

## SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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

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

### Introduction

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

Contradictory information about the impact of SLA research on teachers, like that found in MacDonald's conclusions to their study, is not uncommon in the literature written at the turn of the century. While there are applied linguists who consider that, for the most part, SLA research has made relevant contributions to language pedagogy (Le., Lightbown, 2000; Long, 1990; Mitchell, 2000), there are others who perceive a gap, sometimes a truly, almost mountable conflict of interests between researchers and practitioners (Le., Block, 2000; Crookes, 1997; Markee, 1997). However, these diverging stances are much better understood if one is aware that they originate

from rather fundamental differences in the conception of teaching that these two groups of researchers hold (as conceptualized by Freeman, 1996).

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

### **Main part**

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

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

### **CLT AND SLA**

Communicative language teaching came out at a time when teachers were sceptical about the role of grammar in foreign language instruction (Mitchell, 2000) and felt disillusioned with the results of audio-lingual teaching (Lightbown, 2000). But the drastic changes that took place in foreign second language teaching starting in the sixties had their immediate antecedents outside SLA research and theory. Those changes were mainly based on linguistic theories of communication (British functional linguistics and work in sociolinguistics and philosophy) on which scholars like

Widdowson and Candlin drew in order to advocate for a view of language as a system of communication with an emphasis on language in use. Though scarce at that point, SLA research certainly played a role mainly through Krashen's interpretation of SLA's early research and his theoretical position in the seventies, which were fully compatible with the shift to CLT.

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

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

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

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

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

The nineties witnessed the proliferation of new proposals for potential pedagogical interventions which, unlike CLT, were grounded in SLA research. A number of these proposals include pedagogical events (which have come to be known as focus on form) where students' attention is down to formal elements of language at times in the lesson when the main focus is on meaning or communication<sup>2</sup>. Literature on focus on form (from here on also referred to as FonF) such as Doughty and Williams's edited book (1998) has often also included theoretically grounded work

that includes elements of focus on forms, that is, approaches where linguistic features are isolated from context or communicative activity (in Long's terms focus on forms; see Robinson, 1998). Following this criterion, this type of studies will also be included in the present review.

One central notion to the understanding of FonF is Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) supported by his own experience learning Portuguese in Brazil. During his stay, he realized that elements of the input that had gone unnoticed (even though they had not impeded comprehension in the past) became noticeable and analysable in the out-of-class input only after they were taught in class. He then hypothesized that 'noticing', defined as 'paying attention to... details and differences... ', is a necessary condition to facilitate intake and that it constitutes a first step in the process of language building (Schmidt, 2001). Paying attention to details and differences means that learners notice the difference between their own L1 utterances and those produced by more competent speakers, something that is precisely the intended outcome of a FonF intervention.

The interest in focus on form also comes as a reaction in the mid-eighties to a number of studies of French immersion programmes in Canada. Even though previous reports of these programmes had shown positive evidence as regards students' listening comprehension skills and ability to use French to learn subject matter, later studies looking at the quality of students' spoken French showed less positive results. These studies often reported that students did not achieve high levels of proficiency in language production and that their spoken French still contained many errors (most obviously in its grammatical features). As a result of these studies, researchers started to question exclusively experiential approaches to language learning, especially in learning contexts where students may have few opportunities to use their knowledge productively and where input is limited to the classroom setting, as in the French immersion programmes (Swain, 1985).

### **Macro-options**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



As expected in relation to an emerging area such as this, there is also room for theoretical controversy (see for example the exchange of articles between Van Patten, on one side, and DeKeyser, Salabeny, Robinson and Harrington, on the other, in *Language Learning*, 2002). One of the central sources of disagreement is about the amount and type of attention needed for learning. While the above mentioned Noticing Hypothesis seems to be the most widely accepted position, there are other applied linguists who hold alternative views. According to Robinson (1999), the existence of a central executive, where attentional resources are allocated, comes into play in his redefinition of Schmidt's noticing. Another position is that of Tomlin and Villa (1991) who think that conscious awareness, a requirement in the Noticing Hypothesis, does not intervene in language processing. Similarly, Truscott (1998) is of the belief that noticing should be dissociated from competence, even if it is necessary for the acquisition of metalinguistic knowledge.

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

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

Several thorough reviews on research on Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) and, more generally grammar teaching, have been published that go over work mainly conducted in the eighties and up to the late nineties (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998; Norris & Ortega, 2001; Spada, 1997). The present section will, therefore, pay closer attention to more recent research work (from 1999 onwards), which is not covered by the above mentioned reviews. Since VanPatten and Cadierno's (1993) initial research work, there has been a wealth of studies that have further evaluated the effectiveness of processing instruction (PI). In most of these studies, PI has been compared with traditional instruction (TI) and or no instruction. Typically PI groups have involved information about the target linguistic form or structure, followed by an Information Processing strategy and subsequently a number of structured input activities (both referential and affective). On the other hand, TI has involved an initial explanation of the form followed by mechanical and later communicative practice. Most of the studies carried out in the nineties focused on the acquisition of Spanish and used discrete-point tests to measure production. In this respect, Benati's recent work (2001) is of especial interest in that it dealt with another Romance language (Italian) and included a less structured oral production task. The results obtained are in line with findings in previous research in that the PI group's gains were shown to be superior to those of the TI group in the interpretation task but not in the two production tasks (both the discrete-point test and the communicative task), where both groups obtained similar gains. The fact that these results held over time (in this case, three weeks) also comes to confirm findings in previous research studies. Similar results to those of Benati were obtained in Van Patten and Wong's (2003) study involving the French causative and they were taken to mean that learners in the PI group could transfer what they learned to a different type of task whereas those in the TI group just learnt to do the type of task they were trained in. However, even if these results seem to show the effectiveness of this input-based instructional option, one probably needs to be somewhat cautious, given that there are a number of replication studies (like that of Allen's, 2000) that have not obtained comparable results.

One must also be aware of the fact that some of the referential activities proposed in PI are similar to traditional exercises in TI, the only difference being that language production is not required.

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

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

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

Negative feedback Research on negative feedback has been more abundant over the past few years than any other mode of FonF. This has probably been in response to a scarcity of previous research

that investigated the isolated effects of this type of interactional moves. While previous research consistently showed the availability of negative feedback in NS-NNS task-based interaction as well as in teacher-student classroom interaction, the focus of later work has been on the evaluation of its usefulness. There are a number of laboratory studies that have shown that recasts contribute to the learners' inter-language development, as measured by performance tests. Long, Inagaki and Ortega (1998) showed that recasts were more beneficial than models on forms with relatively high communicative value. More recently, Leeman (2003) has provided evidence that recasts can also be beneficial on forms of low perceptual salience and little communicative value. The superiority of negative feedback was also confirmed in a study by Iwashita (2003) involving beginner learners of Japanese, a relevant finding given that previous studies dealt with more advanced L2 learners.

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

Other classroom-based studies With the exception of a few studies on corrective feedback, classroom-based research on processing instruction, input enhancement and form-focused output by definition involves some type of intervention through a specific treatment on the part of the teacher or through the implementation of specifically designed instructional materials. Another line of research is found in classroom-based studies that analyse unplanned episodes of focus on form in the course of spontaneous classroom interaction. In Williams' work (1999, 2001) two adult students from four classes of different levels of proficiency were recorded in their interaction with other students and the teacher, and in Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen's work (2001) two teachers were recorded in their interaction with the whole class as well as individuals and groups of learners in an intermediate and pre-intermediate class. The fact that Williams' study (1999) focuses on the learner and that of Ellis et al. (2001) focuses on the teacher may explain the contrasting results obtained as regards the frequency of the episodes under study. While in Williams' study (1999) LRE's were infrequent at all levels of instruction (for example, 5.85 per session and 2.34 per 10,000 words), in Ellis et al. 'S study (2001) these episodes are much more common (an average of one every 1.6 minutes). The extremely low ratios obtained by Williams in student-initiated episodes, which are especially low in open-ended activities such as free conversation, would provide evidence for the need of focused tasks as a more productive procedure to elicit spontaneous attention to form in pair and group work. Another aspect that is analysed by these authors is the effectiveness of these LRE's although this is measured in different ways. In Williams' (2001) this was measured with tailor made tests for individual students based on the LRE's that had been previously recorded. Results show that both learner- and teacher- initiated episodes led to accurate performance on these tests measuring explicit linguistic knowledge and that students scores raised with proficiency. Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001), on the other hand, by recording instances of successful uptake (both pre-emptive and reactive focus on form" also came up with positive evidence about the effectiveness of LRE's. A high proportion of them (74%) led to successful instances of uptake, with reactive moves eliciting the highest proportion of these instances and teacher-initiated preemptive moves the lowest.



### **How and what to teach**

The relationship between research, even research conducted within the classroom, and language pedagogy is a complex one (see Ellis, 1997b for an illuminating discussion). Furthermore, probably research findings cannot always be used to advise teachers about how or what to teach. However, as the previous sections have shown, language teachers have at their disposal a wealth of findings on SLA that may inform their methodological options. For example, teachers may make use of implicit or explicit methodological techniques in order to draw attention to form on the basis of the target language feature to be focused on and the learners' characteristics. If they choose to provide explicit attention to the targeted feature, they may provide it pre-emptively or reactively (see Ellis, 2003). Or teachers may decide to use a combination of both implicit and explicit techniques in order not to always disturb the communicative flow. Similarly, the choice of the language features or items that may most appropriately receive form-focused instruction has been a matter of concern among SLA researchers, and relevant proposals have been made. For example, Harley (1993) suggests the following as the most likely candidates for a focus-on-form intervention: forms that differ in non-obvious ways from the learners' first language, for example, adverb placement for French and English (White, 1991; Trahey & White, 1993); forms that are not salient because they are irregular or infrequent in the L2 input, or otherwise forms lacking in perceptual salience, for example, conditionals in French; forms that are not important for successful communication, for example, third person singular S in English; and forms that are likely to be misinterpreted or misanalysed by learners, for example, dative alternations in English (Carroll & Swain, 1993).

Williams (1995) suggests that there may be a variety of reasons why some forms are not acquired and these reasons may, in turn, affect whether and what sort of form-focused instruction is appropriate. Forms that are infrequent in the input, that are irregular or superfluous are again mentioned in that respect. For forms that are infrequent in the input and hence unlikely to be noticed, such as conditionals in French, Williams proposes simply to point out their existence and increase their presence in input and practice. For forms that may be difficult to learn because of irregularities, such as the distinction between past tenses in French, this author sees the need of more explicit instruction and corrective feedback. Finally, Williams suggests that form focused instruction may be of little help in the case of forms that have proven resistant to instruction and that are largely superfluous for successful communication, such as third person singular s in English. From a different stance, that of positively advocating for explicit instruction of grammar, Mitchell (2000) points out the need to prioritise those points in the target language system where explicit attention is most likely to lead to measurable and lasting gains in student learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

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

Hence, it is to be expected that the theoretical bases and research evidence from which the new proposals are drawn will provide teachers with insights that are relevant to their own teaching situations. In settings in which purely communicative methodology is dominant, teachers may be provided with an understanding of the need for incorporating focused instruction. In settings in which the instructional format has a structural focus, teachers may understand the need for providing a communicative context in which to embed focused instruction. To finish, and

paraphrasing Ellis (1997b: 36), although SLA cannot ensure competent practice, it can indeed contribute to teachers' understanding.

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