Volume 11. Issue 1
Article 4

Title

The Efficacy of Setting Process Goals in Orienting EFL Learners to Attend to the Formal Aspects of Oral Production

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Abstract

Breaking down and setting process goals have been shown to facilitate the learning of foreign/second language reading and writing. Whether the same goal-setting mechanism works as well in real-time EFL speaking tasks needs further investigation. This study explored the efficacy of setting form-focused process goals for EFL learners when they perform an oral communication task. Seventy-two college students were randomly paired within three experimental groups – form-focused, meaning-focused, and no goal – for a ten-minute communication task and their dialogues were transcribed and analyzed in terms of the quality (number of c-units, number of words per c-units, type-token ration, and error rates) and quantity (number of words and turn counts) of oral output. Statistical analyses indicated that setting a form-focused process goal did not make a difference when learners performed the oral task. The contradiction between this study and previous ones suggests that the dominance of product goals in real-time communication made explicit attention to form in the process difficult. In addition, level of learner involvement may have been lower when an explicit process goal was present.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), goal-setting, oral communication, focus on form

Introduction

When EFL learners try to communicate and eventually get their meaning across, more likely than not their interlanguage is flawed with mispronunciation, unnecessary pauses, inappropriate usage, and grammatical mistakes. One major objective of EFL teaching is to develop learners' communicative competency and at the same time improve the accuracy and fluency of their interlanguage. With their emphasis on treating language forms within communicative contexts, *focus on form* studies have become one major area in second language acquisition in past years (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991). Long (1991) was the first one to distinguish between *focus on form* and the more traditional *focus on formS* approach. He argues that the traditional pedagogy for language forms in the classroom is more analytical, treating linguistic forms as discrete elements and trying to help students accumulate knowledge over time, hence the plural *focus on formS*. However, in the refined *focus on form* approach, the fundamental focus is on meaning, with students' attention being drawn overtly to linguistic elements when the timing is considered appropriate by the language teacher.

Recent focus on form studies emphasize the importance of learner-generated, rather than the more traditional teacher-initiated, attention to form (Williams, 2001). But how can we ensure that learners themselves take the initiative and attend to the formal aspects of language? Will such attention lead to improved learner output? More empirical investigations are needed to help us answer this question.

In the following, we propose looking into goal-setting theory and its application in various language learning situations. The potential and challenges of goal setting in EFL oral tasks are also discussed. Next, we review relevant focus on form studies and highlight how researchers think learners' own attention to form may be fostered. We then describe the specific learning and social context of a particular learner group to justify our proposed approach. Finally, the research question and the study are presented.

Goal-setting Mechanism and Its Application in Language Learning

Locke and Latham's goal-setting theory (1990) asserts that human action is caused by purpose, and for action to take place, goals have to be explicitly set and pursued. The value of goal-setting is also observed in second/foreign language (L2) learning situations and has been incorporated into Dörnyei's (2001) process model of L2 motivation. In his model, it is delineated that learners' intention formation is

influenced by goal, commitment, and action plan. In fact, goal-setting has been widely applied in various learning situations and found useful. Goals are seen as regulators of actions and goal-setting serves as a significant source of task motivation (Locke & Latham, 1990).

To better facilitate learning, different types of goals can be set for various learning tasks. For example, Schunk and Rice (1989) used goals in teaching reading and compared (a) a product goal of answering questions, (b) a process goal of learning to use the strategy, and (c) a control condition whereby students were only told to work productively. Their findings suggest that both process and product goal students had higher self-efficacy than the control group and process goal children achieved higher comprehension. Graham, MacArthur, Schwartz, and Page-Voth (1992) used product and process goals in teaching writing. They found that the use of both product and process goals helped students positively on their essay writing performance and knowledge of the writing process, and such effects were maintained over time.

The aforementioned findings have suggested that setting process goals could be a useful regulator in the L2 classroom, but its applicability to other contexts and to the development of other skills needs more research. In reading and writing, learners may occasionally pause to consciously monitor their decoding or encoding of the target language. But in the case of real-time listening and speaking, learners' tasks are much more challenging. They have to attend to form and meaning concurrently, causing possible overloading of the brain's limited capacity (Ellis, 2001; Spada, 1997). Proposed solutions include pre-task planning (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) and separating grammar instruction to a later time when the communicative activities are completed (Lightbown, 1998). However, whether learners can still successfully focus their attention on the formal aspects of an L2 through process goals similar to those used in Schunk and Rice (1989) and Graham et al. (1992), particularly in communication-oriented oral tasks, has not yet been reported.

Lack of Learner-generated Attention to Form

Focus on form, unlike *focus on formS* which treats language forms as discrete objects of language instruction, is an approach seeking to direct learners' attention to form when problems occur incidentally in meaning-focused communication (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). Research efforts have been centered on how form-focused instruction can be made more facilitative for second language acquisition (Ellis, 2001). Recently, the emphasis has been placed on the importance of learners' self-initiated attention, rather than teachers', as well as examination of the existence of learner-generated attention to form (Williams, 2001). In an intact

class where intervention was kept to a minimum, Williams found that although learners can and do attend to the formal aspects of language, it occurred rather infrequently. Learner-initiated language related episodes (LREs) occurred in more structured activities such as correcting homework and tasks from the textbooks, but LREs were rare in communication-based activities. Teachers in William's study claimed that they did not distinguish classroom activities and did not ask learners to focus more on form in some activities over others. Further examination of more objective classroom transcripts largely supported teachers' claims. But students seemed to be influenced by more subtle cues and tended to believe that they should be more careful about grammar when they do not use much of their own self-generated language, and they should just communicate clearly when they engage in communication tasks and create more of their own language.

Williams concluded that "the likelihood of learner-generated attention to form seems to be linked to learners' perception of the goals of the activity" (p. 304). In addition, Ortega (1999), in her research on the effect of planning on oral performance, indicated that learner "choices regarding focus on form were also affected by speakers' interpretation of the task" (p.128). Their findings seem to suggest that teachers should, in addition to designing communication tasks for learners to use the language, inform students explicitly of the language-related goals of classroom language tasks.

EFL Learners in an Asian Context

One potential problem with making focus on form an explicit process goal for learners in performing communicative tasks is whether they have the knowledge of language forms. For many learners, especially those who have not received much *focus on formS* training, their grammatical knowledge is still in the process of active formation when they practice carrying out communication tasks. Thus, even if they consciously attend to their language production, they do not know what has gone wrong or what could be improved. However, such concern may not be as necessary for learners who have previously engaged in extensive *focus on formS* education for the target language.

In many Asian contexts, English is an important school subject, but it is not a language commonly used outside of the classroom. Getting high scores on entrance examinations is critical in helping students enter their ideal high schools and universities (Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005). In order to perform well on these discrete-point examinations, learners gradually develop the competency to identify and analyze language problems. On the other hand, the opportunities for them to actually use the language for communication purposes are relatively rare. For example, according to a survey conducted by Savignon and Wang (2003) in Taiwan,

grammatical rule explanations and drill practices still take the majority of class time in most high school English classrooms. Although the situation is not ideal in promoting communicative language use, students' developed declarative knowledge (Johnson, 1996) and analytical ability may serve as a good basis for teachers to facilitate student self-monitoring and make *focus on form* more student-oriented.

Making Attention to Form Explicit by Setting Process Goals

In fact, classroom oral production tasks have inherent goals of both kinds. On the one hand, students are expected to complete the task, and the completion of the task is usually oriented toward communication. But in order to communicate, another goal of no less importance is set, that is to enhance the formal aspects of language, and hopefully the tasks will push learners' interlanguage further toward a more target-like stage. Classroom tasks or activities, if not language related or for the purpose of enhancing the quality or quantity of language, may not be so well justified in a language classroom. Language teachers are generally aware of the purpose of practicing language forms when assigning communication tasks. But students, if not appropriately reminded, may focus exclusively on completing the task and fail to attend to the formal aspects of their language output. If bringing student awareness of formal language to a surface level may improve the quality of their interlanguage, then it seems legitimate to make language goals more explicit to students.

Method

In this study, a goal-setting approach intending to transfer the responsibility of form-focused attention from the instructor to the learners was investigated. Prior to the task when students were planning for their communication, one group of learners was given a process goal that directed their attention to language form. The inherent product goal of the task was not highlighted. A meaning-focused process-goal group and a control group with no particular process goal were designed for comparison purposes. Dependent variables, including task involvement, and the accuracy and complexity of the output, were analyzed to see if students performed differently under these conditions. The specific research question was "Did learners focus more on form when attending to formwas set explicitly set as a process goal for an oral production task?"

Participants and Procedures

Participants were seventy-two non-English-major college students in northern Taiwan. Students admitted to this college, which was generally ranked among the

top three to five on the island, have a proficiency in the high-intermediate level. Many started learning English as a foreign language (EFL) since elementary school or even earlier. However, their EFL learning during junior and senior high school was mainly geared toward the preparation of joint entrance examinations, which were predominantly in the multiple-choice format.

The study employed a quasi-experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental groups – the control group was given (1) the do-your-best goal, while the other two groups were given (2) a meaning-focused goal, and (3) a form-focused goal. Participants were paired with one classmate of the same goal type to carry out a conversation task together in their usual weekly EFL class meeting. The explicitly stated goals focused on the *processes* of the tasks. The product goal of reaching an agreement, however, which was inherent in the task, was not highlighted. The three sets of instructions translated from learners' L1 Chinese (see Appendix) were printed in boldface on their task preparation sheets.

This communication task was drawn from Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) and has been employed in a related study by the author (Huang, 2008). In the first ten minutes when students each individually prepared for the task, they were informed of their particular process goals (control, meaning-focused, and form-focused). Under the respective process goals, learners were given the task to select five among a list of ten student activities for voluntary community services. During the ten-minute pair discussion time, they tried to convince their partners and eventually reach a consensus on three mutually agreed items.

Data analysis

Number of LREs as well as data on interlanguage complexity, accuracy, and quantity were collected to examine if the three process goal groups differed in performance. For the LREs, learner dialogues were examined to find "all interaction in which learners draw attention to form, including those that focus on form in the course of meaningful communication as well as those that are set apart from such communication and simply revolve around questions of form itself" (Williams, 2001; p. 316). For language complexity, we followed Foster and Skehan (1996) and Mehnert (1998) and used c-units (communication units) as an indication of language complexity because of the conversational nature of the learner language output. The number of c-units and the number of words per c-unit were calculated. In addition, type-token ratio was included as well because it has been used widely as a measure of lexical range (e.g., Ortega, 1999), calculated by dividing the total number of words (tokens) by the number of different words (types).

Non-target-language words and partial words were excluded from the calculation. For accuracy measures, the percentage of the number of error clauses over the total number of clauses was used. Other than the quality of the interlanguage, the quantity was investigated through word and turn counts. As Kormos and Dörnyei (2004) illustrated, the number of conversational turns is "a function of the interlocutor's active contribution" and thus is an indicator of learner involvement in the task.

Results

Fifty-two complete data sets remained after the initial screening. Descriptive statistics for dependent variables by groups were summarized by goal type groups, as is shown in Table 1, including number of participants in each group, means, standard deviations, and the minimums and maximums of all dependent variables, i.e., number of c-units, number of words per c-unit, type-token ration, number of error clauses over total number of clauses, number of words, and number of turns. We found only two LREs in the entire transcript. Therefore, LREs were not included in the statistical analysis. One-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine if the three experimental groups were significantly different from one another. A moderately significant difference was found:, Wilks' $\lambda = .604$, $F(2, 49) = 2.1$, $p = .025$, multivariate = .22. For follow-up ANOVAs, the significance level was set at $p = .008$ (.05 divided by 6, the total number of dependent variables). ANOVA summary of turn counts, where the three groups differed most clearly, is shown in Table 2. However, this p value did not reach our significance level.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables for three experimental groups

Measure	Goal types	*Mean*	*SD*	*Min.*	*Max.*
Number of c-units	No goal (*n*=16)	54.3	25.4	18	98
	Form (*n*=20)	52.8	21.1	24	94
	Meaning (*n*=16)	52.1	31.9	13	127
Number of words	No goal (*n*=16)	5.34	1.26	3.35	8.22
per c-unit	Form (*n*=20)	5.49	0.65	4.51	7.34
	Meaning (*n*=16)	6.26	2.67	4.23	15.54
Type-token ratio	No goal (*n*=16)	39%	7%	27%	48%
	Form (*n*=20)	36%	7%	25%	49%
	Meaning (*n*=16)	37%	10%	23%	67%

Number of error	No goal (*n*=16)	29%	12%	14%	50%
clauses over total	Form (*n*=20)	26%	8%	7%	42%
number of clauses	Meaning (*n*=16)	26%	15%	11%	71%
Number of words	No goal (*n*=16)	275	121	146	494
	Form (*n*=20)	286	109	134	533
	Meaning (*n*=16)	299	158	55	587
Number of turns	No goal (*n*=16)	21.8	14.9	6	48
	Form (*n*=20)	11.8	5.9	3	24
	Meaning (*n*=16)	13.2	13.0	1	47

Table 2 ANOVA summary of turn counts

Dep. variable	Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Turn counts	Between groups	1004.331	2	502.165	3.854	.028
	Within groups	6515.141	50	130.303		
	Total	7519.472	52			

Discussion

Results from MANOVA analysis on various language measures indicated that the three groups of different process goals – form-focused goal, meaning-focused goal, and do-your-best, no goal – did not differ from each other significantly. In this section, the results will be discussed from the following aspects, including the impact of cognitive overloading on learners' attention, the tradeoff between attention to form and task involvement, and the implication of lack of communication breakdown.

Overloading of Learners' Cognitive Capacity

The three groups were indistinguishable except in the number of turns taken by students. Those participants who were given no process goal took many more conversational turns than the other two groups, but the result is not significant in a strict statistical sense. According to Kormos and Dörnyei (2004), the number of turns serves as an indicator of learner involvement. More turn taking means fewer stretches of long monologue and more give-and-take in the conversation. It seems that the no goal group, while not having to attend to the process but merely having to focused just on communicating, was somewhat more involved in the oral task, although our evidence does not support a strong claim on this issue.

Being aware of the possible overloading that the process goals may have posed on students (Ellis, 2001; Spada, 1997), the researcher, based on previous literature

(Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003), allowed students time to do pre-task planning. But the results seemed to indicate that students in the form-focused group failed to attend more to forms any more than the other groups even though forms were explicitly set as a process goal. Another possible explanation is that such real-time awareness and attention to form needs more practice and has to be cultivated over time. Thus, effects of such process goals on oral task could not be observable in a one-off situation.

Tradeoff between Attention in the Process and Task Involvement

The results seemed counter-intuitive at first sight. According to goal-setting theory, explicit goals should help regulate learners' behavior and lead to more learning effort. As discussed earlier, Ortega (1999) and Williams' (2001) focus on form studies suggest the possible efficacy of goals in guiding learners to attend to form. Studies in teaching reading (Schunk & Rice, 1989) and writing (Graham et al., 1992) also found that both product and process goals positively influenced student performance.

The contradiction between this study and previous ones may have to do with the nature of the task. In reading and writing, learners have the luxury of going back to previous lines or editing what has already been written. But a co-constructed conversation requires that the speakers present their work in real time leaving few clues for online repair. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002) also acknowledged the dominance of a product goal in oral tasks. Our findings suggest that such dominance can hardly be mitigated by merely setting process goals. Moreover, the fact that the control group produced more turns on average indicates that there may be a price to pay, i.e., lower task involvement, for drawing learners' attention to form in real time. Teachers have to seriously take into consideration the brain's limited capacity and weigh between the cost and gain of learners' attention to form.

Looking beyond Communication Breakdowns

LREs, digressions from mainstream communication, have been regarded as an indication of learners' attention to formal aspects of language. Williams (2001) calculated the number of LREs in language classrooms and concluded that students seldom attend to forms spontaneously. Our finding was in line with Williams (2001) in that only two LREs were found, suggesting that there were few communication breakdowns and no need for interlocutors to stop for clarification. It seems we may conclude that the learners in this study could at least get their ideas across. But having few LREs and breakdowns does not mean that communication is smooth. Learners may have already resorted to avoidance (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989) of

more difficult structures and expressions. Such a phenomenon may be more prevalent in homogeneous classes where students share similar backgrounds. In teaching such classes, the teachers have to be more careful in finding ways to ensure optimal language practice and acquisition.

Conclusion and Limitations

This study adds one more piece of empirical evidence on the efficacy of a goal-setting approach in specific areas of language learning. The positive effects of goal-setting on the learning of reading and writing found in previous studies were not observed in this case of oral communication. The phenomenon was attributed to the higher level of real-time cognitive demand required in speaking than in reading and writing. However, the limitation of the present research report lies in the one-off treatment of the task. Future studies giving learners more opportunities to engage in similar tasks with similar process goals over an extended period of time may help us evaluate more adequately the efficacy of setting process goals in oral communication tasks.

Acknowledgement

This paper is part of a research project sponsored by the National Science Council in Taiwan, Grant #NSC93-2411-H-009-024.

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Appendix: Process goal instructions

Form-focused: The purpose of this task is to give you a chance to practice using English. During both the preparation and the actual communication stages, your major concern is to produce as many error-free clauses as you can, making sure that your pronunciation is correct, that you attend to grammatical details, and that you use well-structured sentences.

Meaning-focused: The purpose of this task is to give you a chance to practice using English. During both the preparation and the actual communication stages, your major concern is to produce as many idea points as you can. Make sure that you have good reasons for your choices and that your partner clearly understands your decision and reasons. On the other hand, you should also try to understand the reasons behind your partner's choices.

Control: The purpose of this task is to give you a chance to practice using English. Please prepare your talk using the space provided below.