A Review of Formal Instruction and Implications for Pedagogy in English as a Second Language Teaching

PHAM THI TU HANG
Ha Tinh University, Ha Tinh province, Vietnam
Email: hang.phamthitu@htu.edu.vn

Abstract

In second language acquisition (SLA), the role of formal instruction attracted the attention from many researchers and teachers. Teaching learners the formal systems of a second language (L2) or focusing on communicative skills is likely to receive the most attention. Formal instruction means teaching grammar (form-focused instruction). This paper analyses the benefits and limitations of the two approaches and some implications for pedagogy are recommended.

Keywords: formal instruction, SLA, L2

INTRODUCTION

In language teaching and second language acquisition (SLA) theory, the role of language form and the issue of formal instruction are at the heart of debate and has been subject to controversy and discussion among researchers for at least 50 years (Ellis, 2010). There are two extreme options in language teaching concerning the role of form: traditional grammar-based instruction and meaning-focused communicative language teaching. In the former, the second language is broken down into discrete items which are taught separately and step by step with the assumption that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up (Wilkins & Wilkins, 2007). The role of learners is to synthesize these parts into a whole unit and then use it in communication. This is what Wilkins and Wilkins (2007) termed as synthetic approach. The general principle for the traditional grammar-based instruction is that grammar is the foundation upon which language learning should be based (Cook, 1991, 2009; Hinkel & Fotos, 2016).

757

However, research on both SLA and psycholinguistics shows that second language acquisition is not a process of accumulating entities (Ellis, 2010; Hinkel & Fotos, 2016). Language learning rarely happens with bits of language being learnt separately in an additive fashion. In addition, teachers cannot predict and determine what students are going to learn at any given stage (Shintani, 2015; Wilkins & Wilkins, 2007). Traditional grammar-based instruction ignored the language learning developmental processes through which L2 learners normally pass, and the fact that progress is not necessarily unidirectional (Ellis 2008). Furthermore, as for the authenticity of the input, Long and Robinson (2008) states that as fabricated by teachers, the classroom interactions and the practiced language forms will not necessarily transfer to actual language use in real-life situations. As a result, traditional grammar teaching has failed to prepare learners for spontaneous, contextualized language use.

Formal instruction occurs in classroom when attempts are made to raise the learner's consciousness about the nature of target language rules in order to aid learning (Krashen, 1982). It can take place deductively (i.e. the learners are told the rules) or inductively (i.e. the learners carry out language tasks designed to develop a knowledge of specific rules) and shows that research findings concerning grammar teaching provide us with considerably strong evidence that this type of instruction can help acquisition, e.g. in accelerating it, in increasing accuracy, etc.

THE ROLE OF FORMAL INSTRUCTION

Form-focused instruction is often referred to as 'instruction' (Krashen,1982, 1985) 'formal instruction' (Lighbown & Spada, 1990; Norris & Ortega, 2000), and 'code-focused instruction' (Doughty, 1991). is defined as the teaching of language with the emphasis on focusing the learner's attention on forms in order that they become conscious of the rules of those forms and eventually acquire the language. It might be surprising for some people that several scholars do not believe that such teaching will have any impact on acquisition and therefore neglect it. Prabhu (1987) for example, believes that development of competence requires the creation of conditions in which learner engage in an effort to cope with communication, not systematisation of planned grammatical input. Other scholars who see little use of grammar teaching are Norris and Ortega, (2000), Terrel (1977), Corder (1981). Some of the reasons given are that grammar teaching could have deleterious effect on learners, it is not effective, etc. The strongest advocate of this view is Steven Krashen (1982, 1985) who is famous for his learning vs acquisition dichotomy and his monitor theory. He also proposes the dichotomy of explicit (knowledge that can be reported and explained) and implicit knowledge (cannot be explained, intuitive and tacit) of language. Only implicit

knowledge is responsible for acquisition (proven by demonstrated correct oral production). Explicit knowledge can be learned (grammar is passively understood) and taught, but it is only useful for monitoring oral production. Implicit knowledge cannot be taught, but it can only be acquired through genuine communicative activities. On these grounds, he rejects formal grammar teaching. However, Krashen (1985) does admit that form-focused instruction can be effective for teaching elementary rules like supplementary 's' for plurals and third person verbs. He based his views on a number of research findings which did not show significant effects of instruction on the process of second language (L2) acquisition. Based on his learning and acquisition dichotomy, Krashen argues that from learning the learners obtain conscious knowledge of grammar which is not responsible for actual L2 performance. On the other hand, acquisition is the underlying process which is responsible for the actual performance and this can only happen unconsciously through the communication experience. Thus for Krashen there are four characteristics of an ideal classroom: the classroom language must be comprehensible; the classroom teaching must use 'communicative activities' because only these activities can ensure that the input is interesting and relevant; there should be no attempt to follow a grammatically sequenced program; and the input must be sufficient in quantity (which implies that extensive reading should be provided). Thus, he asserts that grammar instruction is of little importance.

Swain and Lapkin (2015) suggest that conscious rules obtained by the learners through instruction result in different performance levels. They can facilitate acquisition to help induce hypothesis testing thereby making this process more efficient. He does not suggest that the learned rules can turn to acquisition.

The findings of Qian's (2019) study suggests that formal grammar instruction does make a difference. She compared 3 groups of learners: a natural group (no grammar teaching, learners learn naturally through communication), a mixed group and an instructed group which used a number of grammatical morphemes in unplanned speech.

In conclusion, there are many views support for the idea of formal grammar teaching can help acquisition. These views also show some of advantages of teaching grammar. However, more research on how exactly it facilitates acquisition is still required before it gains wider acceptance because there are still problems with those studies, problems with grammar teaching found in some studies and questions to answer. These are discussed briefly below.

Problems: As can be observed in the review above, there are some problems that may occur in grammar teaching are: it can have deleterious effects, it can de-motivate if the teaching is not interesting, it can lead to wrong

generalisation (Ellis, 2010; Lightbown, 1983), and it can be ineffective if the learners are not ready (Smith, 1993).

Advantages: The advantages are: formal grammar teaching can improve accuracy Ellis (2010); Qian (2019); Lightbown and Spada (1990), it can accelerate acquisition when learners are ready (Smith, 1) it can help eliminate inappropriate use of expressions (Adnan, 1994), and it can result in new knowledge (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

FORMAL INSTRUCTION IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT)

Realizing that considering the language purely as an object of study cannot develop the expected level of interlanguage proficiency, Nassaji & Fotos (2004) attempted to abandon grammar-based instruction in favor of more communicative-oriented language teaching which focused on language use since they They argued that formal language lessons would develop only declarative knowledge of grammar structure, not the procedural ability to use forms correctly and that there was no interface between these two types of knowledge since they existed as different systems in the brain. As such, they see formal instruction as unnecessary for interlanguage development (Dekeyser, 2001; Long & Robinson, 2008; Tran & Nguyen, 2019; Tran et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2021).

According to CLT approach, people of all ages learn languages best by experiencing them as a medium of communication. Long & Robinson (1998) claims the essence of communicative language teaching is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence. Also, Krashen (1985) agrees that exposing learners to large quantities of positive input that is comprehensible and meaningful is sufficient for language acquisition to occur. Grammar is acquired implicitly or incidentally. This communicative language teaching approach underlies a variety of L2 classrooms, including those implementing Prabhu's procedural syllabus, Krashen's Natural approach, some content-based ELS instruction (e.g. immersion education), and task-based instruction.

Problems: Research on the variations within communicative language teaching reveals at least the following problems (Long & Robinson, 1998): First, learning an L2 through experiencing its use is possible, but it is inefficient. Learners who receive formal instruction of various kinds show higher levels of L2 proficiency than those only use the language (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Secondly, due to the maturational constraints on language learning and the adoption of communicative strategies

instead of taking risks for more advanced language in communication, adult learners may become fluent, but not nativelike speakers, despite plenty of learning opportunity. Even worse, a pure communicative language teaching may lead to fossilization of L2 acquisition (Smith, 1993; Tran & Nguyen, 2019). Thirdly, things are not clearly better among child learners. Here it is worth mentioning the immersion programs initiated in Canada. Immersion programs provide students with a rich source of comprehensible input in which the teaching of a second language is integrated with the teaching of content subjects. The goals of immersion education include both academic achievement in the content subjects, and a high level of proficiency in the second language (Hinkel & Fotos, 2016; Swain & Lapkin, 2015).

Advantages: Even for the children who started the immersion education program in kindergarten, after many years of immersion, their productive skills remain far from nativelike, particularly with respect to grammatical competence (Swain & Lapkin, 2015), although their comprehension abilities are indistinguishable from those of native speakers.

As such, the importance of attending to form becomes clear to both SLA researchers and teachers. Given that communicative language teaching by itself has been found to be inadequate (Ellis, 2002; Hinkel & Fotos, 2016), pedagogical interventions need to be interwoven into primarily communicative activities so as to overcome the limitations of both traditional grammar instruction and communicative language teaching (Hinkel & Fotos, 2016).

Implication for Pedagogy

Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. Comprehensible input' is the crucial and necessary ingredient for the acquisition of language (Krashen, 1982,1985; Long & Robinson, 2008; Tran & Nguyen, 2019; Tran et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2021). The analyses of the two extreme options - traditional grammar-translation approach and communicative language teaching approach displays the benefits and limitations of each one.

According to Qian (2019), unlike the extreme teaching approaches which stress either full formal instruction or pure communication within the L2, Focus on Form is an integration of both of these approaches. In other words, Focus on Form cannot exist in a vacuum, but should be embedded in a meaning-focused communicative setting. From a communicative perspective, the most effective way to assist language learning in the classroom is through

communicative tasks (Nassaji, 2000). That is to say, tasks are an important component of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Ellis, 2003). Task-based language teaching, as a strong version of CLT, provides an optimal setting for the incorporation of focus on form (Long & Robinson, 2008; Tran & Nguyen, 2019; Tran et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2021).

Thus, in the process of language teaching, depending on which tasks learners have to fulfill, appropriate formal instructions should be applied. Teachers need consider teaching grammar at appropriate time and teaching grammar should be systematical and concise. Input should be spiral. Also, teachers should use the combination of both formal teaching and engaging students in communicative activities. The last but not least is teacher talk should be clearly and understandable.

Conclusion

The issue of formal instruction in second language teaching has attracted the attention of teachers and researchers for at least half century. How to embed the formal instruction in the setting of communicative language teaching, e.g. task-based language teaching needs more concern from both language researchers and teachers so as to enhance the efficiency of language acquisition in second language classrooms.

It can be concluded that formal instruction plays a crucial role in language teaching. How to apply the formal instruction in the varied settings needs more concern from teachers so as to enhance the efficiency of language acquisition in second language classrooms.

REFERENCES

1. Cook, V. J. (1991). *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*. Edward Arnold Publisher.
2. Cook, V. J. (2009). *Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition*.Cambridge University Press.
3. Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford University Press.
4. Dekeyser, R. (2001). *Automaticity and automatization*. In P. Robinson, (Ed.) (pp.125-151). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Doughty, C., & Varela, E. (1998). *Communicative focus on form*. In C. Doughty & J. J. Williams (Eds.) (pp.114-138). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Doughty, C., & Williams, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Focus on form in classroom language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Doughty, C. (2001). *Second language instruction does make a difference: Evidence from an Empirical Study*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Ellis, R. (2016). Introduction: Investigating Form-Focused Instruction. *Language Learning*, 51, 1-46.
9. Hinkel, E., & Fotos, S. (2016). *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Laurence Erlbaum Associates.
10. Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.

11. Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition learning. *The Modern Language Journal, 4*(2), 121-134.
12. Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1990). Focus on form and corrective feedback in communicative teaching. *Language Learning, 4*(2), 21-46.
13. Long, M., & Robinson, P. (2008). *Focus on form: Theory, Research and Practice*. Oxford University Press.
14. Norris, J., & Ortega, L. (2000). *Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
15. Prabhu, N. S. (1987*). Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
16. Qian, L. (2019), Formal instruction in second language teaching. *Contemporary Research in Education and English Language Teaching, 1*(3), 36-40. http://doi.org.10.33094/26410230.2019.13.36.40
17. Smith, R. (1993). Awareness and second language acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Sevenoaks, 5*(4), 54-67.
18. Shintani, N. (2015). The Incidental Grammar Acquisition in Focus on Form and Focus on Forms Instruction for Young Beginner Learners. *TESOL Quarterly, 49*(2), 115-140.
19. Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2015). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step. *Applied Linguistics, 4*(5), 84-102.
20. Terrel, T. D. (1977). A natural approach to second language acquisition and towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 16*(1), 371-391.
21. Tran, H. N., & Nguyen, T. H. T. (2019). Implemented Activities of English Language Teachers' Professional Development: A case study in Hong Linh province in Vietnam. *International Journal of Adult, Community and Professional Learning*, *26*(2), 27-41. https://cgscholar.com/bookstore/works/implemented-activities-of-english-language-teachers-professional-development?category_id=cgrn.
22. Tran, H. N., Le, A. V., Nguyen, T. H., Tran, C. P., & Dinh, T. H. T. (2021). Vietnamese University Staffs' Perceptions of Lecturer Professional Development During the CDIO-Based Curriculum Implementation. *International Journal of Educational Sciences, 32*(1-3), 107-119. https://doi.org/10.31901/24566322.2021/32.1-3.1171
23. Tran, H. N., Truong, D. T., Dinh, T. H. V., Do, T. L. H., Tran, T. T. A., & Phan, T. M. H. (2020). Significance of TPD in response to the current general education reforms in Vietnam: principals and teachers' perceptions. *Problems of Education in the 21 Century, 78*(3), 449-465. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/20.78.449
24. Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford University Press.