

Function-oriented, Form-focused Instruction: Revitalising Second Language Classes

P. Bhaskaran Nair

Abstract

For centuries, the teaching and learning of grammar has been occupying the core of second language teaching and research; it is likely to be so in future, as well, at least in classrooms—and, rightly so. This statement does not imply that the domain of grammar instruction has been lying stagnant all these years; on the contrary, it may be in this area, more studies have taken place than in any other language component such as lexis. This article partly traces the development of grammar instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL), and then illustrates how a recent development, namely ‘focus on form’ may better suit the exposure-poor Indian ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Form focused instruction (FFI), consciousness raising (CR), instructed language learning

Introduction

The term ‘focus on form’ may mislead those who are not familiar with the history of second language teaching. Focus on form (FoF) does not ignore or side-line meaning. On the other hand, it consists of primarily meaning-focused interaction in which there is brief, and sometimes spontaneous, attention to some of the linguistic forms. In contrast, the pre-CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) methods focused on all forms uniformly, and often presented them as discrete grammar rules along with metalinguistic information. FoF assumes that acquisition occurs best when learners’ attention is drawn to language items *only* when they hinder communication, or when they are essential for conveying the message.

Grammar in the Post-CLT era

The practices followed by most of the approaches and methods in the pre-CLT era, in their treatment of the grammar of the target language, emphasised the need for learning all the rules, that are explicitly stated by paying conscious attention to their form, mastering those rules through pattern practice, drill and repetition, and finally, using them in real communication. Though the teaching of many aspects, skills and components of a second language underwent changes, the way grammar had been treated for centuries followed more or less the same course. Mentalism replaced behaviourism as the psychology of learning and function/meaning replaced form/structure in the use of language. Together, they resulted in the birth of communicative language teaching. But, the history of communicative language teaching again tells us that there was a remarkable difference in the way grammar instruction was treated—an almost total negation of teaching of formal grammar in the first phase, and a swinging back in the later versions. Savignon (2002) summarises the two versions as follows:

Discussions of CLT not infrequently lead to questions of grammatical or formal accuracy. The perceived shift in attention from morphosyntactic features to a focus on meaning has led in some cases to the impression that grammar is not important, or that proponents of CLT favour learner self-expression without regard to form. (Savignon, 2002, p. 7)

Consciousness Raising (CR)

It may sound paradoxical that when CLT was gaining popularity both at the theoretical level and in classrooms in the 1980s, an equally relevant, and may be a counter move also started, converging occasionally and diverging frequently with the former. Consciousness raising (CR) as a theory that was proposed by Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith (1985) which highlighted the need of raising the learner's attention on the specific structural properties of the target language. But, while CR was restricted to theorisation and research, CLT was able to capture the attention of theoreticians, researchers and teachers because of the novel promises it made. The reason was obvious—a majority of teachers who were dissatisfied with the age-old teaching of grammar were trying out something new, or experiencing a switch over from form to function,

from structure to meaning, from writing to speaking, from top-down to bottom-up approach, from rigidly framed textbooks to loosely gathered authentic materials, and so on. Rutherford (1987) himself states:

CR ... failed to get practical manifestation as a classroom method though it had serious concerns about the learner's input and interlanguage as output... Whatever it is that is raised to consciousness should be maximally consistent both with what we presently know of *the nature of language and its organising principles* and with how all of that gets absorbed by the learner—i.e. *the nature of language acquisition*. (p. 209)

Commenting on the age-old practices, Rutherford admits that it was a gross mistake to misrepresent grammar as communication to the learning community. Here, we are not ignoring the contributions of structural linguistics, the paradigm shifts it brought in to applied linguistics such as shift of focus from writing to speaking as heralded by audiolingual approach. The point is that whether writing or speaking, grammatical accuracy was always foregrounded, by pushing communicative competence to the backstage.

By 'consciousness raising', we mean the deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language. We will, in particular, question a current assumption that formal grammar has a minimal or even non-existent role to play in language pedagogy. (Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith, 1985, p. 274)

As a theory, though CR addresses the key issue of teaching the structure of a new language, how it may work in a classroom may be uncertain to teachers, hence reluctance to its application. Teachers are not supposed to go the trial and error way, doing experiments in the class; no parent or society wants to take risks. Since the teacher's intervention is triggered by her 'noticing' (Schmidt, 1990) of the learner's deviant form, remedial measures cannot be planned in advance. Secondly, since stumbling blocks vary from learner to learner, and individual attention has to be paid to each learner, class management will be difficult for the teacher. Thirdly, CR heavily depends on a process approach, and therefore the overall framework of conventional product-oriented teaching may not be able to embed CR into its rigid frame. Rutherford points out this danger:

Yet it can easily be argued that what has invariably been singled out for pedagogical attention, even over the many centuries of documented language teaching, amounts at best to a *misrepresentation* of these principles—where it seems to have been widely assumed that the essence of language is the sum total of its putative combinatorial units and that the task of the teacher is to ‘impart’ these units directly to the learner. This is essentially a ‘product approach’ to grammatical C-R, and one in which the learner is presumed to be a *tabula rasa*. (Rutherford, 1987, p. 209)

However, after trying out the strategies suggested by CLT for a few decades, teachers may be looking for a combination of function-oriented, form-focused mode of instruction.

Form-Focused Instruction (FFI)

Even when CLT was getting popular in the second language classrooms all over the world, there were apprehensions about its objectives meeting success in practice. The early 1980s reported quite a few studies on form focused instruction. Citing Long (1983), Ellis (2008) outlines the debates between Krashen’s hard line version and Long’s comparatively less assertive version. Reviewing the literature of seminal research studies related to the differences in naturalistic and instructed second language learning, Long states that classroom instruction may have to depend, to a certain extent, on explicit teaching of form, as and when the learner needs it.

CLT is currently being reassessed from various perspectives—not just from the angle of classroom transaction alone. From a bundle of communicative activities, now it has assumed larger dimensions in the sense that the most crucial component namely, grammatical accuracy has been brought to the centre stage along with message. Dornyei (2009) states:

Mere exposure to L2 input accompanied by communicative practice is not sufficient, and therefore, we need explicit learning procedures—such as focus on form or some kind of controlled practice—to push learners beyond communicatively effective language toward target-like second language ability. (p. 36)

Justifying the role of instructed learning in the post-CLT era, Ellis (2007)

states that when faculties of subconscious assimilation turn weak, external scaffolding in the form of explicit teaching becomes imperative. He calls such props as “additional collaborative conscious support” or “the capacity of consciousness to organise existing knowledge in new ways” (2007, p. 26).

In an effort to reset the earlier lop-sidedness between function and form, and drawing suggestions from second language classrooms all over the world, and at the same time eliciting support from theory and research, the 21st century is readying for more learner-engaged practices in developing communication. The notion that the more exposure to the target language, the better the learning output, is undergoing drastic revision. Concluding her article on designing curriculum for the 21st century, Savignon (2002) clarifies what CLT is not:

CLT does not exclude a focus on metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness. The essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence. (p. 7)

The term ‘engagement’ has now become the buzzword in the discussion of CLT, because what decides whether a task or an activity is communicative or not, whether it is successful or not in practice is how much the learner is engaged in it, preferably subconsciously. Quoting the findings of seminal studies, such as Christensen, Reschly and Wylie (2012) and Philp and Duchesne (2016), Littlewood states that learner engagement may be manifested in four modes such as cognitive (sustained attention, effort invested, self-regulation), social (giving and getting feedback), behavioural (time spent on task, participation) and emotional (motivation before and during tasks) (2018, p. 1226).

FFI as the Need of the Hour in the Current Indian ESL Context

Those teachers who are still waiting for ‘the method’ that suits their classroom, either an imported one from the West or an indigenous breed, may try out, without wasting their time, a method of their own, a version that they got distilled from their past experience, mixed with the little theoretical awareness they have gained so far. Such a fusion may be the result of two streams of awareness: First, the undeniable role of optimal input to the target language mainly in its spoken form, and the role of grammar, especially when the quality and quantity of comprehensible

input goes inadequate. As the former is self-explanatory, and the latter has always been elusive for definition, we may go into the latter in some more detail.

Let me cite here the basic distinction between the two grammar-centred pedagogic notions, namely 'focus on forms' and 'focus on form' as outlined at the outset of this article and extend it still further, both from a historical and analytical perspective. Ellis (2005) in a seminal paper related to this context states:

[T]here is no agreement as to whether instruction should be based on a traditional focus-on-forms approach, involving the systematic teaching of grammatical features in accordance with a structural syllabus, or a focus on-form approach, involving attention to linguistic features in the context of communicative activities derived from a task-based syllabus or some kind of combination of the two. (p. 210)

Ellis (2005) lays down 10 principles of effective instruction in second language learning. They are:

1. Instruction may begin with making the best use of a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.
2. Learners may focus predominantly on meaning.
3. Make sure, focus is on form, as well.
4. Priority on implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.
5. The learner's built-in syllabus must be made use of.
6. Extensive L2 input is essential for successful instruction.
7. Successful instruction also requires opportunities for output.
8. The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.
9. Learner profile, especially individual differences, is crucial to instruction.
10. In assessing L2 proficiency, both free and controlled production must be tested.

One point that is remarkable in this synthesis is that the guidelines take into consideration the exposure-poor ESL environment. Of the ten

principles, three that are directly related to form-function equilibrium have been discussed in some detail below; the remaining ones together form the background.

First, formulaic expressions, such as greetings, idioms, phrasal verbs and gap fillers which are first internalised and later analysed, are cited as the preferred starting points for SL learners, since they convey notions and functions of real life, much earlier than the child develops grammatical competence. "A notional-functional approach lends itself perfectly to the teaching of prefabricated patterns and routines and may provide an ideal foundation for direct intervention in the early stages" (Ellis, 2005, p. 211). The second and third principles direct the teaching processes to be predominantly meaning-focused with attention on form where necessary. Closely related to this directive, comes the balance between implicit and explicit knowledge; the more successful the teacher's efforts in turning the learning processes subconscious, the better the learning output. However, space has been left for explicit leaning too. Now comes the crucial issue of the role of input with extreme views on it. On the one hand, there are claims that comprehensible input (together with motivation) alone is sufficient for successful acquisition to take place. But, the pre-CLT methods had tried to prove that though comprehensible input is essential, it must be preceded by grammatical knowledge for comprehending the input that follows. Instructed language teaching posits natural input directly accessible to learners; and it is *during* learning, and that too when individual learners stumble on individual grammatical items, the teacher has to step in with focus on those singled- out forms.

While the first six principles together form the first phase of learning (the phase of intake and input), the second phase consists of the remaining principles, among them the most crucial one is providing opportunities for output. Generally, teachers believe that providing natural comprehensible input is the greatest challenge, realising and admitting their own inadequate communicative competence. But, these days, technology comes handy to any exposure-poor classroom in providing optimal input. Still the greater challenge is how to provide opportunities for natural output or better to say, 'natural opportunities for output'. This issue is closely related to that of how to make classrooms interactive. One way of addressing both the issues together has been suggested in an earlier article (Nair, 2012) entitled "Individuals

in *Imagined Communities: Contextualising Interaction in Second Language Classrooms*". Anderson (1983) argues that a nation is unreal; it is a hypothesis formed by the people who create the notion of nation. Similarly, Nair argues that a school or a classroom also can be realised as an imaginary community in miniature that operates with a set of rules shared by all its members. Suppose that imagined society adopts English as its medium of communication, with whatever deficiencies it may have, that community may feel at home in its day-to-day function. Such an imagined community can take care of providing some amount of input to be shared among them, opportunities for interaction to meet the member's needs, and it may prompt its 'people' to produce natural output.

Conclusion

More important is the question "How can I improve my teaching?" than "Which method suits my teaching best?" Such an inquiry may lead us to reflect on our past practices and experiences, from which we may pick and choose again, elements that had worked well with our learners. This bottom-up method, in our context, theorising from the classroom may have the added advantages of getting the teacher's self-confidence enhanced, and professional knowledge base widened. Thus, to focus on the teaching of grammar, we are likely to get informed that (i) all grammatical forms need not be treated with equal importance; (ii) each form in terms of difficulty varies from learner to learner; (iii) when the learner is engrossed in conveying the message, form is likely to be pushed to back-stage, (iv) still, occasionally certain forms may prop up as hard-spots, (v) only those stumbling blocks that hinder the process of meaning-making need to be seriously taken for explaining, (vi) a minimal use of metalinguistic terms while explaining the hard-spots may be necessary, and (vii) we ensure that such explanations which are part of explicit teaching, eventually become part of implicit knowledge through language use—a move from usage to use.

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P. Bhaskaran Nair was formerly at Kannur University, Kerala. He is the President of English Language Teachers' Interaction Forum (ELTIF) and the Editor of the quarterly journal of ELTIF.

nairpbhaskaran@gmail.com