Combining Form and Meaning

Abstract

One of the most controversial areas of L2 pedagogy concerns the extent to which classroom teaching should focus on form and accuracy or on meaning and fluency. This article illustrates the problems inherent in an extreme focus on form and accuracy and in an extreme focus on meaning and fluency. It is argued that current language teaching theory views a 'dual', simultaneous focus on form and accuracy as well as meaning and fluency as highly desirable. However, evidence is lacking as to whether such a dual focus can be achieved in practice. There follows an account of a search of a database of L2 lesson transcripts for such evidence, followed by an analysis of the features of an authentic example of dual focus.

The problems inherent in an oppositional approach

The last twenty years have seen a protracted debate in language teaching concerning the relative merits of focusing on accuracy and form as opposed to focusing on fluency and meaning. It is not the purpose of this article to take sides in the debate, but rather to consider whether it is possible in practical classroom terms to synthesise these oppositions within the same classroom activity. I would first like to illustrate the problems inherent in both an extreme focus on form and accuracy and an extreme focus on meaning and fluency by examining extracts from classroom transcripts. When I use the term 'extreme' focus, I mean that the focus has shifted so far and so exclusively to one end of the continuum that discernable problems have been created
at the other end of the continuum: I hope to illustrate this point in the following discussion.

Extract 1

T: Do you make your bed every morning
   <nods>
L: Yes, I make my bed every morning
T: <shakes his head>
L: No, I don't make my bed every morning
T: Does your father make your bed every morning
L: Yes, my father makes my bed every morning
T: Does your little brother make your bed every morning
   <demonstrates a small brother>
L: Yes, my little brother makes my bed every morning
T: <shakes his head vigorously>
L: No, my little brother doesn't make my bed every morning
   I have no little brother

(Bolte & Herrlitz 1986: 206)

This type of extreme form-focused or accuracy-focused classroom activity has been subject to extensive attack for decades now, and it is probably unnecessary to point out its disadvantages: the learner himself/herself highlights (in the last line of the extract) the lack of correspondence between the forms practiced and any kind of real-world meaning. There is no scope for fluency development in such a rigid lockstep approach and the discourse is 'unnatural' in that such transformation sequences do
not occur outside the classroom. The focus is so exclusively on form and accuracy, then, that problems have been created at the meaning and fluency end of the continuum. It should be pointed out, however, that there is an expectation that learners will produce correct linguistic forms and a movement to upgrade learners' interlanguage.

Extract 2

1 L: China, yes.
2 T: Uh huh. in Greece. What about in Greece. Many bicycles?
3 L: Mmm. Bicycles, motor.
4 T: Uh huh, In Australia, er, bicycle, er, we wear a helmet.
5 LL: Helmet. yes, yes.
6 T: Special [gestures] helmet.
7 LL: Ohh. Kong.
8 L: Malaysia, same, same.
9 T: Same in Malaysia?
10 LL: Yes, yes.
11 L: Moto, moto.
12 T: In China a little or a lot?
14 T: Motor bike.
16 T: Ah huh.
17 L: Cap, cap
18 L: Cap.
19 L: Hat on, hat, hat.
In the rush away from a focus on form and accuracy, the disadvantages inherent in an extreme focus on meaning and fluency have often been played down or overlooked. When there is an extreme focus on fluency and meaning what we typically find is the teacher downgrading expectations of the linguistic forms which the learner produces, making concessions to understand, accept and praise the learners' interlanguage. In extract 2 we can see the teacher accepting without comment or correction any and every minimal, pidginised interlanguage form which the learner produces. When we examine the teacher's contributions we find that the teacher (a native speaker) is actually downgrading his/her own language to a minimalised, pidginised interlanguage devoid of verbs (apart from line 4) which is in effect mimicking the learners' interlanguage. This is by no means an isolated example - in Nunan 1989:142-149 I counted 30 other examples of the teacher producing a minimalised, pidginised, verbless interlanguage within the same lesson. In this extract the need to maintain a minimum focus on linguistic correctness and the need to upgrade learner utterances appear to have been sacrificed on the altar of fluency and meaning.

Although the flow of the interaction is maintained, although the learners are able to express personal meanings (after a fashion), and although Nunan (1987:144) suggests that the lesson from which extract 2 is taken is beginning to be "truly communicative",
many teachers would have serious reservations about the instructional value of the interaction in extract 2. The pidginised interlanguage which the teacher is producing is functioning as both input and model for the learners. The fact that the teacher is accepting any and every interlanguage form which the learners produce without correction or upgrading could of course result in fossilised errors. One has to question how students could ever reach any level of linguistic proficiency in a classroom which contained only such interaction as in extract 2. Lightbown and Spada (1993:103) point out, "There is increasing evidence that learners continue to have difficulty with the basic structures of the language in programs which offer no form-focused instruction.". According to Widdowson (1990:161) "It turns out that learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities." Looking at extract 2, we can begin to understand why this is the case.

**Covering form and meaning, accuracy and fluency**

There are clear disadvantages, then, to an extreme focus on form and accuracy, and to an extreme focus on meaning and fluency. The debate continues: Van Lier (1988: 276) amusingly reports that the opposing camps accuse each other of either 'fossilphobia' or 'pidgin-breeding'. 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 form and accuracy or meaning and fluency. According to Lightbown and Spada (1993: 105), for example:

"...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."

How, then, can teachers ensure that form and accuracy are covered together with meaning and fluency? Early communicative approaches to ELT tried to ensure comprehensive coverage in two main ways:

a) a gradual progression from form-focused activity to meaning-focused activity, from accuracy to fluency as described in Littlewood (1981). The terms Littlewood uses are 'pre-communicative' activities and 'communicative' activities.

b) the learners carry out a meaning-focused activity, the teacher notes down errors or deficiencies and uses them as subsequent input for a form-focused activity. This model is often associated with Brumfit (1979:183).

Both approaches cover accuracy and fluency, form and meaning, but do not attempt to do so simultaneously. More recent approaches (Ellis 1994; Widdowson 1990), however, discuss the possibility of establishing what I will call a dual focus, a means of focusing on accuracy and fluency, on form and meaning simultaneously. Ellis (1994:639) posits two possible approaches to integrating meaning and form, accuracy and fluency: first, activities can be devised that require learners to communicate while also focusing their attention on specific formal properties. Second, teachers can elect to provide feedback on learners' errors during the course of communication activities. Widdowson (1990:173) discusses communicative grammar activities which aim to reconcile and combine "...linguistic repetition, with its necessary focus on form, and non-linguistic purpose, with its necessary focus on meaning."

A simultaneous dual focus on both accuracy and fluency, on both form and meaning would therefore currently appear to be highly desirable, in that it would offer a neat and economical way of avoiding both sets of disadvantages: it seems attractive to both theorists and teachers. However, what is the interactional evidence from the classroom?
Does a dual focus ever occur? If so, how is it achieved and what are its characteristics?

In order to answer these questions, I examined my database of L2 classroom transcripts to see if I could find any clear examples of 'dual' focus. I am working from a database of published and unpublished transcripts of L2 lessons which total 330 lessons or fragments of lessons from 12 different countries and teaching 6 different L2s (Seedhouse, 1996). Some of these transcripts are supported by audio and video recordings, but the majority are not. Occurrences of such a dual focus in the data were extremely rare: I was only able to find one single clear and unequivocal example in my database, which may indicate that such a dual focus is not common practice. On the other hand, it could be argued that the criteria which I used were far too narrow and rigid, and that such a dual focus may be quite common. Before discussing the criteria which I used, and before examining the extract, however, it is necessary to consider the issues of 'meaning' and correction.

'Meaningful' and 'meaningless' activities

The issue of whether particular classroom activities are 'meaningful' or 'meaningless' is an extremely complex one, and I feel it has in general been oversimplified by the communicative approach, which has tended to imply that learners will find 'meaning-focused' activities 'meaningful' and 'form-focused' activities 'meaningless'. However, Hymes, the originator of the notion of 'communicative competence' and a major theoretical influence on the communicative approach, states that "... one cannot a priori define the sound of approaching footsteps or the setting of the sun as not communicative. Their status is entirely a question of their construal by a receiver. In general, no phenomenon can be defined in advance as never to be counted as constituting a message." (1972:26). Sociolinguists will recognise that Hymes is elaborating on the emic/etic distinction.
This has implications for the language classroom. It is of relatively minor importance whether a teacher, observer or theorist considers a classroom activity to be 'meaningful', 'authentic', 'communicative' or 'genuine communication'. What is important is whether the learners themselves validate the activity and find it meaningful, whether they think it has a place in the language classroom and whether it matches their own language learning aims or not. To transplant Hymes' point to the language teaching arena, the status of the activity is entirely a question of its construal by the learner, rather than by the observer or teacher or theorist.

The danger of the kind of approach in which the communicative observer or teacher decides what is meaningful to the learner, in which it is assumed that learners find communicative meaning-focused activities 'meaningful' and form-focused activities 'meaningless' is graphically illustrated by large-scale research from the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program reported in Nunan (1988:89-94). Students were asked to rate the most useful parts of the lesson: 40% nominated grammar exercises as most useful and only 10% nominated communication tasks and problem-solving as most useful. In a survey of the most popular and least popular learning activities, students gave error correction a 'very high' rating, whereas teachers gave error correction a 'low' rating. It is therefore vital to appreciate the relativity of the concept of 'meaning' when applied to classroom activities, and to avoid imposing one's own preconceptions onto the learners: one has to find ways of discovering what the learners find meaningful.

**Correction**

A heavy emphasis on the correction of erroneous linguistic forms is typically associated with an extreme focus on form and accuracy. What we found in the case of an extreme
focus on meaning and fluency (extract 2) was a complete absence of correction of erroneous linguistic forms. Correction policy can thus be seen to play a vital role in the establishment of a focus on either form and accuracy or meaning and fluency. There are many different ways in which a teacher can correct learner utterances: Chaudron (1988:146-148) lists 31 different types of corrective reaction which a teacher can make. Very many correction techniques result in practice in what Conversation Analysis terms exposed correction (Jefferson 1987), in which the flow of the interaction is broken and correction becomes the interactional business. This happens especially if the teacher prompts the learner to correct the error him/herself (in Conversation Analysis this is termed other-initiated self-repair). We can see an example of this in extract 3 below: the error being treated is in the second line, where L1 uses 'what' instead of 'who'.

Extract 3

T: I'm thinking of my friends from Paris, Sue?
L1: Um ... what are you thinking about?
T: (laughs) That depends if you want to offend your friends, doesn't it? If you want to insult your friends......
L1: Uh...
T: Do you understand? If you think of your friends as objects
(laugh), you say what.
L1: Um, what are you thinking about?
T: No, not what. They are people, aren't they?

(L1 produces the required response 10 lines later)

(Guthrie 1984: 192 (translated from French))
In the above extract correction becomes the interactional business because the teacher prompts the learner to correct him/herself and the flow of the interaction is considerably impaired as a result. If the teacher had performed a straight correction by prompting with the target form 'who' in line 3 or by presenting the target sentence, then the interaction would probably have continued smoothly. I am not suggesting that other-initiated self-repair is a bad thing per se: on the contrary, it can be a very valuable technique in a form and accuracy context (Edge 1984:24). The problem with exposed correction for current purposes, however, is that it prevents the maintenance of a focus on meaning and fluency. As Brumfit (1984:56) puts it "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." Teachers wishing to establish a dual focus on both form and accuracy, meaning and fluency would therefore have to find a means of correcting errors of linguistic form by which the correction did not achieve interactional prominence: we will see in extract 4 that this is exactly what happens.

Criteria used in the database search

Before searching the database I had to decide on criteria for identifying and distinguishing a dual focus when I encountered it. The criteria used to establish the focus on form and accuracy were as follows: linguistic errors made by the students should be corrected rather than ignored. The criteria used to establish the focus on fluency were as follows: the learners should have control of the interaction, i.e. they should be able to take as long a turn as necessary and should be able to negotiate turn-taking themselves, rather than have the teacher allocate turns or tell them how
long they should speak for. The criteria used to establish the focus on meaning were as follows: the learners should contribute 'new' information to the interaction, i.e. information which was unavailable to the teacher and which was not provided by the teacher. The learners should contribute information which was personally 'meaningful' to them. It will be clear from the previous discussion of 'meaning' that this could in principle be any topic, and it would be necessary to establish what the learners found meaningful. For the purposes of this article, however, I adopted very narrow and rigid criteria in order to be as sure as possible (as a reader of transcripts who is external to the interaction) that the information which the learners contributed was 'meaningful' to them. The criteria, therefore, were that the learners should contribute new information concerning themselves, their own lives, experiences, opinions and beliefs. I am aware that it may ultimately be an unproven assumption that students who are contributing such 'new' and personal information are in fact saying something which is personally meaningful. However, this is the assumption I am working with, and it is based solely on my teaching experience.

An example of 'dual' focus

Using the above criteria, I was able to locate only one clear example of dual focus in the database. In this extract, the learners are talking about what they had done the previous weekend. The multilingual, multinational group of adult intermediate learners is being taught in a language school in England.

Extract 4

1    L1:    And what did you do last weekend?
2    L2:    On Saturday I went on my own to Canterbury, so I took a bus
and I met L6 – he took the same bus to Canterbury. And in
Canterbury I visited the Cathedral and all the streets near
the Cathedral and I tried to find a pub where you don't see
- where you don't see many tourists. And I find one

T: Found

L2: I found one where I spoke with two English women and we
spoke about life in Canterbury or things and after I came
back

T: Afterwards

L2: Afterwards I came back by bus too. And on Sunday what did
you do?

L1: Oh, er, I stayed in home

T: At home

L1: On Sunday I stayed at home and watched the Wimbledon Final.

What did you do on Sunday?

L2: On morning

T: In morning

L2: In the morning I took the bus......

[Mathers 1990:109]

The focus in this extract is on personal meaning in that the learners are able to
contribute 'new' information concerning their personal experiences, and on fluency
in that they are able to manage the interaction themselves locally and by themselves:
the evidence for this is that the learners use a 'current speaker selects next speaker'
technique to select another student in lines 13 and 17. The focus is also on accuracy
and linguistic form in that the teacher corrects all errors of linguistic form, and
in this extract the learners adopt the corrected forms in subsequent utterances.
Although the teacher adopts a direct and overt repair technique which has an upgrading and scaffolding function, this does not result in the flow of the interaction being interrupted. How does the teacher achieve this unobtrusive repair? According to Iles (1995), experienced teachers often engage in what she terms camouflaging of repair. This plays down the activity of repair so that it is less obtrusive and prominent, with the result that the flow of the interaction is not impeded. Some of the features of camouflage are as follows: the teacher produces the target form for adoption by the learner without any overt or explicit negative evaluation or indication that an error has been made. The teacher does not mark the target form out by loudness or decrease in tempo: there is narrow pitch movement and a lack of speech perturbation features. In other words, the teacher fits the repair as unobtrusively as possible into the prosodic environment of the learner’s utterances so that the repair does not obtain prominence and does not become the interactional business. The correction can be treated as a by-the-way activity, and the interactional evidence is that the learners do treat it as a by-the-way activity, with the corrections not interrupting the flow of the interaction. It appears from the interaction that this camouflage technique may work best with ‘slips’ which do not impede communication. Errors of a high level of gravity or which disrupt communication may, by contrast, require the learner to stop and think, or may require a higher level of teacher intervention.

**Conclusions**

It appears from the interactional evidence that it is possible, in certain circumstances, for teachers to create and maintain a dual focus on form and meaning, on accuracy and fluency. This can be accomplished by: 1) finding opportunities for learners to talk about topics which are personally meaningful to them: it is for teachers and learners to negotiate which topics are meaningful to the learners; 2) allowing the
learners to manage the interaction themselves; 3) limiting the teacher's role to using
camouflaged correction techniques to upgrade and scaffold learner utterances. I do
not wish to imply that this is the only conceivable way of achieving a dual focus,
but it was the only way for which I was able to find clear evidence in the data.

Now there are a number of interesting points concerning this dual focus on form and
accuracy, on meaning and fluency as exemplified in extract 4. Classroom teachers are
already creating it without great fanfare. It does not involve any expensive materials
or any high technology. It does not involve complex techniques: although I have used
technical terms from Conversation Analysis to describe the correction technique,
it is very simple and can easily be imparted on teacher training courses. The ordinary
and unremarkable nature of the interaction in extract 4 will have struck many readers:
it would in practice, however, require an experienced and skilful teacher to make
the interaction flow in so ordinary and unremarkable a fashion. So perhaps instead
of proliferating ever more exotic and convoluted classroom activities, we would be
better advised, in the words of Robert O'Neil (O'Neill 1991) to concentrate on "the
importance of doing ordinary things well". Close examination of classroom transcripts
may reveal just how skilful teachers can be at finding practical solutions to thorny
theoretical problems (such as how a dual focus on meaning and form can be created):
theorists may in fact be able to learn a great deal from teachers with respect to
the process of instructed second language acquisition.
References

Bolte, H. and W. Herrlitz 1986. 'Reconstruction and Intervention in the Analysis of Language Learning in the Classroom' in G. Kasper (ed.).


Iles, Z. 1995. 'Learner Control in Repair in the EFL Classroom'. Paper given at the BAAL Annual Meeting 1995, University of Southampton.

Jefferson, G. 1987. 'On exposed and embedded correction in conversation' in G. Button and J. Lee (eds.).


University of Birmingham.
Biographical Details

Paul Seedhouse has taught EFL in Austria, Thailand, Brunei and Spain and is currently Lecturer at the University of York, Norwegian Study Centre. He has an RSA Diploma in TEFL, an MSc in Teaching English from Aston University and a D Phil from the University of York. His current research is in applying CA methodology to the analysis of L2 classroom interaction.

Subject Index

Form
Meaning
Accuracy
Fluency