



Focus on Form in College English Teaching

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Abstract

Many college English teachers lay emphasis on language meaning instead of language forms in order to satisfy the need of new college English curricular, change the present situation of “dumb-and-deaf English” and improve the students’ communicative competence. This approach upgrades the fluency but slows down accuracy, which results in inter-language fossilization. Focus on form in college English can improve both the fluency and accuracy of English language, which are crucial for the learners of English to improve the communicative competence. This paper objects to finding out the practicability of focus on form, the process of practicing focus on form and the effectiveness of the process.

Keywords: Focus on form, Communicative competence, Interaction

1. Introduction

For college English teaching, the “College English Curriculum Requirement” has opened up a greater scope to encourage the implementation for a communication-oriented teaching approach in this language program. It views language proficiency as a whole and especially stresses cultivating the learner’s oral ability. The requirement is practical and useful and probably helps solve the “dumb-and-deaf English” problem. It demonstrates a stronger determination and shows greater encouragement to develop a communication-oriented curriculum than ever before. But the present college English teaching is far from satisfactory, especially in the aspects of English listening and speaking abilities. It has not reached the goals of the Requirements. The reasons for this may be multidimensional, but the teaching methodology is an important factor.

2. Focus on forms and focus on meaning

Focus on forms is a traditional way that the teachers draw students’ attention to grammatical forms and linguistic forms. In college English teaching, teachers focus on the explanation of the words, sentences and the main idea of the text by translation. After having understood the different forms in the text, the students have no chance to practice speaking and listening. The problem of focus on forms is to lay emphasis on language knowledge teaching than students’ comprehensive abilities of using foreign language. The present “dumb-and-deaf English” problem results from the widespread use of this traditional grammar-oriented method. Students became almost “structurally competent but communicatively incompetent”. Language forms is only one component of the overall language knowledge native speakers possess and thus, communicative competence should incorporate sociolinguistic and contextual competence as well as grammatical competence.

Focus on meaning is a student-centered teaching method, which transfer the students’ attention from focus on the grammatical or linguistic forms to focus on meaning in output. Focus on meaning, which is simply based on the notion of communicative competence, asserts that the primary objective of a second or foreign language program must be to provide language learners with the information practice and much of the experience needed to meet the communication needs in the second or foreign language. The past two decades have witnesses a shift of emphasis in foreign language teaching and learning from traditional focus on forms to focus on meaning. In contrast to traditional structural approach, some studies suggests (e.g., Maley 1986; Littlewood 1981) that focus on meaning is characterized by its concentration on language use and appropriateness, focus on fluency, learner-centeredness and integration of language skills.

Focus on meaning views language as a tool for communication, insists that inter-action speaking activities in classrooms be instances of real communication, and ensures that students have sufficient exposure to the target language. All these would develop in students an ability to use English for communication. This student-centered teaching encourages active learning via student involvement. Students are encouraged to think about and experiment with language, with the teacher providing guidance, supervision and encouragement. While teachers direct and facilitate learning, students themselves have ultimate responsibility for their own progress.

3. Focus on form

Recently there has been a call for an integration of focus on forms and focus on meaning in the second language classroom, that's focus on form. Long(1991: 45-46) suggested that one way to encourage accuracy is through the concept of focus on form that target student's accuracy and focus on form "overtly draws students" attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose over-riding focus is on meaning or communication." He stressed the need for a focus on form to be enmeshed in communicative activity and motivated by communicative need. The use of focus on form instruction in the classroom allows the teacher to instruct students to both accuracy and fluency. It emphasizes the accuracy of language forms in communicative classrooms.

If learners acquire the target language only through focus on meaning instruction which stresses the need to foster communicative competence before the mastery of accurate language forms, they will run the risk on "fossilizing" errors. These fossilized errors, or errors that have become ingrained language habits after prolonged usage are extremely difficult, to subsequently eliminate. Thus it is impossible for language learners to achieve high levels of accuracy or native--- like proficiency if their exposure to the target language is limited to those that occur only in natural contexts. According to Long (1991), focus on form refers only to those form-focused activities that arise during, and embedded in, meaning-based lessons; they are not scheduled in advance, as is the case with focus on forms, but occur incidentally as a function of the interaction of learners with the subject matter or tasks that constitute the learners' and their teacher's predominant focus. It occurs just when he or she has a communication problem, and so is likely already at least partially to understand the meaning or function of the new form, and when he or she is attending to the input. Later Long and Robinson (1998) admitted that both planned focus on form and incidental focus on form could work in classroom teaching. But it should be a need for meaning-focused activity into which an attention to form is embedded. So the difference between focus-on-forms in traditional ways and the focus-on-form is that the latter occur in communication.

4. Focus on form and focus on forms

Sheen (2002) argued that focus on form and focus on forms revolve around the degree to which teachers need to direct learners' attention to understanding grammar whilst retaining a focus on the need to communicate. Focus on form refers to drawing students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose over-riding focus is on meaning or communication (1991). Focus on form derives from an assumed degree of similarity between first and second language acquisition positing that the two processes are both based on an exposure to comprehensible input arising from natural interaction. Focus on forms is equated with the traditional teaching of discrete points of grammar in separate lessons. It is based on the assumption that classroom foreign or second language learning derives from general cognitive processes, and thus entails the learning of a skill, hence its being characterized as a 'skills-learning approach'.

Zhang (2007:38-38) did research in oral English teaching which aimed at improving students' communicative competence and found that one big obstacle in improving spoken English is that the oral practice in the classroom is imitation and repetition, the demand is low, the students have no enthusiasm; or the students are demanded to have further discussion about some topics which need more expressions than they have. Both result in failure for lack of forms in target language to use. Though his research is on collaborative learning, the problem he found in teaching is similar with the researcher's problem, which proved that this research is useful. Some researchers (e.g. Ellis, 1999; Long,2000) found that form instruction is most effective when it is focused on raising learners' awareness of how a structure is formed, what it means, and how it is used rather than on practicing drills for accuracy.

In the classroom it is not easy for teachers to design interactive activities. Cameron (2000:26) suggested that if the demand is too high, the learners will find the task too difficult, they're not likely to finish it as well as they can, using what they know to complete the task but not using the language intended. Thus learning goals are not achieved.

The aim of English teaching is the communication between teachers and students, students and students, and is not just teachers teaching and students learning. In the teaching, the action of students is guiding by teachers. The limitation of teachers' talking demand teachers to better their input, and the input must be comprehensible. The output of students is just a kind of their experience and feeling. Teachers should deal with these differences in a correct way in order to give them more opportunities to show their own thoughts and opinion. Focus on meaning is an effective way to improve students' fluency while neglecting the accuracy in communication, which will influence the process towards target language. Focus on form is practical and effective in college English teaching and learning in improving the students and it should be applied in college English teaching and learning to improve students' accuracy as well as fluency.' communicative competence. Focus on form need to take place in a cultural atmosphere that allows students to actively participate in daily activities. Thus, administrators, teachers, parents, and students would need to feel some degree of comfort with letting students be active participants---and sometimes leaders---in the content and manner in which they study.

5. Conclusion

The aim of focus on form is to make learners to sue language to do things and experience language through using it.

Without basic linguistic structures, there is no way to achieve this aim. Therefore, tasks need to be designed and relevant support activities can be chosen to make the use of structures easier. Perhaps, it is a little hard for students to make sure of the relationships between linguistic forms and communicative functions, so the teachers need to design a variety of tasks to increase students' awareness of approaching language from using and practicing.

In China, the traditional way of teaching English cannot meet the communicative demands the changing society, and in language teaching, it is not enough to teach only grammatical structures or syntactic structures, for this cannot develop learners' communicative competence automatically. Therefore, with applying focus on form in input and focus on meaning in output, the students have more competence during the communication compared with the traditional teaching approach. More students can speak more fluent and more accurate English, because they are given more opportunities to exchange the ideas and opinions with others. Meanwhile, this approach creates more authentic communicative environment, in which students can practice meaningful contexts in the process of speaking tasks.

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