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# SLA and the Fundamental LT Divide

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### 2.1. Interventionist and Non-Interventionist Positions

Historical surveys by Fotos (2005), Howatt (1984), Kelly (1969), Musumeci (1997, 2009), Titone (1968) and others have shown that while varying and overlapping at the level of individuals and geographic regions at any one time, the practice of language teaching (LT) over the centuries has swung back and forth between interventionist and non-interventionist positions, between an emphasis on form and on meaning, and between the linguistic code and the learning process. Changes in the twentieth and twenty-first century have often reflected paradigm shifts in philosophy, linguistics, or psychology, but rarely new empirical findings about LT itself. Since the 1960s, the two major orientations have existed side by side. In the past few decades, views held simultaneously by different camps on the effects and effectiveness of instruction have diverged markedly, with proposals running the gamut from *laissez faire* to ball and chain. Teachers and learners have achieved a great deal through the use of all sorts of approaches and “methods.” However, while not the only source of relevant data, I believe second language acquisition (SLA) research findings provide important evidence against both

























## 2.5. A Third Option: Analytic Approaches with a Focus on Form

Given the flaws and limitations of both focus on forms and focus on meaning, I have argued since the mid-1980s for a third option, which I call an analytic approach with a *focus on form* (see, e.g., Doughty & Long 2003; Doughty & Williams 1998a; Long 1988, 1991, 2009; Long & Robinson 1998). One of the original methodological principles (MPs) of TBLT (Long 1991, 2000a, 2009), *focus on form* involves *reactive* use of a wide variety of pedagogic procedures (PPs) to draw learners' attention to linguistic problems in context, as they arise during communication (in TBLT, typically as students work on problem-solving tasks), thereby increasing the likelihood that attention to code features will be synchronized with the learner's internal syllabus, developmental stage, and processing ability.<sup>3</sup> Focus on form capitalizes on a symbiotic relationship between explicit and implicit learning, instruction, and knowledge.

As noted above, reliance on implicit learning from simple exposure, i.e., a pure focus on meaning, is inadequate, especially if advanced proficiency is the goal, and inefficient, due to the time required. Learner attention to problem areas of grammar, lexis, collocation, and so on, is needed in the interests of rate of acquisition and level of ultimate attainment. A purely implicit approach might not work with adults, especially with non-salient items, and would anyway take too long. However, to avoid a return to psycholinguistically indefensible lessons full of externally timed grammar rules, overt "error correction," and pattern drills, with all their nasty side effects, the idea is that as many of the problem areas as possible should be handled within otherwise communicative lessons by briefly drawing learners' attention to code features as and when problems arise. In this *reactive* mode (part of the *definition* of focus on form, not an optional feature), the learner's underlying psychological state is more likely to be optimal, and so the treatment, whatever PPs are employed, is more effective.

For example, while comparing car production in Japan and the USA as part of a *pedagogic task* designed to help students develop the ability to Deliver a sales report (the *target task*), a learner might say something like "Production of SUV in the United States fell by 30% from 2000 to 2004." If the very next utterance from a teacher or another student is a partial recast, in the form of a confirmation check, e.g., "Production of SUVs fell by 30%?" as proposed in Long (1996b), the likelihood of the learner noticing the plural *-s* is increased by the fact that he or she is *vested* in the exchange, so is *motivated* to learn what is needed and *attending* to the response, already knows the meaning he or she was trying to express, so has freed up *attentional resources* to devote to the form of the response, and hears the correct form in close juxtaposition to his or her own, facilitating *cognitive comparison*. These are all reasons why implicit corrective recasts are believed to work as well as they do, without disturbing the fundamental communicative focus of a lesson, and why negative feedback is believed to work better than provision of the same numbers of models of a target form and/or tokens in ambient input (positive evidence). In contrast, with *focus on forms*, the teacher or the textbook, not the student, has selected a form for treatment. The learner is less likely to feel a need to

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 10 for a full discussion of the distinction between methodological principles (MPs) and pedagogic procedures (PPs).

acquire the new item, and so will likely be less motivated, and less attentive. If the form is new, moreover, so, typically, will be its meaning and use, requiring the learner to process all three simultaneously. (We will return to these issues in more detail in Chapters 3 and 10.)

If a problematic form is considered tricky, perhaps because of L1 influence or low saliency, a more explicit brief switch of pedagogic focus by the teacher to the language itself, sometimes for just a matter of seconds, may be beneficial, e.g., “Car or cars?” In either case, and however overt the pedagogic procedure may be that the teacher employs to induce student focus on form, this reactive approach to treating (in the case of plural -s) a simple grammar point is operating in tandem with the learner’s internal syllabus, in that the focus on form was triggered by a problem that occurred in the student’s performance, not by a pre-set syllabus having prescribed it for that day’s lesson. A student’s attempt to produce a form is not always, but often, an indication of his or her developmental readiness to acquire it.

Learners’ attention often needs to be directed to linguistic issues – not only in response to error or communicative trouble, but by extending a learner’s repertoire as opportunities arise, e.g., by a teacher reformulating and extending already acceptable learner speech or writing. For example, in a discussion of great soccer players, an elementary-level student might say or write, “I think Xavi is a better player than Pirlo.” The teacher might respond with “You think Xavi is better than Pirlo, but do you think he’s the best midfielder ever?” The learner (and his or her classmates) is likely to be focused on the teacher’s response, given that it concerns something he or she has just said, and – because already partly familiar with the content of the message – has attentional resources available with which to focus on the switch from comparative to superlative forms.

In sum, rather than the limited binary choice offered by analytic and synthetic approaches, and by focus on forms and focus on meaning, it is clear that there are *three* major options in LT, depicted in Table 2.1.

## 2.6. A Role for Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) Research

Against this backdrop of fundamental disagreement in LT, one might expect theory and research in SLA to provide some help. After all, although most work in SLA has little

**Table 2.1.** Three major options in language teaching.

Options in Language Teaching		
Option 2 Analytic Focus on Meaning	Option 3 Analytic Focus on Form	Option 1 Synthetic Focus on Forms
Natural Approach Immersion, CLIL	TBLT Content-Based LT (?)	GT, ALM, Silent Way, TPR, etc.
Procedural Syllabus, etc.	Process Syllabus (?), etc.	Structural, Notional-Functional, Lexical Syllabi, etc.

or nothing to do with LT, one of its most applied sub-domains, ISLA, is of obvious potential relevance. Since SLA is the process LT is designed to facilitate, the relationship between the two, and understanding the effects and effectiveness of instruction, and constraints on instruction, is of considerable interest. The problem is, the relationship between SLA and LT has not always been a positive one, such that SLA-based proposals will not necessarily be welcomed with open arms, even when, as will become clear in later chapters, the rationale is much broader than research findings in SLA, as is the case with TBLT. The potential contribution of work on ISLA is addressed in the next chapter, as well as in later parts of the book.

## 2.7. Summary

LT over the centuries has oscillated between two fundamentally different and mutually exclusive positions: on the one hand, synthetic, focus-on-forms approaches, syllabi, methods, materials, and (although not discussed yet) tests, and on the other, analytic, focus-on-meaning approaches, syllabi, methods, materials, and (less often) tests. The difference during the past 60 years, up to and including the present day, is that, while synthetic, focus-on-forms approaches remain dominant, mostly due to the influence of commercial publishers; there has been simultaneous verbal support for each approach from different wings of the LT field. SLA research findings show that both have serious problems, however, and fortunately, are not the only choices available. As explained briefly, and as will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, a third option, *an analytic syllabus with a focus on form*, captures the advantages of analytic, focus-on-meaning approaches, while avoiding their shortcomings.

## 2.8. Suggested Readings

- DeKeyser, R. (2007). Skill acquisition theory. In VanPatten, B., & Williams, J. (eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition* (pp. 97–113). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
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