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Employing “Focus on Form” in the intermediate EAP classroom at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Background to the Study

The Level III program of English language proficiency courses in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Colombo was closely examined in the study. This program is very important as it is the only English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course which is accessible to the Arts students with low English language proficiency. At Level III, the students are taught discourse styles, reading strategies, note-taking skills, presentation skills, summarizing skills and vocabulary development strategies but explicit instruction in grammar is not targeted in the curriculum since it is assumed that those who end up in Level III do not need grammar instruction. Nevertheless, this assumption is not always correct as many students lack grammar knowledge and these students are in need of continuous grammar input to maintain and develop their proficiency.

Rationale

I have realized that the Level III students’ metalinguistic awareness is weak and most of them cannot analyze their mistakes grammatically although they perform a variety of language tasks successfully in the EAP class. Thus, I personally have experienced to some

extent what Swain (1998) describes about immersion learners as they “are in many ways, extremely proficient and exceptionally fluent, but their accuracy lags far behind that of native speakers, and there appears to be some restrictions in the range of language functions they use” (p.7). In addition, Lyster (2004) acknowledges that although immersion students develop their strategic communication ability through negotiation of meaning, they reach a plateau in terms of accuracy, possibly due to a lack of form focused instruction. In the light of cognitive theory, Lyster (2004) presents the view that “the proceduralization of rule based declarative representations occurs through practice and feedback” (p. 324) and emphasizes the need for incorporating Focus on Form (FOF) into content based lessons. According to Long (1991) FOF “overtly draws students attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (as cited in Doughty & Williams, 1998, p.3).

Moreover, as a member of the materials development team, I face difficulties and dilemmas as there are different views among the material developers. Some colleagues’ views are similar to the view of Long (1998) who promotes more implicit meaning-based FOF, while some favor explicit FOF with arguments similar to Swain and DeKeyser (1998). Some material designers still believe in the view of the communicative approach in which any type of FOF is absent. Such contradictory views on learning form, explicit or implicit have created drawbacks in the processes of material production and have affected the consistency of teaching among the teachers. The aforementioned reasons prompted me to research on a more effective FOF approach to be used in the EAP classroom in the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo.

Methodology

First, the literature on FOF with regard to theory, research and practice was reviewed. In doing so, how the notions regarding FOF have changed over time, the role played by FOF with respect to different second language theories, the teachability of forms, and FOF in Content Based Instruction were investigated by looking at theory and research.

Then samples of Level III lesson modules were used for a qualitative data analysis. Evaluation of the course material was done by first describing the context (University of Colombo, objectives of EFL Program within the Faculty of Arts, the students and teachers). Then, the course material of the Level III program (i.e., the listening, speaking,

writing and reading modules) was examined and analyzed with respect to how focus on form was employed in them using the theoretical framework I designed through my literature review. Finally, I explored how the currently used listening modules (activities and transcripts), reading comprehension passages and activities, speaking activities and writing activities of the particular program could be improved with respect to a more effective FOF approach.

Outcomes

All things considered, it is apparent that an explicit FOF instructional approach by means of structured input, traditional production practice and functional production practice has been predominantly used in the Level III lesson materials in order to focus on target forms.

However, the use of planned implicit FOF through enriched input has been neglected in many Level III lesson materials. As a result, the acquisition of the target forms does not take place naturally, simply as they are not there to be noticed while engaging in meaning focused activities. Instead, the target forms are learnt with conscious operations mostly through the traditional order of presentation, practice and production. Occurrence of “explicit incidental FOF” (Ellis, 2001) within the Level III material takes place as “pre-emptive FOF” (Ellis, 2001) and “reactive FOF” (Ellis, 2001). However, as discussed earlier, written teacher feedback is given minimally in the Level III program by means of explicit reactive FOF (i.e. metalinguistic feedback and explicit correction) which may contribute to students focusing less on form. On the other hand, the employment of implicit reactive FOF is present through teacher-learner and learner-learner negotiations through recasts, clarification requests and repetition.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the use of explicit and implicit FOF in combination has the potential to benefit the Level III EAP Program at the University of Colombo. Employment of FOF in any type of text used in any module can raise the awareness for grammar forms in the process of input perception. Thus, it is important to investigate ways to incorporate planned FOF techniques such as enriched input (Ellis, 2001) in to the Level III EAP material. Furthermore, incorporation of more communicative activities in which FOF is embedded can create opportunities for students to integrate accurate language and appropriate content. Giving form focussed feedback will help the students to monitor their

output as well as reflect on their mistakes. Assigning group work which targets both content and form will generate novice-expert partnership and socio-cultural learning stimulating meta-talk, hypothesis formulation and hypothesis testing which are important for the development of L2 proficiency, particularly grammatical competence at the intermediate second language proficiency level.

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