Before or During? The impact of timing in form-focused intervention

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Over generations of investigation into Second Language Acquisition, learner generated language learning and form meaning mapping in contextualized settings have been identified as among the core objectives in facilitating language learning. These notions were emphasized in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) movement initiated in the late 60s and 70s, in Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) from the 80s to the present date, and in the concept of Focus on Form (FoF). However even today, form introduction often takes place prior to the task or practice sessions per se such as seen in presentation, practice and production approaches. The question remains; is preemptive form introduction truly contextualized? Is there an optimal timing for form introduction?

To address these topics and explore an approach to pedagogical practice that could avoid introducing form in isolation, this paper presentation reports on the impact of different timings of form-focused intervention. Further, the study attempts to shed light on the conditions of informational encoding at the initial stage of form attainment. This initial stage is framed in contrast to the subsequent automatizing stages when error rates and response rates are reduced and stabilized. The scope of the study is form attainment with comprehension. In this study, an attempt was made to use naturalistic language in a naturalistic setting. By the same token, an effort was made to incorporate a number of benefits identified in research designs used in laboratory studies and artificial language studies. These include controlling for outside exposure by conducting the experiment only once, with all groups participating in the experiment on the same day, manipulating the number of target forms, controlling the frequency of exposure to the target forms, influencing the type of target forms and eliminating some linguistic features in order to avoid a blocking effect.

A reading task served as a platform for exploring the timing of intervention with 58 EFL students in Japan. The informants were classified into three groups: one group receiving unified form-focused intervention before the task, another during the task sometime after the subjects were exposed to task materials, and a control group receiving no treatment. The treatment was a one time intervention, uniformly provided in an effort to isolate the variables. Pretests and posttests were conducted immediately before and after the task in one class session. Exploring the use of epistemic meanings of a single modal auxiliary verb associated with the tense-aspect system, each informant recorded real time reflections during the three steps of the task procedure.

These real time reflections revealed that semantic meaning oriented reasonings are associated with higher accuracy rates. Meanwhile, the uses of metalinguistic terminologies are allied with decontextualised rationales and accompanied by a higher rate of incorrect selections of words. With regards to the attainment of target forms during one task session, statistical significance was evident for group variance in the learning of epistemic meanings of a modal verb (p < .001). This result verifies the stronger impact of form-focused intervention during the task in a delayed fashion. However there was no statistical significance in attainment of the tense-aspect system, indicating variance in the transparency of different features and their learnability in a limited period of time. Although statistical significance was not evident in attainment of the tense-aspect system, the outcome replicates a pattern that was produced in two preliminary studies (N: 234) and a pilot study (N: 52) indicating a promising role for delayed form introduction.

The results suggest that form meaning mapping guidance in a contextualised setting, applied to current work had a more robust impact than the guidance provided in a decontextualised setting disassociated from current use. These outcomes simply reconfirm many works produced during the last 40 years in CLT, TBLT and FoF. There were some distinctions in this study however. These include a few factors: 1) the treatment is not provided right at the moment of inquiry, nor, soon after a noticing event takes place. It is provided in a delayed fashion, after learners are exposed to the current task for a certain duration of time in order to enhance the learners’ curiosity. And, 2) the treatment in the delayed group is reactive, however it is not reactive to learner error or inquiries. It is reactive to the learners’ intention to know the function of essential forms.

Applying the theory of adjustable attentional control (Cowan et. al. 2005; Cowan, Johnson and Saults 2005), it is hypothesized here that informational encoding is enhanced with ‘preparatory attention’ (LaBerge, 1995). And possibly, sustaining information over a delay of time might have optimized the function of the perceptual system and assisted in priming the operations of working memory. The results also present a positive role for a reactive mode of treatment associated with learners’ voluntarily generated goal oriented learning while also supporting the use of proactive material design.

References


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Evidence from proactive interference. *Memory,* 13, 293-299.