

A Simultaneous Dual Focus on Form and Meaning to Enhance Language Learning

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Doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v7i4p59

Abstract: Language learners aim to achieve a level of proficiency and ability to function in the second language at a native-like level. To put it in another way, learners need to demonstrate both accuracy and fluency to become proficient. Equal attention to form and meaning in language learning provides clear advantages for learners to improve their language performance. The incorporation of form and meaning allows learners to perceive formal structures in context and also encourage them to engage in meaningful use of language. The exposure to meaningful contexts helps language learners with the development of accuracy and fluency. This article attempts to demonstrate the benefits of combining form and meaning to increase proficiency in second language learning.

Keywords: Form, Meaning, Integration, Language Performance, Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

The establishment of form-meaning connections has been a controversial issue for a long time in language learning. The form is a feature of language that is used to constitute meaning. Language learners need to attend equally to form and meaning for language development. When learners understand the connection between form and meaning, they can better sense how a language works and communicate more effectively. Krashen's (1981) Input Hypothesis emphasized the beneficial effect of exposure to comprehensible input for successful language learning. Seeking balanced attention to form and meaning provides a significant opportunity for language learners to improve language performance.

The incorporation of form and meaning has been considerably supported. Brumfit (1984) points out that feedback provided during communication activities help learners attend to form. Also, helping learners receive in communicative interaction motivates them for accuracy in language production. In the same vein, Celce-Murcia (1991) supports combining form and meaning and stresses that "grammar should never be taught as an end in itself but always with reference to meaning, social factors or discourse-or a combination of these factors" (pp. 466-467). The integration of form and meaning provides clear advantages for language learners to perceive formal elements in context; moreover, learners engage in meaningful use of language and improve oral production. This article aims to show the benefits of combining form and meaning in language learning.

Received: October 10, 2020

Accepted: November 23, 2020

Daskan, A., & Yildiz, Y. (2020). A Simultaneous Dual Focus on Form and Meaning to Enhance Language Learning. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 7(4), 59-63.

2. Literature Review

Although Krashen (1985) argues that acquisition is a subconscious process, second language acquisition occurs by consciously paying attention to formal features of the language. Simply put, by means of “conscious attention to form in the input” (Vanpatten, 1990, p.288) successful language acquisition happens. Schmidt (1988) emphasized the role of conscious attention to grammatical forms in the input and states that “nothing in target language input becomes intake for language learning other than what learners consciously notice, that there is no such thing as learning a second language subliminally” (p. 61). It appears from the evidence that language acquisition does not take place in a subconscious manner. Language learners need to notice the grammatical rules and understand how they work.

Learners aim to achieve a level of proficiency and ability to function in the second language at a native-like level. Successful use of language for the attainment of communicative competence is an essential objective of language learning (Mart, 2018). In other words, learners need to demonstrate both accuracy and fluency to become proficient. Finding a proper balance between grammar-based instruction and meaning-based instruction has a crucial role in increasing proficiency in second language learning. While overemphasizing on grammatical forms may hinder to reach high levels of communicative competence, focusing primarily on meaning may interfere with embracing target language features (Mart, 2019a). It is important not to demotivate learners by correcting all errors they have made (Yildiz & Budur, 2019; Celik & Yıldız, 2019; Yıldiz, 2017). If they feel that they are criticized, they will not be encouraged to communicate. On the other hand, paying little or no attention to grammatical structures is a serious handicap for not conveying messages accurately. The use of language for communicative purposes has become a core component to increase proficiency in the second language (Mart, 2013a; 2013b). Therefore, language learners need to focus on both form and meaning to produce accurate language (Celik, 2019).

The use of grammatical features in meaningful communication can be achieved through integrating form and meaning in language learning. Van Lier (1988) advocates showing form-meaning connections simultaneously and he argues that “the middle way, covering both form and meaning, accuracy and fluency, would seem to be the most sensible way to proceed, and indeed there currently appears to be a general consensus that it is unwise to neglect either area” (p. 276). Presenting grammatical forms in isolation does not offer discernible advantages as learners may fail to notice the target structures in a meaningful context. The presentation of grammar rules and vocabulary in a meaningful context allow learners to make connections between the grammatical features and meaning of texts (Mart, 2012a; 2012b). Learners use language units appropriately if they are exposed to target language structures by means of communicative input.

Without form-focused instruction, learners may fail to grasp basic grammatical structures. Widdowson (1990) suggests that “it turns out that learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities” (p. 161). These studies show that presenting form and meaning at the same time is a useful condition for language learners to deduce linguistic structures by involving in the communication environment. Simply emphasizing grammar or communication in the language learning process may not lead to successful acquisition because “by dealing with related units of information rather than isolated bits, more efficient processing becomes possible” (McLaughlin, Rossman, McLeod, 1983, p.138). For a perfect mastery of the target language learners need to become aware of the

linguistic features of the target language and develop skills to use them effectively in communication settings (Mart, 2015). Combining form and meaning by exposure to meaningful communication gives rise to understanding the relationship between form and meaning in language learning.

Fotos (1998) argues that the integration of form and meaning is a favourable condition in language learning because “learners should be able to notice, then process, linguistic structures which have been introduced to them within purely communicative contexts” (Fotos, 1998, p. 302). The acquisition of target language structures by exposure to meaningful contexts help language learners with the development of fluency and accuracy because learners stand a better chance of noticing how language works and apply the rules for language production. The activities which focus on the combination of form and meaning in language learning “significantly increase learner awareness of the target structure and improve accuracy in its use, as well as providing opportunities for meaning-focused comprehension and production of the target language” (Fotos, 1998, p. 307). An attempt to cover both form and meaning appears to be desirable in language learning. Lightbown and Spada (1993, p.105) point out that:

Classroom data from a number of studies offer support for the view that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of a communicative program are more effective in promoting second language learning than programs which are limited to an exclusive emphasis on accuracy on the one hand or an exclusive emphasis on fluency on the other.

A dual focus on form and meaning can be achieved in two main ways (Seedhouse, 1997, pp.338-339):

- a) Shifting gradually from form-focused activity to meaning-based activity
- b) During meaning-based activities, errors of learners are noted by the teacher and are used as input in form-focused activities

Although both ways cover form and meaning, they are not combined simultaneously in this way. Form and meaning is not presented at the same time. However, in two other approaches suggested by Ellis (1994) form and meaning are combined and presented to language learners at the same time:

- a) Classroom activities that encourage learners to communicate by attending to formal structures
- b) During communication activities, the teacher provides feedback on errors

It is important to stress that extreme focus on learner errors impede the smooth flow of communication. Prompting the learner to correct his/her error impairs the flow of interaction. Even the learner may be demotivated. Brumfit (1984) warns that “correction should have either no place, or a very minor place, in fluency work, for it normally distracts from the message, or may even be perceived as rude” (p. 56). In the establishment of form-meaning connections (Celik, 2015), the role of error correction cannot be underestimated; however, teachers should handle error correction carefully. While overemphasizing error correction may prevent the flow of communication, ignoring it may lead to grammatical deficiency. Therefore, teachers should create effective ways concerning the use of error correction while trying to establish form-meaning connections in language learning.

Teacher: What is the main idea in the text?

Student: Lie and ...

Teacher: Lying and what?
Student: Lying and dishonest.
Teacher: Lying and dishonesty.
Student: Yes, lying and dishonesty.
Teacher: Do you think lying made him happier?
Student: No. Lie did not bring happy.
Teacher: Good point. Lying did not bring happiness to him.
Student: Yes, lying did not bring happiness.
Teacher: Tell me! Why did he lie?
Student: He lie because he wants money.
Teacher: He lied to get the money.
Student: He lied, and he got the money from his friend.
Teacher: Great! He lied to his friend about money.
Student: Yes, he lied to his friend about money, but he lost his family.
Teacher: Very good!

It goes without saying that active engagement with the language is indispensable for a good learner. By stimulating learners for their interpretations, the teacher acts as a facilitator to keep the conversation going. He also provides corrective feedback for learners to allow them to fix their language errors. In the example, the target language is practised in a meaningful way. Learners by means of verbalizing their ideas endeavour to communicate. In order for language acquisition to take place, it is important to engage learners in the communication environment. The teacher tries to effectively invite the learner to construct their interpretations without impeding the flow of communication (Mart, 2019b). The teacher raises questions to give a chance for learners to express their thoughts. However, he refrains from overdoing error correction in order not to disrupt the flow of communication.

3. Conclusion

Combining form and meaning is a favourable condition in language learning as it allows learners to notice linguistic structures and apply them in communicative contexts. Language learners make connections between the grammatical features and meaning of texts if they presented in a meaningful context. Learners stand a better chance of using language units appropriately if they are exposed to target language structures by means of communicative input. It is possible to conclude that well-balanced attention to form and meaning provides clear advantages for language learners to improve language performance.

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