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The Focus on Form Model of Second Language Acquisition

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been on the forefront of second language methodology for more than two decades. It developed as a result of the “Communicative Revolution”, sparked by the failure of Grammar-Translation and Audiolingualism to produce fluent speakers of second languages. During the 1970s and 1980s, researchers experimented with a variety of alternative methods, searching for effective strategies for promoting fluency (e.g., Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Counseling-Learning, the Functional-Notional Approach, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach). Ultimately, these methods were synthesized into what we now call Communicative Language Teaching.

The Communicative Revolution resulted in an emphasis on spoken language in the classroom. The teacher became more of a facilitator and orchestra leader, rather than a dictator (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Learner-centered activities involved students working in pairs and small groups engaged in meaningful communication (Richards, 2002). Realia (i.e., objects, pictures, maps, charts, gestures) was used to teach the direct meanings of vocabulary instead of memorizing vocabulary lists out of context, and to scaffold interactive activities. Roleplay, information gap, interviews, games, problem-solving, opinion-gap, and decision-making replaced cloze and translation exercises (Richards & Rodgers).

Krashen’s (1982) Monitor Theory was the “credo” of the Communicative Revolution. It provided the theoretical framework for CLT. It was intuitively appealing because it explained many of the factors that inhibited second language (L2) learners from achieving native-like competency, and it was supported by the second language acquisition (SLA) research of its day. Its goal was to make the L2 acquisition experience more like the first language (L1) acquisition experience. The new curriculum that it supported was dynamic, interactive and encouraged students to use their L2 for real communication.

The Monitor Theory is a unified model that consists of five hypotheses which each account for a specific component of the L2 acquisition process, while also being interrelated (Krashen, 1982). The Acquisition–Learning Hypothesis proposes that there are significant consequences for learning L2 unconsciously vs. consciously. According to Krashen, only the unconscious processing of L2 leads to “acquisition” and results in fluency. “Learning” a language is the result of consciously processing L2 in a grammar-based curriculum in which students memorize rules and practice them in decontextualized exercises. This leads to the development of the “Monitor”, as described in the Monitor Hypothesis. The Monitor is a conscious editor of L2 output that must be engaged in order to assemble utterances and check their structures. The notion that only acquisition leads to fluency implies that the direct teaching of grammar should be avoided in the classroom, and is referred to as the “non-interventionist position” (Long & Robinson, 1998).

The Natural Order Hypothesis claims that learners who acquire L2 in naturalistic settings follow an order of acquisition similar to that of L1 learners (Krashen, 1982). The order is more or less fixed, and cannot be affected by classroom instruction. Therefore, grammatical structures that are presented in an artificially ordered curriculum cannot be acquired until the learner’s internal syllabus is ready for them. This argues against the use of a synthetic syllabus, one that isolates individual language components and sequences them in a linear, additive fashion, and supports an analytic syllabus, which does not treat language as the object of study but as a means of communication (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Krashen’s (1982) Input Hypothesis proposes that grammatical structures are acquired when the learner is exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly above their current level of proficiency. This is represented as “ $i + 1$ ”, in which the “ i ” stands for input and the “1” represents one step beyond what the learner can already understand. In the classroom, comprehensible input with “ $i + 1$ ” can be provided in teacher talk and materials that contain grammatical structures that students have not yet acquired, but are made understandable by being contextualized with realia. When students process comprehensible input with “ $i + 1$ ”, it promotes the acquisition of the unknown structures, thus driving the acquisition process.

However, input can only affect L2 acquisition after it is converted into intake (Krashen, 1982). While “input” refers to the language stimulus that the learner receives from the environment, “intake” is that portion of input that enters the memory system, and is therefore available to be processed by the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). The Affective Filter Hypothesis proposes that input can only be converted into intake when the student is emotionally and psychologically open to receiving it. The affective filter acts as a barrier that prevents input from entering the memory system when students lack motivation, feel self-conscious, or suffer anxiety. The affective filter is lowered when students have high self-esteem and feel comfortable in the classroom. Krashen claims that forcing students to produce L2 structures before they are ready and using direct error correction raise students’ affective filters, so that input cannot become intake. In this way, the affective filter helps explain why traditional teaching practices do not promote acquisition.

While Krashen's (1982) Monitor Theory is one of the most influential theories in L2 pedagogy, it also met criticism from the moment it was proposed (Shannon, 1994). Today, second language acquisition theory and pedagogy has entered the "Post-CLT" era, characterized by a re-evaluation of CLT methodology and the Monitor Theory. This is the result of evidence that while CLT promotes fluency, it does not promote accuracy to the same level (Harley, 1994; Swain, 1985). Thus, while Grammar-Translation and Audiolingualism seem to have promoted accuracy to the detriment of fluency, it appears that CLT promotes fluency to the detriment of accuracy. The Focus on Form Approach (Long, 1991) is currently being developed to resolve this problem by proposing new techniques for incorporating grammar teaching into a communicative curriculum to promote both accuracy and fluency. It is supported by a new set of hypotheses that challenge many of the assumptions embodied in the Monitor Theory, and finds support in cognitive psychology.

The Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1993) challenges Krashen's assumption that only the unconscious processing of language information is involved in the acquisition process, especially for older learners. Noticing is defined as the mental registering of an event (Schmidt). In language acquisition, it refers to the conscious awareness of grammatical forms. Evidence for noticing is demonstrated when learners can verbalize the experience of becoming aware of forms, and can describe their structures, meaning and functions (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Swain, 1998). According to the Noticing Hypothesis, noticing is crucial to the second language acquisition process because it enables learners to process forms in short-term memory, with the potential of being incorporated into their interlanguage (Schmidt, 1990). Input that is perceived is held in short-term memory briefly, only to be replaced by the new incoming input, unless it undergoes further mental processing (Doughty & Williams, 1998b). This additional processing represents the stage of input being converted into intake. The final step of "restructuring" entails additional mental processing that results in the information being stored in long-term memory when it is integrated into the L2 system by modifying its configuration (De Keyser, 1998; Doughty & Williams).

Therefore, in order to begin the process of acquiring a form, learners must consciously attend to forms in input. It is not sufficient to only process comprehensible input because learners might not notice the grammatical structures it contains, since they are focused more on meaning than forms. This focus on meaning and not form allows comprehensible input to affect their fluency but not their accuracy, and can explain Harley (1994) and Swain (1985)'s observations that French immersion students who experienced an input-rich immersion curriculum still made many morphological and syntactical errors after reaching a high level of fluency. The Noticing Hypothesis contradicts Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis because it proposes a distinct process for transforming input into intake (i.e., by being noticed rather than by a low affective filter).

However, noticing has its limitations. Van Patten (1990, 1994) points to the Limited Capacity Attention Model, which claims that there is a limit to the amount of information learners can process in working memory at one time. This can create a trade-off between attending to meaning and form when the learner is required to do both simultaneously. As a result, for grammatical structures to be noticed, the meaning of the language in which forms are embedded must first be comprehended (Doughty & Williams, 1998b). One way this can be done is to give students a task in which they do not focus on form until the meaning is understood. Another is to make sure the meaning of the input is right at or slightly below students' level so that it will be easy to process, and they will have enough memory resources to process forms (Van Patten).

The Interface Hypothesis agrees with Krashen's (1982) assumption that language information processed consciously is stored differently from language information processed unconsciously, resulting in two distinct mental representations for language information, known as "dual representation" (Doughty & Williams, 1998a). Today, Krashen's "learned knowledge" is called "explicit knowledge", while his "acquired knowledge" is called "implicit knowledge" (e.g., De Keyser, 1998; Ellis, 2002a). The notion that these two types of memory exist for many kinds of information is supported by cognitive psychology (Ellis, 2002b). On the other hand, the "Interface Position" of the Interface Hypothesis proposes that a "synergy" exists between explicit and implicit knowledge (Carr & Curran, 1994). This means that the same language information can be stored as both types of representation, and that one type of knowledge can be transformed into the other kind. It contradicts Krashen's "Noninterface Position", which claims that once information is stored in one way, it cannot be transformed into the other type of memory (Doughty & Williams).

The Interface Hypothesis is supported by Anderson's ACT model for skill acquisition (De Keyser, 1998). This model proposes three stages for learning to perform a skill: 1) "declarative knowledge" (equivalent to explicit knowledge) is developed by learning facts about the skill; 2) declarative knowledge is "proceduralized" when the learner begins to perform the skill, by accessing the individual components of the skill and coordinating them; and 3) "automaticity" develops when the skill can be performed without conscious control after repeated practice. This proposes a second route for learners to use in order to develop the implicit knowledge of L2. Krashen's (1982) route is to learn L2 information as implicit knowledge from the start, while Anderson's model shows that L2 information can first be learned as explicit knowledge, and later acquired as implicit knowledge through practice.

Both the Noticing Hypothesis and the Interface Hypothesis propose a role for explicit knowledge in adult L2 acquisition. Indeed, it may be impossible for adolescents and adults to acquire a language without some conscious analysis of L2 structures, despite being in a communicative classroom or the natural environment. The notion of the older student as a conscious, reflective learner who actively analyzes the structure of L2 is supported by Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development. By adolescence, learners have reached the final "formal operations stage" in which they develop the ability to think abstractly, draw conclusions from the information available, and reflect on their learning process. Consequently, some researchers believe that adults do not have the same

unconscious grammar-generating capacities of children, and instead apply general conscious problem-solving skills to the learning of L2 grammar (De Keyser & Sokalski, 2001).

Explicit knowledge can also serve as an “advance organizer” (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Fotos, 2002). The advance organizer, which allows the learner to transfer prior knowledge to new information, is adopted from Ausubel’s Subsumption Theory. This theory is based on the idea that learning is facilitated by learners making connections between new information and previous knowledge. In second language acquisition, prior explicit knowledge of forms may help students notice these forms in meaningful activities (Doughty & Williams, Van Patten, 1998). Thus, having students become aware of target structures through explicit instruction can make them easier to notice when students subsequently encounter them in input, allowing them to convert into intake. The notion that explicit knowledge plays an important role in SLA contrasts with Krashen’s (1982) claim that L2 acquisition is essentially the same as the implicitly learned L1 acquisition

The Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1998) offers an opposing view to Krashen’s (1982) claim that the processing of input is sufficient for second language acquisition to occur. It ascribes a greater role to the production of output, and provides the mechanism by which explicit knowledge becomes implicit knowledge. When learners are faced with the need to communicate, they draw on whatever they have learned, try out some forms they only have guesses about with the hope that they “work”, and note the reaction of the people they are speaking to (Swain, 1998). In this way, hypotheses are tested, and then confirmed or disconfirmed, depending on the responses that learners receive from their interlocutors. Each time a hypothesis is confirmed, it is more deeply ingrained into the interlanguage system, while each time it is disconfirmed, it is revised, causing the restructuring of the L2 system. The process of testing hypotheses occurs in situations in which the learner needs to produce output that goes beyond the limits of their current L2 competence (Tarone & Liu, 1995). This concept is known as “pushed output” (Ellis, 2002a), and can be characterized as “ $i + 1$ ”, by applying Krashen’s (1982) notion of “ $i + 1$ ” to output. Similar to Krashen’s concept that comprehensible input slightly above the current level of the learner moves the acquisition process forward, the Output Hypothesis proposes that the production of output slightly beyond the current level of the learner also moves the process forward, and that it is even more crucial to the SLA process.

Anderson’s ACT model supports the Output Hypothesis by explaining “how one moves from exclusively declarative knowledge to at least partially procedural knowledge” (De Keyser, 1998, p. 49), which can eventually lead to automaticity (i.e., implicit knowledge). This occurs when the learner produces pushed output while temporarily depending on declarative knowledge. Repeated practice results in the restructuring of declarative knowledge, making it easier to proceduralize by combining the co-occurring elements into larger chunks, which has the effect of reducing memory load (De Keyser). This notion connects the Output Hypothesis to the Interface Position because it identifies the production of output as the mechanism that allows explicit knowledge to begin to transform into implicit knowledge.

The Output Hypothesis is also connected to the Noticing Hypothesis because learners can notice output in two ways that promote acquisition. “Noticing the gap” occurs when learners become aware of the difference between their output and that of interlocutors with a higher level of proficiency. This occurs when the learner becomes aware that an interlocutor is using different pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar structures from theirs (Swain, 1998). The Output Hypothesis and the Noticing Hypothesis are also linked by the concept of “noticing the hole” (Doughty & Williams, 1998), which refers to the experience of the second language learner trying to express an idea and finding that they do not have the vocabulary or sentence structure to express it. They “notice the hole” between the language they want to produce and the language they are able to express. The active learner consciously seeks to “fill the hole” by consulting an “expert”. This can include asking a teacher or classmate how to say something, or looking up information in a dictionary or grammar book.

When “noticing the gap” or “noticing the hole” results in the successful restructuring of the learner’s interlanguage system, it is called “uptake” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Uptake is evident when the learner self-corrects errors during an interaction. Uptake may also occur internally, with no observable effect, if the learner does not attempt to verbalize the correct form. Furthermore, it might not be instantaneous, and only emerge in subsequent output (Doughty & Williams, 1998b). When uptake occurs, it reveals that the restructuring of L2 has pushed the developmental process to a new level.

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981) works together with the Output Hypothesis to provide the context for producing output. While Krashen’s (1982) Monitor Theory supports the use of communicative activities in the classroom, it assumes that they are effective for language acquisition because they create situations in which “the more you talk, the more people will talk to you” (Krashen, 1987, p. 60). In other words, Krashen believes that communicative activities promote second language acquisition because they provide opportunities for learners to be exposed to more input. In contrast, the Interaction Hypothesis claims that interaction is a crucial site for language development because of the “negotiation for meaning” it involves (Long & Robinson, 1998). According to Long (1996), when communication breaks down, more proficient speakers modify their output to make it more comprehensible to the less proficient learner, similar to how caretakers modify their speech so it can be understood by children acquiring their first language. This modified input provides models for the learner’s output, and may also make structures more salient. More importantly, the negotiation for meaning provides the learner with positive and negative feedback.

Positive feedback is a response to a learner’s output that contains no indication of linguistic errors. Positive feedback confirms the learners’ hypotheses about the target language system because it implies to the learner that their output is correct. Negative feedback is an indication from an interlocutor that there is a structural

problem in the learner's output. Negative feedback serves to highlight linguistic forms that are problematic to learners. This helps the learner "notice the gap" between the input they receive from their interlocutors and their own output (Schmidt & Frota, 1986), which leads to the restructuring of their L2 systems.

A new set of five hypotheses emerge from this analysis that each account for an individual component of the L2 acquisition process, which can also be interwoven into an integrated model. These are The Input Hypothesis, the Output Hypothesis, The Noticing Hypothesis, the Interaction Hypothesis, and the Interface Hypothesis. According to this new model, the processing of input and output can be viewed as two distinct stages of acquisition. Input provides the information for formulating hypotheses, and output provides the means of testing them. Noticing is involved in both identifying forms in input, and identifying errors in output. The restructuring of the learner's L2 competence occurs as a result of noticed input becoming intake, or noticed errors in output causing rule modification. Interaction provides the opportunity for receiving input and producing output as learners engage in the negotiation for meaning. Interaction also provides the environment for learners to receive feedback from interlocutors, which acts to reinforce learners' hypotheses about L2 structures, or challenge them so they must be re-evaluated. The opportunity for repeated practice of the same forms in meaningful interaction allows information that might have first been stored as explicit knowledge as a result of conscious processing to be transformed into implicit knowledge.

A comprehensive model for second language acquisition still requires additional hypotheses. The "Learnability Hypothesis" would propose that forms cannot be noticed unless learners are ready to acquire them. In other words, structures cannot be noticed or integrated into the L2 system until students are on the "verge" of discovering them already (Long & Robinson, 1998). This hypothesis takes the learner's internal syllabus into account as well as Krashen's notion of "*i* + 1", in which structures slightly above the learner's current level move the acquisition process forward. The "Inherent Difficulty Hypothesis" would define what characterizes a "hard" vs. "easy" rule, and make claims about which type of rule can be better acquired through inductive vs. explicit learning and implicit vs. explicit instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998a).

Along with a new model for SLA, the defining principles and associated techniques of the Focus on Form Approach are also in the process of being refined. Its general principle is to promote both accuracy and fluency and develop both explicit and implicit knowledge by proposing new ways to address grammar in the classroom using a communicative tasks. The fact that all target structures should be contextualized is emphasized, so that forms are acquired in association with their meaning and function. However, researchers still debate about the efficacy of different strategies. For instance, Long (1991) originally proposed a "reactive approach", in which Focus on Form only occurs as corrective feedback when students make errors. Other researchers support a "preemptive approach", in which target structures are chosen *a priori* by the teacher, and activities focus on the practice of those structures. Also, what defines "easy" vs. "hard" rules is still controversial, as well as which strategies are more effective for learning them (Doughty & Williams, 1998b).

A theoretical framework comprised of these seven hypotheses has several implications for the Focus on Form curriculum. They support a curriculum that is both preemptive and reactive (Long & Robinson, 1998), in which grammar is one of the driving forces, with tasks or functions being the other possible driving forces. In a preemptive curriculum, target structures are selected as the objectives for activities, and lessons are developed around them. Presentation activities are used to initiate the acquisition process by making students aware of target structures. However, the presentation of grammar structures can be less direct than rule teaching, so that both implicit and explicit knowledge can be developed, as supported by the Input Hypothesis and the Noticing Hypothesis. This has inspired the development of two techniques to make target structures more salient so they may be noticed without direct rule explanation. "Input flood" (White, 1998) is the purposeful presentation of multiple examples of a structure. "Input enhancement" (Sharwood Smith, 1993) is the strategic exaggeration of target structures to make them more salient. In writing, this is done by printing target forms in distinctive fonts, such as in bold, italicized, underlined, or in color. Oral input enhancement is achieved by pronouncing target structures with exaggerated length, pitch and intonation. Furthermore, the crucial role of output, interaction and practice in the acquisition process, as outlined in the Output Hypothesis, Interaction Hypothesis and Interface Hypothesis means that a greater percentage of classroom time should be devoted to giving students opportunities to practice target structures in interactive, communicative activities.

While Focus on Form incorporates interactive activities from CLT (e.g., roleplay, interviews, games, information gap, decision-making, opinion gap, problem-solving), several activities are specifically associated with Focus on Form (e.g., contextualized drills, dicto-gloss activities and discovery activities). "Contextualized drills" are drills in which the language being practiced makes statements based on real situations. Contextualized drills provide an input flood of a target structure and repeated practice to promote automaticity. There are two types of contextualized drills. "Meaningful drills" are closed, with only one appropriate response for students to make (e.g., "Roberto's shirt is blue"), while "communicative drills" are open-ended so students may respond in a number of ways, depending on their experience or opinions (e.g., "I like fish better than chicken") (De Keyser, 1998). These are contrasted with "mechanical drills", which are decontextualized, and therefore not supported by Focus on Form.

In "dicto-gloss activities", students' reconstruct a short passage, usually a paragraph of a few sentences. Embedded within the passage are several instances of the target grammar structure. The teacher reads the passage to students three times. The first two times, students are instructed to just listen to the passage for meaning. The last time, they write down key words to scaffold their reconstruction of the passage. Students work in pairs or small groups to pool their key words and collaborate to create a paragraph as close to the original as

possible. At the end of the activity, each group shares their paragraph with the class, and compares it to the original. Students can also be asked to underline each instance of the target structure that they used to check their correctness. Dictogloss activities develop implicit knowledge of target structures when students are asked to listen to the passage for meaning. Working in pairs or small groups provides the context for interaction and the negotiation of meaning. While reconstructing the paragraph, students talk about the vocabulary, grammar and word order, which contributes to the noticing and explicit knowledge of these forms. Having students highlight target structures at the end of the activity makes use of input enhancement and addresses accuracy. The repeated exposure to the target structure throughout the activity provides an input flood.

“Discovery activities” are also associated with Focus on Form (Ellis, 2002b). In these inductive consciousness-raising activities, students are given a language sample to analyze. This can be in the form of a set of sentences, text, or dialogue. Students work together to identify the patterns of target structures and their uses, make generalizations about them, and then verbalize the rules that govern them. In these activities, students start out by perceiving structures implicitly, and end up by discussing them explicitly. However, these are only the first steps towards acquisition, since they need to be followed by communicative practice.

Thus, I believe that we are currently at an exciting point in the history of L2 pedagogy in which both a new theoretical framework and methodology are in the process of being developed. Now the details of an alternative unified model to Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model need to be established to account for second language acquisition, as well as a clearer definition of Focus on Form. In this way, researchers can inform teachers about what the latest data shows about best practices and the learning theory that supports them.

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