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Teaching Grammar to Adult English Language Learners: Focus on Form

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels and adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, and further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for teachers, program administrators, education researchers, and policy makers to provide information on evidence-based strategies for teaching grammar to adult English language learners through focus on form.

Introduction

Many adult English language learners place a high value on learning grammar (Ikpia, 2003). Perceiving a link between grammatical accuracy and effective communication, they associate excellent grammar with opportunities for employment and promotion, the attainment of educational goals, and social acceptance by native speakers. Reflecting the disagreement that was once common in the second language acquisition research, teachers of adult English language learners vary in their views on how, to what extent, and even whether to teach grammar. Indeed, in popular communicative and task-based approaches to teaching, the second language is viewed primarily as "a tool for communicating rather than as an object to be analyzed" (Ellis, 2008, p. 1). Nonetheless, most research now supports some attention to grammar within a meaningful, interactive instructional context.

This brief begins with a brief history of grammar instruction in the United States, including the shift from explicit to implicit approaches. It then describes the contemporary approach, called *focus on form*, and explores the reasons and research-based evidence for drawing learners' attention to language structure while they remain focused primarily on meaning. Next, it offers examples of instructional activities that can help raise learners' awareness of grammar. It concludes with suggestions about areas for future research within the focus-on-form movement.

The Evolution of Grammar Instruction

The debate over the place of grammar in instruction has played a dominant role in the history of language teaching. For much of the previous century, the debate revolved around the question of whether grammar instruction helped learners gain proficiency in a second language. The many answers to this question could be placed along a continuum with extremes at either end (Gascoigne, 2002). At one end are highly explicit approaches to grammar teaching, and at the other end lie implicit approaches that eschew mention of form.

Hinkel (2002) provides a concise history of grammar instruction in language teaching, which is summarized here. The list of historical approaches to grammar instruction is long, though certain approaches are noted for their influence. One of the earliest of these, the *grammar translation approach,* was characterized by rote memorization of rules and an absence of genuine communicative activities. Around the turn of the 20th century, linguists' structural descriptions of world languages, combined with behaviorist psychology, gave rise to the *direct method*. Proponents of this method believed that students should learn a second language in the same way that they learned their first; grammar was acquired through oral practice, drills, and repetition, not through memorization and written manipulation of explicit rules. Nevertheless, language learning was still ordered around structural principles. *Audiolingualism* was another structural method that shared this implicit orientation toward grammar. By the 1960s, *cognitive approaches* to instruction had gained popularity. Inspired by Chomsky's theory of universal grammar and the resulting emphasis on syntax, cognitive approaches represented a shift back to more explicit grammar instruction. However, the pendulum swung again toward the implicit in the 1970s with the advent of *humanistic approaches,* particularly *communicative language teaching*. These approaches emphasized meaningful interaction and authenticity in learning activities and held that communication should be the goal of instruction. Grammar was not explicitly taught; proponents instead believed that accuracy would be acquired naturally over time. (See Gascoigne, 2002, for a full discussion of the explicit/implicit grammar debate.)

Contemporary research on the merits of the implicit and explicit approaches described above has led to the consensus that an exclusive emphasis on either extreme impedes adult learners' acquisition of English. While the inadequacies of a traditional focus on language structure alone are well documented (Green & Hecht, 1992; Long, 1991; Winitz, 1996), the drawbacks of a strictly communicative approach have also been noted (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Scott, 1990; Skehan, 1996). Indeed, experienced language teachers have long recognized the benefits of the judicious use of error correction, repetition, and even drills in the classroom (Poole, 2005b). Gass and Selinker (2008), drawing on a large body of research, asserted that complex forms cannot be acquired by processing meaningful input alone. Ellis (1996) suggested that advanced speaking and writing proficiency, necessary for achievement of students' academic and vocational goals, may require explicit form-focused instruction. Moreover, studies on the practices and

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attitudes of teachers (Borg & Burns, 2008; Farrell & Lim, 2005) and students (Ikpia, 2003; Manley & Calk, 1997; Paraskevas, 1993) suggest that both groups are favorably disposed to some element of explicit grammar instruction in the classroom. These findings and others set the stage for the current focus-on-form movement.

Focus on Form in Instruction

Ellis (2001) defines focus on form as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (pp. 1-2). This attention to form should take place within a meaningful, communicative context, making it an extension of communicative language teaching, not a departure from it.

Instructors encourage learners to focus on form in several ways. Focus on form may be planned and focused on pre-selected structures, or it may be incidental, arising spontaneously at any point in a communicative activity. Teachers might design a task to encourage learners to notice forms in the input (e.g., prepositions of location such as *in, on, under*), or they might explicitly teach these forms and provide opportunities for meaningful practice. Focus on form may be reactive, including explicit corrections to student language; recasts (saying what students have said, but differently); clarification requests; and other types of feedback. Focus on form is most frequently teacher-initiated, but it is also initiated by learners through questions and requests for explanation (Poole, 2005b).

Although second language acquisition research has not definitively answered many important questions regarding form-focused instruction, studies have provided promising evidence that focus on form is correlated with more acquisition of new grammar and vocabulary than non-form-focused approaches. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) found that learners who engaged in communicative, focus-on-form activities improved their grammatical accuracy and their use of new forms. Loewen (2002) found that short episodes of corrective feedback correlated with higher rates of correctness on subsequent tests. Some empirical studies have found that various focus-on-form techniques (discussed below) have led to more accurate use of target structures (Camhi & Ebsworth, 2008; Doughty & Verela, 1998; Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughty, 1995; Loewen, 2005; Williams & Evans, 1998). A synthesis of the findings from a large review of research on the needs of English language learners suggested that they learn best with instruction that combines interactive approaches with explicit instruction (Goldenberg, 2008).

Instructors should consider learners' developmental readiness when deciding whether a focus-on-form approach is appropriate in a given context. Since learners with low literacy often struggle to comprehend form in their first language, it is not advisable to teach them grammar in the second language until they have advanced into higher stages of literacy. It has also been suggested that focus on form should not be initiated with beginning learners (Ellis, 2006; Spada & Lightbown, 1999). Instead, learners should be encouraged to attend to form only after they have acquired basic structures and vocabulary and have developed a basic ability to communicate. Yet, Spada and Lightbown found that even in cases where learners are not developmentally ready to learn a form, intensive focus-on-form instruction can help them learn other structures that are associated with the target form. For example, learners who may not be ready to fully acquire the comparative structures in English (e.g., That cat is *smaller than* this cat; That book is *more interesting than* this book) could still begin to use and pronounce the comparative suffix *–er* and the comparative word *more* plus adjective. Conversely, advanced learners with academic goals may benefit from a more explicit approach, especially when learning complex structures and concepts (Andrews, 2007).

An instructor must also consider learners' needs and interests in identifying the best way to draw their attention to a form and practice using it in a meaningful context. For example, in an ESL class for landscaping workers at an intermediate level of proficiency, an oral work report given at the end of a shift (e.g., "I mowed the lawn, then I weeded the flower beds") could be used to focus students' attention on the formation of the past tense. Finally, a focus-on-form approach may be more difficult to use in programs in which teachers are obligated to strictly follow mandated curricula or in which class sizes are too large to allow much individual feedback (Poole, 2005a).

Instructional Activities

Several strategies for integrating form and meaning in instruction have been presented in the literature. In fact, the implicit-explicit continuum persists within the body of techniques used to draw learners' attention to form. One of the more implicit techniques, the *input flood,* presents students with a text that contains many instances of the target form, with the expectation that students will notice it. In the technique known as *input enhancement,* forms are highlighted with different colored inks, bold lettering, underlining, or other cues intended to raise students' awareness of a structure. Fotos (2002) describes an implicit *structure-based task* in which students compared two cities. Pairs of students told each other about features of familiar cities and recorded the information on task sheets. They were then instructed to write sentences comparing the cities according to the features they had described (e.g., "New York is bigger than Washington, DC"). Students were not explicitly taught comparative structures at any point during the task, but they had to use comparative forms to complete it. Afterwards, their instructor taught a lesson on comparatives, and students rewrote incorrect sentences, did more production exercises, and read stories that contained frequent instances of the comparative form.

Explicit techniques include *consciousness-raising tasks*, during which learners are encouraged to determine grammar rules from evidence presented, and the *focused communicative task* (Ellis, 2001, p. 21), which is designed to bring about the production of a target form in the context of performing a communicative task. The latter task is designed in such a way that the target feature is essential to the performance of the task. For example, a task might require one student to give another student detailed instructions for the creation of an origami bird. The first student will likely feel a need to use adverbs such as *first*, *now*, *then*, and *next* to talk the second student through the sequential steps of the task. *Error correction strategies* are another way to explicitly focus on form within a primarily meaning-focused activity, in that they help learners notice differences between their production and the target (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Among these strategies, the *garden path technique* (Tomasello & Herron, 1988, p. 244) introduces a grammatical rule and then leads learners into situations in which they may overgeneralize, so they can

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consider the correct form. Nation & Newton (2008, p. 140) give the following example of a typical garden path technique:

Teacher: Here is a sentence using these words: *think* and *problem*. *I thought about the problem*. Now you make one using these words: *talk* and *problem*.

Learner: We talked about the problem.

Teacher: Good. *Argue* and *result*.

Learner: We argued about the result.

Teacher: Good. *Discuss* and *advantages*.

Learner: We discussed about the advantages.

Teacher: No. With *discuss* we do not use *about*.

In the example above, the student is corrected and thereby is made aware of the exception to the grammatical rule. Celce-Murcia (2007) suggests that, instead of creating grammar correction exercises using decontextualized sentences from learners' writing, teachers should create short texts that include common error types made by students in their writing. Students can work together to edit the more authentic texts, which helps them learn to correct their own work more successfully.

Although much second language acquisition research has centered on awareness-raising and noticing activities like those described above, there are focus-on-form grammar production activities as well. Larsen-Freeman (2003) discusses and gives examples of the following techniques. *Collaborative dialogues* (pp. 94-95) are conversations in which students work together to discuss and use a new form, constructing a sentence together. Another technique, *prolepsis* (pp. 95-96), is an instructional conversation that takes place between a teacher and a student. The teacher coaches the student through the process of writing or saying something in English, perhaps incorporating the use of a new form. In the following example of a proleptic conversation, a teacher (T) talks with a student (S) at a low intermediate level who is writing a description of an important event in her past.

(S writes "My baby was angry.")

T: Oh, she was angry. And then?

S: I pick her up, but she cry.

T: I see. Why don't you write it down?

S: I can say it, but I don't write.

T: Just try it. Write what you know.

(S writes "She cry.")

T: Good. Ok, cry when? Now?

S: No, she cried.

T: Yes. Go ahead and write it. I'll help.

(S writes "She cryed.")

T: Right. But remember what happens to the "y"?

(S erases "cryed" and writes "cried.")

T: Right. What happened then?

In the conversation above, both teacher and student are engaged in the story. The teacher directs the student to focus also on the formation of the past tense but does not simply tell her to use the past tense form of *cry,* nor does she tell her how to spell it. In other words, the teacher defines the parameters of the problem for the student but encourages her to come to the answer on her own.

The *language experience approach* (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 96) is a technique in which learners dictate to the instructor, in English, something they would like to be able to say. The instructor then writes students' messages in correct, grammatical English and gives them to the students. For example, a student might say or write, "I late the work for the bad traffic." The teacher would write the sentence as, "I was late for work because traffic was bad." With the corrected text in hand, students have the opportunity to compare what they said or wrote with the correct form of the messages they wished to convey, ask questions, and learn.

Areas for Further Research

As the focus-on-form movement has taken shape, the debate among instructors and researchers has undergone a fundamental shift. The question is no longer whether explicit grammar instruction helps learners gain proficiency in English, but rather how this approach can best be accomplished. A number of interesting questions about focus on form have yet to be addressed. Some questions have to do with the timing of focus on form. How should attention to form and meaningful interaction be ordered in the adult ESL classroom? When in the syllabus should it be introduced (Doughty & Williams, 1998)? Should focus on form precede interactive activities, or vice versa? How do learner characteristics such as educational background, goals, and levels of literacy and oral proficiency affect their readiness and ability to attend to form (Poole, 2005b)? Though these questions continue to point to the need for further research, an empirical study by Andrews (2007) suggests that forms to be focused on do not have to be sequenced by complexity in order to be learned, nor do they have to match learners' proficiency levels.

Other questions revolve around which forms to focus on and to what extent. Which forms lend themselves to focus on form in instruction, and which do not? A case study in an English as a foreign language class, conducted by Farrokhi, Ansarin, and Mohammadnia (2008), found that students across proficiency levels tended to focus more on vocabulary than on other forms and suggested that instructors consider spending more time directing student attention to grammar and pronunciation. Poole's (2005b) similar findings prompted him to suggest that a form-focused approach was more useful for vocabulary development than for grammatical development. The question may be, then, how can teachers encourage students to focus more frequently on grammatical form?

What is the optimal balance between focus on form and focus on meaning? It is possible that planned rather than reactive focus on form demonstrates to learners that the instructor is concerned more with form than with meaning. Ellis (2008) suggests that intensive, pre-planned focus on form can be time consuming and result in focusing on fewer structures, while a reactive or incidental focus allows for the targeting of many different linguistic forms as the need arises.

The answers to these questions promise to provide new instructional direction for teachers on helping adult learners give attention to both the meaning and the forms of language.

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Conclusion

Recent focus on communicative instruction has at times resulted in explicit grammar instruction playing a limited role in adult education. However, the research on second language acquisition and focus on form in instruction supports approaches like those described in this brief. To help learners improve their grammatical accuracy, instructors should embed explicit focus on form within the context of meaningful learning activities and tasks that give learners ample opportunities for practice.

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