

Literature Review: The Theoretical Underpinning of Dictogloss

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Within the predominant paradigm of communicative language teaching (CLT) it has been judged that attention should be placed on helping learners to communicate genuinely, spontaneously and meaningfully in the second language and for teachers to move beyond the mere teaching of rules, structures and definitions (Brown, 2000). In today's terms, (CLT) guides pedagogy to focus on conveying and transmitting of 'meaning' and to a lesser degree 'form' and 'use'. However, what the role of a L2 teacher should be in a communicative classroom is far from being settled. Of particular interest for students, and teachers alike, is in the area of grammar instruction.

In comparison to other research topics, grammar instruction has been the primary focus of the greatest amount of empirical research and practical interest in second language and L2 language learning (Borg & Burns, 2008). Within this body of research, there is still a number of controversial issues in regard to grammar instruction pedagogy, and in particular the implicit/explicit, and the inductive/deductive instruction dichotomies. However, there is growing consensus that some formal attention to grammar can be beneficial to L2 learners. The aim of this review is on the role noticing plays in acquiring morphosyntactic knowledge of the target language. Adams (2003, p. 351) cites several areas of research, including Leow's study on attention, Tomlin and Villa's study on awareness, and Robinson's study on memory that have implicated noticing as a necessary condition for second language development.

The best method to promote noticing in a language class is still up to debate. In fact, very little in SLA has been completely resolved. Language teaching is not easily packaged into certain trends or methods. What is important is to have a sound over all approach to teaching, where the teacher is free to choose a particular procedure or technique (Brown, 2000). Ellis (2001) pointedly summarizes the current trend as moving away from a method conceptualization to approaches that rely on promoting pedagogically driven exposure that meets the needs of the learner. Also, he envisioned a move towards a smaller set of classroom processes that provide increasingly psycholinguistically motivated options. This review will focus on one particular pedagogic option, referred to as grammar dictation or dictogloss, which became popular in recent times with the publication of 'Grammar Dictation' written by Ruth Wajnryb

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(1990).

The Focus of this Literature Review

Two areas that have been ignored in SLA research, but which are critical in determining what adult learners need to notice to be successful are: 1) what are learners paying attention to and 2) the nature of the default L2 processing mode and how it might be enhanced by instruction to promote noticing. (Doughty, 2003) The objective of this literature review is to survey SLA researchers' opinions in regard to these two areas and to see if it might provide support for the application of the dictogloss procedure in an EFL classroom. This review looks at the need to focus on form and incidental learning in relation to the Noticing Hypothesis, Output Hypothesis and Interaction Hypothesis. Also considered are the possible benefits of using a dictogloss procedure that might also complement focusing on form.

Defining Focus on Form

Similar to many areas of SLA, defining what we mean by focus on form is not a straightforward endeavor. There is no clear agreement on defining focus on form or for the procedures to direct learners' attention to achieve this goal (Ellis, 2001). Definitions range from a narrow perspective advocated by Long and Robinson, who view it to mean a reactive, unplanned approach, to a broader definition that provides for the planning of the elements to be focused on (Mayo, 2002). Therefore, in SLA literature, we see that the meaning of focus on form range from reactive to preemptive, and from occasional to explicit plans for both positive and negative evidence. In this review focus on form takes on the broader definition; "that is, it is a form approach that addresses the student's need to attend to form" (Mayo, 2002, p. 158).

A broader interpretation of focus on form is also consistent with the definition provided by Long and Robinson (2001): "Focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher – and/or one or more students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (p. 23) This definition is preferable, since it highlights difficulties that are not only geared toward meaning/comprehension, but also focused on production or output. As the next section will discuss, the focus on production is an valuable benefit of the dictogloss procedure.

The Dictogloss Procedure:

Dictogloss is an output-oriented focus on form technique. There are many variations on the main technique, but it generally consists of four main steps. The first step is preparation or schema-building activities. Second, the dictation of a short text, which can

be either authentic or constructed, but has been selected to provide practice in the use of a particular construction or linguistic form. The first time the text is read the learners listen without taking notes, to gain a global view of the text. On the second reading, learners are advised to take notes on what they hear. The next stage is the important reconstruction stage of dictogloss. It is during this reconstruction of the text that the learner finds out what they know, what they need to know and what they don't know (Kuiken & Vedder, 2002). Finally, there is the analysis and correction stage, where learners compare their finished product with the original text (Wajnryb, 1990). A fifth step has been added to the procedure for further study. In this final step, a pair or small group, after a short interval, work together to reconstruct the text again, but this time exclusively from memory and their grammatical knowledge of the target language.

As previously mentioned, focus on form is triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production (Long & Robinson, 2001). Using the dictogloss procedure creates the need for learners to focus on production as well as for meaning. During the reconstruction, and the analysis / correction stages learners focus on production of the dictated text. If problems occur, they will have an opportunity to focus on the missing elements, or incorrect additions to their reconstructed text. Potential cognitive conflict may arise while comparing the reconstructed text with the dictated text. It is believed that this might indicate that 'noticing' is being promoted during the dictogloss procedure.

The need for focus on form

Early interest of focus on form was motivated on both a theoretical and a pedagogical level (Ellis, 2001). On a theoretical level, the aim was to research claims made by Krashen (1981) that grammar could only be effectively taught implicitly to affect the learners' acquired language. Krashen viewed that comprehensible input was sufficient and teaching or correcting students' errors had no effect on interlanguage development. As will be discussed later, the noticing hypothesis, proposed by Schmidt (1994), contradicts Krashen's claim that the process of language acquisition is unconscious (Ellis, 2001).

On a pedagogical level, studies explored if a focus on form could help learners acquire structures that they have failed to achieve through the natural approach (Ellis, 2001). A very influential area of research was carried out with immersion programs, and naturalistic acquisition studies. These studies by Harley, and Harley and Swain (cited by Doughty & Williams, 1998) indicated that when second language learning is primarily or entirely meaning focused or experiential, some linguistic features do not end with target-like levels. This is of great pedagogical concern since if learners are not able to achieve success within an environment with a high level of L2 exposure, what chance will EFL learners have in situations, which are severely impoverished in comparison. Impoverished in the sense of quantity and quality of L2 input. These studies seem to

indicate that when lessons are overwhelmingly focused on meaning, there is limited focus on form by learners.

There has been a strong claim, and a weak claim, for the pedagogical application of a focus on form. The strong claim, “has been made that focus on form may be necessary to push learners beyond communicatively effective language toward target like second language ability. A somewhat weaker claim is that, even if such a focus may not be absolutely necessary, it may be part of a more efficient language learning experience in that it can speed up natural acquisition processes” (Doughty & Williams, 1998, p. 2). Classroom teachers have had heated debates over the amount and type of attention to form, with some teachers completely rejecting attention to form in favor of a wholly ‘meaning-focused’ approach, while others see this as a call to return to discrete-point grammar instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Dictogloss can be easily adopted to fit into either of these two camps.

The Importance of Noticing and the Noticing Hypothesis

Noticing is a complex cognitive process, which involves intake of both meaning and form (Batstone, 1996). Additionally, discourse elements should also be added to Batstone’s list of what comprises intake, since for effective communication there is a need to focus on structure, semantics and pragmatics. Batstone continues that it takes considerable time for learners to progress from initial recognition, to the point where the learners’ interlanguage has been reconstructed.

A related concept to noticing is ‘consciousness-raising’, which was proposed by Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985), which states that learners’ attention to the formal properties of language facilitates language learning. However, Ellis (as cited in Cross, 2002) significantly, points out, “consciousness raising is only directed at explicit knowledge, with no expectation that learners will use, in communicative output, a particular feature that has been brought to their attention through formal instruction” (p. 1). The key difference between consciousness-raising and noticing is that noticing is believed to have implication for language processing and development of the interlanguage of L2 learners. Skehan (1998) emphasizes the processing of input and the effect of input on learners’ interlanguage as a result of noticing. Noticing also centers highly in Ellis’s model (1995) where it is viewed to facilitate the process where explicit knowledge becomes implicit knowledge. Ellis prefers to use the term ‘cognitive comparison’ since this “better captures the fact that learners need to notice when their own output is the same as the input as well as when it is different” (Ellis, 1995, p. 90). The very nature of dictogloss has learners comparing their output with the target input expressed by the dictated text. The learner’s attention appears to be directed at the targeted input, while completing a dictogloss procedure.

In the Noticing Hypothesis, Schmidt views SLA as “largely driven by what learners

pay attention to and notice in target language input and what they understand the significance of noticed input to be" (cited in Doughty, 2003, p 288). Schmidt (1990, p. 135) identifies three levels of awareness, which are perception, noticing and understanding. In regard to dictogloss an important part is where Schmidt (1990) states, "Unconscious learning, by contrast, may be seen as unintended by-product of communicative interaction. Of course, such learning might still involve noticing and understanding" (p. 135). This is what I believe occurs with the use of dictogloss. While the participants are interacting with the spoken text or with each other, the primary focus is communicative in nature. While the focus is on form, the communication element of dictogloss is also important. Long views a focus on form as being necessarily communicative in nature, with concern for linguistic features in a secondary position. The need to communicate would draw the learners' attention to linguistic elements as they arise in communication (Long, 1996). Therefore communication is the engine to drive attention to linguistic terms.

Another important distinction is with what is considered to be intake. Schmidt (1990) views intake differently from Krashen, who he believes equates intake with comprehensible input that helps the learner acquire language. Importantly, Schmidt (1990) states "it makes no difference whether the learner notices a linguistic form in input because he or she was deliberately attending to form, or purely inadvertently. If noticed, it becomes intake".

Schmidt's noticing hypothesis has received its share of support and criticism. Ellis (2001) concedes that Schmidt's hypothesis is widely accepted by SLA researchers. Batstone (1994) views noticing as the "gateway to subsequent learning" (p. 100). Ellis (1997) and Skehan (1998) support the opinion that noticing accounts for the way in which input becomes intake and is available for processing and reconstruction of the learners interlanguage. Critics argue that a distinction needs to be made between attention and consciousness (Truscott, 1998); however, for the purpose of this study, no distinction is made. Schmidt claims that learners must pay attention to "surface elements" in order for them to be acquired. This attention to surface elements is the primary objective of the dictogloss procedure. Reproducing a verbatim reconstruction of surface elements is not however, the purpose of dictogloss. Schmidt's (2001) definition of noticing is also interesting where he states, "the objects of attention and noticing are elements of the surface structure of utterances in the input - instances of language, rather than any abstract rules or principles" (p. 5). Schmidt (2001) continues, "Noticing structural irregularities, forming hypotheses, and making comparisons is a level beyond." While this is the ultimate goal, I believe it is of the utmost importance to insure that learners are actually noticing the target language of the grammar instruction, since it is apparent this is an essential first step. As the old saying goes "What I teach is not necessarily what my students learn".

Output Hypothesis

Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985, 1998) may provide additional theoretical underpinning to dictogloss. According to this hypothesis, output generated by the learner may influence noticing and promote L2 acquisition. Swain also stresses the important role of collaborative dialogues, which are present in a dictogloss procedure. In working in pairs or small groups learners need to work collaboratively to co-construct the text in the target language. After going beyond what they can recall from their working memory, collaborative learning may prompt learners to focus on linguistic rules as they attempt to fill out the text. The need to go beyond what they can remember of the first two readings requires them to access their morpho-syntactic knowledge of the L2. It is when the learner has trouble achieving this that they are likely to notice the gap in their lexical or syntactical knowledge. As stated by Swain and Lapkin (cited in Kuiken & Vedder, 2002, p. 8), this noticing "may trigger cognitive processes that may both generate new linguistic knowledge and consolidate existing knowledge."

There is also benefit from the metatalk within a group, which helps participants understand the relationship between meaning, form and use (Long and Robinson, 1998). This leads into the next section on the importance of collaboration in language learning.

Collaboration in the design of classroom activities

Another important pedagogical advantage of dictogloss is the collaborative nature of the procedure. Recent studies in second language pedagogy advocate the use of activities that require learners to produce output collaboratively (Mayo, 2002). As Swain (1997) (cited in Mayo, 2002) points out, while learners often will struggle with difficult grammatical elements of the target language alone, when they work together much more can be achieved. "The joint construction of language – or knowledge about language – by two or more individuals; it is what allows performance to outstrip competence; it's where language use and language learning can co-occur". Within the dictogloss procedure it is quite apparent that by working with other students, a Zone of Proximal development (ZPR) (Vygotsky, 1962) is created where the strong learners are in a position to help weaker students, and by doing so strengthen their own understanding of the second language. According to Lesser (2004), research has shown that learners generally perform better in classroom tasks while working together, rather than alone.

Long's (1996) "Interaction Hypothesis" also stresses the benefits of interaction for language advancement, when he refers to meaningful interaction is a needed (although not sufficient) condition for learners to acquire a second language. Dictogloss is geared to provide a high degree of interaction between the participants and with the instructor.

The Cognitive approach to language learning

In my opinion, the greatest support for the use of Dictogloss in the classroom comes from the cognitive approach to language learning, which resonates especially true for how second language learning is processed. Krashen's (1985) comprehension-based account of second language development holds that comprehensible input is the driving force to interlanguage development. We learn to speak by listening. However, this view is still highly controversial. Skehan (1998) views that comprehension is a mixture of top-down and bottom-up processing (citing Eskey, 1998), with the more effective use of top-down processing reducing the need to attend to acoustic or visual stimulus. According to Skehan (1998) this implies that the comprehension process can be partly detached from the underlying syntactic system and from production. In other words a learner might be very skilled at selecting and using appropriate strategies to comprehend communication. More importantly, Skehan (1998) states, "Effective comprehension may leave the underlying interlanguage system untouched and unscathed" (p. 15). Van Patten (1990) also sees that under normal conditions learners will prioritize meaning, which will be the primary goal. Attention to form is considered a luxury only possible when conditions for attending to meaning have been achieved. These arguments are particularly relevant to the ESL or EFL learner. "Such learners, when confronted by comprehension problems, are likely to exploit what they are best at – mobilizing relevant schematic and contextual knowledge to overcome their systemic limitations" (Skehan, 1998, p. 15).

Batstone makes an excellent point in a section of his book (Batstone, 1994) on noticing as a skill, in that learners face the danger of consistently failing to notice, or to re-notice salient grammatical points. Instead, the learner potentially will engage in a top-down approach of processing in which the grammar points can be largely disregarded. Attention to one area, such as form, can only be achieved at the expense of the other, for example meaning (Van Patten, 1990).

I strongly believe this to be the case with adult learners of EFL in Japan and myself with the Japanese language. Dictogloss clearly addresses this problem by focusing on the need to attend to form as well as meaning in the written production of language.

Another issue brought up in the cognitive approach is directed at the very nature of oral communication. Kess clearly summarizes the problem by stating, "Native speakers or learners, are going to place great emphasis on communicating meanings, but may not necessarily worry about the exact form that they use" (cited in Skehan, 1998, p. 25). Skehan proposes that speakers will generally say only what needs to be said in the most efficient manner possible, trusting that the burden of attending to meaning will be shared by their conversation partner. As long as communication is proceeding, there is little need to attend to syntactic form, more energy is focused on maintaining the conversation and taking and giving of appropriate turns. Therefore, for the most part Widdowson (1989) adds, as a result of pressures of processing language in real time, communication is

elliptical and incomplete in surface form, heavy in assumptions regarding context and schema (cited in Skehan, 1998). This is not an ideal situation for the learner to attend to form with the intention of developing their interlanguage. Skehan (1998) perfectly summarizes the point as, "The central point is that of language use, in itself, does not lead to the development of an analytical knowledge system since meaning distracts attention from form" (p. 27). This is why intervention through the use of the dictogloss procedure may help shift attention to form without neglecting attention to meaning.

Incidental learning

Within SLA literature there are a number of definitions offered for incidental learning. Ellis (2001) refers to incidental learning as a response to a communicative need and therefore was not a point that was explicitly brought to the learner's attention by the instructor. In this study, incidental learning refers to the learning of formal features through a focus on semantic features (Hulstijn, 2003) and in the words of Schmidt (1994, p. 16) incidental learning is "learning of one thing (e.g. grammar) when the learner's primary objective is to do something else (e.g., communicate)" Much of the research within the field of SLA, concerning incidental learning is focused on vocabulary acquisition and not with grammar instruction (Hulstijn, 2003). These studies are mostly concerned with the incidental acquisition of vocabulary through reading. Krashen (1989) argued that through reading grammar could possibly be acquired.

There are only a few studies that have explicitly stated that the focus is on incidental learning of grammar (Hulstijn, 2003). Incidental learning is of primary interest for two reasons. First, students in academic programs often will focus only on material if they feel that they will be held accountable on tests, which creates the problems that material is often only memorized superficially without any attempt to reconstruct the meaning, form and use relationship within their interlanguage. As a result, the material is often forgotten shortly after the test. Therefore, if a procedure demonstrates that noticing occurred incidentally, then the procedure would be very useful with learners with low motivation. Second, it is important for pedagogical reasons, as it allows teachers to maintain a communicative approach in the classroom with the knowledge that learners will still be able to "pick up" important points in regard to form.

In dictogloss, incidental learning occurs in two ways, first by instructing learners to focus on the meaning of the text. During a dictogloss activity, learners are instructed to focus on the meaning of the text and to convey this meaning in whatever way they wish, with the caveat that is should be grammatically correct. The important point, that is stressed, is to capture the meaning of the text. Second, learners are not made aware that they will be subsequently tested on the text. The critical feature, which makes the study of incidental learning operational, is whether or not students are informed that they will be tested on the material that is presented for study (Hulstijn, 2003). Therefore the text

that students contribute on the last stage of the dictogloss shows evidence of noticing on the part of the learners. The key point is that with intentional learning, learners are informed that they will be tested on the material. This notification is absent when testing for incidental learning. To conclude it appears that dictogloss might be useful to measure the amount of incidental noticing of the pedagogical grammar target incorporated in a dictogloss activity.

Incidental learning and implicit learning have a strong relationship, but are not interchangeable terms. Incidental learning occurs when a learner focuses on one aspect, but is able to acquire a different point, for example 'form' is acquired when attending to 'meaning'. Therefore incidental learning is always implicated in implicit learning, but implicit learning entails more than incidental learning (Hulstijn, 2003). In the same way, explicit and intentional learning are also different. Intentional learning involves the deliberate attempt to commit new information to memory, whereas explicit learning is being aware of the point of learning. For example, trying to understand the function of a particular grammatical structure (Hulstijn, 2003).

Schmidt has argued that there is no learning without attention and noticing (Schmidt 1994). He also states that this is true for both intentional and incidental learning, which require noticing to occur as a prerequisite to learning. The key difference between the two is that intentional learning does, and incidental learning does not, imply the use of deliberate retention techniques (Schmidt, 1994). The difference between these two types of learning is important in the case of dictogloss because a significant amount of what is learned during a dictogloss procedure is learned incidentally, since learners are focused on meaning.

Pedagogical factors justifying use of dictogloss

Dictogloss has a number of sound pedagogical advantages, which make it a viable option for grammar instruction. A significant advantage is that dictogloss focuses on a whole text; therefore learners are concerned not only with sentence level grammar but also at the discourse level.

Jacobs and Farrell (2003) pointedly summarized the advantages of dictogloss. "When implemented conscientiously, dictogloss embodies sound principles of language teaching which include: learner autonomy, cooperation among learners, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment, and teachers as co-learners" (p. 2). In many teaching situations, instructors face classes with different levels, dictogloss is suitable for these kind of classes, because of "its build-in heterogeneity: different learners, depending on the state of development of their interlanguage, as well as their interest and motivation, will notice different things" (Thornbury, 1997, p. 332).

Conclusion

To conclude, this literature review looked at the theoretical underpinning of the dictogloss procedure in relation to the Noticing hypothesis, Output hypothesis and Interaction hypothesis. An area of importance was with the cognitive approach to language learning, which highlighted the likelihood that learners will attend to form only when they are satisfied with achieving a necessary level of comprehension. Therefore we can not expect language use to lead development since meaning will distract attention to form. For second language learners to be successful, instruction needs to direct their attention not only to meaning, but also to form.

In addition, the importance of output, collaborative group work, and the pedagogical importance of providing learners an opportunity to notice form at a discourse and grammatical level were discussed. In conclusion, the dictogloss procedure is likely to be a useful activity in EFL classes as it focuses on form while remaining a communicative activity.

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