



## **Second Language Acquisition and Language Teaching**

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### **ABSTRACT**

After discussing the ties between language teaching and second language acquisition research, the present paper reviews the role that second language acquisition research has played on two recent pedagogical proposals. First, communicative language teaching, advocated in the early eighties, in which focus on the code was excluded, and then the more recent research-based proposals of integrating some degree of focus on form in meaning-based curricula. Following Ellis (1998), four macro-options of focus-on-form interventions and their theoretical motivations are presented, followed by recent research evidence: input processing, input enhancement, form-focused output and negative feedback. The last section of the paper deals with two related pedagogical issues: the choice of linguistic forms in focused instruction and its benefits depending on individual factors and the learning context.

**KEYWORDS:** focus on form, form-focused instruction, input processing, input enhancement, negative feedback, form-focused output, explicit / implicit learning

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between SLA and language teaching is not by any means a straightforward one nor is there a consensus about how much of an influence SLA **should** play on language teaching. However, the fact that there is **often** a component of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in TESOL MA **programmes** attests for the centrality of this field in the education of a language teacher'. Studies on teachers' pedagogical systems **also** show that propositional knowledge within teacher education courses plays a role in shaping teachers' personal theories of language learning and teaching (Borg, 1998). For example, MacDonald, Badger and White (2001) showed that the two groups of student teachers under study underwent significant changes in their beliefs and knowledge about language learning as a result of the course on SLA research **and** theory they took within the context of a B.A. and an **M.Sc.** Me. Nevertheless, these same authors report on their student teachers' avowed aversion towards **the** theoretical approach of the SLA course they took, a concern that has **also been** voiced by **several** authors in **reference** to conventional SLA literature. For **instance**, both Ellis (1997a) and Markee (1997) are of the opinion that basic SLA research tends to be regarded by teachers as **difficult** to understand (a problem of inaccessibility of the discourse of SLA) and removed from their **own** concerns (a problem of pedagogic utility).

Contradictory information about the impact of SLA research on teachers, like that found in MacDonald *et al.*'s conclusions to their study, is not uncommon in the literature written at the turn of the **century**. While there are applied linguists who consider that, for the most **part**, SLA research has made relevant contributions to language pedagogy (i.e., Lightbown, 2000; Long, 1990; Mitchell, 2000), there are others who perceive a gap, sometimes a **truly**, almost unsurmountable conflict of interests between researchers and practitioners (i.e., Block, 2000; Crookes, 1997; Markee, 1997). However, these diverging stances are much better understood if one is aware that they originate from rather fundamental differences in the conception of teaching that these two groups of researchers hold (as conceptualized by Freeman, 1996).

Those critical of the role of mainstream SLA research **reject** the view of teaching as mainly propositional knowledge, as a set of behaviors that can be prescribed by researchers. Instead, they view teaching as intuitive knowledge that takes the form of theories ('teaching as cognition') or as a **craft** where the context guides the teachers' moment-to-moment decisions ('teaching as interpretation'). Resulting from these views of teaching, basic SLA research has **been** criticized for paying little attention to the social context of L2 acquisition (Ellis, 1997a) as well as for excluding the teacher as a focus of investigation (Markee, 1997). Block (2000) has **also** discussed researchers' exclusive concern with underlying **competence** at the expense of behaviour, something which, according to him, teachers are primarily concerned with. These are **some** of the reasons why applied linguists like Sheen (2002), among others, maintain that mainstream SLA research, together with the positivist research methodology that tends to go with it, **have** contributed little to the improvement or development of language teaching.

Even though those researchers embodying mainstream SLA research would not agree with Sheen, there **is** an awareness on their part that not **all** findings in SLA can **equally** contribute to pedagogy. For example, for Gass (1995) the **training** in SLA that teachers receive should not be used to apply its findings directly but to **make** them able to be critical with SLA research. On a similar line, Lightbown (2000) **is** of the opinion that SLA research **is** not the only **source** of information teachers should draw on. In any case, both **parties**, a **number** of researchers critical with mainstream research as well as most of those advocating alternative ways of SLA research, see the benefits of strengthening the **ties** between researchers and teachers, or 'users of research', as Mitchell (2000) puts it.

However, the main difference on the part of mainstream SLA researchers lies in a faith in 'scientific' pedagogy, a faith that propositional knowledge can be of use to teachers ('teaching as knowing'). From this perspective, there **is** certainly a sense of SLA having contributed to language teaching. For Mitchell (2000) this contribution to practice **is** found mainly in SLA ability to elaborate objectives and theories of language learning and in the promotion of experiential methodology as well as of learning activities for the classroom. For Lightbown (2000), this contribution has **been** especially notorious over the **last fifteen** years, where one can find a considerable body of research focused on pedagogical questions. **In** her review of research of this period, two **recurrent** themes are apparent, one is the revision of **some** of Krashen's hypotheses and the other is the benefits of a focus on form in the communicative classroom. These are **precisely** the two topics the remainder of the present article **is** devoted to. The following section revisits **some** of Krashen's hypotheses which provided **support** for a strong version of communicative language teaching (CLT). Next comes a section dedicated to focus on form from a theoretical viewpoint, followed by a section that reviews recent empirical **evidence** for focus on form. The final part of the article **deals** with **areas** of language pedagogy for which research findings may be immediately relevant.

## II. CLT AND SLA

Communicative language teaching **came** out at a time when teachers were sceptical about the role of grammar in foreign language instruction (Mitchell, 2000) and felt disillusioned with the results of audio-lingual teaching (Lightbown, 2000). But the drastic changes that took place in **foreign/second** language teaching **starting** in the sixties had their immediate antecedents **outside** SLA research and theory. Those changes were mainly based on linguistic theories of communication (British functional **linguistics** and work in sociolinguistics and philosophy) on which scholars like Widdowson and Candlin **drew in order** to advocate for a view of language as a system of communication with an emphasis on language in use. Though scarce at that point, SLA research certainly played a role mainly through Krashen's **interpretation** of SLA's early research and his theoretical position in the seventies, which were fully compatible with the shift to CLT.

According to Krashen (1985), in order to acquire a second language all that was needed was comprehensible input and motivation. He made a fundamental distinction between **learning** and acquisition, to argue that the former, entailing metalinguistic **information** and corrective feedback, could impede language acquisition. These ideas **became** very engrained among teachers, to the point that Lightbown (2000) reports that in the late eighties 'everybody' believed in comprehensible input and the benefits of group work. Similarly, she mentions that the teachers in her environment took it for granted that it was not good to point out students' **errors** nor to focus on one single grammatical point at a time. The impact of these ideas was considerable and they fostered the adoption by **some** of the 'strong' version of CLT. According to this version, communicative activities are an integral part of instruction where students' attention is focused on the meaning of the message to the exclusion of any focus on the **code**.

Scholars **have** attempted to understand **the** surprisingly enormous impact on L2 pedagogy of Krashen's theoretical position. According to Mitchell and Myles (1998), Krashen's theory was so well tuned to the needs of the teachers **because** there was a feeling of frustration among them given the gap that existed between what was taught and students' accuracy. Ellis (1997b) points out that Krashen's work being a theory instead of just empirical research played as an advantage given that theory-based applications, as opposed to research-based applications, are likely to **survive** longer, and that theories are less **restrictive** to **apply** than specific research studies. This author **also** remarks the dangers of an SLA theory like that of Krashen where his hypotheses were **taken** on faith and pedagogical implications were **drawn** too prematurely.

Even though **some** of Krashen's **claims** were empirically based **because** they **relied** on "the morpheme studies", his exclusive reliance on those studies, known to **have** methodological problems, has **been** criticized. In addition, **some** of his hypotheses **have been** said to be too vague and imprecise. For example, the Monitor Hypothesis is impossible to test empirically even if it can **have** intuitive appeal. Likewise, his **proposal** of the existence of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) lacks any specification as to how it may work empirically. For Mitchell and Myles (1998), Krashen's **main** weakness is presenting a set of hypotheses as an empirically **valid** model, when in fact those hypotheses **have not been tested**. Yet, and in spite of those limitations, Krashen's work continued to be influential for a long time in teaching circles.

Similarly, CLT continued to gain popularity well into the eighties in spite of the fact that there was little evidence available to **prove** the effectiveness of its **principles**. Studies that included a communicative component produced unconvincing support for CLT (see for example, Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Savignon, 1972). But, according to Spada (1997), this research evidence had little impact on L2 pedagogy **because** of the scarcity of classroom research at that point and its descriptive nature. Consequently, the findings coming out of research of this type were limited, and this allowed the strong version of CLT to **prevail**.

### III. FOCUS ON FORM

#### III.1. Theoretical foundations

The nineties witnessed the proliferation of new proposals for potential pedagogical interventions which, unlike CLT, were grounded in SLA research. A number of these proposals include pedagogical events (which **have** come to be **known** as focus on form) where students' attention is drawn to formal elements of language at times in the **lesson** when the main focus is on meaning or communication<sup>2</sup>. Literature on focus on form (from **here** on **also** referred to as FonF) such as Doughty and Williams's edited book (1998) has often **also** included theoretically grounded work that includes elements of focus on forms, that is, approaches where linguistic **features** are isolated from context or communicative activity (in Long's terms focus on *formS*; see Long & Robinson, 1998). Following this criterion, this type of studies **will** also be included in the present review.

The origins of FonF can be traced back to Long's distinction in the late eighties between focus on form and focus on *formS*, characteristic of synthetic and **analytic** approaches to language teaching respectively. This distinction was at the same time motivated by Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) according to **which** negotiation of meaning that takes place in interaction between learners and other speakers plays a crucial role for language development and, in particular, for the development of L2 form-function relationships. Negotiation of meaning **also** elicits negative feedback, which is said to contribute to language development, since this type of feedback leads learners to focus on **form**. Another initial rationale for focus on form was the early studies that compared naturalistic and instructed language development at a time when instruction **could** be potentially viewed as an interference to SLA. In Long's review of these studies (1983), he concluded that formal instruction was beneficial in both **acquisition-rich** as well as acquisition-poor environments.

One central notion to the understanding of FonF is Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) supported by his own experience learning Portuguese in **Brazil**. During his stay, he realized that elements of the input that had gone unnoticed (even though they had not impeded comprehension in the past) **became** noticeable and analysable in the out-of-class input only **after** they were taught in class. He then hypothesized that 'noticing', defined as 'paying attention to ... details and differences ...', is a **necessary** condition to facilitate intake and that it constitutes a **first** step in the process of language building (Schmidt, 2001). Paying attention to details **and** differences means that learners notice the difference between their own IL utterances and those produced by **more** competent speakers, something that is precisely the intended **outcome** of a FonF intervention.

The interest in focus on form **also** comes as a reaction in the mid-eighties to a number of studies of French immersion programmes in **Canada**. Even though previous **reports** of these programmes had shown positive **evidence** as regards students' listening comprehension skills and ability to use French to learn subject matter, **later** studies looking at the quality of students' spoken French showed **less** positive results. These studies often reported that students did not

achieve high **levels** of proficiency in language production and that their spoken French still contained many **errors** (most obviously in its grammatical features). As a **result** of these studies, researchers **started** to question exclusively experiential approaches to language learning, especially in learning contexts where students may **have** few opportunities to use their knowledge productively and where input is limited to the classroom setting, as in the French immersion programmes (Swain, 1985).

### 111.2. Macro-options

**Ellis** (1998) identifies four macro-options to foster noticing or processing of linguistic form: processing instruction, explicit instruction, production practice and negative feedback. These four options, each responding to a theoretical motivation, place the focus-on-form intervention at different points in a computational model of L2 acquisition. In more recent work, **Ellis** (2003) has elaborated on the three first options as different ways in which researchers **have** set about designing focused tasks, that is of **planning** pre-emptive **FonF**.

In *processing instruction*, an option based on a model of SLA developed by **VanPatten** in the early nineties, the pedagogical intervention takes place at the input stage when learners are actively engaged in comprehension. It is assumed that focus-on-form interventions taking place during comprehension practice tend to be less cognitively demanding (and therefore more likely to **leave** attentional resources to focus on form) **than** those aimed at production practice. In meaning-based comprehension tasks following processing instruction, the input has **been** carefully manipulated so that in order to carry out the task learners are induced to notice the target grammatical features. Exerting this control of attention on particular **features** of grammar during comprehension, **VanPatten** and Sanz (1995) argue, is an effective way to maximize form-meaning connections in the process of conversion of input to intake.

Other, less explicit instructional options which **also operate** at the input stage are *input flood*<sup>3</sup> and *input enhancement*<sup>4</sup>. Input processing and input flood (with or without input enhancement) constitute *comprehension-based focused tasks* (**Ellis**, 2003). These are designed to **obligate** learners to process a specific **feature** in the input, and may be more successful than production-based tasks **because** learners **cannot** avoid processing them. In contrast to comprehension tasks typical of experiential CLT, where learners can avoid processing the input syntactically by exclusively **relying** on semantic processing (**Swain**, 1985), focused comprehension tasks require syntactic processing.

In *explicit instruction* the pedagogical intervention is intended to impinge on the learners L2 knowledge by deliberately directing them to attend to form. According to **DeKeyser's** definition (1995), an instructional treatment is explicit if rule explanation forms **part** of the instruction (deduction) or if **learners** are asked to attend to particular forms and try to find the **rules** themselves (induction). In other words, explicit instruction can be delivered **under** two modes depending on its **directness**. Direct explicit instruction takes the form of grammatical explanations that can be delivered **orally** or in **writing**. Indirect explicit instruction is meant to

have learners discover grammatical rules for themselves by **carrying out consciousness-raising tasks**.

Consciousness-raising tasks, also referred to as *grammarproblem tasks* (Nassaji, 1999), are intended to develop awareness at the **level** of "understanding" rather than at the **level** of "noticing" in Schmidt's (1994) terms. That **is**, they cater **primarily** for explicit learning of the **targeted feature**. In this type of tasks, students analyse data that has **been** especially designed to illustrate how specific linguistic forms work, and they are required to talk meaningfully about a language point, which becomes the focus of the task (see, for example, Fotos & Ellis, 1991). The intervention generated in these tasks **provides** learners with opportunities for what Lyster (1994) calls *negotiation ofform*, that is, negotiation about how a language system works. Such activity can be considered a task **because** learners engage in meaningful talk to achieve an **outcome** (a criterial **feature** of tasks in, among others, Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998). **Besides**, consciousness-raising tasks acknowledge the learner's internal syllabus (since the tasks do not encourage immediate production). According to Ellis (2003), the rationale for the use of consciousness-raising tasks draws **partly** on the claim that learning is more significant if it involves greater depth of processing, and partly on the hypothesis that explicit knowledge is a facilitator of the acquisition of implicit knowledge. That is, they assume that the explicit declarative knowledge that is generated through this mode of instruction will foster the development of implicit procedural knowledge through intake facilitation (a weak interface position). In addition, the value of consciousness-raising tasks may be **seen** in the opportunities they **provide** for learners to communicate.

A different position about the role of explicit knowledge **is held** by DeKeyser (1998). Based on John Anderson's theory of **skill** acquisition, this author advocates for explicit grammar instruction followed first by forms-focused exercises (to develop declarative knowledge) and then by more open-ended activities (to foster automatization). The rationale behind DeKeyser's stance is that declarative knowledge is a necessary condition for proceduralization and that procedural knowledge needs to be well established before automatization begins. In this view, practice may gradually bridge the gap between explicit knowledge and use.

In *production practice* the pedagogical intervention takes place at the output stage through tasks that include language production. There are **several** ways 'noticing' **is** aimed at through production practice. **Tasks** specifically designed to elicit the use of preselected target linguistic items (for example, dictogloss<sup>5</sup>) constitute an option. Another option consists of communicatively oriented tasks that are followed by metatalk. According to Swain's Output Hypothesis (1995), producing language may be beneficial for three reasons: 1) **it makes** learners aware of their limitations, 2) it fosters hypothesis formation and testing and 3) it **promotes** learners reflecting on their own and others' language use. Ellis (2003) reformulates this type of task as structure-based production *tasks*, which originate in Loschky and Bley-Vroman's (1993) discussion of the three ways in which a task can be designed to incorporate a specific target language **feature**: task-naturalness, task-usefulness and task-essentialness. In the **first** case, the

target structure can be expected to arise naturally and frequently in performing the task, even **though** it may not be necessary for completion. In the second case, although the targeted **feature** is not essential for completing the task, it is very useful. In the third case, **learners** are required to use the **feature** in order to complete the task successfully. Loschky and Bley-Vroman acknowledge, however, that it may be difficult to design tasks that **make** the production of the target **feature** essential. They **also** suggest that learners cannot be expected to use forms in production that they **have** not previously internalised, and that the role of such tasks should be **seen** as that of automatizing existing knowledge rather than as that of triggering acquisition of new linguistic forms. Ellis (2003) concludes from his revision of studies that use structure-based production tasks that, at least in **some** cases, such tasks result in the use of the target structure. For example, in the study by Mackey (1999), learners were asked to work out a story by asking questions **and** the task effectively elicited the use of question forms. Other conclusions are that learners vary in their ability to produce the target structure, probably depending on the learner's stage of development, and that learners are more likely to notice lexical, semantic and phonological **features** than morpho-syntactic **features** (as shown in the study by Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000). Structure-based production tasks as **well** as comprehension-based tasks cater for implicit learning in contrast to consciousness-raising tasks, which cater for explicit learning (see above).

In *negative feedback* the pedagogical intervention takes place as a reaction to students' output and it **provides** information to the **learner** as to what is not grammatically possible in the target language. Unlike the previous types of interventions, this option occurs on the spot in an unplanned way, and plays no role in task design. There are **several** techniques that can be used to get learners to self-correct. **Some**, like recasts<sup>6</sup>, are minimally obtrusive in the communication flow (implicit negative feedback) while others, like the provision of metalinguistic clues, are more likely to interfere with communication (explicit negative feedback). Recasts are viewed as an especially attractive option **because**, due to their implicit nature, they are hypothesized to contribute to the kind of implicit knowledge used in communication.

In sum, when chronologically reviewing key concepts and theoretical foundations of the four macro-options in FonF, there is the perception of a growing emphasis on cognitive processes. In Long's revision of the Interaction Hypothesis in 1996, **learner's** cognitive processes are **stressed**. In Skehan 1998's work, an information processing model to SLA is proposed that **integrates** theories and findings from cognitive psychology and SLA. One **also** perceives the centrality of concepts from cognitive psychology (such as **implicit/explicit** learning, **procedural/declarative** knowledge, etc...) in the rationales provided for the above macro-options on **grammar** teaching. More recently, Schmidt's work on attention (2001) has reframed the concept of 'noticing' within a broader cognitive approach. **And** in Doughty's **later** work (2001), focus-on-form terms are translated into cognitive processing terms and two models from cognitive psychology (one of memory **and** one of speech processing) are used in search of validating pedagogical recommendations and SLA **research**.



As expected in relation to an emerging area such as this, there is **also** room for theoretical controversy (see for example the exchange of articles between VanPatten, on one **side**, and DeKeyser, Salaberry, Robinson and Harrington, on the other, in *Language Learning*, 2002). One of the central sources of disagreement is about the amount and type of attention needed for learning. While the above mentioned Noticing Hypothesis seems to be the most widely accepted **position**, there are other applied linguists who hold alternative views. According to Robinson (1995), the **existence** of a central executive, where attentional resources are allocated, comes into play in his **redefinition** of Schmidt's noticing. Another position is that of Tomlin and Villa (1994) who think that conscious awareness, a requirement in the Noticing Hypothesis, **does not** intervene in language processing. Similarly, Truscott (1998) is of the belief that noticing should be **dissociated** from **competence**, even if it is **necessary** for the acquisition of metalinguistic knowledge.

Another **source** of controversy is the relationship between metalinguistic or explicit knowledge and L2 acquisition and performance. As mentioned **earlier**, while Ellis (1994) believes that this type of knowledge can facilitate the development of implicit knowledge, DeKeyser (1998) believes L2 learning should **start** with explicit rules that are **later** on proceduralized and automatized **through** spontaneous performance. Still, others give a less prominent role to explicit knowledge (for example, see Birdsong, 1989 or Paradis, 1994). These theoretical discussions as well as the awakening of an interest in cognitive psychology in part stem from the fact that nowadays there is a growing number of **researchers** in SLA who view **adult second/foreign** language acquisition as general problem solving (Bley-Vroman, 1988) and who are of the belief that one cannot rely on just implicit learning for efficient and effective **second/foreign** language acquisition.

#### **IV. FOCUS ON FORM: RECENT EVIDENCE FROM SLA RESEARCH**

Several thorough reviews on research on FonF and, more generally **grammar** teaching, **have been** published that go over work mainly conducted in the eighties **and** up to the late nineties (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998; Norris & Ortega, 2001; Spada, 1997). The present section will, therefore, pay closer attention to more recent research work (from 1999 onwards), which is not covered by the above mentioned reviews.

##### **IV.1. Input processing**

Since VanPatten and Cadierno's (1993) initial research work, there has **been** a wealth of studies that **have** further evaluated the effectiveness of processing instruction (PI). In most of these studies, PI has **been** compared with traditional instruction (TI) **and/or** no instruction. Typically PI **gi-ups** **have** involved information about the **target** linguistic form or **structure**, followed by an Information Processing strategy and subsequently a number of structured input activities (both referential and affective). On the other hand, TI has involved an initial explanation

followed by mechanical and **later** communicative practice. Most of the studies carried out in the nineties focused on the acquisition of **Spanish** and used discrete-point tests to measure production. In this respect, Benati's recent work (2001) is of especial interest in that it dealt with another Romance language (Italian) and included a less structured oral production task. The results obtained are in line with findings in previous research in that the PI group's gains were shown to be superior to those of the TI group in the interpretation task but not in the **two** production tasks (both the discrete-point test and the communicative task), where both groups obtained similar gains. The fact that these results held over time (in this case, **three** weeks) **also** comes to confirm findings in previous research studies. Similar results to those of Benati were obtained in VanPatten and Wong's (2003) study involving the French causative and they were taken to mean that learners in the PI group could transfer what they learned to a different type of task whereas those in the TI group just learnt to do the type of task they were trained in. However, even if these results seem to show the effectiveness of this input-based instructional option, one probably needs to be somewhat cautious, given that there are a number of replication studies (like that of Allen's, 2000) that **have** not obtained comparable results. One **must also** be aware of the fact that **some** of the referential activities proposed in PI are similar to traditional exercises in TI, the only difference being that language production is not required.

#### IV.2. Input enhancement

Another relevant line of research operating at the input stage that has **been** the focus of recent research involves input enhancement. Previous studies that compared the effectiveness of visually enhanced vs. non-enhanced input yielded limited results for this mode of **FonF** in which task design involves preselection of **target** forms. This is **also** what happened in a study by White (1998) that targeted possessive **determiners** in English in the context of a science class. The enhanced input seems to **have been insufficient** to focus the learners' attention on the target forms, even if exposure to enhanced texts was considerable (10 hours). More recently, a study on the acquisition of English relativization (Izumi, 2002), where the effects of input enhancement versus output-input activities on learning were compared, **also** failed to show any advantage for the former instructional mode. Yet, another type of input enhancement, that which is delivered **orally** through exact repetition, may be more effective, as suggested by Jensen and Vinther's work (2003). **These** authors hypothesized that through oral repetition learners would **have** more time to process form as well as **meaning**. Results show that this mode of input enhancement, in which the items to be acquired are not preselected, led to better acquisition of language form and phonological decoding strategies as well as better comprehension skills.

#### IV.3. Form-focused output

In contrast to the experimental/quasiexperimental design typically used in research on input enhancement **and** processing instruction, research carried out in the nineties on form-focused output has **been mainly** of a descriptive nature. A representative study is that conducted by

Kowal and Swain (1994) which **proved** the validity of dictogloss as a task that **promotes** attention to form as a result of students' collaboration. **In later** studies one finds more **fine-grained** analyses of LRE's (language related episodes) when students are engaged in dictogloss tasks. **In** two of these detailed analyses of students' talk both Fortune and Thorp (2001) **and** García Mayo (2002) found fewer metalinguistic explanations in the dyads' talk than they had expected. This observation **is** especially striking in the case of the latter study involving **third-year** English philology students at an **intermediate/advanced level**. Descriptive analysis of students' talk **have also** confirmed a previous observation in Kowal **and** Swain about the grammar aspects the dictogloss intends to elicit. In fact, Swain (1998) reports that her students rarely focused on the targeted linguistic form but on their **own** needs. In this respect, text reconstruction, another type of collaborative task where learners **have** to insert appropriate function and linking words as well as inflectional morphemes, seemed to be a more effective procedure to get learners to focus more often on the targeted **features** in Garcia Mayo's work. In that same study, text reconstruction, in contrast to dictogloss, **also** generated significantly more LRE's.

A different version of a text-reconstruction task was the basis of a **solid** piece of research that measured performance in post-tests (Izumi, 2002). The distinctive **features** of this version of output task, in contrast with dictogloss, are that (1) the input texts are presented to students, who work on an individual basis, in the **written** mode and that (2) these texts are presented to them in **several** shorter sections to lighten the processing load on the learners. Test results from Izumi's work show the benefits of this type of text-reconstruction task both in production and comprehension measures. In addition, this greater attention to form in output seemed not to take place at the expense of comprehension as measured by a **recall summary** students were asked to write in their L1. This piece of research is **also** relevant in that it has shown that learning of the form can **also** take place in form-focused tasks that do not require collaboration between learners in writing the output, as is the case in dictogloss.

#### IV.4. Negative feedback

Research on negative feedback has **been** more abundant over the past few years than any other mode of **FonF**. This has probably **been** in **response** to a scarcity of previous research that investigated the isolated effects of this type of interactional moves. While previous research consistently showed the availability of negative feedback in NS-NNS task-based interaction as well as in teacher-student classroom interaction, the focus of **later** work has **been** on the evaluation of its **usefulness**. There are a number of **laboratory** studies that **have** shown that recasts contribute to the learners' interlanguage development, as measured by performance tests. Long, Inagaki and Ortega (1998) showed that recasts were more beneficial than models on forms with relatively high communicative value. More recently, Leeman (2003) has provided **evidence** that recasts can **also** be beneficial on forms of low perceptual **salience** and little communicative value. The superiority of negative feedback was **also** confirmed in a study by Iwashita (2003)

involving beginner learners of Japanese, a relevant finding given that previous studies dealt with more advanced L2 learners.

The usefulness of negative feedback has **also been** studied by assessing students' incorporation of feedback (**also referred to as uptake**) that was not targeted at specific forms. In an experimental study, conducted by Mackey, Oliver and Leeman (2003), it was observed that between 25% to 47% of the feedback provided led to modified output. The feedback included recasts, clarification requests and comprehension checks and the dyads involved NNSs and NSs adults and children. **This is a rather different result from that observed in earlier studies of French content-based classrooms at the primary level in Canada.** In one of these studies Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that, out of the six types of corrective feedback identified in teacher-student interaction, recasts elicited the **least** uptake on the part of the students (**only 18%** of teacher recasts resulted in student uptake), in spite of this being the most frequent form of correction. While in Lyster and Ranta's study students' uptake is taken as an indirect index of 'noticing' the form, additional studies **have been** conducted which examine learners' noticing of negative feedback through introspective and retrospective methods (Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000; Morris & Tarone, 2003; Ohta, 2000). In **all three** studies, intervening variables that affect learners' perceptions of implicit negative feedback are identified. In Mackey *et al.*'s study (2000) learners were reported to be better able to notice lexical, semantic and phonological feedback than morphosyntactic feedback. In Ohta's work (2000), where students' private responses to recasts were recorded, it **is** suggested that there was **some** variability among learners as to how much attention they paid to teacher-initiated recasts. Morris and Tarone's study (2003) of student-student interaction documents an intervening variable of a different nature, the social dynamics of the language classroom. In this study, the interpersonal conflict that **arose** during pair work led less-advanced students not to notice recasts addressed to them by their more participative and motivated partners. Instead, they interpreted the **instances** of recasts as criticism or even mockery. Consequently, in **several** cases learners continued to produce the erroneous form.

A less complex picture is obtained from more controlled classroom studies that include a salient type of recast and that target on specific **grammar** items. In Doughty and Varela's study (1998) of ESL learning in content-based science classrooms, recasts were always accompanied by **some** form of attentional focus (e.g., repetition of the error with stress and rising intonation). Such explicit recasts seem to **have** led learners to notice the form (in this case, simple and conditional past tense constructions) since the results revealed **clear** advantages for those students under treatment. A positive effect for another way of making recasts more salient was obtained by Muranoi (2000) with Japanese EFL learners. In this study, recasts were always preceded by a request for repetition from the learner after **all errors** with the indefinite article in obligatory contexts. It should be added that there was a treatment group in this study that **also** received explicit instruction (or 'debriefing' in the author's terminology) after the recast sessions and this group outperformed the other treatment group which just received explicit recasts and

no explicit instruction.

In sum, there seems to be **some** evidence that just relying on implicit negative evidence as the **sole source** of focus on form may be too risky as regards the learning of grammar. Instead, the combination of implicit negative evidence with **some** other option or the delivery of negative evidence in more salient ways seems to lead to uptake in an easier way, given the number of intervening variables that are at play. In addition, implicit corrective feedback that targets on specific grammatical items seems to be more beneficial than feedback with no such pre-established specificity.

#### IV.5. Other classroom-based studies

With the exception of a few studies on corrective feedback, classroom-based research on processing instruction, input enhancement and form-focused output by definition involves **some** type of intervention through a specific treatment on the **part** of the teacher or through the implementation of specifically designed instructional materials. Another line of research is found in classroom-based studies that analyse unplanned episodes of focus on form in the course of spontaneous classroom interaction. In Williams' work (1999,2001) two adult students from four classes of different levels of proficiency were recorded in their interaction with other students and the teacher, and in Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen's work (2001) two teachers were recorded in their interaction with the whole class as well as individuals and groups of learners in an intermediate and pre-intermediate class. The fact that Williams' study (1999) focuses on the learner and that of Ellis *et al.* (2001) focuses on the teacher may explain the contrasting results obtained as regards the frequency of the episodes under study. While in Williams' study (1999) LRE's were infrequent at **all** levels of instruction (for example, 5.85 per session and 2.34 per 10,000 words), in Ellis *et al.*'s study (2001) these episodes are much more common (an average of one every 1.6 minutes). The extremely low ratios obtained by Williams in student-initiated episodes, which are especially low in open-ended activities such as free conversation, would **provide** evidence for the need of focused tasks as a more productive procedure to elicit spontaneous attention to form in pair and group work.

Another aspect that is analysed by these authors is the effectiveness of these LRE's although this is measured in different ways. In Williams' (2001) this was measured with **tailor-made** tests for individual students based on the LRE's that had **been** previously recorded. Results show that both learner- and teacher- initiated episodes led to accurate performance on these tests measuring explicit linguistic knowledge and that students scores raised with proficiency. Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001), on the other hand, by recording instances of successful uptake (both **pre-emptive** and **reactive focus on form**<sup>8</sup>) also **came up** with positive evidence about the effectiveness of LRE's. A high proportion of them (74%) led to successful instances of uptake, with **reactive** moves eliciting the highest proportion of these instances and teacher-initiated **pre-emptive** moves the lowest.

#### **IV.6. Need of further research**

In sum, it is clear from this review that FonF has **been** and continues to be a productive area of research in SLA. Nevertheless, there is **still** some way to go in order to **sort** out contradictory findings across studies. This is especially true for enhanced input and negative feedback where **some** studies **have** shown that these instructional **interventions** were insufficient. Probably a number of variables should be taken into account in future research such as the **presence** or absence of a target form, its **salience** and complexity, the age of the learners as **well** as individual differences and the type of instruction (immersion or language programmes), among others. Future research **also** needs to continue in the study of how LRE's vary as a result of the type of task and the participants both in focused and unfocused **tasks**.

### **V. FROM RESEARCH IN SLA TO LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY**

#### **V.1. How and what to teach**

The relationship between research, even research conducted within the classroom, and language pedagogy is a complex one (see Ellis, 1997b for an illuminating discussion). Furthermore, probably research findings cannot always be used to advise teachers about how or what to **teach**. However, as the previous sections **have** shown, language teachers **have** at their disposal a wealth of findings on SLA that may inform their methodological options. For example, teachers may make use of implicit or explicit methodological techniques in order to draw attention to form on the basis of the target language **feature** to be focused on and the learners' characteristics. If they choose to **provide** explicit attention to the targeted **feature**, they may **provide** it pre-emptively or reactively (see Ellis, 2003). Or teachers may decide to use a combination of both implicit and explicit techniques in order not to always disturb the communicative flow.

Similarly, the choice of the language **features** or items that may most appropriately receive form-focused instruction has **been** a matter of concern among SLA researchers, and relevant proposals **have been** made. For example, Harley (1993) suggests the following as the most likely candidates for a focus-on-form intervention:

- forms that differ in non-obvious ways from the learners' first language, for example, adverb placement for French and English (White, 1991; Trahey & White, 1993);
- forms that are not salient **because** they are irregular or infrequent in the L2 input, or otherwise forms lacking in perceptual salience, for example, conditionals in French;
- forms that are not important for successful communication, for example, third person singular *s* in English; and
- forms that are likely to be misinterpreted or misanalysed by learners, for example, **dative** alternations in English (Carroll & Swain, 1993).

Williams (1995) suggests that there may be a variety of reasons why **some** forms are not acquired and these reasons may, in turn, affect whether **and** what sort of form-focused instruction is appropriate. Forms that are infrequent in the input, that are irregular or superfluous are again mentioned **in** that respect. For forms that are **infrequent in** the input and hence **unlikely** to be noticed, such as conditionals in French, Williams **proposes** simply to point out their **existence** and increase their **presence in** input and practice. For forms that may be difficult to learn **because** of irregularities, such as the distinction between past tenses in French, this author **sees** the need of more explicit instruction and corrective feedback. **Finally**, Williams suggests that form-focused instruction may be of **little** help in the case of forms that **have proven** resistant to instruction and that are **largely** superfluous for successful communication, such as third **person singular s** in English.

From a different stance, that of positively advocating for explicit instruction of grammar, Mitchell (2000) points out the need to prioritise those points in the target language system where explicit attention **is** most **likely** to lead to measurable and lasting gains in student learning. **Among** available **proposals** in the SLA literature, Mitchell mentions Schwartz's (1993) suggestion that explicit teaching of items which do not form part of the "core" grammar may be more effective than attempts to trigger parameter resetting **through** instruction. Mitchell concludes, however, that we still lack a set of generally agreed **principles**, with clear empirical support, for the selection of grammar items which may merit explicit treatment.

In grammar task design, research has suggested that grammar structures with a few simple rules benefit from instruction followed by communicative usage of the instructed form (Ellis, N., 1995; Robinson, 1996). In contrast, in the case of complicated structures, explicit instruction alone **does** not seem to enable learners to process them and, hence, extensive meaning-focused use of the target form is recommended in order to develop learners' awareness of its **features** (Fotos, 2002; Skehan, 1998).

Drawing from his revision of the few studies that **have** compared the effectiveness of implicit and explicit learning, DeKeyser (2003: 332) hypothesizes different **degrees** of usefulness of explicit teaching for different levels of difficulty. Explicit learning **is seen** as least useful when the rule is very easy, in which case it is not necessary, and when the rule **is** very difficult, in which case it is not effective. When the degree of difficulty of the rule **is** easy, explicit instruction has the role of speeding up the explicit learning process; when the rule has **moderate** difficulty, the role of instruction is that of stretching the learner's **ultimate** attainment; and when the rule is difficult, instruction may enhance **later** implicit acquisition by increasing the chances of noticing (see, among others, Schmidt, 1990, 1994, 2001). DeKeyser notes, however, that rule difficulty may **vary** according to the student's ability, and that other factors that may play a role are abstractness of semantic categories (e.g. aspect or articles) and salience. For example, in a previous study, DeKeyser (2000) argued that subject-verb inversion in yes-no questions **is easily** learned explicitly **because** of its salience, in contrast with subject-verb inversion in wh-questions.

DeKeyser (2003) concludes that the harder it is to learn something through simple association, **because** it is too abstract, too distant, too **rare**, too **unreliable**, or too hard to notice, the more important explicit learning processes **become**.

## V.2. The learner and the learning context

An important issue in relation to the benefits of focused instruction is whether **all** learners can equally benefit from it. Individual factors such as learner's age and cognitive characteristics, as well as proficiency **level** can be **seen** to play a big role. As for age, **while** adult learners will be able to draw on their cognitive resources to engage in explicit learning, young learners are less likely to benefit from focus on form instruction that places too high cognitive demands on them. Another important individual difference is the learner's (verbal) analytical abilities, which **have been** found to be a good predictor of **proficiency** in both formal and informal settings (Harley & Hart, 1997; see also DeKeyser, 2003). Research has pointed out that learners with higher levels of grammatical sensitivity (a component of language analytic ability) find it easier to notice formal details of the L2 during second language acquisition (Ranta, 1998). Hence, Sawyer and Ranta (2001) suggest that an important function of form-focused instruction may be to compensate for learners' deficiencies in certain components of language aptitude, for example, grammatical sensitivity.

Learners' proficiency **level** is **also** an important factor to take into consideration when **planning** focused instruction. **Because** research seems to show that beginning learners find it difficult to focus on meaning and form at once (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Van Patten, 1990), the latter may need to be applied with caution in the case of learners who **have** to struggle with basic comprehension problems.

A not less important issue **is** the learning context. As Fotos (2002) argues, implicit approaches to grammar instruction may be less appropriate in foreign language settings, where class-time is limited and there is not enough **external** communicative input to support continued awareness, than in second language settings with abundant communicative input inside and **outside** the classroom. In such contexts a combination of implicit and explicit approaches may be more adequate. For example, this author (2002) **proposes** to incorporate implicit approaches in lessons in which explicit instruction precedes communicative task performance. The explanation aims at activating previously developed knowledge (Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1978) and facilitating the establishment of form-meaning relationships. Provision of subsequent communicative input containing the target structure is recommended to facilitate continued awareness of its use **in** context.

It is to be noted, however, that purely communicative methodology has had only marginal impact on foreign language teaching settings, where the dominant pedagogy continues to involve a structural syllabus or, even, grammar translation (Skehan, 1998). In such contexts, the recent emphasis on focus on form may mislead teachers into believing that their explicit instructional practices and analytic syllabuses is **all** learners require. Hence, the need to



emphasize the necessity to incorporate form-focused activities in communicative contexts in the foreign language class.

## CONCLUSION

As seen in this paper, the influence of SLA theory and research on language teaching proposals continues to be strong. After the emphasis given in the eighties to meaningful input and exposure to enable learners to acquire the language, at present it is widely recognised that exposure alone is not sufficient for acquisition to take place. Drawing on cognitive perspectives on second language learning that claim that noticing is necessary for acquisition, recent developments point out the need for selective attention to form in generally meaning-centred classrooms. As a result, an increasing number of research and methodological proposals are concerned with how to include form-focused activities in communicative contexts.

Hence, it is to be expected that the theoretical bases and research evidence from which the new proposals are drawn will provide teachers with insights that are relevant to their own teaching situations. In settings in which purely communicative methodology is dominant, teachers may be provided with an understanding of the need for incorporating focused instruction. In settings in which the instructional format has a structural focus, teachers may understand the need for providing a communicative context in which to embed focused instruction. To finish, and paraphrasing Ellis (1997b: 36), although SLA cannot ensure competent practice, it can indeed contribute to teachers' understanding.

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## NOTES:

1. In a survey of 50 MA TESOL programs, Richards (1991, cited in Ellis 1997a p. 70) found that 29 of them included an SLA course as a requirement.
2. Long's definition of focus on form (1991) is more restrictive than the one adopted in this article since his is restricted to spontaneous events while our definition includes both spontaneous as well as planned events.
3. In input flood, texts are specially elaborated so that they contain numerous examples of the target form(s).

4. In input **enhancement**, texts are manipulated (via **bolding**, underlining, etc.) so that the perceptual **salience** of **targeted form(s)** is increased.
5. Dictogloss is a **procedure** that consists in students in **groups trying** to reconstruct a short dense text that the teacher has previously read while students are **jotting** down notes.
6. Recasts are corrective reformulations of a student's **utterance** that preserve the student's intended meaning.
7. The most recent review, that by Norris and Ortega (2001), summarizes **findings** published **up until** 1998.
8. Pre-emptive focus on form is planned in advance, while **reactive** or responsive focus on **form** is provided in response.

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