CONTEXTUALISING FORM AND FUNCTION FOR THE SAKE OF THE LEARNERS IN CLT

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Abstract

Arguments that the ultimate purpose of L2 acquisition and learning is to communicate have been widely accepted. To get a better result, a combination of instruction and opportunities to practice in communication is necessary. Instruction can provide learners with communicative competence, and practice can improve the automatic processing of this competence to communicate (Brown, 2001). CLT instruction should therefore equip L2 learners with both formal and functional aspects of the language. Depending on the context of the learners, focus on form and function are here viewed as a continuum and complementary to each other. By doing so, it is expected that L2 learners are well provided with ability to perceive not only the whole picture (in this case to communicate) but also small pieces (of grammar, form). It is believed that SLTL with activities that focus on both form (grammar) and function (communication) tends to produce learners with greater accuracy and fluency.

Keywords: *form, function, communication, L2 learners*

Introduction

Much has been put forward with regards to the shift in second language education from the traditional view, that gives more emphasis on language competence, to the contemporary perspective, which stresses the prominence of real communication (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 1999). An evidence of this shift may take account of the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT). Among other things, CLT believes that learning a language is basically learning to communicate (Brown, 2001). As a result, language teaching and learning should be directed towards the use of language rather than the language itself.

For certain people, CLT should therefore focus only on the use of language without direct teaching of grammar (Ellis, 1997). However, debates about whether communication requires a learner to acquire (and learn) only the function of language without form (including grammar) have been quite intense. This essay will attempt to shed light on this polemic, especially with the emergence of "form-focused instruction" in second language teaching and learning (SLTL). The author here subscribes to the argument that both form and function are equally

important in SLTL. Form and function are thus better viewed as a continuum depending on the context, instead of two opposite poles.

Form and Function in SLTL

First, as SLTL is often associated with L2 acquisition, a line should be drawn for the basis of this essay. Some people believe that learning is different from acquisition (Krashen, 1981, 1982; Yule, 2006). To them, acquisition refers to the subconscious development of language ability by using it naturally in communication; while learning tends to be more conscious, by building up knowledge about the language, usually in an instructional setting.

On the other hand, Ellis (1994, p. 14), for example, is questioning this division as "problematic" because it cannot be determined whether a learner's ability (knowledge and performance) is actually the "acquired" or the "learnt" one. Similarly, Nunan (1999) to some extent support the idea that acquisition may be preceded by learning. This essay goes with the later proposition that acquisition and learning is closely related and may therefore be used interchangeably, more particularly in certain contextual situations such as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context.

Secondly, even though the two terms *form* and *function* might be quite familiar in SLTL, the author still needs to highlight the main descriptions understood in this piece of writing. Referring to Brown (2001, p. 361), the formal features of language "include the organizational components of language and the systematic rules that govern their structure". In SLTL practice, form may thus include phonology, grammar, and lexis of the language (Gil, 2007b; Nunan, 1999). In addition, Johnson (2001) writes that form is basically the systemic competence, which consists of sounds/phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. This essay, however, would discuss only grammar (morphology and syntax) in SLTL as it is regarded most paramount.

Language functions refer to how language is used and what we do with it (Gil, 2007a). According to Nunan (1999, p. 131), language functions are sometimes called speech acts and mean "things people do through language, for example, apologizing, complaining, instructing, agreeing, and warning… requesting, denying, introducing, and so on". According to Johnson (2001), function of language covers the *sociolinguistic* competence (which comprises the rules of use and rules of discourse), and *strategic* competence (or communicative strategies). So function briefly means the communicative purposes of a piece of language, while form may be linked to its formal (linguistic) rules of such expressions. That is why Ellis (1994) associates function with *use* and form with *usage* of language.

Claiming to produce learners who can use (or communicate in) L2, CLT should therefore cover communicative competence in teaching and

learning practices: "it [communicative competence] should be the goal of a language classroom" (Brown, 2001, p. 69). Communicative competence includes "the knowledge the speaker-hearer has of what constitutes appropriate as well as correct language behaviour in relation to particular communicative goals" (Ellis, 1994, p. 13). The components of communicative competence consists of *organizational, pragmatic, strategic,* and *psychomotor* abilities of the learners (Brown, 2001), or *linguistic* and *pragmatic* knowledge (Ellis, 1994). Organizational competence includes all the rules in the language: grammar and discourse. Pragmatic correlates to the meaning of language in terms of functional and sociolinguistic aspects. Strategic competence comprises skills in negotiating (intended) meanings in communication, while psychomotor competence is basically pronunciation skills.

Some people of CLT subscribe to the argument that language should be acquired naturally, through a process of what Ellis (1994) calls *naturalistic acquisition*. However, he actually also introduces what he calls *instructed* second language acquisition (SLA), where the acquisition takes place through study, "with the guidance from reference books or classroom instruction" (Ellis, 1994, p. 12). Based on Long's and other experts' research studies, it has been widely accepted that formal instruction has a positive effect on L2 acquisition: "formal instruction is of value in promoting rapid and higher levels of acquisition" (Ellis, 1990, p. 133). It is evident from research that instructed L2 acquisition is quicker (in process) and higher (in level of proficiency) than the naturalistic one.

What might be worth highlighting with regards to instructed SLA, however, is that there are two different types of settings: *traditional* and *communicative instructional settings* (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). The common features of traditional instructional settings of SLA may include its focus on accuracy over meaningful interactions; sequenced, simplified and isolated presentation of linguistic items; graded language input; and the like. As a result, the language used (and learnt) in this setting would most probably differ with the language used in real life communication; it may be too far detached from natural interactions. On the other hand, communicative instructional setting attempts to create a classroom setting which can generally resemble real life interactions. In this particular setting, learners are encouraged to practice the language in meaningful interactions (often at the level of the learners' interlanguage); accuracy is not overemphasized; input is indeed modified to the stage but through "contextual cues or gestures"; and "real-life materials such as newspapers, television broadcasts" are equally explored to vary the discourse (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 95).

Contextualising Form and Function for Learners' Interests

A number of CLT people believe that learners do not need to be taught grammar (form) to communicate, for they will acquire it naturally as part of the process of learning to communicate. This faction of CLT may presumably depart from an overgeneralization that L2 acquisition/learning is similar to L1 acquisition, while they are in fact different. They might believe that L2 acquisition should just be done by, for instance, immersing and involving the learners in the community of the language, just as a child acquires L1. Conscious efforts to learn the language, which may include the 'complicated' rules that govern it, such as grammar, semantics, or discourse, are considered unnecessary. Learning may be viewed by this group of people as an obstacle to acquisition, predominantly because it is complicated.

To some extent, this view may have a valid point when the learners are children and live in (or have easy access to) L2 communities. However, at the same time, the assumption that L2 acquisition does not require the teaching of form (including grammar) is weak and may be misleading. First, L2 learners may come from different age groups, perhaps most of them are not children. Secondly, the contexts in which people learn L2 might be varied: some as a 'genuine' second language while others as a foreign language, for example. Other reasons such as orientation to levels of proficiency could be in disagreement with 'no grammar teaching' argument in CLT (Ellis, 1990).

Research shows that L2 learners are usually older/adults, while L1 acquisition usually happens at a very young age (Nunan, 1999). A number of implications may rise from this variation, such as the fact that "L2 learners may have experienced language learning before, their cognitive ability are more developed, or they might not be able to reach native-like ability" (Nunan, 1999, pp. 39-40). Based on these characteristics of L2 learners, especially their developed cognitive capacity, the avoidance of grammar teaching in SLA can in fact be counter-productive. Naturally, adults tend to use their reasoning (brain) for new things they will get including L2. If this capacity were left unexposed in L2 learning, the results might not be very optimal. So the term L2 learning (rather than acquisition) is indeed more appropriate as adults tend to utilize their conscious cognitive capacity to learn (and eventually acquire) L2, unlike children acquire L1.

This implies that grammar (or other types of language form) should still be taught communicatively and holistically, in complementary to the teaching of function in SLA. Larsen-Freeman (1995) states, as quoted in Nunan (1999), that grammar has actually three intertwined dimensions: form, meaning and use. To them, grammar is "the study of how syntax (form), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (use) work together to enable individuals to communicate through language" (Nunan, 1999, p. 101). Therefore, under this perspective, the

teaching of grammar in SLA does not merely focus on the linguistic, formal and isolated features of it but does include their contextual meanings and use.

For example, SLA could cover the teaching of (grammar) the present using V1 and V-ing. The instructions would probably start with (the presentation of) this form in real texts or interactions: through a movie, a recorded conversation, news broadcasts, an excerpt from a newspapers article, a magazine, and so forth. The learners could then be encouraged to understand the whole message first before they take a closer look at the present form/s in the input, for instance (the sequence could be reversed). The next step would be that the learners are to understand (and interpret) the meanings of the present form/s from the contexts around them. Accordingly, they should be able to use the present form they have learnt in their own sentences, with different contexts or discourse. Pair or group work among the learners could be promoted to engage them in the whole process of learning.

Additionally, apart from age, SLA should also be appropriated to the context being in play. People predominantly learn L2 as either a second or a foreign language. A second language learning context is that where the language is widely used (or accessible) in the community where the learners live; while a foreign language learning situation happens where the language being learnt is not used (or difficult to access) in the learners' environment (Ellis, 1994; Nunan, 1999). Opportunities for exposure and practice of the language in both contexts are quite different: 'pure' second language learners are of greater benefit than those of foreign language. Research by Swain (1985), Montgomery and Eisenstein (1985), and Schmidt and Frota (1986), which are cited in Nunan (1999, pp. 45-46), correspondingly concludes that L2 acquisition needs more than instruction. They found that L2 learners should be encouraged to produce the language in the forms of interactions and communication "out of class". Foreign language learners might thus be disadvantaged by their situations: they lack opportunities to do so.

CLT emerged in the effort to integrate instructions and interactions (or communication) into a unity of SLTL programs (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 1999). Most people of the CLT approach have also attempted to negotiate the teaching of both form (grammar) and function of language in class. In its practice and development with regards to how to teach grammar, these people are divisible into those of *indirect* and *direct* approach (Brown, 2001) or *implicit* and *explicit* approach (McArthur, 1983). By indirect, the teaching of grammar gets "only a passing attention" (Brown, 2001, p. 361). In other words, grammar is not really taught in certain amount of time in the instruction. Under this perspective, a particular piece of grammar, the active/passive voice for

example, will not be specifically and sufficiently explored except only touched at times when the learners encounter the form.

It seems that this kind of grammar discussions would most probably result in an unsystematic exploration of it. Based on the *teachability/learnability* hypothesis, grammar is best taught in accordance to the developmental readiness of the learners (Nunan, 1999). This condition may partly lead to the other approach of how to teach grammar, i.e. direct or explicit approach. According to Ellis (1990), there are no research studies of (adult) L2 learners who can learn grammar only through interactions. Accordingly, recent development in SLTL even proposes what is called "form-focused instruction" within the communicative framework (Brown, 2001). This type of instruction can cover various ways to teach grammar, "ranging from explicit treatment of rules to noticing and consciousness-raising techniques for structuring input to learners" (Brown, 2001, p. 361).

The idea of form-focused instruction is most likely based on a number of arguments. First, research and experiences in CLT show that exploration of grammatical form in instruction is both helpful and significant to speed up the learning process (Brown, 2001). Secondly, the whole language education and organic view of language recommend that grammar should be given equal treatment to communication (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 1999). Thirdly, form-focused instruction indeed help the acquisition of L2 linguistic competence (Ellis, 1990). Additionally, some believe that grammatical competence can result in high levels of proficiency and the focus of accuracy (as complementary to fluency) can best be delivered through explicit/direct instructions (Nunan, 1999).

So essentially, the instructed delivery of grammar in SLTL is therefore dependent to the contexts of the learners. It is in line with the principle of learner centeredness of SLTL. In terms of practical considerations, Celce-Murcia (1991) as quoted by (Brown, 2001, pp. 363-364) identifies six variables of how and to what extent grammar is explicitly required, which include: age, proficiency level, educational background, skill, register, and need/use. They could be summarised in the following figure.

Figure 1. Variables on Form-focused Instruction

	Less Important ←	Focus on Form →	More Important
Learner Variables:			
Age	Children	Adolescents	Adults
Proficiency level	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
Educational background	Preliterate (No formal	Semiliterate (Some formal	Literate (Well-educated)

	education)	education)	
Instructional Variables:			
Skill	Listening, reading	Speaking	Writing
Register	Informal	Consultative	Formal
Need/Use	Survival	Vocational	Professional

It can be drawn from the figure that explicit or direct instructions on grammar may well be suited for adolescent and adult L2 learners, with intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency. Direct grammar teaching is also appropriate for L2 learners focusing on productive skill (speaking and writing) orientation, either for vocational or professional use of the language. Nevertheless, this division should not be interpreted as rigid and strict, in that beginner learners may occasionally still need explicit grammar instructions, for example.

In the delivery of form-focused instruction, in this case grammar, there are a number of guidelines that can be followed in CLT classes (Brown, 2001). First, grammar should be taught inductively instead of deductively, perhaps in most situations. Inductive learning essentially means that learners derive grammatical rules from examples of real texts or communicative interactions. Several reasons for inductive method of grammar instruction may include the fact that it is more natural (more subconscious, developmental progressive), more meaning-based, and more involving or motivating. Deductive method may still be employed sometimes, perhaps for controlled practice or production, for instance.

Secondly, grammatical explanations and technical terminology should be presented very carefully (Brown, 2001). He proposes several rules of thumb regarding this. Basically, explanations or technical terminology should be given concisely, employing visual aids (graphs, diagrams, etc.), with clear examples, and so on. Thirdly, grammar should be integrated into the whole curriculum, as one of supporting foundations for communicative functions. Lastly, various grammatical errors should also be treated differently: global errors (which impede meaning) should be treated early while small errors can be corrected later. Adult learners generally expect error correction, so it is acceptable to do so (O'Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1996).

Additionally, Nunan (1999) argues that communicative instruction of grammar should apply the organic perspective, rather than the linear approach. Grammar is often presented in isolation and out of context in linear approach. The organic metaphor understands grammar learning like "growing a garden" than building a wall. Like plants and flowers in a garden, one does not learn a piece of grammar or one linguistic item at

a time perfectly. Instead, people learn "various things simultaneously (and imperfectly)" (Nunan, 1999, p. 109). This means that the treatment of grammatical errors should not expect L2 learners to correct them immediately; it needs process and the results may be delayed. Similarly, L2 learners would absorb numerous aspects (of grammar and their functions) at once but imperfectly, so recycling is necessary.

We shall now have a closer look at how form and function can be integrated (as complementary) in an EFL classes at the author's institution, Fakultas Syari'ah UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta Indonesia (FS). The main objective of English teaching at FS, an Islamic university in Indonesia, is reading for comprehension. Each teacher is accountable for guiding the students, predominantly, to be able to understand English-written materials about Islam in general and Islamic law in particular. They are free to select and practice any teaching techniques or methods necessary and appropriate for this main objective.

Based on the guidelines by Celce-Murcia mentioned earlier, the explicit teaching of grammar is not so important for reading skill but is highly required for well-educated adult learners using formal language. To overcome this discrepancy, under CLT approach, students should therefore be exposed to various authentic texts from books, international journal articles, magazines, news broadcasts, and other audio-visual texts from the beginning. This exposure is aimed at providing natural language input. Appropriate texts could be carefully chosen to include the specific grammar (and other form) in focus.

Open discussions, pair work, and group work are equally promoted in the classroom to activate their communicative skills they may have learnt (and acquired) during their previous study in high school. They can here interact with one another to discuss the message of the texts, specific issues, or certain grammatical items in the texts. These types of activities are expected to enable the students to understand grammar (form), meaning, and how it is used naturally and communicatively. Additionally, these activities are most likely to develop the automaticity of learners' communicative competence (Brown, 2001). By doing so, apart from the reading comprehension as the main objective, oral communication, which is the ultimate goal of language learning but is not emphasised in the curriculum, could also be accommodated in class.

Conclusion

Arguments that the ultimate purpose of L2 acquisition and learning is to communicate have been widely accepted. To get a better result, a combination of instruction and opportunities to practice in communication is necessary. Instruction can provide learners with communicative competence, and practice can improve the automatic processing of this competence to communicate (Brown, 2001). CLT

instruction should therefore equip L2 learners with both formal and functional aspects of the language. Depending on the context of the learners, focus on form and function are here viewed as a continuum and complementary to each other. By doing so, it is expected that L2 learners are well provided with ability to perceive not only the whole picture (in this case to communicate) but also small pieces (of grammar, form). It is believed that SLTL with activities that focus on both form (grammar) and function (communication) tends to produce learners with greater accuracy and fluency (O'Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1996).

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