

PERSPECTIVES OF IN-SERVICE AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) ON THE TEACHING/LEARNING OF GRAMMAR: FOCUS ON FORM OR FOCUS ON FORMS?

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ABSTRACT

The attention to linguistic forms within the context of communicative interaction has been labeled as “Focus on Form” (Long, 1988, 1991). Such a concept contrasts with those most traditional types of form-focused instruction (referred to as “Focus on FormS”, by Long), in which specific linguistic features are isolated for intensive treatment, frequent in non-communicative activities. Based on issues concerning this thematic, the present research comprises a qualitative investigation whose main purpose is to identify and analyze the perspectives of in-service and pre-service teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) towards some aspects concerning grammar teaching and learning in the classroom context, especially in relation to traditional approaches of isolated focus on forms and the proposal of a new approach which would comprise a dual focus form/meaning in communicative interaction. The data that constitute the analysis corpus come from questionnaires and interviews structured towards the elicitation of the subjects’ perspectives on topics such as the meaning of being proficient in an FL, the relevance and ways of approaching the target-language grammar. The collected data are analyzed in the light of theory conveyed in important studies in the field of Second Language Acquisition whose scope covers topics such as form and meaning-focused instruction, linguistic competence and interaction, among which we underline those developed by Ellis et. al. (2001), Long (1988, 1991), Sheen (2003) and Spada (1997).

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the last decades of the past century, there have been many modifications in the field of Second Language (L2) instruction. The major change is indeed the shift from an explicit focus on language (that is, grammar, phonology and vocabulary) to an emphasis on the expression and understanding of meaning, proclaimed by the language teaching communicative approach.

These two extremes have been encapsulated by Long’s (1988, 1991) proposal that grammar instruction may be of two types: ‘focus on form’ and ‘focus on formS’. The former refers to ‘drawing students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning and communication’. (Long, 1991: 45-6). The importance of focusing on form, in this sense, is based on three main assertions on Second Language acquisition: (a) learners acquire new linguistic forms as a result of the attention given to them in contexts where the primary concern is on the message, rather than the code itself (Hatch, 1978); (b) learners usually show difficulty in attempting to and producing new linguistic forms in communication, since they possess a limited capacity of information processing (VanPatten, 1992); and, consequently, (c) they benefit from the opportunities that emerge from communication to give attention to form (Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Mackey & Philip, 1998). Focus on form contrasts with the most traditional types of form-focused instruction (referred by Long as ‘focus on formS’), in which specific linguistic features are isolated for intensive treatment, often in non-communicative activities.

Some studies investigating the effects of communicative language teaching combined with form-focused instruction on the development of L2 have also been interpreted as a support for the inclusion of natural communicative interaction in L2 classrooms. Such studies suggest that classrooms that provide focus on form within significant communication contexts are more effective than those that avoid form focused instruction conjunctly, or those that emphasize form- focused instruction virtually excluding communicative activities.

We should consider that the greatest part of classroom research about the extension of possible benefits of form-focused instruction to L2 learners has been developed in contexts where the instruction is exclusively or primarily focused on forms. There are a smaller number of studies about the effects of form-focused instruction in primordially communicative programs.

In Ellis et al. (2001), since in Ellis (1994), the author argues that ‘... it may be premature to reject a focus on formS approach.’ (p. 641). Since then there has been no published comparative study demonstrating that a focus on form is more effective than a focus on formS (in fact, the reverse is the case).

According to Sheen (2003: 226), ‘it is crucial to understand that the dichotomy proposed by Long is theoretical in nature.’ A focus on form is perceived as being compatible with currently accepted theories of Second Language Acquisition (henceforth SLA), whilst a focus on formS approach is considered as being incompatible with this. The way such a dichotomy has been characterized has created an unnecessary polarization which has resulted in one of them – a focus on forms approach – being stigmatized as unworthy of consideration, whilst the other, a focus on form approach, is being accepted *a priori* as the preferred option. Visibly against such a polarization, Sheen (op. cit.) adds:

[...] our knowledge of the nature of the process of classroom SLA is so limited that theoretically-driven advocacies are not sufficient to justify unquestioned acceptance. They can only be justified if extended trialing provides reliable and supportive empirical evidence. If such evidence is not forthcoming, the greater effectiveness of a focus on form will remain hypothetical. If applied linguists continue to claim it to be the most effective option, in spite of this lack, they will be in the process of creating a myth. (p. 227)

In the present study, however, we do NOT intend to evaluate the merits nor the effects of form-focused instruction and the dual meaning/form-focused approach on the learning of a Foreign Language. Our objective is to identify the perspectives of lecturers and students of undergraduate courses in English Language and Literature (Letters courses) in the southernmost of Brazil about such approaches, taking into consideration the presupposition, or common sense, that linguistic accuracy in the target language would be fundamental to those who teach it. As stated by Consolo (2006), ‘if a language teacher’s speech is frequently marked by errors, this can seriously interfere with the quality of input provided for his/her students.’

Some comparative studies have focused on two types of teaching strategies: implicit (also called inductive) and explicit (also called deductive). Examples of the implicit are: the direct method, the natural method, audio-lingual method, strong CLT, and various aspects of focus on form strategies. Examples of the explicit strategies are: grammar translation, cognitive code learning, and focus on forms as in a skills-learning approach. The present research will also comprise the informants’ perspectives and beliefs about the ‘ideal’ form of grammar approach in terms of explicitness degrees.

2. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The purpose of this study is to investigate issues concerning grammar teaching and learning in EFL classroom. More specifically, we seek to (a) identify the perspectives of lecturers and students of two undergraduate courses of English language and Literature (Letters Courses) about the meaning of knowing (being proficient in) a foreign language; (b) analyze the opinions of such informants on the relevance of teaching/learning the target language grammar; (c) detect the perspectives of such participants in relation to how the teaching-learning of an FL should occur, that is, either through an integrated form/meaning/communicative act approach (focus on form), or through a restrict sense grammatical approach (focus on formS); (d) analyze such perspectives looking for apprehending convergent and divergent points in reference to what has been verbalized by the lecturers and students under investigation and what some studies pertinent to the field of Applied Linguistics have pointed in respect to the teaching and learning of grammar in FL/L2 classroom contexts.

We seek for the contemplation of the present research objectives through the use of qualitative methods of investigation. The qualitative approach works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and behaviors, that correspond to a deeper space of relationships, processes and the phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables” (Minayo, 2002, p.22).

The research subjects are students of two classes of the sixth semester of an undergraduate course in English Language and Literature and their respective teachers (lecturers) from a public and a private university in the southernmost of Brazil. As data collection instruments, there have been applied questionnaires and interviews comprising semi-structured questions, such as: (1) In your opinion, what does it mean to be proficient in an FL? (2) For you, is it relevant teaching the target language grammar? (3) How should grammar be addressed: in an explicit or

implicit way? Therefore, the data from such instruments constitute the *corpus* of investigation, which have been transcribed, compiled and analyzed in the light of the theoretical referential previously referred.3. Data presentation and analysis

Due to the fact that this is an in-progress research, the *corpus* to be analyzed here is composed of samples from the answers to the interviews and questionnaires that have been applied so far, whose informants are, respectively, two EFL teachers (lecturers) and two students of an undergraduate course in English Language and Literature from a public and a private university in the southernmost of Brazil. In order to proceed to the presentation and analysis of the collected excerpts, we denominate the Lecturer from the public university as **L1** and the Lecturer from the private university as **L2**. Following the same criterion, Student 1 (**S1**) and Student 2 (**S2**) belong to the public institution and the private one, respectively.

Based on the guiding questions of this investigation, we have set up the major topics of analysis, which are: **3.1-** *The meaning of being proficient in an FL*; **3.2-** *The relevance of teaching the target language grammar*; **3.3-** *The ideal form of grammar approach in terms of explicitness degrees*. It is necessary to clarify that the pertinence of question 3.1 relies on the fact that it provides subsidies from which we seek to verify the relation between the informants' view about what would imply to be proficient in an FL and if, for the achievement of such a proficiency, explicit teaching of grammar would be considered relevant or not.

3.1. The meaning of being proficient in an FL

3.1.1. The perspectives of Lecturer 1

Lecturer 1 introduces the topic by mentioning that the concept of proficiency has suffered changes in consonance with the different approaches of languages teaching that emerged in the course of history. Since she has been an English teacher for twenty years, she affirms being experienced some of such changes, and being influenced by them.

According to L1, it is proficient the learner who gets to accomplish his/her communicative goals, even with some difficulty, making grammatical and phonological errors/mistakes. She adds that the concept of proficiency can be applied to a particular linguistic ability or skill.

3.1.2. The perspectives of Lecturer 2

Lecturer 2 relates the concept of linguistic proficiency to the idea of mastering the target-language, which means, in her opinion, knowing how to use it in different situations and contexts. Just like L1, the second informant believes that the proficient individual is the one who knows how to communicate in a successful way. However, while the first lecturer does not condition the idea of proficiency to the mastery of the four linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), assuming that the learner can be proficient in one or more (but not necessarily in all), L2, on the other hand, connects the focused concept to the mastery of all four linguistic skills.

3.1.3. The perspectives of Student 1

According to S1, proficiency in a foreign language can be identified through the observation of the learner communicative competence, which can be divided in four dimensions. She defines sociolinguistic, strategic and discursive competences, concluding that

[...] therefore, proficiency in an FL is connected to how communicatively competent the speaker is, taking into consideration the characteristics previously pointed about communicative competence.

We should highlight that the answers given by S1, especially those related to the definition of communicative competence, are certainly based on the literature in the field of language acquisition.

3.1.4. The perspectives of Student 2

Just like the other informants, S2 believes that being proficient in an FL is "to know how to communicate". However, she adds an idiosyncratic component to support her point of view, when she highlights the preservation of the individual's personality essential characteristics in the communicative act.

We emphasize that, despite some divergent assertions, the intersection point verified in the informants' answers relies on the association of the idea of proficiency to the ability to communicate in the target language. Curiously, none of them pointed grammar accuracy as a component of linguistic proficiency, at least not in relation to this topic.

3.2. The relevance of teaching the target language grammar

3.2.1. The perspectives of Lecturer 1

Since grammar is part of any language, affirms L1, one should think about what it means 'to teach grammar'. In her opinion, with the communicative approach advent, the main goal of language teaching has been the learner communicative competence development. In this sense,

if we understand the concept of communicative competence as supported by four pillars, that is, linguistic competence which, in this case, we can associate with: 1) grammatical competence; 2) discursive competence; 3) socio-linguistic competence; and 4) strategic competence, we can say that there is no communicative competence without linguistic or grammatical competence.

Lecturer 1 adds that the way of teaching grammar, in consonance with the communicative approach, should primarily take place through an inductive method, trying to distinguish it from the deductive method of teaching.

3.2. The perspectives of Lecturer 2

While L1 seems to have thought about the relevance of teaching grammar to EFL learners, in general, Lecturer 2 fundamentals her answer taking into consideration her students, that is, pre-service EFL teachers, in relation to whom she finds grammar knowledge to be indispensable.

According to L2, grammar teaching has been target of criticism. However, she has noticed that her students find its teaching important (perhaps, she has referred to the traditional teaching of grammar).

Grammar teaching has been contested, but I have noticed that students ask for grammar... They need to know it, even nomenclatures. They need to know what subject is, what you call this and that in English.

In the above excerpt, the view of grammar teaching points to the most traditional form-focused instruction, or, using Long's terminology, 'focus on forms', in which specific linguistic features are isolated for intensive treatment, so frequent in non-communicative activities.

3.2.3. The perspectives of Student 1

According to S1, a language grammar should always be a subject matter in an FL classroom, being crucial the choice of the most adequate approach for its teaching, considering communication as the major goal to be accomplished.

The informant criticizes traditional methods of FL teaching based on exclusive form-focused instruction.

Student 1's considerations meet Long's focus on form notion, according to which learners acquire new linguistic forms as a result of the attention given to them in contexts where the primary concern is with the message, rather than the code (Hatch, 1978).

3.2.4. The perspectives of Student 2

In Student 2's opinion, learning the target-language grammar is important. Just like the other informants, she recognizes that there is more than one way to work on grammatical points. However, S2 was the only one that pointed the learner maturity (or the developmental stage) as one of the criteria of choice towards the approach to be adopted.

The informant highlights the pertinence of grammatical explanation to promote learners attention to form.

If there is no grammatical explanation, students may not distinguish the subject, or the personal pronoun, from the verb, and they may end up thinking, for example, that: 'I am' is a unique structure and tend to say "I am study", work... Similarly, learners might not recognize the infinitive of the verb when it does not begin with 'to', but with 'ing'. For example: "I started smoking when I was studying for the finals." [...]

3.3. The ideal form of grammar approach in terms of explicitness degrees

3.3.1. The perspectives of Lecturer 1

As an introduction to the question concerning the ideal approach of grammar teaching, L1 reiterates her tendency to work in a more inductive way, recognizing, however, that a balance point would be recommendable. She establishes a sort of relation between both, inductive and deductive teaching methods, and implicit and explicit degrees, respectively.

Presently, we have worked the FL teaching in a more inductive rather than deductive way [...] A balance point is recommendable, especially because the inductive teaching of grammar presupposes linguistic INPUT, an amount of exposure to the target language, so that the learner can get the language rules inductively. Isn't that right? [...]

Considering the fact that FL learners are not constantly exposed to enough comprehensible INPUT¹ in the target language, Lecturer 1 affirms that the teacher should also make use of the deductive teaching of grammar when necessary.

The informant bases her arguments on research references (although she does not mention them explicitly) according to which some linguistic items would need explicit treatment for the effectiveness of the learning by the learner. Taking into consideration L1's academic formation (She holds a PhD in Linguistics), it is expected that she base her pedagogical practice on the literature in the domain of Applied Linguistics.

3.3.2. The perspectives of Lecturer 2

As well as the first lecturer, L2 understands that grammar can be addressed implicitly or, sometimes, explicitly, depending on the situation. The relevant difference between L1 and L2's arguments relies on the criteria that would justify the choice of one or another approach, that is, while for one of the informants the type of grammatical item or structure would define the type of treatment to be used, for the other informant the consideration of the learning moment/situation and the respect to the learner developmental stage would be a decisive point. According to L2, the teacher could firstly address the same linguistic form in an implicit way and, in a second instance, explicitly. Such a procedure would probably optimize the assimilation of content by the learner.

3.3.3. The perspectives of Student 1

The first investigated student points to the pertinence of the implicit approach of grammar in first instance, highlighting its insertion within a meaningful context. Such perspective would corroborate, at least in part, the idea of focus on form, rather than focus on formS (cf. Long 1988, 1991).

A Foreign Language grammar should be addressed implicitly, so that, through the suggested context observance, students deduce rules of a certain grammatical element usage. Consequently, the focus of the study is not on grammatical rules of formation, but on usage.

Despite previous arguments, as well as lecturers 1 and 2, Student 1 believes that explanations and deeper grammatical analysis should have their turn in the FL teaching.

This doesn't mean, however, to give up grammatical explanations or deeper analysis, but, firstly, emphasize the language in use, providing learners with moments for them to familiarize with new linguistic topics. In a next instance, the approach of grammar rules might possibly be effective and helpful to learners.

Here again it seems clear the relevance of a later explicit grammatical treatment as a reinforcement strategy towards those items that have been implicitly addressed by the teacher at first.

3.3.4. The perspectives of Student 2

¹ *Comprehensible input* is a hypothesis first proposed by Stephen Krashen. (Krashen, 1981) He purports that ELLs acquire language by hearing and understanding messages that are slightly above their current English language level. (Comprehensible Input +1)

As a criterion to decide about the explicitness degrees through which grammatical items should be addressed, Student 2 points the observance of classroom context, as well as learners' ages.

It depends on the context, as well as the learner's age. I enjoy explaining grammar in an implicit way when my objective is a general explanation of a certain situation or topic. In this case, what is more relevant is the context and cultural data. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to explicit some grammatical points in order not to cause future misunderstandings.

4. CONCLUSION

In a general sense, according to the research informants' perspectives, the grammar of a Foreign Language should be addressed implicitly, starting from a meaningful context. Such a perspective finds support on studies whose results suggest that classrooms provide learners with focus on form within communicative contexts are more effective (Long, 1988, 1991, for example). However, for the same informants, moments of explicit grammatical focus have their pertinence in the sense of optimizing the assimilation of determined linguistic structures by the learner. Such a point of view corroborates, at least partially, the idea that instruction itself can not make learners skip a natural developmental stage, but, once a certain stage is reached, instruction can be fruitful in the sense of increasing the probability that proper rules of the stage will be applied.

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Ph.D. in Language Studies (Applied Linguistics). M.A. in Language Studies (Language Acquisition). B.A. in Languages (English/Portuguese and respective Literatures). In 1994, Dr. Cunha joined the faculty of the Sul-rio-grandense Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology (IFSul-Pelotas-Brazil), where she coordinates the Graduate course in Visual and Verbal Languages and Technologies. She also teaches in the Master's Program in Education and Technology, at IFSul. Professor Cunha's research interests include: Foreign Language teaching and learning; the role of instruction in FL learning; corrective feedback; beliefs; interaction; e-learning and teacher continuing education.

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