

‘Focus on form’ and ‘focus on forms’

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One of the current concerns of applied linguists is centred on the most effective form of grammar instruction in the communicative classroom (Doughty and Williams 1998; Lightbown 2000; Norris and Ortega 2000). The debate revolves around the degree to which teachers need to direct learners’ attention to understanding grammar whilst retaining a focus on the need to communicate. Thus, on the one hand, there are those who advocate minimal to no interruption in communication, limiting attention to grammar by means of corrective feedback (Doughty and Varela 1998); on the other, there are those who advocate separate attention to grammar and subsequent integration of the knowledge provided in increasingly communicative activity (DeKeyser 1998).

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 or communication.’ (Long 1991: 45–6). The latter is equated with the traditional teaching of discrete points of grammar in separate lessons, and as such also includes the approach advocated by DeKeyser (1998).

In terms of the theoretical underpinnings of these two options, there is a fundamental difference. ‘Focus on form’ derives from an assumed degree of similarity between first and second language acquisition positing that the two processes are both based on an exposure to comprehensible input arising from natural interaction. However, it is also assumed that there are significant differences in the two processes: that exposure is insufficient to enable learners to acquire much of the second-language grammar, and that this lack needs to be compensated for by focusing learners’ attention on grammatical features. ‘Focus on formS’, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that classroom foreign or second language learning derives from general cognitive processes, and thus entails the learning of a skill—hence its being characterized as a ‘skills-learning approach’. As such, it comprises three stages:

- 1 providing understanding of the grammar by a variety of means (including explanation in the L1, pointing out differences between the L1 and the L2;
- 2 exercises entailing using the grammar in both non-communicative and communicative activities for both comprehension and production;
- 3 providing frequent opportunities for communicative use of the grammar to promote automatic, accurate, use.

The difference between these two approaches, therefore, would appear reasonably clear-cut. Unfortunately, however, the use of the two terms in the literature is not always consistent with these two definitions. Two factors have created ambiguity such that it is not always clear which approach is being referred to. The first of these is the tendency by some (e.g. DeKeyser 1998; Lightbown 1998, 2000) to use 'focus on form' to refer to any approach which includes grammar instruction, thus including both 'focus on form' and 'focus on forms'. The second derives from an important article (Norris and Ortega 2000) which endeavours to compare the efficacy of the two approaches. They carried out an analysis of relevant (but by no means all) studies, and define 'focus on form' as that which meets the following criteria (p. 438): (a) designing tasks to promote learner engagement with meaning prior to form; (b) seeking to attain and document task essentialness or naturalness of the L2 forms; (c) seeking to ensure that instruction was unobtrusive; (d) documenting learner mental processes ('noticing'). However, to take but one example, proposals by VanPatten and Sanz (1995) are classed by Norris and Ortega (*ibid.*) as 'focus on form'. This study treats grammar as entailing discrete forms ('el' and 'ella' forms of verbs in Spanish, for example) which it teaches initially by means of explicit instruction in separate lessons, with an emphasis on form (and is, thus, in the terms of Norris and Ortega, obtrusive) before proceeding to aural comprehension exercises enabling students to recognize form-meaning relationships. It is thus, if we follow both Long's criteria (see above), and criteria (a) and (c) of Norris and Ortega themselves, clearly an exponent of a 'focus on forms'. As a result of this terminological confusion, Norris and Ortega's conclusion that '... a focus on form and focus on forms are equally effective' should be treated with some caution, and can in no way be considered an endorsement of Long's focus on form.

Given these different interpretations and the ensuing complexities and ambiguities, the reading of attempts to provide an overview of the relevant empirical studies may prove to be something of a daunting task. One such endeavour can be found in the first and final chapters of Doughty and Williams (1998), written by the two editors. They provide an excellent summary of most relevant studies and it will repay the effort required to assimilate the abundance of descriptions and analyses therein.

References

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