

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Counterbalance hypothesis: Practical or impractical in the classroom?

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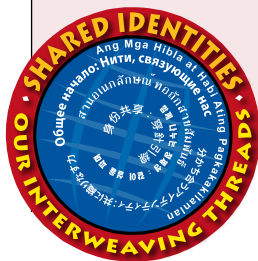
Reference data:

Kawamoto, J. M., & Iwai, C. (2009). Counterbalance hypothesis: Practical or impractical in the classroom? In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), JALT2008 Conference Proceedings. Tokyo: JALT.

This empirical study, undertaken in a Japanese university, examined the quality and frequency of feedback given by teachers, distinguishing between a native English speaker (NT) and a non-native English speaker (NNT). The study deals with the counterbalance hypothesis proposed by Lyster and Mori (2006), which predicts the importance of balancing form and meaning in actual classroom instruction. Despite the ideal theoretical assumption of the hypothesis, the data obtained from an NT and an NNT revealed their difficulty in regulating themselves while they interacted with the Japanese EFL learners who took part in this study. Some qualitative excerpts are presented to show difference in the feedback given by the two English teachers.

本研究は、英語母語話者教員(NT)と非母語話者の日本人教員(NNT)が日本人大学生の英語学習者に対して与えたフィードバックの質と頻度を実証的に調査したものである。Lyster & Mori (2006) によるカウンターバランスに仮説は、言語指導における文法形式と意味の両方に焦点をあてることの重要性が想定されている。しかし、本研究に参加した日本人英語学習者とこれらの教師が交わした授業での会話データを分析した結果は、この両面に焦点をあてるのが NNT と NT のいずれにおいても必ずしも容易ではないことを示している。さらに、これらの教師が学習者に与えたフィードバックの違いについて説明するため、以下では具体的な定性事例を収集データから示している。

Theories and hypotheses may look great on paper, but they are often impractical in the classrooms. The counterbalance (CB) hypothesis by Lyster and Mori (2006) is no exception. The idea of this hypothesis is to merge form-focused instruction, “getting it right to the end” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 165), and meaning-focused instruction, “let’s talk” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 150), so the students would have a well- balanced lesson to “strengthen connections between changes in long-term



memory and actual language use” (Lyster & Mori, 2006, p. 294). Much of Lyster and Mori’s research was based on various types of teacher error feedback and students’ responses to their feedback in Japanese immersion (JI) in the United States and French immersion (FI) in Quebec in English speaking elementary schools. They found that all the teachers used similar feedback, that the JI students were more apt to speak accurately than the FI students, and that feedback was essential for students’ noticing and being aware of their errors. However, in their study, they did not examine how the teachers adapted their teaching successfully to balance form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in either JI or FI classes.

Taking this study by Lyster and Mori into account, the present study aims to determine whether it is easy in reality for a teacher to merge form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in practice in the classroom. We investigated a native English teacher (NT) in Japan and a non-native English teacher (NNT), specifically a Japanese teacher of English, with respect to whether they were able to interweave form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in their lessons. The selection of the NT and NNT in this study was attributed to an underlying assumption that NTs and NNTs would differ from each other in the ways and extent of paying attention to the learners’ oral performance in class. Many NTs, like the one in this study (more details below) tend to pay more attention to meaning, unless they are well-trained to focus on form. In contrast, NNTs tend to learn English via form-focused classroom contexts, so that they are good at focusing on the learners’ forms.

The primary interest of this study is whether the feasibility of simultaneously balancing the two instructional foci, i.e., form and meaning, could be generalized throughout second language teaching for most teachers. We predict that teachers, both the NT and the NNT, will have some difficulty in incorporating form-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction at the same time during their lessons.

With this research interest in mind, we will examine in the first section, these two types of instructional foci in the classroom. The second section will explain the data collection methodology and the participants of the study. The third section will provide qualitative analyses of the data obtained in this study. Finally, the conclusion section will discuss further implications and limitations of the study.

Literature review

Many studies show how form-focused feedback and meaning-focused feedback are important interventions for improvement in the target language and accuracy. Lyster and Mori (2006) and Doughty and Varela (1998) argued that focus on form instruction and focus on meaning instruction helped students notice their errors and develop their awareness toward the target language. Many experimental studies on the CB hypothesis revealed that, through appropriate feedback, students’ performance in L2 improved more than those who received no feedback (Byrnes, 2002). Investigating focus on meaning instruction in FI classes, Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that there were six types of error feedback from teachers. Among them, *recast* was the most common type of feedback, but it was also the most unsuccessful to obtain student utterances. The other types,

elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests and repetition, were all more successful kinds of feedback to elicit student uptake.

Regarding form-focused instruction, Mackey, Polio and McDonough (2004), for example, examined whether experienced teachers used more form-focused technique than their inexperienced counterparts. They predicted that the more experienced teachers would be able to concentrate more on form-focused technique, since these teachers were trained in this instruction and they had more experience in using it. The inexperienced teachers on the other hand, would not use the opportunity to give focus on form feedback effectively, because of their lack of experience in applying this method. The observations of Mackey et al. confirmed that the experienced teachers used more recasts, elicitation, and explicit feedback.

The studies described above provide evidence that error feedback is a necessity in language learning. In addition, they prove that there is a potential of helping learners notice their problems efficiently and overcome their accuracy problems by giving them appropriate feedback while not sacrificing meaning in their utterances. Taking the importance of teacher feedback into account, the following three questions are investigated. First, while trying to pay attention on two grammar forms (past tense and prepositions), are the teachers able to give efficient feedback on focus on form? Second, what types of instruction (form-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction) and what kind of feedback do the teachers focus on? Finally, do both teachers integrate form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in their lessons?

Methodology

Participants and materials

The data collection of the study was conducted in September 2008, under quasi-classroom conditions that were set by the authors of this study. Two teachers and four students were invited to take part. The teachers were one Japanese teacher and one Canadian English teacher. The Japanese NNT had less than one year of teaching experience and the Canadian NT nine years. Of the four students, two were English majors and had passed the pre-second level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), and the other two students were trained to be kindergarten teachers and had passed the third level of the STEP test. The teachers and students were all female, and thus the gender factor was not part of this study.

Teaching materials and the procedure for the quasi-classroom lesson

Four worksheets (one worksheet for each lesson) from the Highlight's Hidden Picture activities (for more in using this resource see Highlight's Hidden Pictures), were downloaded from the Internet. The NNT and NT each had a set of the two worksheets and the students had all four, as shown in Figure 1. In each worksheet, there were about 12 to 14 hidden items. The target items on the students' sheets were all colored.

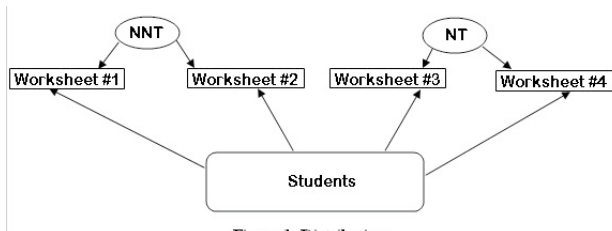


Figure 1: Distribution

All of the lessons were audio and video recorded. After the lessons, a retrospective interview was given to the teachers separately to find out what they were thinking during each feedback they gave to the students and how they felt overall about their lessons. These interviews were also audio recorded.

Procedure

The students were informed, before the data collection started, that they would be requested by their teacher to explain the location of the highlighted items to the teacher, who did not have the answers. To create an obligatory past tense context, the students were asked to imagine that they *were* one of the characters in each picture and they *were* observing what was going on in each situation.

The teachers each engaged in two instruction sessions with the same students, which were also set by the researchers. The instruction sessions consisted of an implicit session and an explicit session, and each session lasted approximately 40 minutes. The implicit session was designed to observe how the teachers would correct learners' errors and give

feedback to them when no explicit request was made to the teachers. In contrast, in the explicit session, the teachers were requested by the researchers to pay attention to students' errors on grammatical tenses and prepositions. This was to examine whether the teachers would change their instructional emphasis on form-focused and/or meaning-focused instruction, and if so, how well they could do so when the degree of their attention on these forms was raised.

Before the implicit session started, the teachers were informed that the picture showed events in the past, and that they would have to ask the students where each item *was*. Once all hidden items were found and explained by the students, they asked the students questions about their experiences in the past. The researchers prepared the questions in advance.

For the explicit session, the teachers used another worksheet and did the same lesson as the previous session, but they were specifically told to correct the past tense errors and preposition, as explained above. This was to examine if the NT and NNT could implement form-focused and meaning-focused instruction at the same time. The students were making similar errors and the same number of errors during this session.

After the quasi-classroom interactions, the data were transcribed verbatim. The symbols and coding representing utterance features were added. First, the dots (...) are used for silent (or unfilled) pauses, and each dot shows approximately one second. Utterances within the two parallel lines (| |) designate overlaps between two speakers. The italicized words illustrate student's katakanization of English, and finally the underlined words indicate there was a time gap between each section.

Results

The results will address the three main research questions through qualitative analysis of the interaction between the teachers and the students. In this section, several excerpts from the transcription are presented below.

Form-focused instruction

Focused on two grammatical forms in the lesson, we wanted to see if the teachers paid attention to grammatical forms while giving feedback. The NT and NNT are compared to examine if they would differ from each other to some noticeable extent. Excerpt 1 shows the NNT's feedback in terms of how consistent and systematic she was.

Excerpt 1: (NNT - Implicit session: Worksheet #1)

- 1 NNT: What was the girl on the chair doing yesterday?
- 2 S: She . . . she studied. . . personal computer
- 3 NNT: Okay or you want to say, yes she used the personal computer. And I asked, "what was the girl doing?"
- 4 S: Doing?
- 5 NNT: So you could answer, "she was using the personal computer, she was using –"
- 6 S: Yeah
- 7 NNT: Can you say that again? What was the girl doing yesterday?
- 8 S: She was using personal computer.

In line 3, the NNT pointed out to the student what grammatical form the teacher wanted with an elicitation feedback. The student was confused and indicated in line 4 by repeating "doing." Then, in line 5, the NNT continued to explain in more detail, an explicit feedback, how the student should answer the question. Next in line 7, the NNT inspired the student to repeat the correct feedback. As this excerpt typically shows, the NNT was very methodical about how she gave feedback to the students.

Regarding the NT, Excerpt 2 shows that she sometimes had a hard time controlling herself from giving feedback on either prepositions or past tense forms even during the explicit session.

Excerpt 2: (NT - Explicit session: Worksheet #4)

- 1 NT: Artist's brush, oh we're practicing past tense, where was the artist's brush? Free answer? Okay, where was it?
- 2 S: It eh . . . A part of chair and it's . . . back to the is girl.
- 3 NT: Okay, so, is it right side up or upside down?
- 4 S: A –
- 5 NT: Er was it, sorry.

From line 1 of this excerpt, we notice that the NT apparently recalled the researchers' explicit direction for the use of past tense in this task after she initiated her utterance. Despite

her question in the past tense, the student started talking in the present tense. In line 3, however, the NT forgot the task direction and kept on using the present tense without correcting the student's utterance. Then in line 5, the teacher recognized that she had to use the past tense. The absence of her attention to the past tense form was confirmed by the post hoc retrospective interview in which she mentioned that the present tense was still on her mind since she had the picture right in front of her. This indicates how difficult it was for her to remember constantly to use past tense forms.

Instruction and feedback

Regarding the next point, which do the teachers tend to do, form-focused instruction and/or meaning-focused instruction, and what type of feedback they use. As we have already observed in Excerpt 1, the NNT was very methodical and systematic on how she gave feedback to the students, which happened during both implicit and explicit sessions. In this way, she was concerned about fixing the students' grammar structure by giving them explicit feedback. Then she had the students repeat the proper form.

In contrast, the NT's feedback on form errors was not as organized as that of the NNT in the implicit session. The following excerpt will illustrate how the NT's lesson was mainly meaning-focused in the implicit session.

Excerpt 3: (NT - Implicit session: Worksheet #3)

- 1 NT: What hobbies did you enjoy?
- 2 S1: My hobby is dancing and singing.

- 3 NT: Ah, what kind of dancing?
- 4 S1: Jazz dance
- 5 NT: Wow! Do you take lessons?
- 6 S1: Yes
- 7 NT: Good. What hobbies did you enjoy?
- 8 S2: My hobby is playing soft tennis.

Although the student used present progressive tense in her answer to the NT's question in the past tense, the NT did not give any feedback and let the conversation continue from line 3 by reverting to present tense.

The NT seldom corrected learners' grammatical errors, but two exceptional cases, as shown in Excerpts 4 and 5, were observed throughout the lessons. These occurred during the explicit session, where the NT made two attempts to focus on form-focused instruction through elicitation and explicit feedback to get the students to notice their errors in their utterances.

Excerpt 4 - Elicitation: (NT - Explicit session: Q&A Worksheet #4)

- 1 NT: How old was the lady?
- 2 S: She is maybe 40 years old.
- 3 NT: Okay, she ~ is?
- 4 S: Is? She was?
- 5 NT: OK, yeah, how old was the lady?

Excerpt 5 - Explicit: (NT - Explicit session: Q&A Worksheet #4)

- 1 NT: Can you use as sentence? What was in the girl's hair?
- 2 S: She is, she *puto* hair ribbon.
- 3 NT: OK, there was a ribbon in her hair. Okay?

The NT did produce two attempts of giving feedback during the explicit session, and this indicates that there was apparently some effort on her part to lean towards form-focused instruction even though she kept reverting to a more meaning-focused instruction.

Balancing form-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction

Finally, regarding whether the teachers could integrate form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in their lessons, the NNT was consistent in her form-focused instruction as mentioned before, and she gave explicit feedback throughout the implicit and explicit sessions. In her interview, the NNT said that it was her first year ever to teach and this study was the first time she had to teach conversation and use only English. She felt she had to base her teaching method on the types of English lessons she had in school, which tended not to focus on meaning.

The NT concentrated more on meaning-focused instruction during the implicit session, as shown in Excerpt 3. She mentioned in her interview that she was nervous about teaching, since it was her first time to meet the students.

Moreover, she felt that by constantly over-correcting students' errors, this might discourage the students to talk.

In the explicit session, although there were two attempts as shown in Excerpts 4 and 5, where the NT used feedback to lean toward form-focused instruction, she lapsed back into meaning-focused instruction throughout the rest of the session. Therefore, it appears that she was fairly consistent in using meaning-focused instruction in both the implicit and explicit sessions.

It should be noted, however, that the NT was successful once in incorporating form-focused and meaning-focused instruction during the implicit session, as shown in the next example, though it had nothing to do with preposition and past tense.

Excerpt 6: (NT – Implicit session: Worksheet #3)

- 1 NT: Ok. Good. Can you find the snail?
- 2 S1: It was a part of rose at the rose *buketo* (bouquet)
- 3 NT: Ok ummm is it in the bouquet she's holding?
- 4 NT: Ok Can you find the bird?
- 5 S2: It is part of *buketo** on the ice.
- 6 NT: Ah, is it on the right hand side of the picture?
-
- 7 NT: Ok, Ok I see it, thank you. Can you find the arrow?

8 S1: Uh it was a part of *buketo**. It was on the cen-center?

9 NT: |OK|

10 S1: |Center| of the *buketo**.

11 NT: Ok is the bouquet on the ice?

12 NT: Where is the seal?

13 S2: It is part of *buke** and her –

14 NT: Is the bouquet in her arm?

15 S2: Ah yes,

16 NT: OK

(Implicit session: Worksheet #3 Q&A)

17 NT: What was she holding in her arms?
Anybody?

18 Everybody: Bouquet (1) bouquet (2).

19 NT: Yeah! Bouquet.

20 Everybody: (low voice) Bouquet.

21 NT: I can hardly hear you! (whispering)
ouquet (whispering), bouquet!

Although the students mispronounced “bouquet” in this interaction by using typical Japanese loan word pronunciation (*buketo*), the NT continued the flow of the conversation. When it was time that the word “bouquet” would not be used for the rest of the session, the NT decided to tell the students explicitly at the beginning of question

and answer section. In line 19, The NT provided the proper pronunciation of “bouquet”. By using humor in line 21, she reinforced the students’ memory to remember how to say “bouquet” accurately. Then she moved onto the next part of the lesson.

Conclusion

Lyster (2007) posits that the interweaving of form- and meaning-focused instruction would “strengthen connections in memory and, thus, facilitate access to newly analyzed or reanalyzed representations during online production” (p. 127). However, this study provided some evidence that balancing two aspects of utterances, i.e., form and meaning, at the same time is by no means easy for teachers, regardless of whether the teacher is an NT or an NNT. In addition, the qualitative excerpts from the study suggest that NTs and NNTs may differ in their ways of paying attention to the learners’ oral performance in class. The most important difference between the two teachers in this study was, as predicted in advance, that the NT was meaning-oriented, while the NNT teacher was form-oriented. These findings are insightful; however, we have to be cautious in interpreting them since the NTs and NNTs may have been asked to take different roles when teaching classes in Japan. There are some NTs who may have been expected to focus more on communication of meaning and, similarly, the NNTs having learned English in a form-focused environment, often replicate that in their own teaching style.

This study is only a preliminary study and more extensive research needs to be conducted. In addition, with only an extremely limited number of teachers and students

participation, this research cannot be generalized due to the small sample size. Also of note, during the data collection for this study, both teachers either talked too much or tended to correct errors before the students could make any utterance, which also made it difficult to obtain enough quantitative data. The present study is, in fact, a basis for an upcoming data collection, which will be done at a later date. Further research is required in order to examine the effectiveness of combining form-focused instruction with meaning-focused instruction or whether there is a necessity to do both types at the same time.

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Acknowledgements

This study was supported by an academic research grant offered by Hiroshima City University (2008 Special Research Grant). The authors would also like to thank Carol Rinnert for her valuable suggestions for refining this paper.

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