

**New Labels for Old Problems: Grammar
in Communicative Language Teaching**
Nuevos rótulos para viejos problemas: La gramática en la enseñanza del lenguaje

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Communicative language teaching has long been controversial due to its lack of explicit grammar instruction. Focus on form instruction (Long, 1991), however, puts communication as the centerpiece of instruction, but addresses form on a need-to-know-basis; thus, focus on form instruction claims to balance communication and grammar. Moreover, the concept of uptake (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001), or the process by which learners respond to correction initiated by teachers and/or other learners, has been used to demonstrate that focus on form instruction, and thus by extension, CLT, gives sufficient attention to grammar. However, in this article, I will show that the concept of uptake is problematic, and demonstrate that focus on form instruction does not offer a feasible way of addressing grammar in EFL classrooms. Yet, before showing the technique's inadequacy, I will highlight selected aspects of focus on form instruction and uptake research.

Key Words: English-Grammar-Teaching-Evaluation, Second Language Acquisition-Teaching, Grammar Instruction.

La enseñanza comunicativa del lenguaje ha sido muy controversial debido no sólo a la carencia explícita de la enseñanza de la gramática, sino también a la carencia tangible para evaluar si los estudiantes han adquirido o no ciertas formas gramaticales. El enfoque de la forma (Long, 1991), sin embargo, ubica la comunicación como pieza principal de enseñanza, pero a la vez enfatiza en la enseñanza de la forma como parte importante que todo estudiante necesita saber. Algunos autores han señalado la importancia de tener un balance entre la comunicación y la enseñanza explícita de la gramática. Esto se debe en gran parte, al concepto de 'uptake' que ha sido usado para demostrar que el enfoque en la enseñanza de la forma y, por extensión el enfoque en la enseñanza comunicativa del lenguaje, facilitan la atención a la gramática. Sin embargo, el concepto de 'uptake' es teórica y prácticamente problemático y demuestra que el enfoque de la enseñanza en la forma no es un camino viable para enseñar gramática en salones donde el inglés se enseña como idioma extranjero. Mi propósito en este artículo es: (1) Resumir las investigaciones concernientes a la enseñanza de la

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forma y 'uptake'; (2) Debatir que 'uptake' y la enseñanza en la forma no son elementos suficientes para aprender inglés como idioma extranjero ya que es muy difícil prestar atención a la gramática.

Palabras claves: *Inglés-Gramática-Enseñanza-Evaluación, Adquisición de una segunda lengua-Enseñanza, Gramática-Instrucción*

INTRODUCTION

Behind the closed doors of faculty meetings and within the pages of academic journals, EFL researchers and teachers have often complained that communicative language teaching insufficiently addresses grammar and overemphasizes communication. However, Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) claim that *focus on form instruction* alleviates this problem by addressing grammar when it is problematic, thereby catering to learners' individual needs. Notably, the concept of *uptake* (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001), in its various interpretations, has been used to support Long (1991) and Long and Robinson's (1998) claims. However, the concept of uptake rests on tenuous theoretical grounds. Uptake also reveals that focus on form instruction results in very little attention to grammar, in addition to being a mode of instruction that makes unrealistic logistical and linguistic demands on EFL teachers and students.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: CONCEPTS AND CRITICISMS

In EFL settings, the credibility of communicative language teaching has long suffered because of its amorphous nature; that is, communicative language teaching has encapsulated anything from a total emphasis on 'authentic' communication to occasional classroom practice. While most EFL teachers use—and most of the time, endorse—the

latter, the former has been looked upon skeptically by EFL professionals (See Brown, 1994; 2000, and Celce-Murcia, Britton, and Godwin, 1996 for reviews of communicative language teaching), even though some of the more radical interpretations of communicative teaching, such as the Natural Approach (Terrell and Krashen, 1983), are presented in relatively straightforward and unambiguous terms. The reasons for this skepticism are, however, quite understandable: The native-like competency; purely communicative language teaching demands of teachers; the high degree of motivation and autonomy that it requires of students; the prerequisite of having access to authentic materials, such as newspapers, magazines, textbooks, video, and other expensive audio-visual materials, have all made communicative language teaching something that many EFL professionals have felt hesitant about using.

In addition, as a North American English language specialist who has taught both in the United States and abroad, I have long wondered whether or not CLT, which has traditionally been exported from the native-speaking world (United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc.) to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) countries, is theoretically sound enough to replace more non-communicative, yet predictable approaches. Moreover, it has concerned some that such an individualistic approach to language teaching infringes upon other cultures' interpretations of authority and

respect for the teachers' knowledge and tutelage (See Li, 1998 for a thorough review of the cultural difficulties of CLT in ELF settings).

However, my greatest concern—and that of many EFL professionals and colleagues I have corresponded with in Colombia, Peru, Russia, Israel, and Italy, to name a few—is that this “strong” version of CLT (Littlewood, 1981) places little emphasis on the explicit teaching and testing of grammar. Some have even claimed that explicit grammar instruction is of little use and thus both instruction and testing should solely focus on language use (Terrell and Krashen, 1983). Nevertheless, such beliefs often run contrary to many EFL teachers' intuition and classroom experience, which more often than not, tell them that not only do students need and want significant amounts of grammar instruction, but also that their acquisition of grammar must be periodically evaluated.

Focus on Form Instruction: An Overview

Some, however, have proposed solutions to this perceived lack of concern that communicative language teaching has for grammar. In a series of publications, Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998), for instance, have promoted the concept of *focus on form instruction*. Here, form—which includes not only grammar, but also lexical usage—is not the center of classroom lessons; instead, communicative tasks are carried out by learners. However, form is focused on by both teachers and learners, but only on a need-to-know-basis. Better put, focus on form instruction ‘overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication’ (pp. 45-46). Long and Robinson (1998) assert that such an approach steers clear of the other two instructional options: *focus on forms* and *focus*

on meaning. The former is seen in traditional approaches such as Grammar Translation and the Audiolingual Method, in which form is the object of the lesson, rather than a tool to communicate more effectively; focus on meaning, in contrast, is seen in methods such as Terrell and Krashen's (1983) Natural Approach, which expects that grammar will be acquired incidentally, and therefore makes no provision for explicit grammar instruction.

An example of focus on form instruction could involve intermediate-level university students role-playing a telephone conversation to distant cousins living in the United States while working in dyads. The teacher notices that one of the students is frequently making an error with the third- person singular. The teacher could then opt to stop the students, explain the error, and follow it with an example. Likewise, if the learner's partner noticed such an error, he/she could also engage in correction and modeling.

Uptake: Key Concepts and Studies

In short, focus on form instruction (Long, 1991; Long and Robinson, 1998) has some appeal for EFL teachers due to the middle ground it proposes. However, as opposed to other communicative approaches, a method to estimate students' learning progress has evolved that justifies focus on form instruction's utility. This method of measurement is known as *uptake*. While this concept has become popular within the last decade, its definition has passed through many metamorphoses. In fact, its roots go back to the early 1980s when Allwright (1984) referred to it as a method in which students would retrospectively describe what they had learned at some stage of a lesson. However, Lyster and Ranta (1997) reengineered the term to pertain to how students react to

corrective teacher feedback; in other words, the responses students generate when their teachers point out their grammatical and lexical errors. More specifically, they claim that uptake, "...refers to a student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student's initial appearance..." (pp. 49). An example of uptake could include a student using the past tense when they should be using the present tense while answering a teacher's question. The teacher could elect to correct the error and explain the correct form. The actual uptake portion would occur with the student repeating or reformulating their original utterance using the correct form. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) adjusted the definition by claiming that instead of being teacher-initiated, uptake is a spontaneous and student-initiated phenomenon. In addition, while uptake includes correction, they expanded it to include situations in which "learners themselves preempt attention to a linguistic feature (e.g., by asking a question), thus eliciting not a teacher feedback move but a teacher response move" (pp. 286).

On a theoretical level, Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001) claim that there are strong reasons to believe that uptake is facilitative of L2 acquisition. First of all, Swain, (1985, 1995) in her comprehensible output hypothesis, posits that actual L2 use forces learners to analyze the form-function relationship of L2 items. Such analysis is particularly helpful for those forms with which learners frequently commit errors. Likewise, Lyster and Ranta (1997) assert that uptake gives students practice opportunities that help students automatize the forms' correct usage—something that most teachers desire. Regardless of the justification used, both of the

latter types of uptake are cited as strong support for the utility of focus on form instruction.

Not surprisingly, studies of teacher/student uptake claim to show that focus on form effectively addresses grammar. Using elementary school students in a beginning French immersion program in Canada, Lyster and Ranta (1997), for example, found that the majority of uptake occurred when teachers intentionally elicited certain forms and when they requested clarification from students. In addition, Lyster (1998) discovered that recasts of 23% of all errors were subsequently used correctly by learners. Finally, Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) found that learners engaged in a high rate of uptake in both student-initiated questions (78.6%) and teacher corrective feedback (26.8%). Significantly, learners successfully engaged in meaning-centered uptake 70.8% of the time, while they engaged in form-based uptake at the rate of 75.6%.

Uptake: Theoretical and Practical Problems

The results of these studies, accompanied by theoretical arguments—as put forth by Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001)—suggest that uptake has revealed that focus on form instruction addresses sufficient amounts of grammar. However, there are many theoretical and practical problems with uptake that reveal that it falls short of demonstrating that focus on form instruction promotes L2 grammatical acquisition. More problematic, studies of uptake show that focus on form instruction gives minimal attention to grammar.

First of all, Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) acknowledge that simple uptake alone is no guarantee that

acquisition has occurred. Seeing as though the concept of 'acquiring' has long been unsuccessfully debated, it is not realistic for these studies to lay claim to solving this problem (see Mitchell and Myles, 1998 for a discussion of learning vs. acquisition). However, they claim that Swain's (1985, 1995) comprehensible output hypothesis is strong support of the presence of acquisition. However, if simple output were enough, then there wouldn't be learners who, in spite of years of exposure to English and active engagement with fluent speakers, still have fossilized and non-target like grammar (See Mitchell & Myles, 1998 for a review of fossilization). Thus, using the grammatical form correctly once or twice may not have a significant impact of learners' acquisition of it. In addition, forced output, as Swain (1985, 1995) herself implies, may have to occur several times before acquisition takes place. However, it seems highly unlikely that most EFL teachers, who, in many cases, have classrooms that range from 50-100 students (Sheorey & Nayar, 2002) have enough time to give each of their students' individual errors attention more than one or two times per class period, if at all.

A problem related to the amount of teacher accessibility to students is students' accessibility to other students. For cultural reasons, many students do not feel comfortable correcting their peers or requesting help from their peers. Shamim (1996) notes that in Pakistan, for example, students who ask questions and actively participate in classroom discussions are often deemed to be show-offs and risk losing face with the teacher and other students, especially if they commit errors. This type of scenario would hardly seem to encourage uptake.

A further problem concerned with students involves competency. In order to initiate more than a token amount of corrective feedback or

request help from teachers or other learners, students would need to possess threshold degree of competency; presumably, they would need to be fairly advanced in order (a) not to regress to the first language during communicative difficulties; (b) to be able to have a reasonable level of fluency so as to maintain the communicative flow of the lesson; (c) to be able to articulate their needs clearly to the teacher and/or students and (d) to be able to respond to other students' needs. While uptake may be beneficial from an acquisition viewpoint, such requirements may be overwhelming for even advanced EFL learners, especially if they have little experience with authentic communication and are not culturally accustomed to student-centered instruction.

It is not surprising, then, to learn that uptake-based studies advocating focus on form instruction have often taken place in second language environments –Lyster and Ranta, 1997 in Canada (French); Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001 in New Zealand (English). In the case of the former, students were in an immersion program where interaction was not only culturally appropriate, but pedagogically required and therefore they were accustomed to communicating with their teacher and peers in the second language. In the case of the latter, regression to the first language was probably not an option, due to the multilingual make-up of the classroom. In addition, the classroom was composed of international students at the intermediate level who, while far away from being fluent speakers of English, were living in an English-speaking country and thus were not unaccustomed to using the language. In any case, such second language settings are markedly dissimilar to those that many EFL teachers and students confront on a daily basis.

While studies that support uptake are problematic in terms of the population they exam, they are also problematic in terms of the amount of forms students attended to in them. In short, such studies show that, in comparison to the amount of hours of instruction the learners received, successful uptake happened relatively infrequently. For example: Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) found that there were only 235 successful uptake incidents during 14 hours of instruction in a class of 12 students. On average, then, students engaged in 16.8 incidents of uptake per one hour of instruction; yet, on average, each student only engaged in uptake 1.4 times per one hour of instruction. Such a minimal amount of attention to grammar is hardly sufficient for students to achieve *grammatical competence* (Canale and Swain, 1980). Finally, well over half the forms students attended to in both studies dealt with vocabulary, not grammar.

CONCLUSION

While theoretical and empirical arguments have been made claiming that uptake demonstrates that focus on form instruction offers students sufficient amounts of exposure to grammar, these are largely speculative. In addition, studies of student uptake have shown that, in general, focus on form instruction infrequently exposes students to grammar. Moreover, the conditions under which such studies took place are most likely dissimilar to types of classes in which EFL is commonly taught in terms of student/teacher linguistic abilities, time, and resources. Thus, while focus on form instruction may be a useful approach in ESL situations, EFL practitioners should be aware that it, like the other types of communicative language teaching that came before it, has not bridged the gap between meaning and structure. More specifically, teachers in

Colombia should be hesitant to incorporate Long (1991) and Long and Robinson's (1998) ideas, for not only is there little evidence to show that they would help students learn more grammar, but also because such ideas make practical demands that many teachers and students may not be able to handle.

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