DIRECTING LEARNER ATTENTION TO LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE AND LANGUAGE USE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: THE VOICE OF AN EXPERT TEACHER

Wendy Lam

Background

While the importance attached to the integration of form and meaning (Long and Robinson 1998) and encouraging learners to "notice" linguistic forms (Schmidt 2001: 4) is now well established, there has been little empirical research that explores second language teacher use of techniques to direct learner attention to both language form and language use in on-going classroom interactions. The main aim of this article is to profile the methods of an experienced teacher in directing learner attention to both language knowledge and language use within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, thereby providing insights for effective English teaching.

I will begin by explaining the terminology used in the article, which will be followed by a brief review of research that has examined variation in EFL teacher use of instructional approaches to draw learner attention to language knowledge and language use. The research design, data collection, and data analysis of the present study are then presented. Finally, the findings and their implications for English teaching in the EFL context are discussed.

Theoretical framework

Schmidt (2001) argues that an understanding of the concept of attention is essential since it affects virtually every aspect of second language acquisition (SLA). People learn about the things they attend to and do not learn much about things they do not attend to. Attention as a construct in SLA is, therefore, worthy of attention.

Language knowledge refers to student knowledge about language i.e. linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation. Language knowledge is comparable to 'subject knowledge' espoused in Burgess, Turvey and Quarshie (2000: 10), which needs to be developed by learners for effective communication. Language use, on the other hand, refers to learner ability to use language knowledge for meaningful communication.

Communicative competence is defined by Hymes (1972: 8) as the 'capability of a person' and 'it is dependent upon both knowledge and use.' Hymes (1972) includes knowledge of aspects of language as well as ability for use, thus supporting the view that both language knowledge and language use are important to the development of communicative competence in SLA.

There has been a belief that effective language learning is impossible unless learners are challenged to use the language for communication. This view has led to the development of communicative approaches and task-based approaches to language teaching (Littlewood 2007). It should, however, be remembered that attention to language use alone is not sufficient to promote language learning; unless attention is also focused on the language itself, errors may become fixed (Skehan 1998) and target-like grammar may not be acquired (Swain 1985). Hence there are compelling reasons why learners need to attend to language knowledge in order to stretch their language abilities. Radwan (2005) postulates that instruction that focuses on language use alone may not be sufficient for learners to acquire the linguistic elements of the target language, and points to a positive relationship between drawing learners' attention to language knowledge and language development. Nevertheless, Ellis (2003) also notes strong arguments that learners need to put what they learn about language into productive use. In other words, attention to language knowledge and attention to language use represent complementary, interrelated aspects of language learning and both are essential in the EFL classroom. The problem is how to achieve this integration.

Recent empirical studies have attempted to explore ways of achieving such integration by examining the relative merits and efficacy of a focus on language knowledge as contrasted with a focus on language use in instructional approaches, in an attempt to determine the key to

successful SLA (see Ellis 2002 for a summary of research). Despite the broad consensus that is emerging on the beneficial effects of attention to language knowledge and the possibility of integrating this successfully into a communicative curriculum that facilitates language use (Lamy and Hassan 2003), concerns remain about how best this may be achieved. Curriculum documents such as those in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council 2007) offer limited guidance on how such integrative practices may be implemented. Hence this project aims to contribute to the knowledge base of how teachers may effectively draw student attention to both language knowledge and language use in the EFL classroom, particularly in the Asian context. The key research question that forms the basis of the present investigation is: how do EFL teachers direct learner attention to language knowledge and language use in the classroom?

Methodology
The main study
The findings reported in this article are drawn from the main study which investigated how the process of researcher-teacher collaboration might affect teacher approaches to the issue of attention to language knowledge and language use in the EFL classroom. The following brief description outlines the relationship between the main study and this study, explaining why and how an expert teacher was selected for reporting in this paper.

The main study was conducted in the EFL classroom in Hong Kong (China). It involved a small group of teacher educators at the Hong Kong Institute of Education and teachers in the English departments of the two participating schools. Two teachers in a primary school and three in a secondary school (N=5) were invited to participate in the longitudinal study, which was carried out in three phases (with each phase lasting about eight months) over a period of two academic years.

Phase 1 was conducted prior to the collaboration between the teacher educators (the researchers) and the school teachers (the research partners). Initial baseline data that captured teacher approaches and practices in directing learner attention to language knowledge and language use in the EFL classroom were collected. Phase 2 involved the treatment or the collaboration between the teacher educators and the school teachers while Phase 3 sought to ascertain whether and how this collaborative process might impact teacher beliefs and practices.

Each phase involved about eight to ten EFL lessons. All of the lessons were video-recorded and the classroom interactions were analyzed to understand teacher classroom practice. In addition, all the participating teachers (N=5) were asked to comment on their perceptions and intentions through stimulated recall interviews. The use of different types of data aimed to triangulate evidence relating to both perceptions and practices (Taguchi 2005).

The present study
With a view to tracking the thought processes of one teacher in depth, the Head of the English Department (hereafter the teacher) working in the secondary school participating in the main study was selected as the focus of this paper. The teacher was leader of a group of 18 English language teachers and had been teaching EFL for about 10 years. She was subject-trained, holding both a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature and a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics. Furthermore, she had received post-graduate professional training as an English language teacher and consequently possessed a sound theoretical understanding of English language teaching methods as well as the practical skills for their implementation. By Tsui's (2002) criteria, she might well be considered an expert teacher. As such, her practice in directing learner attention to language knowledge and language use was thought to be insightful.

Eight English lessons were video-recorded for this study. These were conducted with a class of Secondary Four students who were about 16 years old and had studied nine years of English. The students' English was generally of intermediate level. The series of recorded lessons dealt with the biography of Audrey Hepburn, which was an English reader selected for pleasurable reading under the teacher's guidance.

The baseline stimulated recall interview (SRI) data on the teacher collected in Phase 1 forms the basis of this paper. SRI is a means of eliciting data about the thought processes involved when carrying out a task or activity (see Gass and Mackey 2000 for a comprehensive review). The immediacy of this post-lesson SRI methodology represented an appropriate means of tapping into the expert teacher's thoughts about her actions during the lessons just taught. Indeed, this method was able to capture the thoughts and intentions of the teacher in relation to her recorded actions i.e. what she actually did rather than what she might generally claim to believe. As reported in Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis (2004), there might be discrepancies between stated teacher beliefs and classroom practices. Hence, SRI data are likely to reflect, in a relatively more reliable way, what the teacher was actually thinking about and doing during the lesson.

To minimize memory loss, the teacher selected and viewed episodes of the classroom teaching with the researcher immediately after each lesson. Where there was evidence of attention to language knowledge and/or language use, the teacher paused the tape to report on what she had been doing, and why she had been doing it in terms of her attentional focuses (e.g., attention to language knowledge and/or language use). While the SRI data which recorded the voice of the teacher are presented in this paper, they were triangulated with evidence from the lesson transcripts. Recurrent themes arising from the analysis of the SRI data were identified by the researcher and validated by the teacher.

Findings and discussion
The SRI findings presented below were the voices of the teacher recorded immediately after her lessons. They reflected ways whereby she directed learner attention to language knowledge and/or language use in the EFL classroom. The recordings were collected at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the aforementioned series of lessons on the biography of Audrey Hepburn.

Right at the beginning of the lesson series, the teacher reported raising students'

awareness of the overriding purpose of the learning unit:

> My teaching focused on content not language knowledge. I used the same method of teaching in subsequent lessons. I intended to expose the students to Audrey's life experience by asking them to imagine that they were with her.

The primary focus was on language use (i.e. understanding 'content'). She was explicit about focusing on teaching 'content', explaining that she directed the learner attention to the biography of Audrey Hepburn. She was aiming at helping students understand Audrey's life experiences through the processing of textual meaning, thereby drawing student attention to language use right at the beginning. This is noteworthy given that many EFL teachers in the East Asian context believe that language knowledge (e.g. meaning of vocabulary items) should precede language use (e.g. understanding a text) and that the teacher should begin a learning unit by drawing student attention to language knowledge (e.g. key vocabulary items or grammatical structures) that they feel students must know before being engaged in language use (i.e. comprehending a written text).

While the teacher's overriding focus was on language use, she did not lose sight of the need to direct student attention to language knowledge (i.e. grammar or the past tense). The teacher reported:

> There I deliberately used the past tense to teach because it was about the past life of a person. I hoped that the students would notice this without my pointing it out. However, I did point this out when I saw some students use present tense in their work.

The teacher reported giving attention to a grammatical structure (i.e. 'the past tense'), hoping that 'the students would notice this without [her] pointing it out'. This way, she was trying to help students understand language knowledge (i.e. the grammatical structure) in an implicit, inductive way whereby the learners were expected to pick up the language knowledge through the context of a biography (Thornbury 1999).

In addition, the teacher directed student attention to language knowledge (i.e. the grammatical structure) in an explicit way. On noticing students' mistakes of using the present tense, she explicitly pointed this out

and reminded students of the rules and conditions governing the use of the past tense. The teacher, therefore, seemed to be flexible in and capable of adopting both implicit and explicit methods of directing student attention to language knowledge (i.e. the past tense), thereby integrating language knowledge into language use (i.e. understanding the biography of Audrey Hepburn).

Let us now turn to a lesson in the middle of the series. In the episode, the teacher reported preparing students for an upcoming, language use task (i.e. suggesting a present for Audrey Hepburn). She explained:

> In this task, the students looked at the text for the problems that Audrey had faced. They would need to work in groups to think of a   present for her in the core task that followed. It was necessary for them to understand   Audrey's unhappy experiences before they did the core task.

She reported engineering an opportunity whereby students could find out the problems that Audrey had faced. This could be considered an enabling task which aimed to provide students with the necessary schematic knowledge needed in the core, language use task (i.e. suggesting a present for Audrey). The enabling task was also a language use activity as students were engaged in comprehension (i.e. understanding Audrey's problems).

Notwithstanding the primary focus on helping students to engage in language use (i.e. processing meaning), the teacher was prompt at directing student attention to language knowledge (i.e. meaning of unfamiliar words in the worksheet) as reported below:

> … but students were unable to write the information on the worksheet. I had to paraphrase some of the vocabulary used the worksheet in order to help them understand the requirements, such as "What is the problem?" and "What's wrong about it?" They were then able to answer by saying "Very bad."

At that moment, I thought that open-ended questions might not suit their level of ability. I had to spend a lot of time helping them with the worksheet because they were not able to do it on their own…

The above excerpt indicates that, while the overriding purpose concerned with language use (i.e. understanding Audrey's

problems), the teacher reported directing student attention to language knowledge (i.e. meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary in the worksheet) in a meaning-focused activity as students 'were not able to do it on their own.' The teacher, therefore, appeared to be responsive to the learners' need for language support. It could be argued that the teacher drew the attentional focus of the students to language knowledge in an incidental way which was contingent upon students' need for linguistic scaffolding and had not been on the teaching agenda (Doughty and Williams 1998). The expertise of the teacher allowed her the flexibility to build language knowledge (i.e. meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary) into language use (i.e. understanding Audrey's problems), thereby integrating language knowledge and language use upon the realization that the students were not able to cope with the linguistic aspects of language use. Such an incidental approach is obviously different from the intentional, pre-planned method of drawing student attention to language knowledge (i.e. the grammatical form or the past tense) discussed earlier. This may provide evidence for the teacher's ability to deploy both intentional and incidental methods of focusing on forms while keeping the communicative purpose of the lesson (Doughty and Williams 1998).

Finally, let us look at an episode in the last few lessons in the series; it was at an output stage where students were provided with an appropriate context for using or applying knowledge about language they had learnt. As in the previous stages, the primary focus of the output stage was on language use (i.e. students playing roles of Audrey and her mum). The teacher reported:

> The students played roles; I mean Audrey and her mum. In this way, they could be involved in the characters' situations and experience their lives and feelings…The students could use the words and apply the meanings of this paragraph to play roles. I wanted them to be creative in this task…When they wrote the scripts, I looked at their grammar and the choice of words. I wanted to make sure that the scripts could help them play roles.

The teacher was keen that students were able to apply language knowledge (i.e.

'words' and 'meanings of [the] paragraph') to engage in productive, language use (i.e. 'to play roles'). The teacher told me at a briefing session that she had always wanted to engineer language use activities in the form of production or performance (e.g., writing out scripts, practising reading aloud, or role playing) towards the end of her lesson sequence. The teacher reiterated the significance of student performance as a clear means of language output that could help students put language knowledge to language use, believing that 'the students could use the words and apply the meanings of [the] paragraph to play roles', which provided yet another opportunity to integrate language knowledge and language use.

As in the previous stages, she intentionally directed student attention to language knowledge (i.e. grammar, choice of words) prior to the role-play. She reported: 'When they wrote the scripts, I looked at their grammar and the choice of words. I wanted to make sure that the scripts could help them play roles'. She tried to ensure that students' language knowledge (i.e. 'grammar' and 'choice of words') was accurate As it had been on the teacher's agenda to draw student attention to 'grammar' and 'choice of words', the method of directing student attention to language knowledge was intentional.

To sum up, the teacher drew student attention to language use in her entire lesson series: right at the beginning (i.e. understanding the biography of Audrey Hepburn), in the middle (i.e. understanding Audrey's problems and suggesting a present for her), and at the end (i.e. playing the roles of Audrey and her mom). Notwithstanding a focus on language use, the teacher consistently deployed ways to help students integrate language knowledge (i.e. the past tense in biography; meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary in the worksheets; words and meanings in a text; grammar and choice of words in scripts) into language use. These ways might be implicit (i.e. hoping that students would notice her use of past tense in biography) or explicit (i.e. pointing it out when students failed to notice). On most occasions, the procedure was intentional: the teacher planned in advance on when and how to draw student attention to language knowledge. Nonetheless, she demonstrated

flexibility and sensitivity in adopting an incidental approach, responding to students' need for linguistic help on an ad hoc basis when the need arose. This may well be the kind of skills and awareness that distinguish an experienced from a novice teacher.

Conclusion

Profiling the methods employed by the expert teacher has so far supported the view that integrating language knowledge and language use requires both awareness and skills on the part of the teacher. In the EFL classroom, it seems that the teacher's awareness of the ultimate goal of enabling students to use English for communication is of paramount importance. Such awareness was the key to the development of the series of lessons discussed above, moving from an awareness-raising stage to the ultimate, output stage. Moreover, while language use remained very much the focus, language knowledge was embedded at each stage so that language knowledge could be effectively blended with language use. Such an approach is in line with that espoused by Burgess, Turvey and Quarshie (2000) in helping student teachers to cope with grammar teaching in that grammar - as part of language knowledge - was introduced as a topic in the course of using language and in a way that student teachers were engaged in the process of composing. Not all teachers are able to blend language knowledge and language use and to blend it well. Effective blending of language knowledge and language use should, therefore, not be taken for granted and should be expertise required de facto of expert EFL teachers.

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