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The Forest for the Trees:
Critically Rethinking Current Perspectives on Focus on Form and SLA

by

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Abstract

Following advancements in linguistics in the 1950s and 1960s, second language teaching and research became dominated by the notion that a second language could be learned as naturally as the first, without explicit grammar instruction. This natural or communicative approach, though improving fluency and comprehension, nevertheless resulted in certain lapses in accuracy. In response, Long (1991) proposed a "focus on form" to address formal issues without leaving the communicative framework. This study examines the development of the ideology and practice of focus on form and analyzes representative studies. Results suggest that although the terminology of focus on form has remained intact in order to preserve its ideology, the actual practice has often broadened to include explicit and extensive grammar teaching, or "focus on formS." This thesis therefore calls for a more open system of second language research and pedagogy which articulates and employs effective methods regardless of their ideological constraints.

Key Words/Terms: communicative language teaching, focus on form, focus on formS, focus on meaning, form-focused instruction, grammar-translation, ideology, immersion, integrated form-focused instruction, isolated form-focused instruction, natural method, second-language pedagogy

Acknowledgements

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General Introduction

Reacting against the age-old second language teaching method of grammar-translation, which generally failed to produce competent speakers and hearers of a language and did not aim at proceduralizing declarative knowledge even in the realms of reading and writing, second language instruction and theory became characterized over the latter half of the twentieth century by a movement away from explicit teaching of grammatical paradigms, or "forms". Influenced by theoretical claims that explicit linguistic instruction does not help and may even hinder the "natural" acquisition of a second language, theorists and practitioners alike often adopted an entirely communicative program in which structures were to be induced implicitly from input, and language was to be acquired simply by its use in communicative tasks. As this strongly reactive position tended to produce more fluency but noticeable gaps in accuracy, especially among adolescent and adult learners, many researchers attempted to find a solution which would address such weaknesses while remaining within the new paradigm of communicative language instruction. The most influential of these responses is the "focus-on-form" position, which emphasizes the use of minimal linguistic guidance and non-intrusive error feedback during real communicative events. It thus distinguishes itself from "focus on formS" (explicit and perhaps extensive attention to linguistic structure which, to some practitioners, is too reminiscent of the de-contextualized formal instruction of grammar-translation), as well as from "natural" approaches which in their pure form exclude any structural instruction or error correction.

The hypothesis of this document is that, having found a sort of middle ground which seems to address the need for some overt metalinguistic attention while avoiding explicit

grammar instruction, recent and current research has centred on examining and comparing particular variables within the focus-on-form school while perhaps overlooking the bigger picture, namely, the effectiveness of the approach itself. My review of the literature indicates three pertinent areas of concern. First of all, while the theoretical definition of "focus on form" is relatively clear, its actual application covers a wide spectrum of instructional methodologies but tends in general to hover very near to what is identifiably "focus on formS." Secondly, studies which examine the efficacy of a particular strategy within the approach generally incorporate an extensive explicit instructional period (requiring on average 40% of class time in language or language arts over several days or weeks), which may be impractical for most real applications. Finally, the reported results of such studies are often ambiguous or insignificant within the scope of the study itself or contradict the findings of other studies, while what may in fact be equally significant results, viz., that explicit instruction on specific points of linguistic structure tends to produce improvement in student performance on that structure, are passed over or minimized. In sum, is the attention to detail within a constrained paradigm overlooking the big picture — is it possible that the studies reveal as much about the benefits of extended instruction time and carefully integrated "focus-on-formS" lessons as they do about the pedagogic "focus-on-form" strategy under micro-investigation?

In my view, it is vital that this question be examined and that, if answered positively, what may turn out to be the most important findings of these studies be highlighted for discussion so that they can be more advantageously applied to the practical domain of second-language instruction. By this hypothesis, that this is not currently taking place represents a lacuna within the field which should be addressed. I cannot emphasize too strongly that this

research is not directed toward a return to an exclusively grammar-based approach which would endanger the enormous gains made over recent decades in instructing genuine second language communicators. Rather, I hope to 1) clarify the broader significance of many recent studies, 2) investigate, on the basis of this clarification, the relationship between research priorities and classroom practice, and 3) provoke instructors and planners to openly reflect on effective strategies, time use, and student and curriculum needs for L2 teaching.

Outline of the Document

Chapter 1: From Grammar-Translation to the Natural Method. This chapter takes a rapid overview of the history of second language acquisition and its disciplines in an attempt to understand the circumstances and philosophical perspectives which clung for centuries to the established practice of grammar-translation, and the scientific revolution in linguistics, psychology and sociology which overthrew it within a single generation. The chapter concludes with a preliminary assessment of the gains and losses involved in this paradigm shift.

Chapter 2: The Ideology of Naturalistic Learning and the Rise of Focus on Form. This chapter begins with an examination of the ideological underpinnings of the natural approach and goes on to discuss some early criticisms of its effectiveness which prompted the quest for techniques to improve accuracy without leaving the framework of communicatively-oriented instruction.

Chapter 3: Focus on Form from Within and Without. Focus on form is explained from the viewpoint of its original definition and of broader research and pedagogical perspectives

which have come under its umbrella without clearly articulated criteria of membership.   This section will set out the questions which will guide the analyses of the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Issues Trivial and Grave: Analyses of Representative Focus-on-Form Studies. Seminal focus-on-form studies will be examined with a view to distinguishing their purported and actual methodology as well as rethinking their targeted and real results.

Chapter 5: Focus on Form in the Real World. This chapter will evaluate the implications of the above analyses for research direction and classroom practice.   Particularly, the contrast will be underscored between the research and pedagogic agendas.

Chapter 6: Toward Solutions: A Proposal for a New Articulation of Classroom Language Pedagogy. Based on the analyses and interpretations of the focus-on-form studies as well as on pertinent research, a more open-system approach to second language teaching and learning strategies will be outlined. Possible solutions will be offered to the original question of how to improve accuracy of form in communicatively-oriented classrooms, in consideration of the greater scope of information available from the reinterpretation of the focus-on-form studies.

Chapter 1: From Grammar-Translation to the Natural Method

1. 1. Introduction

Approaches to second language teaching and learning are numerous today, yet just a few decades ago, second language acquisition in most organized settings was dominated by a single viewpoint and a single methodology which had held sway for centuries: the grammar-translation method. It is important to understand how this approach was unseated and why its tenets are now largely rejected, since this shift involved changes not only in research and knowledge but also in the attitudes and ideologies with which they became associated. Serious instructors and even serious scholars often develop convictions in which they invest emotionally, and this is only logical and even, at times, helpful, since the discovery of deeper insights and better practices fuels a passion for implementing strategies which bring scholars and students nearer to their goals. While these latter, more subjective perspectives — intuition, discovery and resulting new hypotheses — do not affect the data nor its analysis in sound scientific studies of language acquisition, they nevertheless exert an influence on choices of focus and of interpretation by engendering and nurturing presuppositions.

It is this understanding which will hopefully shed light on recent trends in second language research, namely, that the current SLA research agenda is constrained both by empirically-based developments in theory and knowledge and also by its underlying ideological paradigm.   To this end, the preliminary chapters of this thesis will attempt to connect the advances in SLA knowledge over the last half-century with the corresponding adoption of a new supporting hypothesis.   Indications from research and practice beginning in the 1950s have

largely undermined the earlier structuralist notion that human language is an ensemble of set structures to be learned, internalized and processed like any other body of knowledge, and replaced it with the assumption that language is acquired in a much more natural and incidental fashion by means of an innately human capacity. The role of instruction in SLA is therefore now perceived as guiding and maximizing this natural process rather than presenting for memorization and manipulation a body of discrete and analyzed facts.

1. 2. Beginnings of Language Acquisition

The earliest instances of second language acquisition are of course lost in the dawn of human history. However, it may be assumed that, in the absence of formalized learning environments or of a written language, any such acquisition was "naturalistic," that is to say, the second language was acquired by a person being placed in the environment of its use and observing, mimicking and producing speech in real-life situations. Whether such acquisition drew upon complete or vestigial inherent mental mechanisms mirroring first language development, or whether it was a result of adolescent or adult cognitive abilities and strategies (or a combination of the two) is not a matter upon which definitive knowledge exists even today; the point is that acquiring another language at this stage in the human story must have been informal, practical, and natural.

There is no need to rest in the obscurity of pre-history to confirm that first language acquisition requires no formal setting or analytical inputs; indeed, successful L1 learning is, barring situations completely abnormal to human development, natural and inevitable (O'Grady and Archibald 2004). Moreover, today's world continues to witness, most notably in the realm

of immigration, examples which undergird the contention that individuals can and do become effective communicators in a second language without textbooks, classrooms or analytical instruction. It is clear, therefore, that first language acquisition is natural and uninstructed, and that second language acquisition, at least to some level, may occur in the same fashion.

1. 3. Changes, Gains and Losses in the Approach to Second Language Acquisition

From the scenario outlined above, three basic questions arise. First of all, if first language acquisition is entirely naturalistic, and second language acquisition must have originated as a naturalistic practice and remained thus for countless millennia, how is it that formal or analytical second-language teaching became the prevalent approach in instructional settings and held this position for many centuries until the middle of the twentieth century? Secondly, what challenged its predominance and within just a couple of decades caused it to be replaced, almost wholesale as it were, by a naturalistic, behaviouristic, cognitive or functional/ communicative approach? And finally, what was gained and what was lost in this change?

1. 3. 1. Even after the advent of the grammar-translation approach, naturalistic acquisition undoubtedly continued to take place in informal settings, through contacts and movements of people. However, structured language pedagogy became dominant in academic environments for many reasons: 1) A ready analogy can be made with other subjects of instruction. Throughout human history, education in most domains above the level of unskilled manual labour occurred through formal instruction. 2) Furthermore, formal instruction was practical. It ensured regular, focused and repetitive work, predictable resources, planned scaffolding and a replicable standard which may have been difficult to obtain or evaluate in

informal settings. Perhaps most importantly, the classroom provided a setting which was accessible to a multitude of learners for whom immersion in a foreign-language environment may have been impractical or impossible.[1] 3) There has existed in Western thought a centuries-old association of higher learning with the acquisition of the "dead" languages Latin and ancient Greek. Because these languages were integrally linked in Western thinking to history, philosophy, politics, law, natural sciences and theology, they were foundational to any formal education. As historical languages, the method of teaching focused on mastering immutable rules and rendering the literature into contemporary languages — in a word, grammar-translation. Although not really suitable for the acquisition of living languages, there is little wonder that grammar-translation, inasmuch as through Latin and Greek it represented the gateway to Western learning, was for many years the overriding template into which all other language studies were fitted. 4) This heritage of the study of Greek and Latin, the tendency to view the processes of language as ideal structures frozen in time, led to the idea that metamorphoses from "elegant" and "precise" forms to ever-evolving "vulgarisms" which pressed and altered what was once standard, must constitute a degeneration, a shift from the embodiment of the rules to an ignorance of them, a descent from "good" language to "bad." Naturally, this had its effect on the study of languages in general, giving weight to the conviction that the ordered and manipulable environment of the classroom was the ideal place to preserve and perpetuate that form of a language which had gained prestige, by its literary or political

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[1] It is worth remarking that at least some studies indicate the superiority of classroom instruction over natural immersion for SLA. For example, Pavesi (1984, 1986) found that Italian high school students studying English in Italy advanced more rapidly and with greater accuracy than a group of Italians working and living in Edinburgh, Scotland.

influence, over those forms which were in a constant state of flux and tended to be found among the lower and less-educated classes.

Counter-currents existed, proposals of alternate approaches to language learning such as those of Gouin, Sauveur and Berlitz (Stern 1970: 57; Omaggio Hadley 2001: 108-9), but they lacked the infrastructure available to the grammar-translation method such as the established schools and universities which tended to propagate the existing system (Brandl 2008: 2-3). Moreover, their results, whether effective or not in producing competent communicators, were hardly designed to fare well under the contemporary paradigm of evaluation.

1. 3. 2.   This brings the enquiry to the second question: with such a historical entrenchment of the grammar-translation method, how is it that within just a few years it had come to be, at least in circles of serious scientific research and progressive instruction, virtually effaced?   The 1950s and the decades immediately following saw the maturing of various disciplines that were now ready to challenge the accepted norms. Developments in fields of science such as neurology and physiology, as well as a growing acceptance of the status of cognitive psychology as a "hard" science, were beginning to have their effect upon linguistics.

American linguist Noam Chomsky (1957, 1959) claimed that language acquisition was enabled by an inherent mental capacity, a pre-programmed Language Acquisition Device (the Universal Grammar, or Naturalist/Nativist, approach).   Chomsky argued that the essential structures of language are innately present in the human brain and that normal verbal interaction during infancy and childhood triggers the Language Acquisition Device, on the one hand setting the parameters of the specific language, and on the other, allowing for creative recombination of

elements and for original production. As we shall see, this claim has had profound and enduring effects on theories of both first and second language acquisition.

Chomsky defined his position against the assertions of behavioural psychologist B. F. Skinner (1957) who maintained that language was acquired entirely through habits formed in response to external linguistic stimuli. The Behaviourist perspective envisioned the mind as a blank slate without pre-set structures, particularly receptive to repeated and patterned input. Initially, Behaviourism had an enormous impact on second language learning, spawning the audiolingual method, in which the learner was bombarded with unanalyzed native speech segments. However, the inadequacy of the theoretical model as well as disappointment with the practical results has led to a sharp decline in the influence of Behaviourism on language theory and SLA practices (Stern 1970: 7; Omaggio Hadley 2001: 54-58).

At the same time, a whole new field of inquiry, that of sociolinguistics, was beginning to explode the traditional concept of language as verbal structures only. American sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972) coined the term "communicative competence" to explain communication as a broad range of strategies not limited to grammar alone but also including organization of discourse, transmission and understanding of nuances and connotations through intonation and non-verbal signals, and practical skill in the use of appropriate register, dialect and cultural contextualization. This notion of language as so much more than structures at the sentence level, indeed as the quintessential human function through which people interact in life and society in the widest possible sense, transformed indelibly the way in which researchers and educators now needed to think about second *language* acquisition (see Canale and Swain 1980).

In spite of the fact that there was no basic agreement at the time (nor did any consensus develop later) on the actual mechanisms of language acquisition, all the new players were in accord over at least one fundamental aspect: the grammar-translation method was an inadequate model for acquiring linguistic competence — speaking, listening, reading, and writing — in living languages. Traditionally-trained second-language learners of the era, that is, learners from the classroom setting, tended to have the ability to read and perhaps to write their second tongue but were extremely limited in oral production and comprehension (Omaggio Hadley 2001: 107-8; Brandl 2008: 2). While grammar-translation satisfied the expectations of instructors whose primary interest was in history, literature or composition, it sufficed neither for the scholarly inquiries into the mental processes of linguistic acquisition and function nor for the practical search for linguistic competence in communication. Furthermore, since grammar-translation instruction generally looked upon language as a fixed and ideal code, it ignored by its very nature evolving structures, vernacular usages and culture-specific connotations. In contrast, linguists and sociolinguists, researchers and teachers were becoming more and more preoccupied with a broader view of communication which went beyond strict linguistics to embrace a culturally-oriented range of strategies.

Some proponents of Chomsky's Universal Grammar or the Naturalist/Nativist position held that the mental capacity to absorb language demonstrated by very young children persisted into adolescence and adulthood (e.g., Ritchie 1978; Bley-Vroman et al. 1988; White 1988), and this possibility led to the suggestion that second language learning should be characterized by the same incidental and stress-free acquisition as L1 learning. Perhaps the most influential spokesperson of this perspective was Stephen Krashen (1978, 1981, 1985, 1989), who claimed

that language was a capacity that could only be effectively employed if it was *acquired* naturally (through subconscious processing) rather than *learned* expressly (through conscious processing). Krashen's adamant distinction between learning and acquisition has sparked fervent controversy since its introduction (e.g., McLaughlin 1978; Gregg 1984; Courchêne 1989), but his model of second language learning seemed to crystallize and articulate the turbulent ideas that had been swirling up for two decades from the probing questions, research and new hypotheses which had unseated grammar-translation.

Stephen Krashen's ideological heritage is, in my opinion, even more profound that his academic one. The overall effect of his claim that the explicit teaching of linguistic structures — that is, grammar — is of no benefit to linguistic progress and competence and in fact may even, by increasing the self-consciousness of the learner and interfering with production through explicit monitoring, hinder progress in language acquisition, has left an enduring mark on the psyche of second language researchers, curriculum designers and instructors. "With the advent of Krashen's theory, most teachers did not know what to do with grammar. Some ignored it, some taught it apologetically, some defiantly" (Courchêne 1989: 133).

Courchêne's observation underscores with stark insight the thesis of this paper. It is not that the explicit teaching of grammatical structures has disappeared from the classroom; in many circles it remains a widespread practice. It is the attitude about such instruction which has changed dramatically. Teachers are often uncertain as to whether grammar should be taught at all, and if so, how it can be adequately contextualized within a primarily task-based communicative curriculum (e.g., Leeman et al. 1995: 217).

The repercussions of Krashen's claim, and of the trends in SLA theory that accompanied it, are difficult to overestimate. Grammar-translation, employed exclusively for half a millennium in the teaching of Greek and Latin and dominant for more than a century in modern language instruction, started from the presupposition that language was a body of knowledge to be learned like any other. The new perspective, based in Universal Grammar, assumed that a second language could be acquired naturally or incidentally like the first language, through the process of communication alone, and apart from any deductive linguistic instruction. H. H. Stern (1970: 58) summed up this perspective:

> A small child simply *uses* language. He does not learn formal grammar. You don't tell him about verbs and nouns. Yet he learns the language perfectly.
> The implication of this remark is that it is equally unnecessary to use grammatical conceptualization in teaching a foreign language.

William Littlewood (1989: 16-17) also reflected upon the shift in second language instruction from a focus on linguistic structures to engagement in communicative tasks, a shift which he saw as almost universal and which had enormous impact upon classroom methodology:

> From the moment that we inquire if the speaker "provides information", "asks a question" or "assigns blame", we adopt a new perspective on language: a functional perspective. Throughout the 1970s, this new approach became so firmly entrenched […] that the structuralist perspective could be said to be practically dead. All language courses, it seemed, were now organized according to categories of function wherein, instead of learning the present or the perfect tense, students learned how to make suggestions, express admiration, ask permission, and so on.
> The functional perspective represents without a doubt a significant step toward a truly communicative approach. However, by one of those leaps of logic which are all too common in language pedagogy, many authors and curricula gave the impression that since language has functions, it cannot at the same time have

grammatical structures.[2]

Stephen Krashen remained in the forefront of this perspective. Central to his schema of language acquisition was the "Input Hypothesis" (Krashen 1981; 1985; 1989). Krashen stressed the importance of the learner receiving input (oral and/or written material in the target language) in order to progress in acquisition. Ideally, such input would be tailored to be just barely beyond the learner's current ability (input + 1, or "$i + 1$") so that existing knowledge could be exploited in integrating new knowledge. Input which consisted only of known material ($i + 0$) would result in stagnation, while input too far beyond the current level (say, $i + 3$) would be unassimilable. True to his theoretical anchoring in Universal Grammar, Krashen (1985, 1989) insisted that neither explicit linguistic/metalinguistic information nor learner interaction or production were necessary for progress in acquisition. As long as the learner's "affective filter" was down — he or she was not resisting the input through nervousness or negative attitudes — and the input was close to but just beyond his or her current level of competence ("$i + 1$"), acquisition would take place naturally. Now, the decades following these assertions have not added any empirical delineation of the notion of "$i + 1$" nor any accepted explanation of the acquisition/learning distinction; in addition, indications began to surface that a "critical age" for naturalistic language learning might be already passed for adolescent and adult learners (Lenneberg 1967, Walsh and Diller 1981, Scovel 1988). Nonetheless, the intuitive appeal of

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[2] My translation of "Dès le moment où nous demandons si le locuteur 'transmet des informations', 'demande quelque chose' ou 'fait un reproche', nous adoptons une nouvelle perspective sur la langue: une perspective fonctionnelle. Au cour des années soixante-dix, cette nouvelle perspective s'est si bien établie […] qu'on aurait presque dit que la perspective structurale était morte. On ne trouvait plus, semblait-il, que des cours organisés en catégories fonctionnelle où, au lieu d'enseigner le présent et le passé composé, on enseignait à faire des suggestions, exprimer l'admiration, demander la permission, etc.
    "La perspective fonctionnelle représente assurément un pas très important vers un perspective vraiment communicative. Seulement, par un de ces sauts de logique que nous connaissons très bien dans la pédagogie des langues, plusieurs auteurs et programmes ont donné l'impression que puisque la langue avait des fonctions, elle ne pouvait pas avoir en même temps des structures grammaticales."

these claims, combined with Krashen's persuasive and eloquent argumentation and supported by the new paradigm of first language acquisition, maintained them in the centre of the discussion of second language acquisition.

Thus, in the two or three decades following the late 1950s, SLA understanding, research and practice underwent a substantial transformation. Although explicit teaching of grammar did not disappear from many classrooms, the value of deductive metalinguistic instruction was sharply questioned in research circles, and in practically a whole generation of curriculum production (see Littlewood 1989 cited above) the structural approach was jettisoned in favour of functional or task-based learning. Extensive teaching of grammar became associated with the now practically discarded method of grammar-translation, which was criticized not only because it was shown to be ineffective in training well-rounded communicators but also because its principles ran counter to the new theoretical underpinnings of language acquisition. As Courchêne (1989, cited above) noted, the current presuppositions of the SLA research paradigm, associated most closely with Stephen Krashen, worked their way into the classroom to the extent that instructors now felt uncertain or reluctant to teach grammar explicitly. Moreover, these presuppositions tended to hinder or obscure a full and clear acknowledgement of the growing contribution of cognitive approaches to second language acquisition, so that cognitive theories and methods were either trivialized as uncertain and probably unrelated to real language use (e.g. Leeman et al. 1995) or else disguised under the rubric of functional/communicative language teaching (e.g. DeKeyser 1998). (Cognitive approaches, especially the roles of interaction, output, attention and correction in SLA, will be discussed in greater detail in 2. 3. below.)

1. 3. 3. The third question presents itself in the wake of this survey: What was gained and what, if anything, lost, in the metamorphosis from grammar-translation to functional or communicative language learning?

1. 3. 3. i. One need scarcely probe deeply to perceive the gains. With respect to living languages, the older generation still remembers, and suffers from the shortcomings of, the grammar-translation method. As an anecdotal example, my mother studied French and Latin in high school in the early 1950s and graduated with about as much ability to speak and comprehend the one as the other: a meagre knowledge of reading and writing but neither the tools nor the skills to go further into communication. Fifty-five years later she has entered an intensive French immersion program in an eastern Canadian university where in just a few six-week modules she has begun to communicate competently in her second language. She, among others, is old enough to have witnessed the change from memorization to communication, from information on paper to authentic encounters in culture.

Immersion education, placing young students of one language background into the educative milieu of a second language which is the *means* but not the *object* of instruction, began in Montreal, Canada in 1965 (Baker 2001: 204). Unlike the grammar-translation method, in which the second language was the object of study, immersion simply employed the second language to teach content courses, assuming that through exposure and usage, learners would acquire the second language in a natural and incidental fashion. As early as 1972, Tucker and d'Anglejan (1972: 19) were reporting resounding success:

> the experimental students appear to be able to read, write, speak, understand, and use English as well as youngsters instructed in English in the conventional manner. In addition and at no cost they can also read, write, speak and understand French in a

way that English students who follow a traditional program of French as a second language never do.

The notion that there was "no cost" to the acquisition of French underscored the contention of Krashen and others that a second language could be acquired like the first, without determined attention to form or undue application. Although immersion education targeted young learners (pre-adolescent and adolescent) rather than adults, it nevertheless seemed to offer remarkable support to the notion that sequential bilingualism was possible in an entirely natural fashion (that is, past the simultaneous bilingualism stage of up to about five years of age; see Lenneberg 1967, Scovel 1988). Since the initial Montreal experiment, immersion education has spread throughout Canada and into several countries, involving a number of languages including Finnish, Japanese, Gaelic tongues and many aboriginal languages, and is regarded as "an educational experiment of unusual success and growth" (Baker 2001: 208).

The communicative revolution in the typical second-language classroom was likewise impressive. Similar to immersion practice, communicative approaches in the core second-language curriculum emphasized the functions of language rather than the structures, and employed language in tasks rather than in drills. Use of the second language for both instruction and communication in the classroom became a priority, and students were encouraged to develop a wide range of linguistic and paralinguistic strategies of communication. Rod Ellis (1994: 602) asserted: "There is now convincing evidence that learners can learn 'naturally' in a communicative classroom setting."

The advances since the 1950s were enormous. The focus on real communication was, in some ways, just the beginning: students learning a language now undertook to encounter a culture, to become knowledgeable about various pragmatic aspects of communication beyond

just vocabulary and grammar, to become familiar with a language's registers and to employ vernacular rather than "textbook" language where appropriate and to engage in authentic encounters with native speakers. If they entered into a reasonably well-designed program with a reasonable commitment to hard work, they could expect at the end to be able to function and even to succeed in the milieu of their second language.

1. 3. 3. ii. Despite these positive results, certain problems began to surface. Some linguists, researchers and language instructors noted that naturalistic learners tended to make persistent phonetic and structural errors and were likely to "fossilize" (arrest their linguistic development long before reaching native or near-native proficiency) when they had gained sufficient overall strategic competence to make themselves generally understood and to seize the gist of what was said to them. For example, as part of the European Science Foundation Project, a longitudinal study (Klein and Perdue 1992; 1993) followed 21 adult/naturalistic language learners representing six L1s and 5 L2s in five different European countries. The researchers identified three stages of L2 acquisition: 1) nominal — predominantly nouns supplemented by gestures and context; 2) infinite — subject plus a verb in the infinitive, perhaps with adverbs to suggest some idea of tense and mood; and 3) finite — a precise, near-native use of grammar. The study indicated that among naturalistic learners, fossilization commonly occurred at the second, or "infinite" stage of acquisition. On another front, Canadian French immersion schools, researchers (Harley and Swain 1984; Hammerly 1987; Lyster 1987; Hamm 1988) were finding that although anglophone students reached an almost native-like level of comprehension of French, their production evidenced serious lacunae in spite of years of rich target-language input. Not only were certain aspects of pronunciation flawed as well as a number of structures (e.g.

grammatical gender even of very common nouns, the distinction between perfect and imperfect past tenses, use of the conditional mood to express hypotheses, active/passive/pronominal voices, choice and conjugation of auxiliary verbs) but there were persistent sociolinguistic errors (e.g. the distinction between the familiar and the polite second person singular, the choice of appropriate register).

So it seemed, then, that an entirely natural approach which minimized or eliminated a focus on grammatical forms was not without flaws of its own. However, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, the theoretical and practical shift from grammar-translation to naturalistic learning also entailed an ideological shift which rendered uncongenial the re-introduction of grammar lessons as a solution. Researchers rather sought for solutions within the new paradigm.

Chapter 2: The Ideology of Naturalistic Learning and the Rise of Focus on Form

2. 1. Introduction

As I have argued in Chapter 1, in the decades following the 1950s, a whole new field of research, that of second language acquisition, had opened up, and an entirely new paradigm in second-language pedagogy had replaced the traditions of grammar-translation. The foundational hypotheses ranged from the Universal Grammar position to Behaviourism, but one fundamental aspect was shared: the new paradigm compared, and perhaps went so far as to equate, a learner acquiring a second language with a child acquiring his or her first language. The human mind was seen to be innately equipped for or remarkably receptive to language acquisition, and therefore the explicit teaching of grammar in language learning was considered peripheral or perhaps even counter-productive.   However, as we have seen, this approach did not produce uniformly satisfactory results in terms of accurate production.

To probe the reasons behind the lapses in naturalistic learning, various studies questioned whether instructed learners acquire language (or at least specific linguistic structures) more rapidly and more accurately than naturalistic learners. Some of these studies (e.g., Chihara and Oller 1978; Pavesi 1986) seemed to show that in fact they did. At the same time, other studies (e.g., Lightbown et al. 1980; Pica 1983) demonstrated that such advantages were often of short duration, or that instructed learners tended to overuse certain learned structures.   Still other studies indicated that instruction had no beneficial effect (e.g., Fathman 1975) and some even suggested that instruction led to a deterioration in production (e.g., Felix 1981; VanPatten 1990).[3]

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[3] For a thorough overview of such studies, see Ellis's tables and review in *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford 1994), 612-647.

In short, the results were inconclusive at best. What did emerge rather clearly was that focused instruction seemed to heighten metalinguistic awareness. However, since a metalinguistic approach (treating language as an object of study apart from its use in communication) was the very concept whose value the naturalist/communicative school denied, this finding added no real illumination to one side of the debate or the other.

2. 2. Framework for a Solution to the Problems

The point to be made at this stage of the argument is that the explicit teaching of grammar in any overt or wholesale fashion, whether contextualized or not, was not really an option as a remedy for the failure of language students in naturalistic, strongly communicative or immersion programs to reach optimal or expected levels of accuracy. This was due to the tremendous ideological shift which had taken place in language research and second language pedagogy after the 1950s. It was not so much that grammar teaching had disappeared from many instructional settings (although it certainly had from immersion and naturalistic learning approaches) as that the teaching of grammar ran counter to the presuppositions of the new SLA understanding, especially in research circles. For example, Michael Long characterized instruction which focused on the grammar of a language as "neanderthal teaching practices" (1988: 136). In speaking about the option of adding explicit grammar lessons into a communicatively-oriented classroom in order to deal with lapses in accuracy of production, Doughty and Varela (1998: 114) warned:

> Arguments against explicit procedures centre around the likelihood of precluding fluency, which has, after all, been the major advancement of communicative approaches to classroom language acquisition, since in explicit procedures language becomes the object rather than the means of discussion.

Doughty and Williams expressed an even more decided position in another study (1998b: 229), where they discuss the distinction (made by Long 1991 and upon which this thesis will concentrate) between "focus on form", or the incidental and implicit guiding of grammar within the context of authentic communication, and "focus on formS", or the explicit teaching of linguistic structures:

> Language use tends to be of two types — highly skilled and effortless versus halting and deliberate. The processes by which deliberate language use can be automatized are far from well known. However, it is already clear that the starting point for discovering them is the distinction between *focus on form* and *focus on formS*, the latter entailing the well-known pitfall that too much attention to form results in deliberate rather than automatic language use.

According to Doughty and Varela (1998: 116), even such minimally intrusive and incidental attention to structure as is called for by a strict approach to "focus on form" would cause some communicatively-trained instructors to shy away:

> There has been considerable opposition to the notion of focus on form from primarily communicative language teachers who, not without basis, fear a return to purely grammar-based methods.

The value-charged language and wide-ranging assumptions in the above citations, from renowned and respected researchers in SLA, are excellent examples of the entrenchment of the communicative ideology. The attitude demonstrated suggests that researchers and teachers in the communicative era tend to make an identification (in the psychological sense of the term) of grammar teaching with grammar-translation. That is to say, a focus on linguistic forms, though far removed in the new communicative milieu from the older system, seems to evoke an apprehension of the old system in its entirety. Moreover, this attitude also indicates that researchers tend to think in terms of complete paradigms (e.g., communicative language teaching

versus grammar-translation) rather than of the possibility of combining disparate elements from varying theoretical backgrounds. This issue will be discussed at greater length in chapter 5.

In any event, the reluctance to address certain lacunae in naturalistic, functional or communicative language teaching by the means of administering increasing doses of explicit grammar lessons, a reluctance motivated by the legitimate concern that authentic communication would be traded off for a return to textbook-style rote learning which could scarcely be (depending on the theoretical presuppositions) acquired/automatized/processed, circumscribed the options available to researchers and teachers. The answer was to be sought within the perspective itself: how could authentic communicative events be exploited to nurture increased accuracy and to further acquisition without modifying to the point of betrayal the nature of the event itself, indeed the goal of language teaching: authentic communication?

Several possible responses were put to the test. In general, these responses ranged themselves against, and attempted to find a reasonable middle ground between, the two extremes of the Natural approach, represented by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1981, 1985, 1989) which denied the value of any attention to form, and the now obsolete but still potentially influential grammar-translation method, which concentrated exclusively on forms. As we shall see, although many serious minds made individual contributions to the solution, the various techniques came to be grouped around the notion which was articulated by Michael Long (1991) under the rubric of "focus on form".

2. 3. Proposed Solutions Within the Framework of Communicative Language Teaching

With a paradigm that prioritized authentic communication, second language researchers

looked to develop techniques of intervention that would minimize the disruption of communicative flow while maximizing the accuracy of production. The challenge was to deal with formal problems in some way that would bring about awareness and correction on the part of the learner without changing the focus of the encounter from linguistic to meta-linguistic, that is, from the subject of the conversation occurring by means of language to the reification of language itself as the material under examination. These interventions were an attempt to correct persistent learner errors or to advance learner knowledge of linguistic structures whether within a naturalistic setting or a communicatively-oriented classroom. Stated another way, researchers were looking either to modify or to invalidate the strong non-interventionist position (the "zero option", meaning absolutely no explicit teaching and no required production) of Krashen's Input Hypothesis. We shall look broadly at four approaches: the Interaction Hypothesis, the Output Hypothesis, Noticing/Attention, and Corrective Feedback.

2. 3. 1. The Interaction Hypothesis. Michael Long (beginning in 1980) suggested that input alone, even input designed to be just at the ideal level for learner acquisition, is insufficient for progress to target levels in language learning. He noted that when native speakers spoke to language learners, the pattern of grammar and of discourse was altered, and, most significantly, that it was altered both through native speaker adjustment to the utterances of the non-native speaker and through non-native speaker improvement by reacting to and imitating the native speaker — in other words, through interaction. It was through such interaction, Long hypothesized, that a genuine level of "$i + 1$" could be determined for the learner's benefit. This became known as the "Interaction Hypothesis", wherein "negotiation for meaning" between an accomplished speaker and a learner, including self- and other-correction, leads to acquisition.

2. 3. 2. The Output Hypothesis. Swain (1985) went further in directly contradicting Krashen's tenet that production on the part of the learner is unnecessary for acquisition. As noted above, Swain and other researchers had remarked that even after years of rich input, students of French immersion (where French is the *means* of instruction in content courses but not the *object* of instruction as a second language) still manifested persistent production errors. Swain suggested that learners must have adequate opportunity to use the language which they are acquiring, and must find themselves in real communicative situations where they will be "pushed" to re-articulate their discourse with greater grammatical accuracy and even to switch from semantic (top-down) to syntactic (bottom-up) processing. It must be emphasized that this hypothesis, known as the "Output Hypothesis", went far beyond the earlier Structuralist idea of simply "practicing" learned and memorized forms; it involved 1) noticing (or consciousness-raising), 2) hypothesis testing, and 3) metalinguistic reflection.

Schachter (1986b) also observed the importance of output in a way that lent support to both Long's and Swain's positions, namely, that learner production is the prerequisite for error correction or negotiation for meaning on the part of a native speaker or more advanced learner.

2. 3. 3. Noticing, Consciousness-raising, and Input Enhancement. Richard Schmidt (1990), primarily based on reflections on his own experience learning Portuguese, realized that input did not necessarily become part of his interlanguage system, but that he had to notice or give attention to it for it to be absorbed and put to use in his own comprehension and production. His work concentrated on how the learner's attention could be drawn to salient structures in the input so that linguistic features would be noticed and acquired (or, as he expressed it, so that "input" would become "intake") within the context of communicative events. Although Schmidt

distinguished between simple "noticing" (such as the odd spelling of a word) and "awareness" or "understanding" (grasping an underlying structure or principle), researchers now speak more generally (following Ellis 1991d) of "consciousness-raising." Studies have focused on ways to raise the learner's awareness of structures within the input to be acquired; and modifying the input with this purpose in mind is what Sharwood Smith (1991) called "Input Enhancement" (for example, typographic enhancement in written materials; e.g., J. White 1998).

2. 3. 4. Corrective Feedback. While Krashen (1981) categorically denied any value to corrective feedback and even claimed that might hinder acquisition through raising the "affective filter" (inhibitions, feelings of intimidation or negative attitudes), others argued that not only did many learners desire correction as an aid to acquisition but that there were indications that correction improved accuracy or accelerated the acquisition of some structures (see below). So, in addition to interaction within conversations, extensive research was conducted into the effects of error correction in the classroom. Although pedagogical systems had been devised since the 1970s regarding what, how, and when to correct and who should correct, considerably less work had been done on the real effects of correction on acquisition. Rosenstein (1982) and Almari (1982) tested the benefits of teacher correction on student learning (within rather traditional, i.e. grammar-focused language classrooms) and found relatively low results. Tomasello and Herron (1988, 1989) argued that the "garden path technique", in which students were led to make overgeneralization or transfer errors and then were corrected, was more effective.   This technique, however, still implied a strong focus on forms which may have been unsuited to a communicative task-based curriculum. Lightbown and Spada (1990) studied corrective feedback in English second-language classrooms in Quebec. In these decidedly communicatively-oriented

settings, students evidenced better mastery of some structures when the teacher provided error correction.

Error correction has proven a vast field for research, with questions focusing on simple prompts or highlighting of errors versus explicit correction, recasts, the value of positive and negative feedback, self-repair versus other-repair, and the effectiveness of metalinguistic information as feedback. While the terms "error correction" or "corrective feedback" have been used generally in this section, it should be noted that researchers and research questions make fine distinctions among the types of feedback employed and their corresponding descriptive terminology (e.g., Lyster and Saito 2010).

2. 4. An Articulated Vision for Formal Instruction within Communicative Language Teaching: "Focus on Form."

Much of the work of Michael H. Long in the field of second language acquisition, along with the work of many others, has now come to be grouped under a banner which Long devised in 1991 and which gave new direction to the search for ways to address the structural gaps in naturalistic acquisition. That banner is the term *focus on form*. It was in his 1991 article "Focus on form: a design feature in language teaching methodology" that Long set out his definition of an approach which, according to his description, avoided the extreme positions of purely structural (grammar-based) language teaching and purely functional (task-based) language teaching. Long's distinction between "focus on forms", or the concentration upon the structures of language, and "focus on form" or the incidental attention to language structure in the course of authentic communicative events, seemed to put into words the quest of numerous researchers.

The manner in which many have seized hold of this banner and aligned their own efforts under it demonstrates the remarkable insight with which Long gave voice and direction to the attempt to give attention to form without betraying the ideological framework of the new linguistic and sociological approach to second language instruction: communicative language teaching, that is, teaching which prioritizes authentic communication not only as the goal but as the means of acquisition. The following chapter will examine "focus on form" in detail, both from Long's own definition and from the perspective of researchers who work within the approach.

Chapter 3: Focus on Form from Within and Without

3. 1. "Focus on Form" According to Long

Long (1991) defined "focus on form" as giving incidental and reactive attention to linguistic form in the course of real communicative events. While the primary emphasis in language learning will always be on communicating the message, attention is allocated as well to negotiation for meaning, including the provision of feedback, while maintaining the flow of communication. In terms of classroom pedagogy, Long insisted that "focus on form" arises out of a task-based syllabus in a communicatively-oriented setting.

Long contrasted this with what he called "focus on forms" (now frequently with the orthography "focus on formS" to draw attention to the distinction), pedagogy which starts with the forms of the language and submits the learning process to priorities arranged not by communicative needs but by an analyzed schema of progressively more complex linguistic structures.

The focus given to form in Long's approach draws "students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication" (Long 1991: 46). In its pure form, a pedagogy applying focus on form will not design communicative events beforehand with the idea of highlighting certain linguistic forms for attention, but only with the idea of highlighting communicative tasks. Attention to form will always be reactive and incidental, minimally intrusive on both the immediate communicative task and the long-term organic design and growth of the functionally-based syllabus.

3. 2. Focus on Form in Theory and in Practice

As part of Doughty and Williams's (1998a) book *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*, Long and Robinson contributed the second chapter, "Focus on form: Theory, research and practice", to bring the general status of the focus-on-form school up to date. This section will examine key points of this survey article in order to highlight in a general way the major structural and analytical persuasions of studies within the focus-on-form school. As well, the emergence of certain problematic areas will be indicated.

3. 2. 1. Focus on form defined. In the first of the two sections of Long and Robinson's 1998 article "Focus on form: Theory, research and practice", the authors define the theoretical foundations and practical implications of a focus-on-form orientation. We recall that Long had declared in his 1991 article that a focus-on-form approach to language does not teach language but "something else" by means of the language, and that instructors "overtly draw students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication" (1991: 46). This constraint is explicitly maintained in Long and Robinson's 1998 update, in which it is specified that "pedagogical tasks are designed, with no specific linguistic focus" (1998: 23). Curriculum design for focus-on-form instruction

> is analytic, employing a non-linguistic unit of analysis, such as a task. Syllabus content is a series of *pedagogical tasks* (or, in some content-based approaches, curricular subject matter), the justification for which is that the content or tasks are related to the current or future needs of the particular group of learners to be served. As described elsewhere[…], pedagogical tasks are designed, with no specific linguistic focus, as successively more complex approximations to the *target tasks* that a task-based needs analysis has identified as facing the learner, such as attending a job interview, making an airline reservation, reading a restaurant menu or a journal abstract, writing a lab report, or taking a driving test. (Long and Robinson 1998: 23)

Long and Robinson (1998: 22) represent this approach as a "third option, which attempts to capture the strengths of an analytic approach while dealing with its limitations", and display this notion graphically (1998: 16) by positioning focus on form evenly between what they call the "first option" (synthetic or formal language teaching) and the "second option" (analytic or semantic language pedagogy). However, one should not conclude from the term "third option," nor from Long and Robinson's chart, that focus on form stands somewhere between, and draws rather evenly from, the two extremes. Rather, focus on form is positioned almost entirely within the second option, the analytical or communicative approach. The incidental attention given to form is limited by Long to interaction within a communicative event (negotiation for meaning and feedback). The role of focus on form is not to bring about metalinguistic insight but only to call attention to a formal item in a given communicative instance where such an item has become problematic to the communicative flow. Long and Robinson (1998: 24) cite Schmidt's (1993b) distinction between "noticing" and "understanding" ("noticing" is perceiving specific items while "understanding" is discovering a coherent principle behind specific usages) and make it clear that the goal of focus on form is uniquely "noticing". Essentially, focus on form is not a system of language teaching but, from the point of view of language structure, a non-system of language acquisition; its approach vis-a-vis language structures is reactive, whereas its approach to language use (functions or tasks) is proactive. The syllabus is designed around the functions of language; focus on form comes into play only incidentally, when language functions are impaired by language forms. Attention to forms is item-specific rather than systematic.

3. 2. 2. Focus on form in research: important studies. In the second section of the article, Long and Robinson review in detail some 15 studies (examined below) which they group

into three categories: implicit versus explicit learning, attention to structure versus attention to meaning, and focus on form. The intent in highlighting these particular studies seems to be to show that focus-on-form instruction generally yields superior results to zero-intervention or entirely naturalistic instruction. However, as my comments will attempt to show, the studies chosen do not always seem to fall within the definition of focus on form as Long and Robinson overtly assume they do.

3. 2. 2. i. Implicit versus explicit learning. Following claims by Reber (1989) that test subjects showed evidence of implicit language learning, and that implicit learning was often superior to explicit, several researchers took up the challenge. Among the questions left by the study was whether a natural language with all its structural and semantic complexities would yield the same results as Reber's artificial and simplified non-semantic testing language.

N. Ellis (1993) studied English learners of Welsh divided into three groups. A "random" or implicit group received input examples alone, a "grammar" group received explicit rule instruction before seeing the examples, and a "structured" group received rule instruction and examples together. The implicit group showed no acquisition, the grammar group showed metalinguistic awareness but inability to transfer it to the structures, and the structured group evidenced improved acquisition. With its target of a specific morphological structures and explicit rule instruction, it is difficult to see how this study supports focus on form according to Long's definition. However, Long and Robinson do not actually address this implication of the research but simply suggest (28) that the third group might have done just as well without the explicit rule instruction.

DeKeyser (1995) used a complex artificial language based on Finnish and showed pairs

of sentences to two groups. One group (implicit/inductive) received no additional instruction, the other (explicit/deductive) received three five-minute instructional sessions. Both groups performed equally well in reproducing previously viewed constructions but the explicit/ deductive group outperformed the other in generalizing the targeted construction for correct use in new production. Once again, this study shows that within a pedagogy designed from the starting point of linguistic structure, a narrowly-targeted form is acquired better with explicit metalinguistic instruction; this is not a finding supportive of focus on form. Moreover, all subjects in the study were exposed to the pairs of sentences for five hundred minutes; even an arguably inferior pedagogy would likely result in some acquisition with such an outlay of time on a single linguistic structure.

The studies which follow demonstrate in general the same finding (though not in every case commented upon individually in this respect), namely, that explicit metalinguistic instruction results in superior acquisition to naturalistic, communicative or implicit pedagogy.

Robinson (1995a, 1996b) studied Japanese learners of English attempting to acquire inversion after adverbial fronting and pseudoclefts of location. The group which received rule instruction did better than the uninstructed groups with adverbial fronting; both groups performed equally poorly on the more difficult pseudoclefts of location.

3. 2. 2. ii. Attention to structure versus attention to meaning. Doughty (1988, 1991) examined acquisition of object-of-preposition relative clauses by learners of English. One group simply read texts with such clauses embedded (the control group); a second group received texts which were supplemented with highlighted clauses, rephrasings and lexical adjustments to make the structure clear, and was instructed to read for comprehension (the meaning group); a third

group received texts amplified with rules highlighting the clauses (the rule group). The meaning-oriented group did best of the three on a comprehension test, and the meaning and rule groups did better than the control on a test of relativization ability.

VanPatten's 1990 study came up with somewhat different results than Doughty's with respect to the allocation of attention, but it tested verbal as opposed to written interaction. Unlike Doughty's findings wherein both meaning-based and rule-based groups evidenced equally superior performance on written tests, listeners in this oral setting who were instructed to listen only for meaning (meaning-based) had better recall than those who were told to listen for both semantic and formal elements (rule-based).

Alanen (1995) looked at the acquisition by four groups of two structures within a semi-artificial language. The control subjects received texts including the structures, a second group received the same texts but with the structures italicized, a third group received unmodified texts and rule explanation, and a fourth group was given both the enhanced texts and rule explanation. These latter two groups are described by Long and Robinson as the "two FonF conditions" (33) even though the tasks are designed from the starting point of targeted linguistic structures and the instruction included explicit, deductive rule information — the two crucial elements which plainly distinguish the operation *from* focus on form. The two rule-based groups scored significantly higher on all post-test tasks than the two meaning-based groups; there was no real difference between the two rule groups, nor between the two meaning groups.

In a laboratory experiment, Hulstijn (1989) studied recall and retention of a structure of Dutch by learners. Recall of structure was best for groups instructed as to form over those who simply read texts for meaning. Retention was equal across groups.

3. 2. 2. iii.   Focus on form.   Lightbown and Spada (1990) observed focus-on-form correction in communicatively-oriented English classes for young francophone learners. They noted that in classes where more time was spent by teachers on error correction, accuracy of production among the learners was higher.   Although these classes ostensibly rejected an emphasis on forms, teachers devoted from 10 to 29% of class time to error correction. Such a proportion of class time spent on error correction may pass the limits of a focus-on-form approach which limits error correction to incidental attention in communicative events.

L. White (1991), working with beginners in the same program as Lighbown and Spada's 1990 study, examined acquisition of English question formation.   Two classes were given explicit instruction along with error correction over a two-week period; three classes were uninstructed.   The instructed learners performed better at English question formation than the uninstructed ones on post-tests and delayed post-tests. A second phase of the study indicated that these advantages were continuing and potentially long-term.

In a very similar study, Spada and Lightbown (1993), again focusing on English question formation, discovered that instructed learners did better within the experimental period than uninstructed ones, and that instructed learners tended to continue to progress ahead of uninstructed students even months after the instruction period had ceased.

In Canadian French immersion programs, Harley (1989) demonstrated that students instructed for an average of 1½ hours per week for eight weeks on the usage of two past tenses showed improvement in accurate usage, but that this advantage was no longer present three months later.   Day and Shapson (1991) taught the use of the French conditional for almost 3 hours a week over six weeks, and found that instructed learners outperformed uninstructed ones

(a control group in the regular content-based instruction but without the added lessons) both immediately after the instruction period and in a test administered 11 weeks later. Lyster 1994a, in slightly over 2 hours a week for five weeks, concentrated students' attention on the distinction between the French second person singular/familiar and plural/polite, and found that students who received the instruction demonstrated enduring improvement in correct usage over uninstructed students.

Finally, Leeman, Arteagoitia, Fridman and Doughty (1995) tested the usage of two Spanish past tenses with two 50-minute sessions of preparation. One group was given an assigned reading and questions; the second group, in addition to the same assignment and questions, received error correction, highlighting and underlining and colour-coding of forms in the written material, specific instructions to pay attention to the use of the past tenses, and presentation of models. The group which had received the additional instructional input, the "focus on form" group (this must be considered, to borrow DeKeyser's 1998: 43 words, "a rather strong variant of focus on form") outperformed the "communicative" group in some measures but not in others.

3. 3. Implications of the Definition.

By Long's definition, two underlying ideological convictions become clear:

3. 3. 1. First of all, *focus on form is based on a functional perspective and rejects a structural perspective*. The language learning event, whether in a naturalistic, immersion-instruction, or second-language-classroom setting, should not be designed with linguistic structures in mind but only with communicative events/tasks in mind. Focus on form is not a

compromise position but remains generally at one end of the spectrum, the communicative/ semantic perspective, with only minor and well-defined departures from its tenets.[4]

3. 3. 2. Secondly, *focus on form relies implicitly on a nativist theory of second language acquisition*. It will be recalled from the discussion of chapter 1 that Chomsky argued that a person's first language is acquired with remarkable facility, rapidity and mastery because the human brain is pre-programmed, as it were, to acquire language. According to this view, the basic structures of human language are innate (which he called "Universal Grammar") and the specifics of language are taken up through a portion of the brain designed just for this purpose (the LAD or "Language Acquisition Device"). The nativist view was extended by Stephen Krashen to embrace second language acquisition as well as first. Long's focus on form depends on this view of second language acquisition — at least, as specified above, *implicitly*, for Long and Robinson (1998: 22) are careful to explain that the Interaction Hypothesis "holds that SLA is a process explicable by neither a purely linguistic nativist nor a purely environmentalist theory." Indeed, Long has argued consistently against Krashen's entirely naturalistic "zero option" assumption and has put forward focus on form precisely in order to address the inability, in his view, of learners to master some linguistic forms without intervention. However, as we have seen in Long and Robinson's (1998) definition (see 3. 2. 1. above), it would be erroneous to conclude that because Long distances himself in a nuanced way against one option, he therefore stands somewhere evenly between two options. That he is essentially nativist in his presuppositions about second language acquisition is the necessary conclusion from his insistence on a task-based syllabus. That is to say, a language pedagogy which is almost entirely

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[4] The point is belaboured here because it is the premise of this study that both within the research agenda and within the classroom, so much is done claiming the approach of focus on form which is far from following its principles either ideologically or practically.

task-based and never treats any part of language as facts to be analyzed, memorized, learned or drilled must assume that the human mind is innately equipped to acquire language simply through exposure and use. Long is clear that he does not support an approach which blends structuralism and functionalism (Long and Robinson 1998: 16-18). Only the presupposition of the innate ability of human beings to acquire a second language inductively can support an entirely task-based curriculum with only reactive and incidental attention to structure.

It is these two ideological underpinnings which, despite the approach's claim to address the need for attention to form, continue to constrain the terminology and the areas of concentration of both researchers and instructors. Nevertheless, it will be argued in chapters 4 and 5 of this study that despite the reluctance to articulate it, the effect of extensive focus on formS may constitute a part of the meaningful findings of many recent important research efforts in SLA conducted under the auspices of focus on form.

3. 4. "Focus on Form" as Adopted by Researchers

The distinction between "focus on form" and "focus on formS" somehow materialized the hitherto nameless attempt to devote attention to accuracy of form without leaving functional or task-based pedagogy, and revolutionized and redefined the way countless researchers and instructors viewed their own work. Many of the most important and progressive experts in the field of applied linguistics in second language acquisition ally themselves with Long's approach, among whom are Robert DeKeyser, Catherine Doughty, Birgit Harley, D. Larsen-Freeman, Merrill Swain, and Jessica Williams. Certain researchers such as Roy Lyster and Leila Ranta examine the methods of focus-on-form instruction but may tacitly distance themselves to some

degree from a purely task-based syllabus by employing related terminology such as "form-focused instruction".[5] Still others, notably Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada, often work under the rubric of focus on form but seem less overtly constrained by the paradigm.

As I shall attempt to show in 3. 5. below and in chapter 4, many of these researchers subtly broaden or occasionally contradict the definition and theoretical underpinnings of the approach as proposed by Long, while overtly asserting their affinity with it. An important focus of the analysis of chapter 4 of this paper will be to show that many researchers, despite aligning themselves under the rubric, do not operate within such a strict ideology and indeed seem to be somewhat surprised when focus on form does not result in greater "understanding". For example, DeKeyser (1998: 43) remarks: "If a structure is not part of UG or cannot be acquired without negative evidence, then a rather strong variant of focus on form, including rule teaching and error correction, will be required." By the definition which we have seen, pedagogy which is aimed at transmitting a particular linguistic structure and does so through rule teaching and error correction is not "a rather strong variant of focus on form" nor any other variant of focus on form — it is simply, in one sense or another, focus on formS.[6] As a second example, Harley 1998 (see the analysis in chapter 4 of this paper) employed a "focus-on-form" pedagogy to help uptake of grammatical gender in French among young anglophone students, with an expressed hypothesis that through exposure and usage the students would implicitly grasp and then apply

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[5] How far this may distance them is not clear: Long himself uses this term in his original 1991 article (48) with equal ambiguity. Doughty and Williams (1998a: 4) attempt to resolve this by suggesting that "form-focused" be eliminated from focus-on-form terminology. Sheen and O'Neill (2005: 274) add to the muddled clarity by defining "form-focused episodes" as the moments in an incidental focus-on-form communicative lesson when attention is allocated to the form-meaning relationship, and "form-focused instruction" as the term which "covers all approaches which aim to make learners' [*sic*] aware of form-meaning relationships and thus may include exponents of both a focus on form and a focus on formS."

[6] Incidentally, this also indicates that the operation of UG is presupposed in the focus-on-form approach; see 3. 3. 2. above.

the underlying principles, but found that "the experiment was more successful in inducing 'item learning' than 'system learning'" (168). But since focus on form is only concerned with "item learning" and is diametrically opposed to "system learning" — it is about, as Long and Robinson (1998: 24) explain in Schmidt's terminology, "noticing" and not "understanding" — how is it that the researcher came to the study with this as her hypothesis in the first place?   Finally, Long's insistence on a task-based curriculum (that is, a curriculum arranged by the learner's need to perform certain real-world tasks and not by any hierarchy of linguistic structure) has been altered by many researchers to embrace "focused tasks," tasks designed to elicit the usage of certain language forms rather than to address communicative need (e.g. Boston 2010).   While such a design may offer promise from the standpoint of acquisition of structures, it no longer maintains the goal of a pedagogy of language use where attention to form is incidental and reactive; it has become a pedagogy aimed at the mastery of pre-targeted formS.[7]

3. 5. The Problem: Conflict between Focus on Form in Theory and in Practice

Long and Robinson's theory and definition of focus on form in the first section of their 1998 article, followed in section 2 by their treatment of the representative studies, reveals the presence of contradictions which, I contend, hamper the movement.   Clearly, focus on form defines itself as a minimal attention to form, reactive and incidental, within a task-based communicative curriculum.   Just as clearly, in these actual instances, focus on form plays itself

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[7] Boston's 2010 article defines a focused task as designed from the pedagogical point of view to elicit the use of certain structures but perceived from the student point of view as a regular meaning-oriented task. His experiment was to use pre-task priming to increase use of (unmarked) English passives with Japanese ESL students.   The experiment was unsuccessful. The task was followed by a reading wherein passives were located by students and an explicit discussion analyzed their use.
    I would suggest that this study indicates that focused tasks may be helpful but avoidance strategies may too often trump them; they would be most effective, in my view, as a contributing methodology in a more open-system setting (see chapter 6).

out in exercises derived from structuralism and in pedagogy heavily weighted toward explicit, deductive analysis. The avowed definition accords to researcher and instructor the belief that they are upholding an overwhelmingly communicative ideology; the real practice seems to betray a strong leaning toward focus on formS.

The problem, then, is that there is a contradiction between the explicitly articulated theory and the practice of focus on form, between what it claims and indeed sees itself to be and what it actually is; and Long and Robinson's 1998 article reveals both the problem and its extent. Therefore, the studies which follow in Chapter 4 are not isolated anomalies but typical of the genre. This is an important point to consider if this paper is to make any real contribution to the discussion: the studies which are analyzed below have not been selected because they somehow betray the focus-on-form school but because they are truly representative of it.

3. 6. Directions for Analysis

Based on the above discussion of emerging contradictions, the following questions will guide the analysis and interpretation of representative focus-on-form studies in chapters 4 and 5:

3. 6. 1. Is the focus on form or on formS? What comes under the rubric of focus on form is often task-based or communicative-event-based instruction — but with the task or event designed from the starting point of a linguistic form to be acquired. Therefore, it is important to analyze the actual structure and content of studies which purport to test focus on form but may in fact employ an ambiguous, de-contextualized or clearly formS-based instructional paradigm.

3. 6. 2. What is the relative effect on acquisition of focus on form versus focus on formS? Although focus-on-form studies do not typically employ a control which is overtly

focus on formS, it is sometimes possible to qualify the relative merits of the targeted focus-on-form treatment and of the ancillary exercises which generally constitute a focus on formS.

3. 6. 3. Is the time spent on focus on form/formS practical and effective? A common element of focus-on-form studies is that a considerable amount of time is often allocated to "form-focused" interventions. This invites examination of the practicality of such treatments in the typical second-language classroom, as well as discussion of time spent versus progress achieved.

Chapter 4: Issues Trivial and Grave: Analyses of Representative "Focus on Form" Studies

4. 1. Introduction

The format for this chapter will consist of a chart of the central tenets of five typical focus-on-form studies from the United States, Canada and Great Britain, followed by a verbal analysis of each study, a summary of the issues common to the studies and concluding remarks. These particular studies have been chosen as representative of the genre, as coming from an international perspective, and as products of scholars ranging from aspiring researchers to some of the most important names in the field.

4. 2. Chart Overview of Five "Focus-on-Form" Studies (following two pages)

	Study # 1: Nina Spada & Patsy M. Lightbown	Study #2: Birgit Harley	Study #3: Catherine Doughty and Elizabeth Varela	Study #4: Emma Marsden	Study #5: Roy Lyster and Jesús Izquierdo
author	Study # 1: Nina Spada & Patsy M. Lightbown	Study #2: Birgit Harley	Study #3: Catherine Doughty and Elizabeth Varela	Study #4: Emma Marsden	Study #5: Roy Lyster and Jesús Izquierdo
title	"Instruction and the development of questions in L2 classrooms"	"The role of focus-on-form tasks in promoting child L2 acquisition"	"Communicative focus on form"	"Input-based grammar pedagogy: a comparison of two possibilities"	"Prompts Versus Recasts in Dyadic Interaction"
publication and date	*Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 15. 2. 1993. 205-221.	*Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Doughty and Williams, eds. Cambridge UP, 1998. 156-174.	*Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Doughty and Williams, eds. Cambridge UP, 1998. 114-138.	*Language Learning Journal*. 31. Summer 2005. 9-20.	*Language Learning*. 59. 2. 2009. 453-498.
declared goal	form-focused instruction and corrective feedback to improve English L2 question formation	focus on form to improve uptake of French grammatical gender (156)	corrective recasts to improve production of English past and conditional (118-119)	effectiveness of Enriched Input alone compared to Processing Instruction in uptake of French past tense	"effects of form-focused instruction and different types of feedback" on uptake of French noun gender (464)
declared approach/ methodology	explicit instruction, corrective feedback (210)	focus on form (156) consciousness-raising (157)	implicit focus on form in content-based ESL classroom instruction (114-115)	"Focus-on-form techniques" IE and PI in a "broadly-defined communicative curriculum" (9, 15)	skill acquisition theory; corrective feedback (prompts and recasts) (465), focus-on-form techniques (457)
subjects	3 classes of Grade 5-6 francophone intensive English L2 students	6 classes of Grade 2 anglophone French immersion students	34 students ages 11-14 in 2 ESL science classes in TL environment	3 year-9 French FL classes from 2 British schools	25 university students in intermediate French L2 in an English-speaking university (in Quebec)
groups	two experimental classes, one control class	all classes were experimental; control was grades from tests of the previous year	21 students in treatment class, 13 in a control class	Classes A and B each split into two groups (PI and EI); Class C control (no treatment)	students divided into two groups (prompt and recast); no control group
tools	games/activities/tasks, group or teacher-fronted; explicit instruction	games/activities/tasks involving memorizing of gender	3 written and 3 oral science tasks designed to elicit forms; oral prompts and recasts	Brief grammar instruction, EI materials/ PI exercises on French conjugation	"form-focused instructional treatment" in class; "feedback treatments" on 3 tasks in laboratory (465)
time spent	9 hours over 2 weeks	c. 750 minutes (100-200 minutes/wk for 5 wks: see 169)	science classes: incidental FonF corrections (4 weeks); lab reports (6 weeks)	9 hours over a 7-week period	3 hours in class over 2 weeks (50% of class time); 2 x 30 minute individual feedback sessions in lab
test instruments	English listening comprehension MEQ, analysis of classroom tapes, pretest, post test, delayed (5 weeks) post test, long term (5 months) post test	aural discrimination, discrimination of gender-coded endings, oral response, naming pictured items	oral and written reports (same as tools): pre-test, post-test, delayed (2 months) post-test	pretests, post tests, delayed (3 months) post tests in 4 domains (reading, writing, speaking, listening)	pretests, post tests, delayed (3 week) post tests. Oral and written production, computer-run reaction time testing.

author/ title (cont'd)	Study # 1: Spada & Lightbown 1993 "Instruction and the development of questions in L2 classrooms"	Study #2: Harley 1998 "The role of focus-on-form tasks in promoting child L2 acquisition"	Study #3: Doughty & Varela 1998 "Communicative focus on form"	Study #4: Marsden 2005 "Input-based grammar pedagogy: a comparison of two possibilities"	Study #5: Lyster & Izquierdo 2009 "Prompts Versus Recasts in Dyadic Interaction"
results	experimental groups improved. Comparison group improved also: by delayed post test reached higher levels than experimental groups. Analysis: comparison teacher used metalinguistic instruction and intense focus on form	improvement in recall of memorized gender but no generalization to unfamiliar nouns with gender-coded endings.	significant improvement of treatment group in target structures in both oral and written production. Oral effects were durable; written were not. Control group: little to no change	Classes A and C from one school made significant gains regardless of method (EI, PI, or none — EI and PI gained more than Control group); Class B from another school showed gains with PI but not EI	No difference between recast and prompt group. No evidence that type or even presence of feedback influenced acquisition. Evidence that instruction significantly improved accuracy and enabled application of principles to previously unknown items.
comments JSL	early exploration of FonF. Explicit instruction followed by FonF effective. Long term instruction more effective than short term. In my view, important findings for best uses of FonF (see below)	"more item learning than system learning" (168)	essentially pure FonF, though tasks were designed to address structural need. Questions: effectiveness of time use and generalizability. In my view, important findings for best uses of FonF (see below).	Strong students with exceptional teachers (15-16) tended to learn well regardless of or even in spite of method. Weaker/less advanced students seemed to benefit more from formS-focused (PI) exercises.	focus on formS in context of film studies resulted in significant improvement in grammatical gender. No evidence that focus on form impacted acquisition. The methodology was flawed (see below), biased toward the hypothesis which however was not borne out.

4. 3. Analyses of Five "Focus-on-Form" Studies

4. 3. 1. Study #1: Nina Spada and Patsy M. Lightbown (1993). "Instruction and the development of questions in L2 classrooms"

4. 3. 1. i. Study #1 Spada and Lightbown 1993: Synopsis. Drawing on a growing consensus of research indicating that instruction can contribute to accuracy of L2 structures requiring negative evidence even in input-rich environments, Spada and Lightbown investigated the effects of explicit instruction and corrective feedback on the development of question forms in English (ESL). Their subjects were 79 francophone students (aged 10-12) in intensive English programs in three elementary-school classes near Montreal. Because pronoun subject/verb inversion in questions is optional in oral French, many francophone learners of English seem to transfer this syntactic freedom to English, where, conversely, interrogative subject/auxiliary verb inversion is obligatory. For this reason, the researchers concentrated their efforts on these forms.

The presuppositions of the English language program in Quebec are, as the authors comment, "based on an interpretation of communicative language teaching in which the importance of meaning over form is considered crucial" (209). In the course of observing some 22 classes over several years, the researchers had noticed little or no form-focused instruction or error correction: this was truly a communicative content-based instructional milieu.

Subjects were tested for general knowledge of English with a global comprehension test developed by the ministry of education of Quebec (MEQ). The test revealed that the three classes were close to each other in overall language proficiency and not significantly different from 30 previously-tested classes in the same program. Researchers designed explicit teaching

materials on forming questions in English which was administered by the teachers in two classes

for nine hours over a two-week period; a third class did not receive the instruction and was not

informed of the research focus, and therefore was used as a control.

Treatment included teacher-fronted metalinguistic instruction, exercises and games which

featured question forms.   Both the two experimental classes and the comparison class were

audio-recorded for subsequent analysis.

Pretesting, post testing, delayed (5 week) post testing, and long-term delayed (5 months

after the conclusion of the intensive English semester) post testing revealed that the treatment

classes made substantial gains during the treatment period and the post treatment period, and, of

great interest, continued to make gains in the following five months even though their instruction

in English had ended. However, complicating the interpretation of these results was that fact that

the comparison class also made significant gains during the treatment period. In fact, the pretest

showed that the comparison group was at a higher level in producing accurate question forms at

the beginning of the experiment than either of the experimental groups, and although the

comparison group did not gain as quickly as the experimental groups during the actual two-week

treatment period, they continued to advance in the subsequent weeks until they attained a

proficiency above both of the treatment groups. This, said the researchers, "came as something

of a surprise" (213). They therefore decided to deepen the analysis of classroom interaction in

both the treatment and the control classes.

Spada and Lightbown found that, contrary to expectations and general observations, it

happened that the teacher in the comparison class placed a high priority on language form.

Interaction in the classroom between teacher and students was frequent, there were indications

that the teacher had previously given metalinguistic instruction, and the audiotapes revealed that she corrected 84% of question-form errors in oral interactions. In contrast to the experimental class teachers, very few of her corrections were metalinguistic: over half of the corrections took the form of pointing out the error and correcting it, and more than 30% were recasts with some form of emphasis to indicate the correction. The authors observed: "In Long's (1991) terms the comparison teacher provided focus on form, not focus on form*s*, in an acquisition-rich environment" (218).

4. 3. 1. ii. Study #1 Spada and Lightbown 1993: Critique. The intervention in this study was certainly extensive: 9 hours of focused instruction and exercises over two weeks dealt with just one grammatical problem. While a treatment of this intensity may not have impinged too drastically upon the context (an entire semester of intensive English, of which "the experimental instructional materials accounted for about 15-20% of their ESL time over the 2-week period" (210)), it would admittedly consume an enormous proportion of a normal language arts or second language course in a regular semester of a school or university. This form of treatment may therefore not be widely applicable.

The study was not intentionally designed to investigate focus-on-form methodology, but shows awareness of the concept which was articulated just two years previously by Michael Long, and winds up examining in some detail what the authors considered focus on form in action. This seems to be an accurate assessment of what was going on in the "comparison" class at least during the audio-recorded portions obtained within the two-week period. The teacher responded to and corrected almost every oral production error made by students, almost always in some form of recast which clearly indicated that an error had taken place (that is to say, the

student knew that the recast was error correction and not confirmation or some other type of response). The error correction was designed to call attention to syntax presumably already learned by the students. Feedback did not derail the communicative nature of the event.

While the audiotapes of the comparison class indeed illustrate true focus on form according to the definition and conditions propounded by Long, the authors insist repeatedly that this was not the whole story.

> Preliminary analysis of the tapes from [the comparison teacher's] class revealed that she frequently corrected students' use of question forms (as well as other grammatical errors) and in some cases reminded students of the metalinguistic information about question formation that she had apparently provided in earlier classes. (213)

> However, unlike the experimental group who had their form-focused instruction and corrective feedback "parachuted" in for a 2-week period, we assume that the comparison group received sustained form-focused instruction and correction over the entire 5-month term of their intensive ESL course. Indeed, there is every indication in the classroom interaction data for this class as well as from subsequent observations that this teacher consistently provided focus on form and corrective feedback in her teaching. […] Evidently, at an earlier time, the teacher had provided some explicit information about English interrogatives that included at least some metalinguistic information. (218)

> In this study the comparison group teacher, with few errors to be concerned about, responded quickly and efficiently to the learners' errors, assuming that the students already had some knowledge about question forms and thus required only a brief reminder. (219)

These observations demonstrate that the focus-on-form techniques at work in the classroom were not necessarily the primary means of transmitting knowledge about language form but were employed as reinforcements to "sustained" previous and ongoing metalinguistic instruction. We recall that a true focus-on-form perspective never treats the target language as the subject (metalinguistic analysis) but only as the means of communication about other subjects. Focus on form is employed incidentally when attention needs to be called to a form which has been

imperfectly acquired during communicative interaction and which threatens to impede communication. In this case, however, the students apparently did not acquire the forms to which the teacher was applying focus-on-form intervention in the course of content-based instruction alone but with the aid of explicit grammar teaching. Moreover, the teacher was not responding to risks of communicative intelligibility but to syntactical errors. Although this was a communicative course, explicit attention to the forms of the English language was given a prominent place.

A pure focus on form was being employed in the comparison classroom during the two-week treatment period, as the researchers concluded. Nevertheless, it would probably be a grave misinterpretation to attribute the success of this class to these techniques alone without taking into account the larger context. Spada and Lightbown suggest that the sustained focus on form, or forms,[8] combined with sustained error correction, was responsible for the exceptional performance of the comparison group. In addition, they point out that the individual style of the teacher was significantly different:

> The first analysis revealed to our considerable surprise that the teacher in the comparison class asked far more questions per hour than the experimental teachers. This is particularly striking, since the comparison teacher was not "teaching questions." (214)

The comparison class was somewhat more teacher-centred. Spontaneous questions and interactions instigated by the teacher were frequent. Her students produced less questions than the treatment classes but with much higher accuracy. Although she attended to almost every

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[8] At the date of this study, the distinction between a focus on form and a focus on formS had been made and indeed the authors make pertinent reference to it, but in general the greater elasticity of their terminology suggests that ideological constraints had not yet firmly coalesced around the use of certain terms. They often refer interchangeably to a focus on form, form-focused instruction and explicit instruction and metalinguistic information.

error, the researchers assert that errors were relatively infrequent, and correction could avoid metalinguistic sidetracking and be confined to "a brief reminder" (219) because it was only necessary to recall previously-taught material.[9]   Spada and Lightbown add: "Teachers' speech mannerisms, high-frequency lexical choices, and routine classroom activities may contribute to some of the observed differences in learner language" (219).

The comparison class indicates an ideal environment for pure focus-on-form intervention. Incidental and reactive correction with reference to previously-taught forms is a minimally-intrusive and effective means to call attention to language structure within a given event where the overriding emphasis is on meaning and communication.   As will also be argued in the analysis of Study #3, focus on form may find its most important function where it supports and supplements a broader second language pedagogy that includes metalinguistic explanation and a wide range of input.

4. 3. 1. iii. Study #1 Spada and Lightbown 1993: Conclusion. Spada and Lightbown's investigation of the effects of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback on the development of English interrogative forms among francophone elementary-school students found much more than the researchers expected. In exemplary fashion they extended their scope to analyze the comparison class as well as the experimental classes in as much depth as possible. It was this commitment to investigation combined with data analysis and astute interpretation which yielded the study's most intriguing results.

The researchers found that in an input-rich communicative language setting, students

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[9] Lyster and Saito's 2010 meta-analysis of studies of corrective feedback in classroom settings indicates that prompts (indications to the student that an error has been committed and that the student must draw upon linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge to make the repair) are superior to recasts or explicit correction. This adds support to the notion that some degree of explicit teaching of *forms* provides the foundation for subsequent less intrusive attention to *form* as seems to have been the case here.

made progress on certain forms when given supplemental explicit instruction and error correction. They found moreover that a long-term instructional concentration on linguistic forms combined with persistent incidental focus-on-form techniques produced even greater advancement. Finally, they noted that a particular teacher's lexical choices, pedagogical emphases and routine teaching methods may have a significant impact on students' language acquisition.

Even though findings of this study may be taken by some to support a focus-on-form pedagogy,[10] they show rather, in my opinion, a particular area for which focus on form may be ideally suited within a broader pedagogical context, namely, one which includes explicit grammar instruction. In this study, incidental and reactive error correction was an efficient and effective way to call attention to forms without sabotaging the purpose or the flow of a communicative event, in an instructional environment where said forms had previously received explicit attention and explanation. Focus on form thus served a reminding and reinforcing function, minimally intrusive upon communication, since the burden of structure-related processing had already been done. I will offer the opinion, based on this and on the analysis of Study #3, that this particular finding may be generalizable.

4. 3. 2. Study #2: Birgit Harley (1998). "The role of focus-on-form tasks in promoting child L2 acquisition"

4. 3. 2. i. Study #2 Harley 1998: Synopsis. This study set out to use focus-on-form

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[10] See chapter 3 (3.2.2.iii): Long and Robinson certainly embrace the study in this light, including a synopsis and evaluation of it in their 1998 article, in a section entitled *Quasi-experimental studies of the effect of focus on form* (note that this article clearly distinguishes "focus on form" from "focus on formS"). More directly, Long and Robinson (1998: 37) call this study's instructional intervention "FonF instruction". Since the researchers themselves describe it as teacher-delivered "5 hr of explicit instruction in question formation" (Spada and Lightbown 1993: 210), Long and Robinson's nomenclature is, to put it charitably, certainly misleading.

techniques in order to improve the accuracy of grammatical gender among French immersion students. The study

> was designed to test two hypotheses: first, that grade 2 immersion students receiving such focus-on-form (FonF) instruction would learn to assign gender more accurately to nouns in French than would their peers who did not receive this instruction; and second, that students who received the instruction would be able to generalize the knowledge they acquired about noun endings to new nouns that were unfamiliar to them. (156)

Harley's study is unusual in that it involved very young learners (7-8 years of age). It has been generally accepted that children acquire their first language(s) through communication, without intentional recourse to cognitive strategies. However, Harley notes the research which indicates that by the time children are attending school, even a full immersion program does not seem to provide sufficient tools for language learners to master certain forms. This has come to light in the case of French grammatical gender, a linguistic feature which is not always connected to noun form and not typically connected to meaning. French L1 children seem to build their nominal vocabulary as seamless units of article (= gender marker) + noun, whereas learners of French tend to learn nouns separately from articles and thus have difficulty with effortless storage and retrieval of a noun's gender (Carroll 1989). Harley chose as her starting point Schmidt's (1990, 1994) concept of noticing, and postulated that focusing the attention of even such young children on otherwise overlooked features of the input might have an effect on accuracy. She noted also that opportunities for production (Swain 1995) are thought to enhance acquisition, and that motivation is a key factor as well (e.g., Loschky and Bley-Vroman 1993). "In short, input salience, opportunities for focused output, and intrinsically interesting, age appropriate tasks that cannot be performed without attention to the relevant forms" (158) are the three pillars of this study.

Harley chose grade 2 immersion students as the subjects of her study since it was believed that by grade two, students would have acquired a sufficient vocabulary in their immersion language and familiarity with the use of articles to make the study pertinent. However, it was hoped that they would be young enough to benefit from a child's typical sensitivity to phonology. As well, an early intervention strategy was considered to be useful in order to spur development of the interlanguage before incorrect or ambiguous forms had fossilized.

Six second-grade French immersion classes in the Toronto area participated in the study, with an average class size of about 22. Students were mostly of anglophone background, had completed kindergarten and grade 1 in French and were continuing in an all-French curriculum. They were pretested, post-tested immediately after the treatment period and subsequently delayed-post-tested 6 months later. As a control, the delayed post tests were identical to end-of-year tests for the previous year's second grade, that is, similar classes taught by the same instructors but without the focus-on-form instructional treatment.

The treatment consisted of games and exercises in which students had to correctly identify the grammatical gender of nouns, and in which nouns of the same gender were grouped by shared morphological indicators (endings which consistently encode gender). These tasks were designed to be administered for twenty minutes a day, five days a week over five weeks, but by the third week teachers were spending 30 to 40 minutes each day on them.

Four tests assessed the effectiveness of the treatment. Test 1 was an aural discrimination test to see if students could notice oral differences in gender. On Test 2, words with their pictures were presented without articles and students had to choose the appropriate article. These tests

were group-administered. Tests 3 and 4 were individual production tasks: Test 3 presented words which were likely to be unfamiliar to the students but whose endings included reliable gender indicators. Test 4 was a picture of a rural setting and the student was asked to name as many (probably familiar) items as possible; this test tended to elicit the indefinite article.

Test results showed that students had made significant and durable progress in memorizing the gender of learned nouns, but that they had made no progress in discerning or applying the underlying principle (that is to say, in recognizing that certain endings were always associated with a certain gender), nor in applying this principle to unfamiliar nouns. Thus, Harley's first hypothesis, that form-focused intervention would improve uptake of grammatical gender with known nouns, was supported; but her second, that students would discern the underlying morphological principles without being explicitly taught them, was not.

4. 3. 2. ii. Study #2 Harley 1998: Critique. The problems with this scholarly study are not in its design or execution but in the ideological constraints which limit, distort and occlude its parameters and its findings.

First of all, the study explicitly aligns itself with "focus on form." However, as discussed in Chapter 3, the focus-on-form approach does not design curricular materials from the starting point of linguistic form but always from real-world (or classroom approximations of real-world) communicative events, and deals incidentally with form only as it arises within these events. The games and exercises in Harley's study do not appear to have had any relevance to the children's lives or communicative needs (as defined by focus-on-form criteria) or even to the content-based curriculum of the immersion setting (although in the first two of the five weeks of the study there was some connection to the regular classroom routine). Rather, a remarkable

amount of time was taken each day *away from* communicative or content-based tasks to concentrate on a purely linguistic structure. While the study demonstrates that this was effective pedagogy in terms of structural acquisition, it is a clear violation of the author's avowed approach.

Moreover, the tasks designed to make the structure salient did not do so in any way connected with meaningful communication. That is to say, although the exercises were embedded in games and other interchanges, the use of gender in these exercises did not carry meaning, but uniquely form. In the sense that the structures as employed in this study and at this level did not influence communication, they are not even a legitimate subject for focus-on-form treatment. However, by a philosophical stretch one might concede that incompetence in gender distinction will come to hinder immersion students from the fullest benefits of communication with native speakers, and that therefore even a purely formal aspect is worth treating. Harley argues that gender distinctions in French are "communicatively nonessential formal features of the L2" (158), and there is no disputing that from the point of view of meaning, grammatical gender usually has little impact on communication. Yet there are cases in which gender carries meaning in real communication, and tasks could have been designed to capitalize upon this. They were not; they were instead solely focused on formS.[11]

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[11] I am not suggesting that an emphasis on meaning-gender connection is an advisable approach for teaching grammatical gender in French or that it would be accessible to students at a grade 2 level; what I am saying is that such an emphasis would be much closer to a true "focus-on-form" perspective, and if one truly wished to operate within the ideology, meaning-based and communicatively-significant tasks are conceivable. For example, activities could be designed in which nouns are replaced by pronouns. Students would thus have to relate the gender of the pronoun (which is evident in French) to the gender of the antecedent (which often is not salient); knowledge of grammatical gender would then be tied to meaning in communication. As another possibility, there is a group of adjectival substantives distinguished only by article (e.g., *marié/mariée*) and a few phonological homonyms (eg., *tribu/tribut*). Additionally, there is a group of French nouns (admittedly very small) whose gender is variable dependent on meaning (*vase, livre, mode, guide, poste, voile, manche*, and some dozen others) and which could be used as a starting point for meaning-based use of gender. In this latter case, however, the gender/morphology connection would be lost.

Thirdly, this concentration on a particular form was given a significant place in the allotment of class time. Over five weeks, between 20 and 40 minutes every day was devoted to exercises concentrating on grammatical gender. This amounts to as much as 150 minutes a week on only one structure: with such an allocation of time, surely some formal progress might be expected even under the most flawed of pedagogical regimes. Language teachers will recognize that the equivalent amount of time in regular class divisions, fifteen 50-minute periods, takes a sizable chunk out of a semester; in most cases it would be quite a luxury, as it were, to be able to consecrate this much time to a single point of grammar. This could hardly be considered reactive and incidental focus on form from any point of view. Harley's perspective on the time usage is remarkable: "The instructional activities developed for this study were compressed for research purposes into a 5-week period […] students may not have had the opportunity to focus intensively enough on the noun-ending clues that were introduced" (171).

In sum, the feature selected for treatment was not one which affected ordinary communication; the starting point for design was not communicative need but linguistic form; the exercises were not communicatively meaningful or even content-based but simply the memorization of formS; and they were anything but unobtrusive, consuming a significant portion of class time daily for several weeks. There was, therefore, nothing in this study that resembles, closely or distantly, focus on form, although the author explicitly claims membership.

Or rather, almost nothing — because there is one aspect of the research paradigm which reflects focus on form. This is that noun endings which reliably indicate gender in French were never explicitly taught to the students, but simply grouped and presented in ways to highlight their shared form. This is a focus-on-form technique, as Harley notes, known as "consciousness-

raising" (157).   The first two weeks of the study concentrated on simple memorization (connection of the noun with the appropriate article gender) while the last three weeks emphasized, but only implicitly, the relationship between gender and morphology.   It was expected in the second hypothesis that students would inductively discern the underlying principle and be able then to generalize it to new items. In the event, they did not. Ironically, the only marginally focus-on-form approach in this research was revealed to be ineffective. Furthermore, as noted above (3.4), this approach is only tangentially related to focus on form, since "noticing" the specific element in the communicative event, and not "understanding" the underlying principle in the language, is the "intended outcome of focus on form" (Long and Robinson 1998: 24).   It is not clear why Harley in her second hypothesis expected system learning from the focus-on-form approach, which was designed, as Long and Robinson defined it, to limit formal acquisition to item learning.

4. 3. 2. iii. Study #2 Harley 1998: Conclusions.   It was stated above that this is an important and scholarly study. For it to be so in its fullest capacity, it is necessary to distinguish between what the study claims to be and what it is, between what it purports to show and what it actually shows. Ideology has framed the terminology, research focus, and interpretation to the point where much of the study's real significance has been buried.

Harley's project reveals that, in the context of grade 2 French immersion, an extensive program of focus-on-formS exercises favourably and lastingly impacted accuracy of grammatical gender in French L2. As a second finding, a more focus-on-form approach designed to foster implicit learning of the connection between morphology and gender was unsuccessful.

A weakness of the study is that the tasks were not contextualized within the overall

curriculum. The majority of the exercises (weeks 3, 4, and 5) "lacked any thematic thread that provided a context for the new vocabulary that was introduced" (171). Another possible weakness is that, in spite of the effectiveness of some of the exercises, the time spent on a single linguistic structure may seem inordinate and impractical in many second-language settings. Related to this is that the method chosen to inculcate system learning (implicit acquisition of underlying structural principles) was unsuited for the goal, and arguably the time thus used was inefficiently employed.

A direction for further research is that the one focus-on-form aspect, implicit presentation of the morphological-gender connection, be tested against an explicit presentation, to determine if a) acquisition and application are enhanced, and b) overall time could be reduced. Harley observes that the first two weeks of the study, during which explicit formal deductive instruction was emphasized rather than induction, were "the most successful" (169). This indicates at least the possibility that a more efficient use of the time would have been the explicit presentation of gender-coded noun endings. The possibility remains a speculation since, unfortunately, the implicit method was not tested against any other method, though it may be supported by Lyster and Izquierdo 2009 (see Study #5), who found that explicit teaching of the form-gender connection was effective among university students. With respect to a lack of a control group or a second-method group in focus-on-form studies, Spada and Lightbown (2008: 193) comment: "To our knowledge, no empirical classroom-based research directly compares the effects of isolated and integrated instruction." Sheen and O'Neill (2005: 273) complain that "applied linguists frequently cite Long on 'focus on form' but systematically fail to cite or act upon his most important comment-cum-proposal which is: 'True experiments are needed which compare

rate of learning and ultimate level of attainment after one of three programs: focus on forms, focus on form, and focus on communication… Research has yet to be conducted comparing the unique program types' (Long 1991: 47-8)". After the passage of a decade and a half since Long's proposal, one comprehends Sheen and O'Neill's (2005) frustration. In fact, as recently as 2010, Nassaji (2010: 908) stated categorically: "No research has directly examined the difference between a FonF and a FonFs." However, part of the argument of this paper is that such studies which make pertinent indications about the value of focus on formS do in fact already exist — it is rather their nomenclature as "focus-on-form" studies which is often erroneous and misleading; and determining their real results requires a meticulous reanalysis.

4. 3. 3. Study #3: Catherine Doughty and Elizabeth Varela (1998). "Communicative focus on form"

4. 3. 3. i. Study #3 Doughty and Varela 1998: Synopsis. In this project, researcher Doughty and middle school teacher Varela collaborated on an important investigation into the effects of incidental form correction in a content-based instructional setting. This study, in keeping with the original proposal of focus on form, attempted to rectify formal problems in an entirely communicative setting where there was resistance to the notion of giving any attention to linguistic structure.

Subjects of the study were 34 students aged from 11 to 14, mostly Spanish L1, in 2 ESL science classes in a suburban school in the eastern United States. "Nonnative speakers in the district make up approximately 30% of the total school population, and the ESL population countywide is 17%" (119). Varela observed classroom language behaviour for 2 weeks and

decided on English simple past and conditional as the most widespread problematic forms.   21 students were in Varela's focus-on-form treatment class, while 13 students (the control group) were in a similar class performing the same tasks but without the treatment.   Meanwhile, Doughty chose teacher recasts (reformulations of student errors calling attention to the error and providing correct exemplars) as the technique to be employed. She based this choice on recent findings in studies of caretaker speech (adult speech to children learning their first language): since the 1980s, evidence has been coming to light that children both notice and incorporate negative linguistic evidence provided by adults.

The research team was overtly committed to the principles of focus on form as they arise from Long's original 1991 article: incidental and reactive focus on form in content classes, primary emphasis on communication, attention to form added to attention to meaning (see 115). Therefore, although the focus-on-form tasks were designed to elicit the target structures, the structures themselves were chosen based on observation of normal classroom interaction, and the tasks were entirely congruent with the regular science curriculum. These tasks were science lab reports, both oral and written, in which the target forms would be required in order to report activities and to state hypotheses. There were five reports over a six week period and a sixth report two months after the treatment; the first, fifth, and sixth reports served as the pretest, post test and delayed post test respectively, while the second, third and fourth reports served as the catalysts for recast error correction. Within the treatment group, the teacher provided feedback on the reports themselves and in addition circulated among the students and offered spontaneous feedback to them throughout the research period. Only errors of simple past or conditional were highlighted; all other grammatical errors were ignored.

Post-testing showed that the focus-on-form treatment group improved substantially in their use of accurate past and conditional forms as well as in their "emergent interlanguage" (132) attempts to use these forms, and incorrect uses dropped correspondingly. By contrast, the control group made almost no improvement except a small but significant gain in their written production. The treatment group likewise maintained these gains in the delayed post test (two months later), especially in oral production; written production tended to fall off. The control group made no significant gains during this latter period.

4. 3. 3. ii. Study #3 Doughty and Varela 1998: Critique. In a relatively pure focus-on-form treatment, substantial gains were made in target language usage as opposed to the control group in similar instructional circumstances but without focus-on-form intervention. The study violates the ideology of focus on form only in very minor ways. With regard to its focal source, a structure to be targeted was chosen ahead of time based on linguistic rather than communicative need, and curricular materials were designed to bring about uses of this structure; focus on form in its pure manifestation is reactive and incidental only to communicative events or content-based tasks. However, the targeted structure was chosen from authentic classroom interaction as constituting a real impediment to accomplished expression in the target language. Additionally, as noted above, the authors were careful that this pre-organized focus should have little impact on the overall momentum of classroom content and communication: the linguistic

and communicative needs were adroitly managed so as to coincide rather neatly.[12]

A second criticism may be offered of the restriction of error feedback to only two forms. The teacher remarked that in addition to problems with the past tense and conditional, there were other prominent errors, as well as numerous less salient ones (118); these were passed over since the two structures upon which the study focused were thought to be most useful for the reporting tasks. Real-world L2 communicative situations are likely to produce a variety of errors, any number or type of which could impede communication. The constant drilling of only two forms for several weeks and the ignoring of all others may have produced an artificially heightened awareness and corrective response which, outside of the research agenda, would not have been the result in a true focus-on-form classroom where attention is spontaneously allocated to *any* incidental formal problems which derail communication. Nevertheless, while this point ought to be taken into account in a realistic evaluation of the gains on the particular structure targeted, it is understandable that, for research purposes, items under investigation would need to be isolated and controlled.

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[12] We recall that Long's (1991) original definition of focus on form was that it gave "incidental and reactive attention" to learner errors in a meaning-based event, which is to say that the linguistic nature of the attention is *ad hoc* (not addressing underlying principles but reacting only to the item that poses a communicative problem within the event) and *unplanned* (not designed beforehand as part of a lesson). While Long (Long and Robinson 1998) has continued to insist upon this narrow definition, other researchers have broadened it while retaining the terminology (as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis). Doughty and Varela's design would probably have been called "proactive focus on form" (Doughty and Williams 1998a) in that the lessons were designed ahead of time to target a particular structure but the structure itself was determined from analysis to represent an already existing lacunae. Terminology has become even more confusing (see 6. 2. 1. of this thesis): Nassaji (2010: 910) apparently defines Long's "incidental focus on form" as "reactive focus on form" but later (914) equates "reactive" as "planned FonF" in contrast to "incidental." Attempting to make some sense of this, I suggest that perhaps what is defined above as "proactive focus on form" might now be called "reactive focus on form" or "planned focus on form" because it reacts to an identified learner need but plans lessons accordingly. Nassaji (914) then distinguishes this from "pre-emptive focus on form" which seems to be an approach wherein lessons are designed to focus on language forms which the designer believes may pose future problems for the learner. However, he has described (211) "pre-emptive FonF" as "a kind of incidental FonF that occurs spontaneously". As a result, it is very difficult to know a) just what his study attempts to demonstrate, and b) what relationship it bears to any agreed-upon definition of "focus on form." My argument throughout this thesis is that such terminological exercises blur to an ever-increasing degree any meaningful distinction between a focus on form and a focus on formS, to the point where "focus on form" supports not a clear practice but a now mostly empty ideology.

Furthermore, it may seem to language teachers that the amount of time spent on a limited number of forms is excessive and impractical. Still, in this case the language teacher was equally (or perhaps principally) a science teacher, and so linguistic progress was only an adjunct to progress in the subject matter.

Finally, as in the previous study, focus-on-form intervention was not compared with other methods but simply with no intervention at all. Since the study begins with the understanding that the entirely naturalistic setting was tending to highlight certain linguistic lacunae, it would have been helpful to compare two or more intervention strategies (for example, focus on form, focus on formS, consciousness-raising techniques) in order to assess their relative merits.

Although it is one of the principal contentions of this paper that when true focus on form is implemented, results are either ambiguous, minimal or nonexistent, this study has been chosen for analysis because (among other reasons[13]) it reveals a particular linguistic niche where pure focus on form may be especially useful.[14]

One of the most significant aspects of this study is its cultural and linguistic context. The merits of focus on form are often debated with respect to the second-language classroom, the foreign-language instructional setting, or the content-based curriculum of the immersion school. However, this study takes place in a content class taught in the *dominant language* to students

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[13] This is a very careful study; it is produced by one of the foremost scholars in the field of applied linguistics; it presents a successful application of focus on form; unlike many works which claim the title, it is quite faithful to the ideology of focus on form. It would be unbalanced not to include these positive results, albeit with several stubborn caveats, in a paper which is critical of current realizations of the approach.

[14] I say "pure focus on form" to distinguish this from the use of focus-on-form techniques (error correction, negotiation, incidental response to communicative problems, etc.) alongside other approaches, such as overt metalinguistic explanations, formS-focused exercises, structurally-based linguistic progression, etc. Focus on form by original definition is pure: if explicit, deductive interventions are being employed it is no longer focus on form, but on formS. The present argument is that in settings such as that of Doughty and Varela's study, focus on form as defined and espoused by the authors — that is to say, *pure* focus on form, or focus on form *alone* — may be the ideal language tool.

with a foreign-language L1. Baker (2001: 194) distinguishes this form of education from both "immersion" (dominant-language speakers in an L2 content-based instructional setting) and "submersion" (speakers of a different L1 plunged into the dominant-language educational setting without language-specific institutional supports). He labels it "submersion with withdrawal classes/sheltered English", where students live in the linguistic environment of the language of instruction and in addition are offered transitional supports to aid acquisition of the dominant language.

This, then, is a very particular setting. The subjects in this study are not simply students following the option of a foreign language for a maximum of a few hours a week, nor are they perfectly fluent native speakers of the dominant tongue who are being educated in a second language with an emphasis on comprehension and fluency. Rather, they are students who are exposed to the language of instruction in all of their classes; most of their fellow students are native speakers of this language; and their broader environment, that is, the language of the region and the country, is the same as the language of instruction. There are thus three factors by which these students differ from their foreign-language or immersion counterparts:

1) They are surrounded by a flood of input in the target language which is easily accessible and at times forced upon them, available in all domains from classroom through conversation in the streets and shops to entertainment. Simply put, this is the situation of the foreign-language immigrant; however, not all foreign-language immigrants have the advantages of being students with institutional language support and training.

2) They are in camaraderie and in competition not only with other language learners but also, in fact even more so, with native speakers, within a setting that expects not just foreign

language proficiency but native proficiency.   Whether this challenge is presented to them explicitly or not (and the communicatively-oriented classes seem to wish to avoid such a confrontative presentation) they are faced with it with every returned assignment and every grade.   Varela observes (119) that what is unfortunately holding many of these students back from full academic participation is not a lower proficiency in subject matter but simply a lack of linguistic skills.

3) In addition to rich input and content-based instruction, these students also are provided with an English language arts course which provides some metalinguistic instruction and specific supports for their transition to the dominant language.

The situation is therefore ideal for ESL content classes to implement incidental focus on form. Attention called to form will be more or less explicitly analyzed in English language arts classes, noted in oral and written assignments in other subjects and reinforced almost constantly in day-to-day life both within and without the school.   In this sense, focus on form is calling attention not uniquely to the input available in the class or program in which it is administered, but to all the input and intake of the ubiquitous linguistic environment. And surely, since some of the courses are "sheltered" ESL classes, part of the intention must be to provide not only content instruction but language development. Although teachers are understandably reluctant to be drawn away from the subject matter into a grammar lesson, there is little argument that focus on form is the least intrusive way to address the linguistic need in the particular circumstances.

The caution that must be stated here is that it would be unwarranted and indeed counter-intuitive to assume that the focus on form which is successful in the transition-supported linguistic submersion setting will be equally efficacious in a foreign-language or immersion

classroom. The comparison cannot be made to an environment where input is limited both in quantity and in breadth, where explicit linguistic instruction is not provided by other institutional sources, and where all group members are more or less equally skilled in the area of learning with expectations adjusted accordingly.

4. 3. 3. iii. Study #3 Doughty and Varela 1998: Conclusions. This study reveals that true focus-on-form intervention within a content course in a linguistic submersion educational setting with adequate transitional supports[15] can be very effective in increasing accuracy of targeted forms. This should encourage teachers of content courses in dominant-language sheltered syllabi to adopt such a minimally-intrusive approach with some confidence that linguistic gains can be expected without the sacrifice of attention to the curriculum.

An important direction for further research (though admittedly of daunting complexity) would be to compare the effectiveness of focus-on-form intervention in identical content tasks across different educational contexts — submersion, submersion with sheltered classes, immersion and foreign language — in an attempt to determine what factors would contribute to the success (or lack thereof) of a pure focus-on-form approach.

4. 3. 4. Study #4: Emma Marsden (2005). "Input-based grammar pedagogy: a comparison of two possibilities".

4. 3. 4. i. Study #4 Marsden 2005: Synopsis. Three classes of French FL students, aged 13-14, from two secondary schools in England, took part in an experiment to determine if focus-on-form techniques could provide new options for grammar teaching. Marsden notes that

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[15] By this I mean only, adequate for the effective functioning of the focus-on-form intervention; I am not referring to factors unknown from this study, such as full academic, ethnic, and social infrastructure — which are, all too often, inadequate.

grammar pedagogy in the United Kingdom often resorts to "metalinguistic instruction, grammar-translation methods and behaviourist and audio-lingual style slot and replace activities" in spite of the education system's declared goal of "a broadly-defined communicative curriculum" (9). Drawing on several recent studies, the author recognizes the weaknesses of a purely content-based approach as well as those of explicit linguistic instruction, and proposed investigating the value of supplementing current techniques, heavily weighted towards output, with input-based activities. In contrast to the North American focus-on-form and Communicative Language Teaching agenda, Marsden is insistent that these more implicit approaches "should not *replace* production practice or diminish the role of listening and reading in other aspects of language learning!" (10, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, the author clearly places the strategies under investigation in the domain of "focus on form" (9, 15).

The study investigated two techniques, Enriched Input (EI) and Processing Instruction (PI) and their relative and absolute effectiveness in improving acquisition of the French present and *passé composé*.[16] The problem which Marsden noted with many approaches is that they typically allow the student to attend uniquely to meaning or uniquely to form, but rarely require attention to both. Enriched Input (also called "Input Enhancement", see Sharwood Smith 1991, 1993) highlights form incidentally in meaning-based activities through attention-getting measures such as input flood and typographic enhancement. Processing Instruction (based on VanPatten and Cadierno's "Input Processing" 1993) consists of a three-stage lesson: explicit explanation of a linguistic feature, "referential activities" requiring attention both to form and meaning of the feature followed by immediate correction, and meaning-based exercises where

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[16]The article refers to the French *passé composé* by the not-quite-analogous English grammar term "perfect".

the feature is present but attention to form is not required. In this particular study, both the Enriched Input and the Processing Instruction lessons began with a brief grammatical explanation of the target structure and included the same amount of input tokens; the two techniques were distinguished only by PI's "referential activities" which required responses where meaning must be decoded with the aid of form.

Subjects were "top ability" (12) students in their ninth year of school with a background of some 180 hours of classroom instruction in French. Class A and the control class (C) were in one school while Class B was in another. Questionnaires and pretests determined that the students were suitably similar for purposes of the experiment (although Classes A and C were more advanced than B). Classes A and B were each split into EI and PI test groups.

Treatment was carried out for 9 hours over 7 weeks. Researcher and teacher alternated in giving instruction so that any given technique was not associated with an individual instructor. Teachers were trained to administer the techniques and all class teaching was monitored by audio and video taping for the entire 25-week period from the pretests to the delayed post tests. The control group (C) received no specific instruction in the target features during this same period. It is important to note that this experiment was not limited to the analyzed and reflected production of grammatical forms (writing): the pretests, post tests and delayed (3 months) post tests covered a wide range of tasks eliciting responses in reading, writing, speaking, and listening comprehension abilities.

Although not specifically offered as a hypothesis, Marsden gives the impression that she expected PI to be more effective than EI, since PI entails "that learners have to interpret the meaning of specific features in the language if those features are to be learned" (14). In Class B

this turned out to be the case, with the PI group gaining significant accuracy in the treatment period in all four linguistic domains and maintaining this through to the delayed post test, while there was no gain in the EI group. However, the two classes from the other school showed a markedly different result. Class A made strong gains in all four domains, but this was equally true of both the EI and PI groups. These results are further complicated by the fact that the control group, Class C, which received neither of the experimental treatments nor any targeted instruction on the tested measures, also improved significantly during this period, less than Class A but considerably more than the best group (PI) of Class B. Although admitting that the group sizes were too small for statistical significance in this regard, the author suggests that differences in student and teacher ability and in the general approach to language acquisition between the two schools may be major reasons behind these findings.

4. 3. 4. ii. Study #4 Marsden 2005: Critique. This study is intriguing and pertinent from several points of view. For one thing, Marsden implies that "Focus on Form" is a primarily North American subject of research that is gaining interest in the United Kingdom. Marsden's own focus, the two techniques investigated, and the study's supporting literature all make it clear that the study is situated within the focus-on-form school. However, the lack of intimacy with the ideological climate of focus on form seems to have two effects. 1) The construction of this project is less overtly constrained within the focus-on-form philosophy. For example, researchers under the focus-on-form banner in the United States and Canada would be unlikely to affirm that an input flood exercise prefaced each time by a "brief grammar explanation" (12) qualifies as focus on form. This is not to say that such explanations would not be a part of a focus-on-form study; as I show in my analyses of studies 1, 4 and 5 in particular, extensive

explicit linguistic instructions and exercises are virtually always part of so-called focus-on-form treatments. However, in the North American context which is considerably limited by the ideological paradigm (discussed in Chapters 1 to 3 of this paper), these elements are much better disguised. 2) Both the focus of investigation and the terminology employed are less hampered by the aforementioned ideological heritage and thus the results are far easier to interpret clearly than those of a study whose ostensible goals and tools are removed from the actual ones.

Although Marsden is convinced that this experiment represents an investigation into focus-on-form techniques, and bases her perspective on research which is clearly within the domain, neither of the methodologies tested were purely focus on form. First of all, focus on form presupposes a communicative setting using the target language. For both EI and PI in this study, however, examples show that introductions, explanations, and corrections were given in the L1 (English). Secondly, both techniques were designed around specific forms to be acquired: this is starting from a structural rather than a functional perspective, which is contrary to the principles of focus on form. Thirdly, the techniques were prefaced by explicit metalinguistic explanations. Language therefore becomes the subject, rather than the means of communication — again, clearly inimical to the focus-on-form perspective. Finally, the PI exercises were clearly a focus on formS with relatively unconnected tasks emphasizing correct structures rather than effective communication. Although it may be possible to conceive of a syllabus utilizing EI and PI within a focus-on-form approach, this was clearly not the situation in this study. Perhaps the EI treatment comes closer to the ideals of focus on form in that it tested the ability of students to make formal gains from input (almost) alone through incidental noticing. Once again, it is ironic that this treatment was ineffective in one of the two test groups, indistinguishable from another

intervention in the other test group and unnecessary for significant acquisition in the control class.

The fact that two strong classes with a superior instructor made notable progress in accuracy of target forms regardless of which intervention strategy was employed, or even whether a strategy was used at all, while another somewhat less advanced class made modest gains with Processing Instruction but none with Enriched Input, says far more about the ability and engagement of teacher and pupil and the underlying approach to language acquisition than it does about any particular instructional technique, focus-on-form or otherwise. Marsden herself hypothesizes that Class B was a group of students more typical of the usual British secondary school than Classes A or C and that, conducted over a larger sample, the results found from Class B would likely be more general. This may well be the case.[17] However, even without such further research, this project reveals the paramount importance of skilled and enthusiastic teachers eliciting high levels of engagement and achievement from willing students. Marsden observes that British FL grammar pedagogy "does indeed mainly consist of output-based activities" (10). She comments that Classes A and C shared similar "prior experience of grammar teaching and research" (15) and that they were from a "Language College"; she likewise makes reference to students "who are perhaps also more accustomed to grammar-focussed sequences of activities" (16).[18] "Furthermore, their class teacher, in classroom and staff development activities, made uncommon efforts to improve the teaching and learning of

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[17] It may also be, *pace* Marsden, that researchers seek to justify the expected findings in spite of the actual results.

[18] All of this suggests to me that teaching which includes some measure of focus on formS in a solid and enthusiastic instructional context prepares students to advance in linguistic accuracy in all language domains; but without more detailed information on what the students' previous learning experience was, this must remain my personal speculation. Of much greater importance are the gains that were made without reference to a specific methodology, approach or ideology.

grammar, for pupils inside and outside school" (16).

     4. 3. 4. iii. Study #4 Marsden 2005: Conclusions. Marsden's experiment indicates that

the pedagogical methodologies of Enriched Input and Processing Instruction or the absence of

either had little effect on the progress of good students in a superior instructional milieu. The

study further suggests that choice of technique may have had more of an impact on less advanced

students.[19] In that scenario, a more focus-on-form approach, implicit learning through enhanced

input, was ineffective, while a more explicit approach which focused on forms produced

improvement in accuracy of reception and production of the targeted forms. It may be that

holistic knowledge of language, acquisition and teaching is more important than the rigorous

adherence to any particular ideological or methodological approach.

     It would be interesting to research these two techniques further, as Marsden suggests, in a

broader and more typical context of second language classes rather than with "top ability" (12)

students. It would also be profitable to examine in greater depth the background circumstances

of the successful students, in order to add to the body of knowledge as to what makes a

successful language teacher and a successful language learner — though it must be

acknowledged that an investigation of this sort which goes beyond external and easily

measurable factors often leans toward the anecdotal and the subjective, and may involve

personality traits and attitudes as integrally as pedagogical skills, aptitude and cognitive

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[19] This is in keeping with preliminary findings of Bolger and Zapata (forthcoming) comparing semantic clustering to heterogenous sets in vocabulary learning. The greatest differences found were not between methodologies but between strong and weaker classes: "Good students are good no matter how you teach them" (Zapata's wry comment in a presentation at the University of Alberta March 2 2011), while poorer students seemed to be more sensitive, at least slightly, to teaching technique and class organization. Lyster and Izquierdo (2009: 454) note similar findings in recast studies by Mackey and Philp (1998) and Ammar and Spada (2006).

strategies.[20]

4. 3. 5. Study #5: Roy Lyster and Jesús Izquierdo (2009). "Prompts Versus Recasts In Dyadic Interaction".

4. 3. 5. i. Study #5 Lyster and Izquierdo 2009: Synopsis. The authors' description of prompts and recasts as "focus-on-form techniques" (457) and as feedback which "can be effectively yet seamlessly integrated into classroom interaction" (454) places this study clearly within the focus-on-form camp. However, preparatory exercises are repeatedly referred to as "form-focused instructional treatment" (e.g., 453), a term which is not precisely defined.

The authors examined the relative merits of prompts (giving an indication to the learner that self-repair of an error is desired) and recasts (reformulating the learner's problematic utterance for the purpose of correction) for formal acquisition. Both classroom and laboratory studies are reviewed which tend to suggest that in the classroom, the prompt leads to higher levels of accuracy, while in the laboratory, no real difference emerges between the two forms of feedback.

The study targeted the acquisition of grammatical gender in French among 25 undergraduate students in an intermediate-level French course in an English-speaking university in Quebec. Lyster and Izquierdo noted that the majority of French nouns possess endings which reliably indicate gender, and, based on Harley (1998) and Lyster (2004), suggested that calling attention to these structural features might produce more accurate assignation of gender than if lexical items simply occurred randomly in the input or if gender was memorized on an item-by-

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[20]Even so, significant contributions have been made in this challenging domain from the fields of sociolinguistics (e.g. Schumann 1978, though this is on naturalistic learning) and qualitative Discourse Analysis (e.g., Foster and Snyder Ohta 2005).

item basis. The researchers hypothesized that learners exposed to this sort of instruction would benefit more from feedback in the form of prompts than from recasts, since prompts provide the opportunity for a deeper level of processing and production while recasts call for less reflection and do not provide opportunity for self-repair.

Subjects were given three hours of "form-focused instruction" on gender-coded noun endings over two weeks. Precisely what constitutes "form-focused instruction" is unfortunately ambiguous but it appears that students were explicitly taught the morphological relationships between noun endings and grammatical gender. Exercises were contextualized in the study of two Quebec films. The subjects were also divided into two test groups for one-on-one laboratory sessions (two sessions of ½ hour each) wherein the errors of one group were treated by recasts while those of the other group were signaled with prompts.

Dyadic lab interviewers were native or near-native speakers of the target language and followed a strict protocol in each of the feedback conditions. With the recasts, the student's error was reformulated correctly, with no changes of intonation, no emphasis on the correction, and no opportunity for the student to repeat the correct form. Moreover, even if the student got the answer wrong (supplied the wrong gender for the noun), the interviewer responded with the recast in a neutral tone followed immediately by "Yes, let's continue" (472). Conversely, the prompt condition provided for a clear indication of a problem and a second more explicit prompt if the error persisted. An error was met with a clarification request ("Pardon?"), and if the student continued in the error, the interviewer repeated the student's answer with rising intonation. The response "Yes, let's continue" (472) was given only after the correct form was

furnished by the student.[21]

There were three elements to the study's pretests, post tests, and delayed (3 weeks) post tests: two oral interactions which were audiotaped for analysis, and one computerized binary-choice test measuring both accuracy and reaction time. During the tests, no feedback was given to the subjects. Tests showed that both groups made major gains in accurate assignation of grammatical gender from the pretest to the post test and that they maintained this improvement to the delayed post test; however, there was no significant difference between the prompt group and the recast group. The hypothesis thus turned out in this case to be unsupported. Lyster and Izquierdo even admitted that the focus-on-form feedback instruments may have had no effect at all upon acquisition and that amelioration may have been due entirely to the "form-focused instruction". Since there was no control group, this cannot be known; however, the authors "assume the likely probability" that the error treatment enhanced acquisition, and base their discussion on this assumption.

4. 3. 5. ii. Study #5 Lyster and Izquierdo 2009: Critique. Several flaws mar this investigation. To begin, all of the criticisms of the unsuitability of the target form (grammatical gender) for a focus-on-form research project that were discussed under Harley's study (4. 3. 2. ii.), namely, that it is not an impediment to meaningful communication, that it was not treated incidentally as it arose in a communicative task, and that the instruction did not use the form in any way that involved meaning, apply equally here. Indeed, this study positioned itself under the focus-on-form banner by investigating "prompts versus recasts" which are explicitly defined by

[21] The authors remark: "Our initial design even included recourse to a third and fourth prompt (elicitation and metalinguistic clue, respectively) but it was never necessary to do so and it was indeed rare to provide a second prompt" (472). This design seems weighted in favour of self-correction in the prompt condition, since in all of the questions there were only two possible choices (masculine or feminine) and if the interviewer made it clear that the one was wrong, the subject would surely have chosen the other without a great deal of additional encouragement. I suggest that the rare second prompt must have been when the subject did not clearly hear/understand the interviewer.

the authors as "focus-on-form techniques", and prepared for the investigation with some hours of ambiguously-designated "form-focused instruction"; but it is manifest that the study was designed to elicit and correct a particular linguistic structure which has little or nothing to do either with a functional syllabus or real communicative need. It also emerges rather clearly that the preparatory instruction was an explicitly metalinguistic focus on formS, albeit embedded within a film studies task. Although the specific techniques under micro-investigation are associated with focus on form, their use as tools of recall for formS-focused material belies the ideological auspices of the study.

Then, the authors cite Harley's 1998 study as support for the contention "that drawing learner's attention to the relationship between noun endings and grammatical gender leads to significant improvement in their ability to accurately assign grammatical gender" (464). However, as we have seen in this chapter (Study #2), this is the hypothesis which Harley confesses was not borne out by her study. Lyster and Izquierdo claim that Harley's subjects "made significant progress on all but one measure, which was composed of unfamiliar nouns" (464). True, and this one measure was the test as to whether or not the relationship between nominal morphology and grammatical gender would be acquired implicitly from the input. It was not, and therefore the study says nothing about "drawing learners' attention" to the form-gender connection, since Harley specifically *did not* draw attention to it. All that she could conclude regarding this particular measure was that the young learners in her study did not seem to perceive the relationship between endings and gender.

Of great concern is the way in which the two techniques were managed so as to give advantage to the treatment which the authors had predicted to be superior. Obviously, both

prompts and recasts in this study were meant to be forms of error correction. Prompts may be defined in this case as indications from the interlocutor regarding the desirability of self-repair.[22] This may range from a raised eyebrow to a request for clarification and even to specification of the form required (e.g., 456). Recasts, on the other hand, when they are a form of error correction, are a repetition of the learner's utterance in corrected form. Recasts can serve other purposes, however, which the authors recognize: "Because recasts are forms that perform confirming functions, they cannot be categorically differentiated from confirmations and confirmation checks" (459). For this reason, it seems that the recasts in this study should have been weighted towards correction (by some non-verbal indicator or by intonation or stress; see Chaudron 1977) so that there would have been equal transmission of the notion of error and the desirability of correction in both techniques. Yet the administration of the two treatments was starkly different. The prompt condition called explicit attention to the gender error and continued to do so until the error was corrected. By contrast, the recast condition allowed for only one recast, a discrepancy which is noted by the authors as "a slight imbalance" (471). What cannot be passed off as "slight" is that this condition not only avoided any indication of error and prohibited opportunity for correction, but even deliberately mimicked the role of confirmation: if a student made an error, the interviewer simply repeated the student's utterance with the correct article and said (472): "Yes, let's continue." Now, my own experience as a learner of the French language and my personal experience as a teacher of it suggest to me that learners at the intermediate stage, within an ordinary verbal exchange, may not even perceive aurally the difference between the masculine and feminine indefinite articles unless some emphasis is placed

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[22] I use the term "desirability" as I cannot say in this case the *need* for self-repair, because the errors of gender in this study do not represent a breakdown or even a confusion in communication, but merely the desire of the research agenda to target a particular structure of essentially formal significance.

on the distinction.[23]   Learners have even more difficulty with the definite article. Harley (1998: 159) observes this same lack of salience and suggests several possible reasons for it.   In any event, the subjects of this study were students in an intermediate French course at an English-speaking university in the province of Quebec, a course which was designed for students with "an elementary knowledge of French" and who are not natives of Quebec (466).   That is, the authors emphasize that the subjects were truly anglophone learners with limited exposure to French even though the university is located in a French-speaking province.   The tonally and expressively neutral repetition by a native speaker of an intermediate learner's utterance, wherein the only change is the gender of the article, followed immediately by "Yes", is far more likely to be perceived as confirmation than as error correction.   This study can therefore hardly be received as a test of two different forms of error correction when the forms were actually presented as insistent error correction in the one case, and as confirmation in the other: I argue that it is only in the mind of the researchers that the recast with "Yes, let's continue" could be construed as error correction. What makes this approach all the more unacceptable is that Lyster (1998) himself had argued that since about three-fourths of recasts serve some function other than correction of form, they are too ambiguous to consistently highlight errors. Remarkably, the authors claim that the "recasts used in the present study can be considered at the explicit end of the continuum, because they were always short, involving reformulation of no more than one noun phrase" (484). I will argue below that because one of the interventions (recasts) scarcely constituted an intervention at all, the experiment could be viewed as actually testing the relative values of instruction alone (that is, instruction plus an ambiguous repetition) against instruction

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[23] This is especially true when the indefinite article precedes a masculine noun beginning with a vowel and thus entails *liaison*.

plus error correction (prompts).

Additionally, the authors based their prediction of the superiority of prompts over recasts on "the opportunities that prompts provide for a deeper level of processing as learners are pushed to retrieve target forms and to produce modified output" (465). On this reasoning, the choice of structure seems rather impoverished: surely this is a grandiose way of describing what goes on when one has the choice between *un* or *une* and is told that *un* is wrong. Since all corrections represented only an either/or choice of the most basic sort in the French language, masculine or feminine gender, a choice which moreover carried no semantic burden, self-correction versus other-correction in this study seems far less at issue than the difference between a corrective technique which aggressively points out a formal error versus one which tacitly may have the effect of concealing the commission of an error. (As it turned out, in spite of this bias, there is no way to be certain if either technique was effective from a pedagogical perspective, since there was no uninstructed control group — but attention should be called to this from the point of view of sound research design.)

Also problematic is a procedure used in the computerized binary-choice test. The accuracy measure was straightforward, but the reaction time score may not have been equally so. "Participants were not told that they were being timed" (475). While measurement of hesitation in oral production may typically (though not unambiguously) indicate uncertainty, hesitation over written production where there is no overt time pressure — as I believe any language teacher can verify — may simply show the care taken by the most capable students over any task, especially in the domains of reading and writing, that allows opportunity for reflection. It is true that production in this instance represents only an either/or choice (masculine or feminine

gender). Nonetheless, in contrast to the prompt condition, where the unequivocal indication of error left only one possible response with no need for analysis, the computer test would permit reflection on the form-gender connection that had been taught in the class exercises. In any case, hesitation in the test cannot be unequivocally applied to a known cause.[24]

As pointed out in the critique of other studies, the amount of time spent on just one aspect of formal structure may seem excessive and impractical to language teachers. The university course provided three one-hour classes per week, and for two weeks, half of this time was devoted to exercises highlighting either explicitly or implicitly the form-gender connection of French nouns, not including the two laboratory sessions. In defense of this process one may note that the exercises were embedded within a study of two films, and by necessity, attention was undoubtedly allotted during this treatment to other aspects of language and culture. Even so, such attention would be incidental; this kind of concentration of exercises around a single structure probably represents a luxury not always available in the pedagogical context.

The most serious problem with this study is that it deliberately passes over its clear results in order to concentrate its discussion and interpretation upon a narrowly-focused speculation. The study reveals that the subjects made impressive progress in accurately assigning gender to French nouns after receiving form-focused instruction for three hours over two weeks. In addition, the study shows that no difference in accuracy was observed relative to two different focus-on-form feedback techniques; and since there was no control group receiving the instruction without the investigated feedback, there is no evidence that either technique had any effect on acquisition. It is of interest that the authors admit this:

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[24] Much more to the point would have been the measurement of oral fluency as Ranta suggested to the authors (485).

[…] the sample did not include a comparison group that received instruction without any feedback treatment. It may have been the case, therefore, that the form-focused instruction provided over 3 hr during a 2-week period outweighed any potential impact that the two half-hour sessions of feedback might have had and was even sufficient on its own to cause the gains made by all participants. (483)

Nevertheless, this clear acknowledgement turns out to be but a passing comment: the authors go on to immediately assume that the feedback enhanced the instruction, and spend the next six or so pages ignoring what may be the equally significant results of instruction, or even the *only* significant results — sadly, it is impossible to be sure, given the parameters of the study — and discussing the possibly insignificant results of the focus-on-form techniques. Several times they even seem to forget that any effect of the techniques rests in the realm of speculation and speak as though it had been demonstrated; for example: "in the present study [...t]he effectiveness of prompts and recasts can be attributed […]" (484); and

[…] the conclusion that learners receiving recasts benefited from repeated exposure to positive exemplars as well as from opportunities to infer negative evidence, whereas learners receiving prompts benefited from repeated exposure to negative evidence as well as from opportunities to produce modified output (487)

— whereas in fact, whether or not there actually was any effectiveness to prompts and recasts, or whether students benefited from either, remains the point which was to be, and is still to be, demonstrated.

It is unfortunate that there were no control groups with instruction only or with no instruction. However, as mentioned above, it is arguable that the recasts were so ambiguously administered as to constitute no real error correction and in some respects more of a confirmation. If this is so, it suggests the very real possibility that, analyzed from a purely practical point of view, the experiment actually tested instruction alone (instruction with no

meaningful focus-on-form intervention) versus instruction plus prompts. The administration of the recast condition was sufficiently ineffective as error correction to render the recast group, for all intents and purposes, a control group which received instruction but no focus-on-form intervention. Therefore, the finding that there was no significant difference between the two groups would indicate that all gains were due to the form-focused instruction. Of course this remains just a probability, but it is my opinion, based on the analysis, that this is a more likely assumption than the one which the authors make, and should have constituted the focus of their discussion and interpretation.

This strong inclination to avoid quantifying and analyzing what may be the significant results of explicit instruction in favour of concentrating on problematic, insignificant or even failed expectations is also evident when the authors review an earlier study (2004) of Lyster's with fifth-grade primarily anglophone French immersion students. This study likewise tackled the relative effectiveness of prompts versus recasts in the acquisition of French grammatical gender. In this case there were four groups. Three received the same forms-based instruction; of these, two were also given either prompts or recasts and the third functioned as a control group which did not receive any focus-on-form feedback. The fourth was a comparison group which underwent neither form-focused instruction nor focused feedback on grammatical gender.

> The analysis of eight proficiency measures (i.e., two oral tasks and two written tasks administered immediately following the instructional unit and then 2 months later) showed that the group receiving prompts distinguished itself by being the only group to significantly outperform the comparison group on all eight measures. The recast group significantly outperformed the comparison group on five of the eight measures, whereas the instruction-only group (receiving no feedback) significantly outperformed the comparison group on four of the eight measures, suggesting that recasts were more effective than no feedback, but only marginally so. (2009: 456)

Lyster (2004) explains that the form-focused intervention in this study was conducted for 8-10 hours over five weeks. Tests showed that

> all three treatment groups demonstrated significant long-term improvement on all but one measure at the time of delayed post testing, but showed short-term improvement on this measure at the time of immediate post testing. Prompts proved to be the most effective type of feedback […] (Lyster 2004: 331)

This study, then, certainly demonstrates measurable effectiveness of focus-on-form intervention, but it indicates that the single most influential factor was form-focused instruction. This element, however, was virtually passed over in silence.

Thus in both Lyster 2004 and Lyster and Izquierdo 2009 a major element of the intervention is a structurally-derived and rather extensive instructional treatment. On the other hand, varying in importance from significant to insignificant and possibly immaterial are the focus-on-form techniques under scrutiny. Yet the researchers do not acknowledge or analyze the contribution of the instruction and instead concentrate all their interpretive discussion and application on what seem to be far less effective pedagogical techniques. Is this not clearly a case of being unable to see the forest for the trees?

Of importance here also is the fact that Lyster 2004 tends to confirm my interpretation of Study #1 (Spada and Lightbown 1993) and of Study #3 (Doughty and Varela 1998), viz., that focus on form produces quantifiable improvement when employed in combination with focus on formS.

4. 3. 5. iii. Study #5 Lyster and Izquierdo 2009: Conclusion. Lyster and Izquierdo's study of undergraduate university students in intermediate French showed that targeted instruction on the form-gender relationship of French nouns improved accuracy in assignation of gender. Treatment involving either prompts or recasts evidenced no difference between the two

types of feedback, even though the recasts were designed to minimize or conceal their corrective nature while prompts were employed as clear indicators of error with insistence upon repair before the task could continue. Furthermore, there was no clear indication that the error correction feedbacks had any effect on acquisition, though the authors assumed that they did; rather, the method of administering the recasts made their contribution doubtful and suggests that it was only the instruction which produced the gains. Although aligning itself under the rubric of focus on form, this study adds to the evidence that extensive formS-focused instruction aids acquisition of the targeted forms. In spite of this result, the authors all but ignore this meaningful finding and confine their interpretation, application and conclusion to the speculation that the focus-on-form techniques had some effect and that the study therefore adds to a body of knowledge about these techniques.

This study would have benefited from sounder methodology and from a control group to more clearly indicate the effects of the instructional treatment without focus-on-form intervention as well as a comparison group with neither instruction nor feedback. Such an orientation would seem a natural outgrowth of the work done by Harley (1998) with second-grade children and Lyster (2004) with fifth-grade children; in some ways this study seems to retreat from, rather than build upon, these earlier efforts.

4. 4. Five-Study Summary: Common Threads

The above five studies, though ranging in time over some fifteen years and in space over three countries and two continents, and varying in source from a relative newcomer to some of the most experienced and respected members of the field, share many distinctive features.

4. 4. 1. First of all, the actual focus-on-form portion of most focus-on-form studies is remarkably small. Although it is a general consensus that techniques such as prompts, recasts, other spontaneous forms of error correction and negotiation for meaning in communicative situations are true focus-on-form (and not focus-on-formS) techniques, and although these may be the ostensible tools under micro-investigation, it is nevertheless rare that they are actually employed in a genuine focus-on-form acquisition situation.

I reiterate perhaps to the point of annoyance that the whole *raison d'être* of focus on form, the crucial mark that distinguishes it from focus on formS, is that it does not start from language structure or a perceived hierarchical linguistic acquisition pattern but from real communicative need in events that are not about language but about something else, for which language is the means of communication. Focus on form was originally conceived as a means of modifying, by introducing an acceptably minimal intervention, the zero-intervention position, accepting almost all of the presuppositions of that approach. Therefore, it must be admitted that a so-called "prompt" or "error correction" that consists of something which, in essence, functions along the lines of "Now, don't you remember the conjugation that we memorized last week?" can by no stretch of the term be regarded as focus-on-form instruction. As argued in Chapter 3, the presuppositions of focus on form are functionalism and naturalistic acquisition. The approach accepts that language is principally acquired by using language: the contention of focus on form is that naturalistic acquisition is not 100% effective. Therefore, in those instances where problems arise, incidental attention is called to proper form during language use. That is to say, forms that have not been correctly acquired through input and interaction are allotted focus during communicative events to recall the correct form from the input or to model or negotiate it

in the interchange.

It is evident that, without actually explaining the change, many researchers have embraced an expanded understanding of focus on form that starts from an identified structural problem and allows a certain amount of explicit metalinguistic instruction, often pre-emptive. If such is the case, then the approach is *by definition* no longer focus on form as distinct from focus on formS. The proponents of focus on form must themselves be the ones to articulate the new understanding and to admit that it no longer recognizably constitutes the approach as originally and currently defined. In this case focus on form as an exclusive paradigm (one which rejects focus on formS as well as entirely naturalistic learning) no longer exists, but rather only a remnant of it survives in techniques and approaches that combine with others techniques and approaches, including formS exercises and structural syllabi. Such an acknowledgement would constitute, in my view, an enormous step forward. However, as Long and Robinson's 1998 article demonstrates, no such acknowledgement has been forthcoming. Doughty and Williams (1998a: 3) also affirm that what quintessentially defines focus on form and distinguishes it from focus on formS or "the traditional forms-in-isolation type of grammar teaching" is that the learning situation prioritizes an overriding focus on meaning wherein "the learner's attention is drawn precisely to a linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand."

I believe that careful reflection on the implications of this position will serve to demonstrate that focus on form as articulated by its own spokespersons is worlds removed from language forms drilled in a structural syllabus or even a blend of communicative and metalinguistic emphases, followed up with so-called "focus-on-form techniques." Yet in most of the studies seen above, focus-on-form *instruments* are tested, but in settings either where

significant grammar teaching is present or where the research design itself has identified structural lacunae and focus-on-formS exercises are implemented to prepare for the treatment.

Now, I acknowledge that since pure focus on form presupposes a functional rather than a structural curriculum, the disconnect between the researcher's need to track progress on given structures and the teacher's need to pursue a task- or content-based instructional program is exacerbated. Such a disconnect is not insurmountable, however, as the classroom observations of the control group in Spada and Lightbown's (1993) study and the research design of Doughty and Varela (1998) demonstrate (we recall that Spada and Lightbown analyzed classroom tapes in great detail in order to discover that the focus-on-form techniques in operation made constant reference to earlier explicit instruction; Doughty and Varela took time beforehand to determine structures in need of amelioration which represented real and recurring communicative impediments in the content-based classroom). It is understandable that, for purposes of research, certain elements of a genuine focus-on-form instructional situation may need to be modified or isolated. Nonetheless, what appears to be critical in the current approach is that 1) these modifications are not noted and rigidly described as such but are generally treated as though they conform to the ideology and practice of focus on form; and 2) the research venue in which focus-on-form techniques are usually tested, that is, instructional settings with mixed emphases including explicit linguistic instruction, has little or no relation to the situation for which focus on form was originally articulated and for which its proponents still claim its efficacy. It is not expected that the exigencies of research will not alter authentic classroom routine and trespass normal classroom limitations, but it is expected that such alterations be clearly acknowledged so that the contribution of the research to real-world pedagogy can be evaluated and applied. No

more is it supposed that focus on form can only be researched and implemented in a purely communicative setting (in fact, I consistently argue the contrary in this paper), but it is supposed that the setting should not be disguised as a purely communicative one when in fact it includes pre-emptive structuralism and explicit linguistic and metalinguistic instruction. The problem is not any flaw in the research but rather a philosophy which obscures an accurate depiction of the investigative setting, controls the tools tested and distorts the discussion, interpretation and conclusions.

4. 4. 2. Secondly, while the studies purport to test the effects of focus on form, the presence of extensive form-focused preparative exercises generally leads the study to reveal in reality much more about the effects of focus on formS. In some cases the presence of proper controls shows that the focus on form has very little effect; in other cases, due to lack of a comparison group, it is not evident that the focus-on-form techniques have any significant effect at all. By contrast, it is quite clear (although sometimes only after exhaustive reanalysis) that explicit instruction has a positive effect on development and acquisition, at least within the parameters of these studies.

4. 4. 3. Thirdly, while a narrow interpretation of many studies can demonstrate some effects of statistical significance for focus on form, it is incontrovertible that the techniques invade an enormous amount of classroom time. There begins to appear a lamentable inefficiency with a technique that may consume many hours over many weeks, aimed at the amelioration of but a single structure, when the results are usually uncertain and minimal at best — and this exorbitant amount of time is spent not because pedagogy but ideology restrains using a wider range of strategies to tackle, explain, and reinforce the form. I say "exorbitant" because as a

language teacher I would be delighted to be able to concentrate on one form for the amount of time that researchers consider "compressed"! For this reason (the time constraints of the typical second-language instructional setting) it should also be noted that when these studies demonstrate the value of focus on formS, such effects may be as impossible to achieve in a real second-language curriculum as any of the ostensibly targeted focus-on-form effects.   (This parallel constraint of focus on formS will be discussed in chapter 5.)

As acknowledged above (4. 4. 1.), it is understood that the research agenda and the classroom agenda will not be identical.   Researchers are (in Spada and Lightbown's 1993 imagery) "parachuted in" for a few weeks and must cover in that time what a teacher might spread out judiciously over a semester or a year.   Still, both the amount of time focused on a single structure and the researchers' apparent lack of awareness of this are cause for alarm. After all, these are not studies of second language acquisition in a vacuum but of second language pedagogy in the classroom.

4. 4. 4. Fourthly, it has been seen that in those instances where a relatively pure variant of focus on form has been effectively employed, there exist crucial background factors to which the focus-on-form treatment serves as an adjunct, namely, explicit metalinguistic instruction and rich, readily-available input.

4. 4. 5. Finally, in some cases (especially Studies #1 and #4) the researchers offer the opinion that student and/or teacher engagement and ability are likely to have at least as significant an impact on acquisition as the application of any specific technique or approach in itself.

4. 5. Conclusion

All this is to say that focus on form may find its lasting importance in functioning in cooperation with other approaches and methodologies regardless of their fortunate or unfortunate ideological connections. That this is what these studies reveal is now clear; the hindrance to moving ahead is the widespread unwillingness of the current research agenda to articulate its freedom from a particular and exclusive ideological paradigm. Until this occurs, such studies, apart from an agonized untangling and reinterpretation, will continue to hide as earnestly as possible what may be their most valuable findings. This means a real loss to the entire SLA community, whether teacher, researcher, or student, for with so many incisive minds working with such dedication on the problem, it should not be as difficult as it is to see the whole forest instead of just a few microscopically analyzed and minimally helpful trees.

Chapter 5: Focus on Form in the Real World

"Once we have cleared our own minds of prejudices, restrictive practices, and artificial taboos, we have cleared the ground for research." — Stern

5. 1. Introduction

As stated above, the studies selected for in-depth analysis in Chapter 4 are in my view representative rather than atypical of the focus-on-form school. I suggest therefore that there is reason to question generally the overt methods and goals of many so-called focus-on-form studies inasmuch as they typically start from a linguistic rather than a communicative need, include a strong component of focus on formS, consume an extensive and perhaps unjustifiable amount of instructional time, and often fail to adequately analyze and interpret their own most important results. Simply put, the real findings of a "focus-on-form" study can rarely be divined by skimming its synopsis and conclusion. Rather, terminology must be defined and redefined, all aspects of context must be examined for their contribution, components must be measured in terms of their relative significance, and results must be openly stated with reference to major importance, minor importance, and speculation. The current format for such studies places major obstacles in the way of their ever being of any more than minor use except for the self-perpetuation of the institutional research agenda.

5. 2. The Value of Focus on FormS and of Focus on Form

It appears from the studies we have examined (especially studies 1, 2, 4 and 5) that, for second language learners beyond the age of first language acquisition, explicit instruction in formal features of the language can contribute to noticing gaps between current and target levels,

developing knowledge of correct forms, and improving accuracy of comprehension and production. Based on what has been gleaned from these typical focus-on-form studies, I suggest that Long's "focus on form", limited as it was by its dual ideological presuppositions of naturalistic acquisition and the functional syllabus, was by itself inadequate as a remedy for gaps in communicative language pedagogy. The inclusion of explicit and metalinguistic instruction — focus on formS — is seen to constitute an effective element in a second language instructional approach whose principal emphasis is on authentic communication, whereas focus on form as an exclusive paradigm is often extravagantly time-consuming and relatively ineffective in most second-language instructional circumstances. Specifically, a focus-on-form approach seems admirably suited to content-based second language education where attention to form is desirable but communicative flow is of overriding importance, in situations where strong L2 support is provided outside of the communicative classroom (see Studies #1 and #3; also Spada and Lightbown 2008: 198).

5. 3. Why is Focus on FormS *Not* the Answer?

The direction of this paper's argumentation to the present juncture, and the aspects of the focus-on-form studies considered to be most salient in the above analyses, may intimate that a call will be made to return to a focus on formS. However, it may be as erroneous to conclude from these and other similar studies that a swing to a strong focus on formS will address gaps in acquisition as it is to maintain that an ideologically and methodologically pure focus on form is the indicated solution. The reasons for this assertion are fourfold:

5. 3. 1. Impractical allotment of time resources.   While the focus-on-form studies indicate that focus on formS aids acquisition, the actual instruments are rarely integrated into a practical curriculum.   It was noted above that the focus-on-form techniques consumed an inordinate amount of time, but this is almost as true of the focus-on-formS elements present in these same experiments.   Researchers expended between 1 hour 15 minutes and 4 hours 30 minutes of class time per week, over treatment periods ranging from two to seven weeks.   The focus was generally limited to a single area of linguistic structure.   If one translates this expenditure of time into a typical second language course which is allotted between 3 and 5 hours per week for perhaps 13-14 weeks of a university semester (somewhat longer in a school setting), it is manifest that from 30 to 100% of classroom session time over the treatment period, and from 6 to 20% of the entire course, would be consumed by attention to a single feature.[25]

Therefore, even though the studies show that concentration on formS enhances development and improves accuracy within the scope of the experiment, this showing is of limited practical value, since most syllabi would not permit — to take one example — the grammatical gender of French nouns to occupy a fifth of a semester's language instruction. What many of these studies reveal is simply that an extensive length of time focused on a given feature produces improvement in that feature.   While the conclusion drawn from such a finding may be ideologically unacceptable to a confirmed nativist, it is self-evident from the point of view of cognitive processing: if one isolates and drills a particular structure long enough, one is likely to see improvement in the uptake of that structure.   It may be that pedagogical method takes a back seat to total time dedicated in terms of the factors which actually have the weightiest

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[25] These are approximate calculations and very much on the conservative side, since they round up hours (classes are typically 50 minutes or 80 minutes rather than 1 hour or 1½ hours) and they do not take into account the fact that there are several hours of non-instructional class time (classroom management, tests, etc.).

influence on the results; that is, a good or a poor pedagogy could both be reasonably expected to have *some* effect with such an intensive concentration of time and attention. For that matter, the studies indicated generally that pure focus-on-form techniques were less effective than focus on formS, and implicit learning was less effective than explicit. These findings point to the possible utility of attention to formS and explicit instruction in the classroom, and to directions for further research; at present, unfortunately, the unrealistically long treatment procedures of many of these projects cannot be translated into pedagogy, and remain indications only.

5. 3. 2. Focus on formS in a new context. It is the nature of research that it must concentrate on a limited number of factors and attempt to highlight isolated contrasts. There is therefore a danger that an item *per se* may be interpreted as having this or that effect, without taking fully into account its position as an element in a larger ensemble of equally essential elements. This is especially true when one goes beyond the level of discrete and identifiable features of a particular investigation to academic, cultural and societal perspectives and assumptions. To put this in more concrete terms, a study which demonstrates that focus-on-formS exercises are more effective in the improvement of second language accuracy than rich input alone or than focus on form cannot be taken to promote the return to a formS-focused curriculum as a whole, because the particular dose of formS-focused exercises has been administered within a communicative language setting which is itself an essential contributing factor. A formS-focused pedagogy may raise the spectre of grammar-translation to today's communicatively-trained instructors (see Doughty and Varela 1998: 116), but let us be clear: an element of focus on formS within a predominantly communicative curriculum is almost diametrically opposed to the grammar-translation approach of half a century ago, which was a

focus on formS without a strong, or often without any, emphasis on fluent and authentic communicative language use. Language teaching, pedagogical philosophy, cultural orientation — indeed, our very world, is a radically different place than it was in the 1950s, and it is this new context in which the discrete elements of form and formS are being tested, a context which is itself an integral part of the test. With respect, therefore, to the reanalysis of the above studies, it must not be concluded in a vacuum, as it were, that these studies suggest that focus on formS is most effective in promoting language acquisition. Such a precipitate conclusion may encourage a return to formS-based instruction which effectively ignores the broader context of the educational environment, to wit the undeniable and prodigious progress made in language pedagogy over the past fifty years. Can one declare, for example, that based on a given study, teacher-fronted grammar explanations and formS-focused exercises will improve student uptake of grammatical gender in French, when what is truly established by the study is that two weeks of metalinguistic explanation and formS-focused instruction in the context of an almost entirely communicative language-learning setting improved uptake of grammatical gender? The reality is that these studies say nothing about the effectiveness of formS-focused instruction in a formS-based syllabus, nor even about formS-focused instruction as a theoretical construct, but speak

only to the likely value of the inclusion of focus on formS as part of an overtly communicative approach.[26]

5. 3. 3. Specific applications.   The third reason for which it is maintained that these studies should not be hastily interpreted to favour a wholesale shift to focus-on-formS is that there are several instructional contexts in which, as some of these studies (#1, #3 and Lyster 2004 examined in #5) suggest, a formS-focused approach is neither necessary nor desirable. Content-based second language courses in a larger educational scenario in which there are also language arts courses, and dominant-language environments where the input is particularly rich and the standards are those of the native speaker rather than of the foreign-language student, may be eminently suited to a pure version of focus on form. Recasts, prompts and negotiation have the ability to recall from the input or instruction encountered in other arenas the not-fully-acquired or mastered form, while avoiding the obstructive consequences of an isolated grammar lesson in the middle of, say, a science class. The studies have shown that focus on form is an effective adjunct to improvement in a setting where the second language as a subject is primarily acquired elsewhere, and where a focus on formS would be counter-productive to the central aims of the given course.

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[26] This being said, it is noteworthy that in the studies which were examined in chapter 4, even decontextualized focus on formS produced positive results (see R. Sheen 2003 for similar findings). However, even when exercises were not well integrated into the pedagogical context, it remains that the pedagogical context — the teaching and learning environment — was strongly communicative. That is to say, communicative language teaching remains the situation in which formS-focused exercises, integrated or not, were successful, and was a contributing factor to that success. Concluding from such studies that decontextualized focus on formS would work as well in a grammar-translation setting is unwarranted.

As an anecdotal example, I interviewed (December 2011) a young university student studying beginning Spanish in a Canadian university. He had grown up in eastern India as a bilingual (Mizo and English) and had also learned Hindi as an adolescent and had studied French in middle school. He described his language training as what we both agreed to be a form of grammar-translation. He explained that to this day he excels at cloze-type exercises and at the recital of paradigms, but has enormous difficulty in identifying any part of speech in actual written or spoken discourse. This example certainly underscores the generalized claim of Leeman et al. 1995 (217) that decontextualized grammar study does not equate to improved accuracy in communicative production. Thus focus on formS in a formS-oriented pedagogical setting is *not* the answer, whereas focus on formS in a communicative setting is, in my view, clearly a *part* of the answer.

5. 3. 4. Major effects of teacher and student ability and style. Finally, these and other studies indicate that the ability of instructor and student, together with subjective factors such as teaching and learning style and motivation, may have a greater impact on improved acquisition than any particular pedagogical technique, methodology, or approach. As Huot-Tremblay (1989: 76) points out from findings of the Pennsylvania Project as well as from her own research, variation in instructional techniques accounts for only between 5 and 10% of overall results: this, though surely significant, is too small an influence to be permitted to take the controlling reins of overall language pedagogy. Therefore, rather than employ the reinterpretation of these studies to move from one constraining paradigm to another, specific findings should be applied to the larger issue of how to integrate effective strategies into a comprehensive open-system approach to committed and focused language learning.

5. 4. Why is Communicative Language Teaching Not the Answer?

Some may rebut at this point that such steps have already been taken and that indeed the result now dominates second language instruction: Communicative Language Teaching. I argue that on the contrary, although communicative language teaching presents itself as an open system, it is actually a relatively constrained pedagogical expression of Long's focus on form. CLT is firmly based on "notional-functional concepts and communicative competence, rather than grammatical structures" (Omaggio Hadley 2001: 116). That is to say, it is not truly eclectic but tends to position itself on the analytic or semantic end of the spectrum.

In the wake of the linguistic revolution of the 1950s there came a bewildering plethora of methods and techniques of second-language learning, each claiming sovereign efficacy. Some

were short-lived, while others have made lasting contributions to the field. As outlined in earlier chapters, these methods and approaches tended to hold in common the twin notions of nativism and functionalism. Today, those strategies which seem to have proven useful are grouped together under the general banner of "communicative language teaching" or "CLT."

Communicative language teaching defines itself as an approach, not a method. As such, it is not bound to a single theory of language learning nor any particular type of syllabus, but utilizes a broad catalogue of disciplines and strategies.

> CLT has left its doors wide open for a great variety of methods and techniques. […] CLT does not adhere to one particular theory or method. It draws its theories about learning and teaching from a wide range of areas such as cognitive science, educational psychology, and second language acquisition (SLA). (Brandl 2008: 6).

It would appear, then, that CLT should answer the problem of an approach that is too bound up in its own ideology, in that it expressly opens itself to effective methods and techniques regardless of their heritage. If CLT had followed through on this eclectic approach, it would certainly have addressed the limitations of focus on form, since it would have accepted judicious focus on formS with "its doors wide open." In reality, communicative language teaching, though dissociating itself from any particular theory or methodology, categorically aligns itself with a specific ideological paradigm. It is true that CLT has adopted and is open to adopt a wide range of specific methods, but, as noted above, all of these methods have arisen from functionalism and nativism. These are therefore first principles, as it were, in the approach. To begin, CLT is task-based, or functionalist. Emphasis is on meaning and not on form, and the syllabus is based on real-world tasks and communicative need rather than on the structure of the language (Omaggio Hadley 2001; 117; Brandl 2008: 7-12). Secondly, CLT rests on the belief that language is

acquired by being exposed to, immersed in and using language, not by studying it (Omaggio Hadley 2001: 117). The critical factor is maximum exposure to comprehensible and authentic input (Brandl 2008: 12-18). This sounds very much like focus on form. Although Brandl (2008: 21) cites Long's focus on form as one of the eight basic principles of communicative language teaching, most of the other principles are nothing more than aspects of focus on form as well, such as the role of comprehensible input, the Interaction Hypothesis, emphasis on tasks, and techniques of error correction (Brandl 2008: 7-21).

Communicative language teaching should have been the answer, and would have been if it had truly followed through on the commitment to openness. There has been well-worded discussion in CLT of broad perspectives, including formS-focused teaching and learning, but it rarely goes beyond discussion.[27] The ideological foundations of the approach were too narrowly circumscribed to permit much real expansion from the functional/nativist/focus-on-form paradigm. As Sheen and O'Neill (2005: 269) put it, although CLT recognized the value of instruction for acquisition, "it was assumed that the form of instruction should be compatible with [focus-on-form] SLA theory." CLT was primarily based upon an exclusive ideology: the contradictions of that position meant that the ideology informed the practice. It is for this reason that little emphasis has been accorded in this paper to the consideration of Communicative

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[27] An apparently unbiased examination of various grammar teaching strategies, including explicit or formS-focused lessons, constitutes a part of the introduction to grammar teaching in CLT. However, focus immediately shifts in the discussion to methods of avoiding explicit teaching and to an emphasis on input-based and inductive techniques for attention to form. For example, Brandl 2008 suggests that if questions of grammar arise, students should ideally consult paradigms and explanations in the textbook on their own time so that such materials need not be integrated into the communicative classroom (Brandl 2008: 110). Brandl acknowledges and cites studies supporting the explicit instructor-centred teaching of grammatical forms (106), but he proceeds to concentrate the discussion on ways to avoid doing just this (107-142). This underscores the fact that CLT presents itself as embracing a broad and essentially pragmatic attitude to second-language instruction, but in reality it assumes the nativist construct of implicit acquisition, the value of an exclusively functionally-based curriculum and the superiority of inductive methods. In other words, CLT assumes all the presuppositions of focus on form and entails all of its proscriptions for classroom strategies.

Language Teaching as a separate contribution to the issue, since by its own definition, CLT is not much more nor less than Long's theory of focus on form expanded for classroom use, with all of that theory's particular strengths and limitations.

5. 5. The Root Problem: The Inherent Limitations of Paradigms

The crucial issue is not the relative superiority or inferiority of a given approach, whether zero-option, focus on form, communicative language teaching, focus on formS or grammar-translation, but the tendency to adopt or reject a system wholesale and to attach philosophical and emotional importance to the integrity of the system. Although the adoption of a paradigm imposes a constraint upon the intellectual and practical freedom to advance, explore, construct and reconstruct, it is nevertheless much easier to adopt a paradigm in its entirety and to apply it to the widest possible variety of situations than it is to construct a new paradigm out of disparate elements to meet the requirements of each unique instance or to employ discrete tools without any overall guiding framework. Of course, most teachers, curriculum designers and researchers are specialists; and the very narrowness of focus which is their particular strength, taking them as it does through the mass of detail pertinent to any close investigation, can also be a particular weakness when it comes to profiting from the wide range of knowledge that becomes available in other approaches. I maintain that it is particularly in one's area of specialization that one ought to be the least attached to a paradigm.

Holistic systems, such as those that we have examined in language learning, are based upon a central insight. That insight gives illumination and direction to the entire structure. Research that undermines the structure or gives support to another paradigm tends to be

trivialized, disputed, or dismissed, not because it is necessarily unsound but because it begins from what is considered a false premise and is therefore thought to bypass the real issues in language acquisition. Philosophy has thus pre-empted investigation.

I have been at considerable pains to argue in the early chapters of this paper that focus on form is a result of a monumental ideological shift which was an integral part of the changes in the understanding of second language acquisition, beginning with the theories and discoveries of the iconoclastic thinkers of the 1950s and growing in the years following. Therefore, the almost total shift from structuralism to functionalism, leading to communicative language teaching and learning, was inseparably tied to basic convictions about how language is learned and used: it was an intrinsically ideological as well as a pragmatic and pedagogical transformation. Referring once again to Littlewood's (1989: 17) observation ("However, by one of those leaps of logic which are all too common in language pedagogy, many authors and curricula gave the impression that since language has functions, it cannot at the same time have grammatical structures"[28]), it can be seen that the underlying nature of mutually exclusive and competing paradigms explains the "leap of logic" which might appear strange and rather excessive on the surface. If the functional paradigm, with all its corollary implications, is true, then the structural paradigm, together with all of its implications, must be false. Littlewood's insightful comment illustrates the deplorable but entirely logical absence of a middle ground.

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[28] My translation from the French (see footnote 2).

5. 6. Paradigmatic Research and the Classroom

The passion to maintain and defend an exclusive paradigm in research has tended to foster the divergence between the research and the pedagogic agendas. This can be seen in the first place in the amount of time researchers spend on studying the specific instruments characteristic of their favoured approach. Researchers are not as limited as classroom teachers with respect to how much emphasis they can place upon a single feature or technique, and therefore the practicality or lack thereof of an ideologically narrow focus does not seem to constitute a meaningful criterion within a study. Researchers who spend weeks focusing on a single, sometimes minor or peripheral, structure of a language, avoiding a direct presentation of the feature because of ideological constraints but consuming instructional attention nonetheless and diverting this from other aspects of the language, ought to engage in a discussion of the means and merit of transferring such work to the classroom. Otherwise, they must have but a poor notion of the responsibilities of an instructor both on a daily basis and as the end of a course and semester approaches.

Moreover, the researchers return to their academic sanctum to analyze, write up and eventually publish their interpretation of the study and its results and, divorced though such studies may be from classroom realities, they nevertheless exert an enormous influence on those realities. It is such studies which inform and guide the training of language teachers and the ongoing professional development of conscientious instructors. It has been acknowledged that many if not most current-day language teachers include some measure of explicit grammar teaching in their instruction, but it is equally true that the research agenda, driven by its ideology, continues to look askance at this practice and to suggest that such an approach is not in keeping

with what is known about the best principles of language acquisition. As Courchêne (1989: 133) put it, some teachers ignore grammar, some teach it apologetically, some defiantly. Teachers teach grammar, or they avoid it, but they often do the one or the other guiltily and uncertainly, since the research agenda has abandoned for so long the examination of isolated grammar teaching in the classroom in order to pursue its ideologically-based commitment to communicative language teaching and focus on form.   It is the teacher, after all, who is faced with the responsibility of facilitating the acquisition of a second language, not just in the abstract but in order to ready an actual group of students for the testing standards at the end of a given course and to prepare them to continue in the next — and beyond that prosaic level, to engage their long-term interest in the language and to facilitate their use of it in the real world.

5. 7. Conclusion

Studies reveal that many and varied techniques and approaches, including a focus on formS, within the overall framework of a communicative language program enhance the acquisition of language and promote accuracy in comprehension and production. By and large, the current research agenda is not committed to furthering this understanding. In order that the enormous amount of scholarship and labour presently expended be turned to the profit of researchers, curriculum designers, language teachers and students alike, a conscious effort must be made to cultivate a practical, realistic and honest mindset both to experimentation and to application of knowledge and practice, as free as possible from any particular ideological paradigm. To this end we will turn our thoughts in the final chapter of this paper.

Chapter 6:

Toward Solutions: A Proposal for a New Articulation of Classroom Language Pedagogy

"Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right!" — *Asimov*

6. 1. Introduction

The failure of grammar-translation, the natural method, or focus on form to furnish a completely efficacious response to the challenges of language learning lies not so much within any flaw in methodology or any single false premise in acquisition theory as simply in the belief that one exclusive paradigm can meet the need. To conclude that a given paradigm is *the* answer is to pretend that a given theory of language acquisition is no longer theory but fact, and that it is comprehensive in itself. Frankly, while the debate still rages on in linguistics, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology and information theory, one should not have the presumption to declare this issue closed. In the meantime, to act as if one theory is fact is to obscure or deny the results of other areas of research, and to withhold from the researcher, curriculum designer, teacher and student the full real and potential benefits of various perspectives. On exclusive approaches, Stern (1970: 42) wisely commented more than four decades ago:

> The primary weakness in many of these efforts lies in the *search for single or too restricted solutions of major problems*. […] The alternatives that method fanaticism has put before us are, in fact, not genuine choices because, to do justice to the complexities of language, we may well have to grasp both sides of the alternative: formal *and* functional techniques, "coordinate" *as well as* "compound" ways of learning, deliberate or cognitive modes of study *as well as* informal, intuitive, and non-analytical approaches [emphases in original].

Proponents of a particular paradigm are earnest in their efforts to invalidate the premises and practices of other paradigms. For that matter, I have been at pains in this thesis to show that focus on form is not the answer. I have been insistent notwithstanding that this does not lead to the rejection of focus on form. Rather, I wish to reject the notion, all too easily adopted, that an approach which offers some solutions, and answers many questions, is therefore exhaustive and exclusive, and I am attempting to challenge the tendency of pedagogical approaches to accrue ideological baggage to the point where believing in them becomes something akin to a moral obligation. Recognizing that the jury is still out on the mechanism, or mechanisms, of language acquisition, existing knowledge should not be censored according to theoretical and ideological connections but evaluated on the basis of what research — honestly and pragmatically analyzed and interpreted — shows to be effective.

We have seen that the "zero-option" (the pure nativist) and the "focus-on-form" (the modified nativist) paradigms are based on underlying convictions about the nature of language acquisition. We have also seen that the practical expressions of these convictions in language learning situations are valid *to some degree*. For example, zero-option pedagogy in content-based immersion education has produced fluent and confident speakers with remarkably advanced levels of comprehension; and focus on form in strong dominant-language or language-arts support circumstances has resulted in significant development in accuracy. This means that the underlying philosophical propositions of these systems are validated, at least in a certain measure. Since these approaches demonstrate domains of success along with areas of failure, and since their foundations in terms of factual knowledge of the acquisition process remain

highly theoretical, their ideological presuppositions should be articulated as *tentative, limited* and *complementary*, rather than as authoritative, complete and exclusive.

In keeping with this perspective, I will outline a philosophical basis for focus on formS.

6. 2. A Philosophical Basis for Focus on FormS: Tentative, Limited and Complementary

This ideological discussion is proposed as *tentative*: it suggests theoretical cause-and-effect situations based on the indications, possibilities and correlations, not certainties, found in the research. It is *limited* in that it attempts to answer only a portion of the questions raised by second language learning. It is also *complementary*, inasmuch as it is intended to work in harmony with other approaches, especially the nativist and the focus-on-form approaches, without invalidating either itself or them.

6. 2. 1. Terminology. I use the term "focus on formS" deliberately although other terms have been suggested (see for example 6. 2. 2. and footnote 29 below). The term has accrued unfortunate connotations since the rise of focus on form and suggests in the minds of many researchers the teaching of grammatical forms as decontextualized paradigms unrelated to communicative production. I am attempting to purge the term of these connotations, since its denotation remains the only forthright and unambiguous statement of the practice: focus on formS means concentration on the structures of language and generally entails inductive or deductive linguistic and/or metalinguistic analysis, employing (without definitively or exclusively endorsing) a cognitive approach to second language acquisition. Generally, the terms used in the literature are creative attempts to euphemistically describe or to camouflage the

explicit teaching of grammar so as to present it under the auspices of focus on form.[29]   Because

they are intended to conform to an ideology and even, at times, are deliberately ambiguous, such

terms contribute to the confusion rather than to the clarification of the domain and have become

largely ineffective.   I believe that the re-establishment of clear terminology will move the

discussion forward.   In sum, though I reject the connotative implications of Long's (1991)

discussion of focus on forms, I maintain the denotative utility of his clear distinction of *focus on*

form, *focus on formS*, and *focus on meaning*.

6. 2. 2. General observations: Focus on formS as a long-term acquisition framework.

Focus on formS complements a natural approach and a focus-on-form approach to second

language learning by providing tools for understanding and applying underlying concepts,

acquiring specific structures and correcting errors which the input does not make salient.   We

have seen that many linguists, Stephen Krashen foremost among them, applied the insights of

Chomsky on first language acquisition (Universal Grammar) to second language acquisition.

That is, numerous researchers assumed (and found some evidence to indicate) that the ability of

the human brain to acquire and process language in a natural, incidental and subconscious

manner is not limited to the L1 but can be exploited in learning additional languages.   That this

was true *to some extent* has revolutionized language instruction and learning, and is evidenced in

the remarkable success of immersion programs and communicative language teaching (Baker

2001: 208; R. Ellis 1994: 602).

However, indications began to surface that this natural or nativist approach was not

sufficient in itself to bring about full competence in a second language.   Leila Ranta (1998: 21)

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[29]   For example, "formal instruction", "form-focused episodes", "form-focused instruction," "form-focused intervention", "integrated and isolated form-focused instruction", "pre-emptive focus on form," "planned focus on form", "explicit focus on form", "reactive focus on form", "proactive focus on form" etc.

summed up the research on this question from the previous two decades: "There is now a consensus in SLA that comprehensible input is not sufficient for attaining native-like ability in a L2, and that some attention to language form is necessary." Research continued to point toward more explicit methods of instruction, at least in some instances.   White (1991) argued convincingly that negative evidence, which is not available in natural input, is necessary for understanding and producing certain L2 structures. A number of studies (among them N. Ellis 1993; DeKeyser 1995; Robinson 1996; de Graaff 1997; see also Norris and Ortega 2000) showed that explicit instruction was superior to implicit in grammaticality judgment. This trend is in keeping with my own analyses in this paper of five focus-on-form studies indicating the importance of explicit metalinguistic instruction as a part of, and a support to, communicative, submersion and immersion instructional settings. Spada and Lightbown (2008) conclude: "There is increasing consensus that form-focused instruction helps learners in communicative or content-based instruction to learn features of the target language that they may not acquire without guidance."[30]

The structured, metalinguistic teaching of grammar (in and of itself, but preferably contextualized, respecting what is known of acquisition order and learner differences, gleaned as far as possible from authentic input and employed in real communicative output) provides a framework for present and future acquisition. A major objection to the explicit teaching of

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[30] Spada and Lightbown's 2008 article will be discussed in greater depth on pages 117-118; at this point it is important to note that by the term "form-focused instruction" (FFI) the authors encompass both attention to form integrated in communicative events and separated or isolated linguistic and metalinguistic instruction. However, the authors (2008: 186) do make a fine distinction between Long's definition of "focus on forms" and their own "isolated FFI" in that Long's use of the term designates "form-based instruction that is not directly tied to genuinely communicative practice."   They also distinguish between Long's "focus on form" and their own definition of "integrated FFI": Long's definition "includes only reactive FFI whereas integrated FFI includes both reactive and proactive FFI" (2008: 193). It is this sort of elaborate discussion which motivates my call for the re-establishment of unambiguous terminology (6. 2. 1; see also footnote 12) rather than the introduction of even more finely nuanced and possibly misleading terms invented more for their ideological acceptability than for their denotative clarity.

grammar as a solution to persistent structural errors is that simply presenting material does not correct faults. Of course this is true, but while it has been noted that naturalistic or uninstructed (e.g. immersion or strong CLT) learners persist in certain faults, instructed learners have the advantage of linguistic and meta-linguistic tools which not only address particular problems but enhance general knowledge. Depending on the form and on the communicative situation, these tools may be put to use either immediately or in the course of continued learning and language use as new communicative demands arise.[31]

Spada and Lightbown (2008) are currently moving the discussion in a direction with which the thesis of this paper and in particular this section is congruent. They argue that both integrated *and* isolated form-focused instruction, that is, instruction as part of the communicative event and instruction as separated from the event to be then applied to authentic communication, are equally important in a communicative or content-based second-language instructional situation.

> For purposes of the discussion, we present these approaches [isolated and integrated form-focused instruction] as if they were entirely distinct. It is clear, however, that they are really the ends of a continuum, especially as we are examining their role within CLT and CBI contexts for teaching and learning. That is, we do not see isolated and integrated FFI as being in competition with each other, rather, we see them as complementary parts of a complete language learning environment. Although we are convinced that there is a role for isolated FFI, we see it as occurring within instruction that is primarily interactive and communicative. (188.)

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[31] One member of the review committee for this thesis pointed out that linguistic and metalinguistic tools tend to be lacking to today's students even in their *first* language, as movements such as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) demonstrate. This insight helps to explain how it is that an even greater burden of instruction often falls upon the second-language instructor since it is in that setting that many students encounter metalinguistic notions for the first time. This is perhaps one more reason that the explicit teaching of grammar in the second-language classroom has been problematic; it is as though in addition to the course being taught (the language), another course (linguistics) must be tackled simultaneously. Little wonder, then, that the introduction of such "grammar" tends to overwhelm the learner. On the plus side, I would argue that second language teachers who invest in the teaching of at least the rudiments of linguistics in a contextualized fashion are providing tools not only for student advancement in the second language but greater metalinguistic reflection in the first language, and contribute in their own way to improved "writing across the curriculum."

This perspective goes beyond both focus on formS as part of a purely structural syllabus, and focus on form as incidental, reactive and item-specific negotiation. Isolated FFI differs from decontextualized grammar paradigms since, although it consists of explicit lessons focused on discrete points of grammar, such lessons are either in response to or in preparation for immediate use in authentic communication. Integrated FFI differs from Long's focus on form in that it can be both proactive and reactive, and it does not limit itself to item noticing nor to minimally-intrusive techniques such as error feedback and negotiation, but may expand to encompass metalinguistic information and elucidation of underlying rules and principles. That is, it exploits the communicative event as a teachable moment, while nevertheless prioritizing the communicative flow.

Although the effectiveness of this article is unfortunately somewhat hampered by its ideologically-constrained terminology (see 6. 2. 1. and footnotes 29 and 30), the discussion represents an important step forward in embracing a more inclusive perspective on approaches, methods and techniques which are indicated by a wide range of research and practice. Spada and Lighbown's (2008) contribution significantly informs my own proposals below for an open-system approach to communicative language teaching (6. 3; 6. 4.).

6. 2. 3. Focus on formS to shape learning attitudes. As important as it is to encourage the learner to embark upon the use of language in real communication as early as possible, it is also vital that he or she become aware in the course of learning a second language that language has structure (often regular but sometimes irregular), is idiosyncratic, and is at times highly complex. The very fact of this general knowledge, even without the specific knowledge itself being mastered, prevents certain assumptions, works against fossilization and provides

reasonable expectations.   What I am suggesting here is simply that the instructor draw upon both a functional *and* a structural perspective (Stern 1970: 42).

6. 2. 4. Focus on formS to free communicative activity.   While there are situations where a communicative event may be exploited to call attention to form, relegating all formal instruction to communicative activities can be intrusive, halting and frustrating for the learner. Separate focus on formS gives attention to grammatical knowledge without interrupting the flow of communicative activities, and minimally intrusive techniques such as prompts, recasts and negotiation for meaning can be later employed in authentic communication since they do not bear the full burden of metalinguistic instruction.   This advantage was clearly seen in the in-depth analysis done by Spada and Lightbown 1993 (see Study #1), where focus-on-form techniques recalled previously-taught metalinguistic instruction without materially interrupting the content-based lessons.   It was also indicated by my interpretation of Doughty and Varela 1998 (see Study #3) wherein language arts classes and submersion education in a dominant-language environment enabled the effectiveness of focus on form in content-based sheltered submersion classes.   Lightbown (1998: 194) argues convincingly that isolated grammar lessons can facilitate the use of focus on form as a type of "shorthand" to maintain the flow of communicative events.

6. 2. 5. Focus on formS to enable advancing accuracy.   General even if hazy acquaintance with linguistic structures, with an understanding that greater complexity can be expected as the student advances, may enable better noticing and a greater degree of intake from input.   Gass (1991) explains that the effects of explicit instruction may not be apparent immediately, but it furnishes a schema of knowledge that aids the acquisition of forms through

ongoing meaningful input. More immediately, Gass suggests, explicit instruction contributes to "noticing". Other studies (see Lightbown 1998; Sharwood Smith 2004) suggest that monitored production of language chunks adds to learner input and creates a feedback loop that is later more fully analyzed and applied. From the perspective of skills acquisition theory, DeKeyser (2003) argues that metalinguistically-learned information can become automatized through use and practice. N. Ellis (1993: 303) observes that superior acquisition of both implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge is the "hard-bought" result of structured language learning which includes rules, exemplars and natural exposure. Lightbown and Spada (2008: 201) caution:

> Isolated lessons are a starting point or a follow-up for communicative or content-based activities. Above all, they should not be expected to result in students' immediate incorporation of the feature in focus into their communicative language use. Nevertheless, such lessons can prepare students to make the best use of opportunities for continuing their language acquisition in meaning-focused activities and integrated FFI when it occurs.

I suggest further that focus on formS activates the student's conscious ability to use knowledge of the L1 for analysis of the L2. It is emphasized once again that a focus on formS cannot achieve these results alone nor even in predominance: this presupposes an overall communicative approach to language in which both rich input and the challenge of production are present (see Canale and Swain 1980: 28:

> Particularly at the early stages of language learning, optimal use must be made of those aspects of communicative competence that the learner has developed through acquisition and use of the native language and that are common to those communication skills required in the second language.

and Spada and Lightbown 2008: 194: "One hypothesis is that isolated FFI is particularly useful when the L1 has a strong influence on L2 forms.").

6. 2. 6. Focus on formS to encourage mastery. Attention to linguistic forms engages the learner in perfecting the production of structures imperfectly gained through input and interaction, and in correcting persistent overgeneralization and transfer errors. The learner is also made aware of the use of structures in the L2 which may hitherto have been avoided through the use of other communicative strategies. Bialystok (1994: 160) discusses the twin and complementary functions of analysis of knowledge and control of processing, and posits that the more fully linguistic knowledge is analyzed, the more accessible language is for controlled production. "Knowledge of language represented in a less analyzed form will limit the learner in the range of functions that can be achieved." In Bialystok's model, instruction should draw upon both ends of the spectrum (analysis and control) to balance communicative need. Acknowledging that most second language instructional situations comprise such a blend, she classifies grammar-translation at the extreme analytical end of the spectrum, and conversational language learning at the control end. Omaggio Hadley (2001: 108), taking the same approach to the notion of complementary values of instruction approaches, suggests:

> Perhaps a modified form of grammar-translation would be useful at the higher levels of proficiency, where the purpose of instruction is to fine-tune students' control of the target language, especially in terms of learning to use specialized vocabulary or developing competence in written stylistics.

6. 2. 7. A philosophy of focus on formS: conclusions. It is acknowledged that a primarily communicative and task-related instructional setting is crucial for instructed second-language competence, and that the philosophies which undergird a natural approach or a focus on form are generally (but not exclusively) valid. In order to justify the articulation of a complementary, tentative and limited philosophy of focus on formS, it is equally acknowledged that without explicit attention to formS in a communicative language setting, certain drawbacks

are likely to be encountered, especially as the student progresses. With respect to these lacunae learners may remain unaware of their failure to reach target accuracy. Then, should they become or be made aware of the missing elements, they may be discouraged that such structures were not explained earlier, and experience frustration at the daunting task of correcting and relearning practices which have now been integrated into their automatic production. Finally, they may continue to struggle with ingrained habits which impede mastery of the language.[32]

On the other hand, I suggest that instructed learners are able to profit from instruction either immediately (though certainly not in all or necessarily even in most circumstances) or to, as it were, "file for future use" so that new knowledge can be integrated into, refine, and constantly advance an overall understanding of the language. On a surface level, this means that taking the time to invest in metalinguistic instruction makes every complex advance easier by building progressively on the student's growing body of knowledge of grammar (a Structuralist perspective to which I hasten to add the proviso that this is *not* the whole or even the predominant understanding of language which I am outlining, but merely one aspect of a global approach). Perhaps more importantly, at a deeper level this addresses the fundamental attitudes of the learner toward the language and language acquisition.

6. 3. Statement of an Open-System Approach to Second Language Acquisition

It is with great hesitation and many caveats that I propose the articulation of an approach to second language learning differing from the natural approach, focus on form or focus on formS. At the outset, I make it clear that I am in no way proposing a new approach, nor claiming

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[32] Recall Harley's (1998: 161) desire to work with Grade 2 students: "An early start to such instruction was also indicated as a preventative measure — as a defense against potential long-term exposure to misleading input from classmates and fossilization of *un/le* or ambiguous forms."

that I have devised the elements which I shall discuss below, nor suggesting that many researchers, methodologists and teachers are not already working at, or far beyond, the scenario which I will describe. Rather, having delved in some depth into the history of language learning and teaching, and having recognized the constraining ideologies which new knowledge inevitably engenders, I wish to *articulate openly and coherently a way of thinking* about second language instruction which embraces the freedom of teachers and researchers to a) do what in many cases they are already doing; b) describe accurately what is already being done under other names; and c) permit the expansion of inquiry, methods and techniques into areas hitherto circumscribed due to their unfortunate ideological connections.

First of all, I accept communicative language teaching as the starting point for second language learning, since it is incontrovertible that since the 1950s, the way in which most students learn and use a second language has been revolutionized. It has been argued consistently throughout this paper that the theories and insights of Chomsky, Hymes, Long and many others have transformed second language pedagogy into a discipline which fosters the development of overall linguistic and cultural competence in a way that was virtually impossible under the domination of grammar-translation. There is surely no going back to the notion that language is simply an ensemble of structures; it is an all-encompassing range of verbal and to some degree non-verbal and cultural representations of interpersonal communication.

Having said this (as plainly, redundantly and forcefully as I know how), I reiterate with Littlewood (1989) that because language has functions, it does not mean that it does not have structures. An approach to language learning which emphasizes authentic communication while profiting, openly and unapologetically, from the structural perspective, and balances its

methodologies in response to the instructional setting, is hereby proposed under the label of *open-system Communicative Language Teaching*.

Open-system Communicative Language Teaching

6. 3. 1. begins with the presupposition that language is primarily a means of communication which is inextricably bound to people, history and culture.

6. 3. 2. accepts that language has four basic spheres of communication: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. All of these spheres are equally important.

6. 3. 3. draws — not just upon "a great variety of methods and techniques" (Brandl 2008: 6) which are all derived from a single philosophical perspective, as Communicative Language Teaching *per se* has done to this point — but upon any and all methods and techniques, from any and all theories and paradigms of acquisition, which have been demonstrated to aid the development process or which show promise of doing so.

6. 3. 4. is responsive to the macro- and micro-environmental factors of the instructional milieu, that is to say, the influence of the ambient society as well as the strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages of a particular instructional setting, learner or group of learners; and acts to emphasize strategies which maintain balanced and effective progress in the four spheres.

This is no more than a description of what many practitioners have called for or are already doing (see for example Stern 1970; Canale and Swain 1980; Day and Shapson 1991; Sheen 2003; Spada and Lightbown 2008).

6. 4. Open-System Communicative Language Teaching: Principles for Practical Expectations and Methods

6. 4. 1. Principle #1: No approach guarantees complete success. We must remember that NO approach, method or technique of instruction will ensure, or indeed may ever produce even in a single case, perfect results. Stern (1970: 5) observed:

> It is no good placing all the blame on the teachers, the textbooks, the methods, or on the stupidity and recalcitrance of the students. The real culprit is language itself, because it is so vast, so complex, and at the same time so elusive. The difficulties of second language learning are inherent in the complexities of language.

Rod Ellis (1994: 658) astutely remarks:

> [...E]ven under favourable conditions classroom learners fail to develop full L2 linguistic competence simply by communicating. It should be noted, however, that it does not follow that formal instruction is the answer. It is possible that many adult learners will fail to develop high levels of grammatical competence no matter what the instructional conditions. […] In other words, there may be limits to what is achievable through classroom learning for the simple reason that there are limits regarding what most learners are capable of achieving under any conditions.

This is not intended to be discouraging, but merely realistic. If one essential element has been lost from the heritage of the rigid grammar-translation classroom, it may be the common-sense expectation that language, like all other subjects of learning administered by an instructor and undertaken by a student, whether a child, an adolescent or an adult, requires disciplined labour, sound pedagogy, aptitude, and time; that no degree of success is assured at the outset; and that mastery, if ever achieved, may take a lifetime. While many teachers and students will instinctively recognize these truths, our conscious expectations at any rate have been drastically modified by the widespread assumptions tracing back to Stephen Krashen. A generation of teachers and students was brought to believe that learning a second language was somehow

different from all other subjects and perhaps just as natural as learning one's first language. With Krashen's insistence on the availability of Universal Grammar and his strong non-interventionist position, it somehow seemed attainable that a second language could be acquired without conscious effort, application, memorization or production on the part of the student; and it seemed reasonable that second-language success could be as universal as first-language. Even the research agenda occasionally betrays the underlying sentiment that some advance will discover or will validate a fail-safe method of language learning. Hammerly (1987: 399), having critically reviewed early studies of immersion education, came to this sober conclusion: "learning a foreign language in the classroom is difficult, learning it well without strong motivation seems virtually impossible." If nothing else, the very minor significance of many instructional methods and techniques demonstrated by the studies which we have examined should return us to a level of expectation in the language classroom whereby we may be more content with good, steady progress, and more apt to apply ourselves diligently. Moreover, since mastery is not necessary for profitable L2 use, the learner may be encouraged that what is acquired at every stage is applicable to the task of interpersonal and intercultural communication. Native or near-native competence in the target language is the ultimate destination of the devoted second-language learner; nonetheless, pragmatic bilingualism is attainable by virtually every committed student, can be reached a lot sooner and offers the majority of its benefits in the course of the journey.

6. 4. 2. Principle # 2: Teacher and student excellence is a crucial factor. Of far greater importance to the success of language learning than any teaching or learning strategy is

the engagement, commitment to excellence, aptitude and enthusiasm of the teacher and the student. Huot-Tremblay (1989: 75-76) makes this sharp observation:

> Is it really necessary to recall the very modest effect of *teaching methods* which has appeared time and again in the results of experimental classroom studies? As early as 1969, Carroll estimated this effect in the "Pennsylvania Project" as accounting for about 5 to 10% of the overall variance. Furthermore, this negligible percentage attributable to teaching methods has been indicated in various ways in research and, with regard to my own work, has just been confirmed again in the results of a recent study (Huot, 1988). Numerous factors other than teaching methods, factors relating to the learner's own contribution, would seem to play a major role in the results which a learner obtains in a language course.[33]

Whereas the enormous amount of research currently underway in SLA would suggest that finding the right theory, practice and technique is the key to successful language learning, our analyses remind us that these elements, though significant, may not be the most important in the grand scheme of second language acquisition. What appears to be critical is that the instructor apply himself or herself diligently to knowledge of the second language structure, culture, and usage, to excellence in pedagogy (of whatever stripe) and to the student's advancement; and that the student consecrate both cognitive and affective resources to the acquisition process with determination and enthusiasm. It is indeed a heartening aspect of language learning that satisfactory results depend to a greater extent upon the efforts of teacher and student than upon the chances of falling upon, adopting and strictly adhering to a felicitous methodology.[34]

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[33] My translation of "Est-il en effet nécessaire de rappeler le modeste apport des stratégies d'enseignement qui est apparu à plusieurs reprises dans les résultats d'études expérimentales menées dans la salle de classe? Carroll, dès 1969, estimait cet apport dans le cas du "Pennsylvania Project", autour de 5 à 10% de la variance totale. Ce faible pourcentage imputable aux stratégies d'enseignement a été du reste pressenti depuis ce temps de diverses façons dans des études et, de notre part, il vient d'être réitéré dans les résultats d'une recherche récente (Huot, 1988). De nombreux facteurs, autres que les stratégies d'enseignement, reliés à la contribution de l'apprenant lui-même, joueraient une large part dans les résultats qu'obtient l'apprenant dans la classe de langue."

[34] In Sharwood Smith's (1993: 166) words: "If whatever fledgling theories in second language research that are around were applied without restraint to language teaching practice, the results might be much worse than simply applying common sense and the fruits of practical experience."

6. 4. 3. Principle #3: Emphasis is on communication. The great treasure gained from the linguistics and second-language revolution which began in the 1950s is the achievement of comprehension, fluent production and a high level of linguistic and cultural comfort in the L2. Thus, while open-system Communicative Language Teaching draws upon any and all approaches, it starts with the concept that language is primarily a means of communication. This means in practice that methods and techniques are employed with a view to improving the learner's ability to communicate, and that skills gained by the employment of any methods and techniques are applied to communication. "Communication" in this context refers to speaking, listening, writing and reading and not exclusively to oral communication.   Complementary methodologies (focus on form and focus on formS, or in Lightbown and Spada's 2008 nuanced terms, integrated and isolated FFI) contribute to an environment which is essentially communicative.

6. 4. 4. Principle #4: Metalinguistic intervention is responsive and comprehensive. Unlike the purely Structuralist approach, an open-system Communicative Language Teaching curriculum design is primarily geared to language function and to increasingly complex levels of expression and comprehension in oral or written communicative events. However, attention to language structure in a given instructional setting is responsive to learner need. In situations where language arts, a dominant-language environment, or other sources of metalinguistic information are contributing factors, the language learning situation focuses on communication and employs minimally-intrusive (focus-on-form) techniques to highlight structural issues. As distinct from a pure focus-on-form approach, an open-system Communicative Language

Teaching addresses language form not only when it impedes communicative intelligibility but also when it manifests departure from target norms for the level being taught.

6. 4. 5. Principle #5: Both language function and linguistic structure inform curriculum progression. We recall that language has both functions and structures which are sometimes loosely but nevertheless integrally tied to each other. Therefore, recognizing that learners of any age and both in the L1 and the L2 tend to follow (in very general terms) a progression from simpler to more complex utterances, both the structure of language and the functions of language should contribute to the progress of instruction. This is not to say that rich and authentic input is to be avoided at early stages nor that students cannot be expected to acquire, perhaps as semantic chunks, more complex ways of expressing themselves. No more is it to indicate that learners should not be required to operate at communicative levels beyond their current ability to analyze and dissect, or indeed that in some cases learners ever need to analyze the structure of all of their own utterances. It is simply to say that, depending somewhat on learner profile, environment, and the structural characteristics of the L2, formS-focused instruction should advance from the examination of simpler to more complex structures, in congruence with the corresponding advance in functional language use. This principle must remain general and flexible especially at the beginning level, since, as Johnson (1977) notes, organization of a curriculum on, say, functional lines necessarily implies a certain level of disorganization on structural lines and vice versa (see also Canale and Swain 1980).

6. 4. 6. Principle #6: Communicative activity, attention to form and attention to formS all play a role in communicative development. Language is about conveying meaning; and purely communicative tasks, focus-on-form interactions and formS-focused exercises are all

effective tools contributing to the development of the accurate and appropriate transmission of content in a second language. An exercise may emphasize purely communicative aspects, or a focus on form may be applied, or a focus on formS may either be integrated into tasks or isolated and applied in later events, depending on effect upon communicative flow, student and teacher styles and the form under consideration.

6. 5. General Conclusion

Inquiry into and hypotheses about language acquisition and the relationship of language to communication and culture dating to the 1950s began a transformation of the way in which language is regarded. With that transformation evolved convictions about language learning and use which unseated, thoroughly and permanently, the former universal method of second-language study, grammar-translation, which had regarded language as a set of structures to be learned, memorized and manipulated according to fixed rules. Instead, language was now seen as something innately human, principally acquired in the obscurity of a natural mechanism inside the brain, primarily concerned with meaning, intimately linked to personal expression and to fluid societal modes and registers and to a whole range of culturally-coded ancillary strategies. Observing the process of first language acquisition and speculating about the possible analogies with second language acquisition, influential researchers asserted that teachers and students must abandon the classroom mentality of language as immutable structures, and embrace language as a functional ensemble of strategies to be acquired simply through exposure and use. Metalinguistic analysis, far from aiding the process, might even retard, confuse or damage it.

These changed presuppositions heralded a wave of new methodologies and approaches in second language teaching which were freed from the structural syllabus. And the results of many were truly remarkable. Immersion education, for example, where the second language is the means of content-based instruction rather than the object of language instruction, produced a crop of young bilinguals whose comfort in their new tongue, fluency of oral production and level of comprehension rivaled that of native speakers. As well, in the core-subject language classroom, teachers who embraced a communicatively-oriented approach were nurturing students who advanced in competence not just in reading and writing skills but in oral production and comprehension to the point where they were capable of functioning in the target culture and of continuing to develop their communication skills.

The new paradigm was better than the old for the acquisition of living languages, but it was not without its proper flaws. Increased fluency and an emphasis on versatility in a variety of communicative strategies produced, perhaps as a corollary, certain lapses in accuracy, oddities of pronunciation, avoidance of complex forms and a tendency to persistence in transfer, overgeneralization and developmental errors. Fossilization of interlanguage forms seemed common enough to raise concern, and some academics and instructors became discontent with the level of accuracy attainable through this approach. However, the answer was not as simple as re-introducing formal grammar teaching, since the new paradigm had replaced not only the practices of the old but its very foundations in thought.

Enter Michael Long, who pushed the edges of the communicative ideology by suggesting that, while the emphasis must remain on authentic communication, incidental attention should be allocated to form as well in order that learners could make unencumbered progress. There was

little adjustment to be made to the prevalent philosophy, theory or practice, since Long's proposed "focus on form" assumed nativist acquisition, insisted on an entirely functional syllabus and avoided focusing on "formS" or language structures and metalinguistic principles as the old paradigm had done, but gave attention only to items arising in the communicative event which constituted an impediment to communication. The integrity of the ideology of natural and functional language acquisition was thus preserved, while at the same time the problem of formal lapses was addressed.

However, evidence indicates that in practice, under most language-learning circumstances, focus on form turned out to have minimal effects or to be a prohibitively time-consuming way to go about conveying grammatical information. Moreover, even with all the evidence that (especially young) language learners could reach certain levels through natural immersion alone, no final proof was forthcoming that this was the only, or even the ideal, way to learn a language. Equally convincing (and equally incomplete) were indications that many aspects of language could be treated like other subjects of learning and acquired, processed and automatized.

In spite of this, "focus on form," with its fidelity to the communicative approach and its ostensible attention to structure, attracted more and more researchers under its banner. As-yet theoretical and contested premises were assumed as fact, and instead of engaging the debate on these fronts, studies have concentrated on micro-variances between techniques and methods within the focus-on-form school. The general trend of such studies, their titular allegiance notwithstanding, is to avoid controls which test more explicit methods, or to introduce explicit methods under ambiguous or misleading descriptions, or to willfully ignore the real results of

explicit methods in favour of an interpretation of negligible and sometimes speculative results which conform to the focus-on-form approach.

The real problem is neither poor methods nor poor scholarship, but a constraining and a distorting of the agenda by the imposition of an ideological paradigm. This thesis calls therefore for no new method or approach to language learning nor for a return to any old method or approach. I suggest, with gratitude and respect toward the scholars who have investigated SLA over the past decades and who continue to do so today, that much of what is needed in that regard has already been provided. Rather, this paper calls for a rethinking and a re-articulating of the present state of SLA knowledge, with an emphasis on determining the boundaries between theory and fact, ostensible practices and real practices, ideological persuasions and sound research and pedagogy. That a system or paradigm of second-language teaching and learning is inevitable, and even helpful, is admitted; that such a system should be soundly based on the communicative revolution of the past half a century is applauded; that it be open to any and all sound or promising practices regardless of their paradigmatic relation is insisted; and that its supporting philosophy remain at all times tentative, limited and complementary is pleaded.

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