. Systemic competence refers to how language operates in terms of its phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic features. While sociolinguistic competence covers the knowledge and skill of using language appropriately according to the sociocultural and discourse rules, strategic competence deals with verbal and non-verbal strategies used by language learners to cope with their communication problems.

From the two descriptions, it is clear that form and function are essential factors in the learning and teaching of foreign or second language. While language researchers have defined form and function in many different ways, many writers seem to agree that they are interdependent. In a series of studies concerning language development and instruction, language scholars have emphasised the relationship between form and function. While Owens (2005, p. 345) asserts that progress in one language area has an impact on others, research by Bos and Vaughn (2005, p. 80) indicates that students who experience difficulties in the use of language seem to have limited knowledge and skill of form.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

As an approach which shows a preference for function over form, CLT has been the popular paradigm in language pedagogy for many years (Nunan, 1999, p. 9). CLT is the term commonly used in the pedagogical literature to describe an approach which aims to implement the theory of communicative competence by incorporating the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 121).

The discussion of CLT would not be thorough without reviewing Hymes' theory. Hymes (1971, cited in Nazari, 2007, p. 202), a sociolinguist, showed great enthusiasm for communication-related matters. As an extension of Chomsky's (1965) ideas, one of his important works was concerned with language competence in which he posited that effective communication could not take place unless a person possessed communicative competence in addition to his/her linguistic competence.

The CLT tenets represent both gradual and radical changes from previous approaches. While the Grammar Translation Method was popular with language pedagogue over the last centuries, CLT theorists move the focus of language teaching

away from rules. Some authors repeatedly mention the importance of language learning to be premised upon genuine communication rather than merely on learning the grammar of a language. Holliday (1994, cited in Hiep, 2007, p. 195), for example, puts forward a concept called ‘the optimum interactional parameters’. This theory holds that learners could best improve their language skills when they are constantly exposed to genuine and meaningful communication in the target language.

However, Brown (2000, p. 266) argues that CLT is a uniform but broad theory about the nature of language pedagogy. Thus, inspite of the fact that CLT tenets are well-understood and recognised at the level of language teaching theory, there is much room for differences of opinion at the level of implementation.

As a result, while the advantages of an emphasis on communication are widely accepted in principle by many scholars; teaching professionals continue to review the implementation of CLT in terms of form and function relationship. Savignon (2002, cited in Hiep, 2007, p. 194), for example, maintains that while communicative activities are essential in enhancing learners’ communicative competence in the target language; the use of grammar should also be taken into consideration.

Form Focused Instruction (FFI)

As CLT continues to be reviewed, the topic of FFI has generated excitement and interest among language scholars over the last three decades. Ellis (2001, pp. 1-2), one of the leading proponents of this form-oriented notion, defines FFI as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form”. In this regard, the term FFI is used to describe any other form-focused methods and approaches such as focus on form(s), corrective feedback and negotiation of form.

The history of FFI could be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s in which language pedagogy was dominated by the Grammar-Translation Method as well as the Audiolingual Method. During this method-oriented period, many language scholars were divided on how to best teach form (Rubio et al., 2004, p. 160). A major controversy is whether second language learning success is a result of explicit form instruction or implicit form instruction (Andringa, 2005, p. 2).

In the second stage of FFI development, SLA researchers attempted to explore the relationship between instruction and acquisition. They found that while FFI could not change the order of acquisition, instructed learners showed higher progress in second language learning compared with their naturalistic counterparts. The research findings challenged the claim made by Krashen (1981, cited in Rubio et al., 2004, pp. 160-161) that learners could acquire grammar unconsciously and that grammar instruction has no impact on the learners' interlanguage.

Another important aspect of FFI development which has a great impact on the current FFI could be seen in the connection of form and function. A major issue is whether there is a need for the teaching of form, in addition to function instruction, to achieve higher degrees of language proficiency. Stern (1990, cited in Ellis, 2001, p. 13), for example, classifies language instruction into two types: *analytic strategy* and *experiential strategy*. While analytic strategy is based on activities which focus on grammar, experiential strategy is concerned with how learners use language in the real world.

Relatedly, Long (1991, cited in Ellis, 2001, p. 10) suggests that form and function are integral to the second language teaching. Using the terms *focus on form* (grammar) and *focus on forms* (communication) to illustrate this point, he goes on to say that "attention to form will work most effectively for acquisition if it occurs in the

context of meaning-focused communication rather than in instruction that is specially directed at linguistic forms”.

Given the importance attached to the form and function relationship, the supporters of contemporary FFI assert that neither form nor function could stand alone. Today, the term FFI is increasingly used to refer to any activity which incorporates communicative approaches in addition to traditional approaches. As such, FFI not only discusses the grammatical form of language; it also places significant emphasis on the pragmatic area of language (Ellis, 2001, p. 2). This is consistent with what Rubio et al. (2004, p. 162) say, “If meaning is paramount in CLT but attention to form is essential for developing accuracy and proficiency, the ideal teaching model would be the one that requires attention to form while maintaining meaningful communication”.

Conclusion

One common agreement about language components (form and function) is that they are intertwined. While research has shown that inadequate competence in form is negatively correlated with pragmatic competence, many language theorists believe that language competence relies on both linguistic and communicative competence. In the simplest terms, language learners could not acquire communicative competence without the knowledge and skill of grammatical competence.

As each pedagogical approach has its strengths and shortcomings (McArthur, 1983, p. 96), it seems reasonable that later approaches emerge to correct or supplement earlier approaches. Just as CLT has served a corrective function to the Grammar-Translation Method, it may be safe to describe FFI as providing a supplement to the limitations of CLT. As such, while CLT which stresses

communication over grammar, FFI concerns a combination of both. It outlines the importance of paying attention to form as ‘the building blocks’ of language as well as teaching meaning-based communication activities.

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