Focus-on-form in a Collaborative Output Task: Exploring a Dictogloss

Youngju Han
(Youngsan University)


This study was motivated by the pedagogic interest in dictogloss as a procedure combining form-focused and communication driven pair/group work leading to collaborative dialogue and looked inside a dictogloss to analyze learners’ spoken attention to form while doing the task. The dictogloss task employed in this study elicited discussions on a wide variety of forms, as has been claimed. However, there was a difference in the amount of form-focused episodes (FFE) the learners produced. The linguistic feature targeted by the study was less frequently noticed and discussed by the learners although one single chosen structure appeared in the text repeatedly. The success rate of the FFEs was moderately high but the problem was that the learners had no way of knowing which linguistic forms to those problems they identified were correct at the moment when they had to make a decision. These results were discussed and implications for pedagogy were suggested.

I. INTRODUCTION

Findings of immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies suggest that when second language (L2) learning is solely focused on engaging learners in communicative success, some linguistic features may fail to develop to target-like accuracy (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Though language learning has been seen as a process that requires opportunities for learners to participate in communication where making meaning is primary, many now recognize that there is a need for activities that create an environment which pushes learners to focus their attention on form in the process of communicating meaning. In addition to empirical findings in the immersion program in Canada, there has been the theoretical evidence which supports some kind of focus on form in the L2 classroom and
teachers’ main concern has shifted to how to teach grammar.

In response to these pedagogic concerns, several lines of research have emerged which are exploring ways to integrate grammar instruction with opportunities for meaningful communication (see Fotos, 1994). Swain (1998) suggests that dictogloss is one of the tasks that might help learners move beyond their current interlanguage toward more native-like target language. Dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990) is a task which can be considered communicative even if learners focus quite explicitly on form. This explicit attention to form comes about as learners are forced to consider the language they need to reconstruct the text collaboratively in pairs or groups. This study was motivated by the pedagogic interest in dictogloss as a procedure combining form-focused and communication driven pair/group work leading to collaborative dialogue and looked inside a dictogloss to analyze learners’ spoken attention to form while doing the task.

II. THEORETICAL ISSUES OF DICTOGLOSS

The most pertinent theoretical issue to dictogloss is focus on form, a term coined by Long (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Led by the theoretical and empirical evidence that some attention to form is needed, Long (1991) argues that attention to specific language features needs to be motivated by communicative situations and carried out as part of interactive, communicative activities, an approach that he refers to as focus on form. This focus on form approach is more effective than traditional isolated grammar lessons in a predetermined sequence, which he refers to as focus on forms. Long and Robinson (1998) define focus on form as follows:

During an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features - by the teacher and/or one or more of the students - triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production. (p. 23)

It is during this communicative breakdown that learners notice features in the input which they would otherwise miss and also compare what they notice with what they produce, which Schmidt and Frota (1986) refer to as noticing the gap. It is believed that these instances may be beneficial to L2 learning by making information about what can and cannot be said in the target language more salient.

Studies by VanPatten (1990) and Doughty (1991) discuss that learners have difficulty in consciously paying attention to form and meaning at the same time. L2 learners, especially those with a lower level of proficiency, have limited processing capacities, such that it is
difficult to allocate attention to a certain form in the input while they are trying to understand the content of input. It is therefore suggested that implicit grammar instruction does not lead L2 learners to successful learning of the target language through comprehensible input supplied in natural communication.

Swain formulated the Output Hypothesis as a supplement to Krashen’s (1981) Input Hypothesis, arguing that evaluation of the immersion program in Canada demonstrated that comprehensible input alone was insufficient for learners to achieve target-like L2 competence (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Related to focus on form is the issue that:

Output is one of the triggers for noticing. That is to say, in producing the target language, learners may encounter a problem leading them to recognize what they do not know, or know only partially. In other words, the activity of producing the target language may prompt second language learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems, it may bring to their attention something they need to discover about their L2. (p. 373)

Swain (2000) has adopted sociocultural theory in recent studies and has reformulated her views about the role of output. From the theoretical perspective of a sociocultural theory of mind, learning occurs through social mediation (Lantolf, 2000). A primary means of social mediation is verbal interaction. Social mediation in the form of interaction can occur as expert-novice mediation (the teacher or more capable peers as ‘experts’) or as peer mediation. Thus, sociocultural theory sees learning, including language learning, as dialogically constructed.

Embedded in this theoretical framework, dialogue with others or internally is a significant context within which learning takes place. The type of dialogue of particular significance in the language learning process is collaborative dialogue in which learners co-construct language and/or linguistic knowledge (Swain, 2000). Learners talk about the language they are producing or produced, question or reflect on their language use, or correct themselves or others.

To structure contexts in which learners would communicate about language, Swain and her colleagues turned to grammar dictation, known as the dictogloss in their studies (Kowal & Swain, 1997; LaPierre, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). In dictogloss, a short piece of text is read out to learners at normal speed. While it is being read, learners take down the key words and phrases and then work together in small groups to reconstruct the text from the gist of the text and from their shared resources. The final versions are then analyzed and compared. The initial text, either an authentic or a constructed one, is devised to expose learners to particular grammatical constructions.

According to Wajnryb (1990, p. 10), “the key to the dictogloss approach to grammar is
interaction.” The reconstruction stage is therefore of central interest because it is in that stage that learners talk about language forms and often decide collaboratively what forms to use in constructing the meaning required by the task. Verbalization of problems in contexts in which learner’s attention is drawn to a linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand may help learners to understand the relation between meaning, form and function, since these kinds of activities may lead to a greater metacognitive awareness. Swain (1998) argues that such reflection through metatalk can aid acquisition in that it makes the process of noticing and hypothesis testing more explicit to the learner.

However, several studies suggested some reservations about dictogloss. Swain (1998) noted that the learners did not in fact focus on the forms the passage was devised to practice (two aspects of the past tense in French); instead they negotiated the gender and number of nouns. Swain (1998, p. 77) explains: “students talked about what they needed to talk about according to the state of their own internalised knowledge.” Kowal and Swain (1997, cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 156) commented with their results “the dictogloss approach might be better suited to promoting syntactic processing skills in general than as a means for drawing attention to a particular grammatical point.” Ellis (2003) reviewed studies on dictogloss and suggests that (1) dictogloss leads learners to talk about linguistic forms but not necessarily the targeted form, and (2) there is yet little evidence to support the claim that dictogloss tasks benefit acquisition if the measure of this is performance in post-tests.

Another reservation is related to the issue of ‘learner-generated attention to form’ (Williams, 1999) or ‘learner-centered exposure’ to form (Leow, 1997). Much of the focus on form research addresses attention to form that is teacher-centered (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Williams & Evans, 1998) but Williams (1999) examined learner-generated focus on form. She found that when learners are engaged in unstructured oral production tasks in groups there was little spontaneous attention to form. They overwhelmingly chose to focus on lexical rather than grammatical issues.

While the task effect of the dictogloss procedure on acquisition is an important issue to be investigated, this study sets out to investigate reservations suggested by the previous studies—if the dictogloss procedure directs learners’ attention to a specific grammar point intended by a dictogloss text. Before investigating how much attention is drawn to the target structure, the question, whether there is substantial attention to form in general, is first investigated. Finally, the investigation of focus on form leads to Research Question 3—how successful the learners’ talks on focus on form were.
III. THE STUDY

1. Research Questions

The study was aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. Is there substantial attention to form in the dictogloss task? Do learners attend to lexis or to a variety of forms?
2. How much attention was given to the target structure?
3. How successful were the FFEs?

2. Subjects

The participants of this study comprised 16 adult learners of English in a language institute in Auckland, New Zealand. Their level of English was upper intermediate based on the placement test administered by the institute. Upper level of learners were chosen because more advanced learners might be expected to have more extensive linguistic resources to contribute to talking about language in the dictogloss text.

Among the learners there were 2 males and 14 females with most learners ranging in ages from 21 to 30. The time they spent studying English varied from 9 months to 15 years but on average they had spent 7.8 years, most of which took place in their home country. Their length of stay in New Zealand was about 4 months on average for their language courses. Their native languages were Chinese (1), Japanese (7), Korean (5), Spanish (2), and Taiwanese (1) with the number of the learners in the parenthesis.

3. Development of the Task

1) Target Grammatical Structure

The target structure chosen was psychological verbs which often cause global errors. Errors that significantly hinder communication are those that affect overall sentence organization. Because of the overall nature of such errors, Burt (1975) labelled this category global.

Learners have problems when they use psychological verbs depending on the order of experiencer and stimulus. For example, The teacher (experiencer) likes hard-working students (stimulus). However, the order is reversed with some specific verbs. For example, This lesson (stimulus) bores the students (experiencer). When reverse psychological verbs are misused with a different order of experiencer and stimulus (i.e. The students bore this
Another reason for the selection of this structure was that it does not usually feature in language teaching materials and is therefore likely to be less familiar to the learners. The pilot study showed the learners were in fact more familiar with using a passive (i.e. *The students are bored with this lesson.*) than the target form. Harley (1993) suggested that these nonobvious features would most benefit from a sort of conscious attention.

2) Dictogloss Task

A dictogloss text was written using seven of the target structure verbs (see the appendix). The dictogloss task was piloted by three pairs at upper intermediate level of proficiency. Based on the comments from the pilot study, some words were changed to make sure that learners understand the text and the instruction was revised to help them complete the task successfully. The pilot study results also showed that the learners sometimes used a passive instead of the target structure in reconstructing the text. The learners were therefore instructed that they should try to write their text so that it would be as close to the original as possible in grammar and words. The learners were instructed as follows:

> Now you are going to work with your partner and you will reconstruct a story together that you’ll hear through a tape. I will play the tape 2 times. The first time, just listen. Don’t write anything. The second time, while you listen to the story, take some notes—words or phrases to help you remember the story. Don’t try to write down everything. You won’t have time. Try to write the story exactly as you hear it, and write it in good English. Try to use the exact words from the story as much as possible, but use other words if you forget the original words. Discuss with your partner the correct grammatical structures you will use.

4. Data Collection Procedure

Each pair performed the task separately at the end of the day when their classes were over in the institute. Each learner of the pairs received an instruction sheet and the researcher went over it with them, clarifying any questions that arose. They listened to the dictogloss text twice recorded by an American native speaker. As they worked collaboratively to reconstruct the dictogloss text, they were audiotaped. The pairs took about 17-20 minutes to complete the task. After the task sheets were collected, they had the opportunity to read the dictogloss text for as long as they needed, in which the target structure verbs were bold and italicized. They spent about 1-4 minutes to read the
dictogloss text after the performance of the task. This was done instead of the last stage of the analysis and correction in the dictogloss due to time constraint in the data collection procedure. The audio recording was transcribed using a broad orthography.

5. Coding

The transcribed data from the learners’ pair work were coded by identifying episodes in which learners’ attention was drawn to forms—termed focus-on-form episodes (FFEs). The term, language-related episode (LRE), is used more widely in SLA studies, which Swain (1998, p. 70) defined as “any part of a dialogue in which students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct”. The other term, FFE, was used in this study as in Ellis, et al. (2001) because this study was limited to focus on form that was collaboratively accomplished. Episodes in which the learners did not identify linguistic problems were not coded as an FFE. For example, when learners negotiated meaning relating to the sequence of the events, without identifying any linguistic and structural problems, those episodes were not considered.

Secondly, although it was acknowledged that self-correction is an occasion on which only the speaker is attending to form, those occasions on which self-correction occurred were included for the data analysis. This was because the data showed that when a learner self-corrected a linguistic form, that form was often noticed and repeated by the partner. The learners brought up the same linguistic issue both in initial telling of the story and in the context of writing up. Such episodes were coded as the same broken episode and counted as one episode.

Once episodes were identified, they were sorted into categories and coded; then quantified. Kowal and Swain (1994) identified three categories: meaning-based, grammatical, and orthographic episodes. Their categories were used as a starting point but Sullivan and Caplan’s (2004) coding scheme was adopted because it better fitted the purpose of the present study and subcategories were derived from the data. The data were coded by both the researcher and a TESOL doctoral student. Where there were discrepancies between the two coders, an agreed coding was arrived at through conferencing.

A wide variety of forms were found in focus, which were grouped into three levels of linguistic analysis: (1) word level, (2) sentence level, and (3) suprasentential (discourse) level. There were 20 subcategories. Some exemplary categories are listed. L10 and L14 in the episode below represent learners.
1) Word Level

At this level those aspects about what it means to know a word (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999) were grouped. Episodes at this level included those in which learners’ attention was directed to the semantic components of the language, spelling, and one instance of asking how to pronounce a word. The five tokens of ‘Other’ category were L13’s question—if she should say, *he jumped up into the bus* or *jumped into the bus*, three faulty uses of adjective forms, and uncertainty of the use of a quantifier.

(1) Meaning of a Word
L13: *by teacher, so, ah, assignment or grade of test?* Assignment mean grade?
L6: assignment? You don’t know the meaning of assignment?
L6: Assignment is homework.
L13: homework? Ah.

(2) Lexical Search
L5: *for the class. handing back assignment?*
L1: I missed it. So, *the teacher? was handing out.* No, no.
L5: *handing back*
L1: student handing, no.
L5: *handing in back, no, handing back just handing back, I think.*
L1: So, then, should be *teacher, right? She teacher hand out or hand back hand out.*

2) Sentence Level

Episodes at this level included subsentential or sentential aspects. In practice, most of them were morphosyntactic issues and any syntactical FFEs which did not fit those categories were coded as ‘Other’. The four tokens of ‘Other’ category comprised of an instance of adding a missing verb in the sentence and two instances of figuring out proper subjects of a sentence, etc. In the subcategory (1) below the learners are trying to grasp for the first sentence (*Tony was fast asleep*).

(1) Reconstructing a Sentence as a Whole
L10: The first start is *Tony was fast asleep? I heard fell a sleep.*
L14: *fell a sleep? fast sleep?*
L10: *fast sleep.*
L14: OK.
L10: *Tony was fast sleep* but
L14: I’m not sure. the first sentence
L10: Yeah. *the fast sleep fell a sleep,* anyway.

(2) Verb Forms

The vast majority of these FFEs were about verb tense as shown in the episode below although there were instances of other verb forms (subject/verb agreement, infinitive, passive voice, and subjunctive mood).

L13: *He was already late for class.*
L6: *late for the class,* hmm. *He travel to university* (pause) *he travel to his university* but
he he had already been late for the class.
L13: Hmm. I catch that simple, hmm, past simple.

In the episode below from the same pair, the learners are working on a subjunctive mood form although the form did not appear in the original text.

L13: *can get a grade.* Hmm. OK. *If he ...*
L6: *worked work*
L13: past?
L6: past.
L13: *hard for [next assignment]*¹
L6: [next assignment] and *he would be satisfied ... at the grade.*

(3) Morphology

There were a few instances of derivational morphology and inflectional morphology including adding plural –s.

L5: *He got up hurry? hurrily?* (laughter) hurrily? *adjec adverb? I think it’s adverb?*
L1: I’m not sure.
L5: Something like that?

L4: *two week just two week*
L2: Yeah. Anyway, *he worked hard for two weeks*
L4: *for two weeks and*

¹ In the transcript [ ] means simultaneous utterances and [x] unclear utterances on the tape.
(4) Determiner
L15: and eventually eventually bus, maybe, we need article, a bus? the bus? a bus?
L11: the bus.
L15: Maybe, a the bus? the?
L11: the bus. Yeah.

(5) Preposition
L15: Maybe, was talking loudly. I heard cellular phone her cellular phone but there was some preposition.
L11: Loudly, I think. talking. How about on?

(6) Adjective Ending -ing and -ed
L7: the lecture
L9: was [boring]
L7: [boring]
L9: was bored
L7: boring?
L9: boring?

(7) Target Structure
L14: OK. The grade was
L10: made him
L14: made him?
L10: I don’t know. Anyway, when he get he catch the grade low grade he was [disappointed].
L14: [disappointed]? And the grade disappointed him?
L10: (laughter) I think.
L14: disappointed
L10: disappoi.n.t.e.d. I don’t know. (laughter)
L14: d.i.s.a.p.p.o.i.n.t.e.d. The grade disappointed him.

3) Suprasentential Level

The suprasentential or discourse level of form focuses on the structure and organization of the paragraph, as well as higher level stylistic issues (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). There was only one category of logical organization in this study. It is noted that L17 in turn 37 is correcting a faulty use of were to was, which was one episode nested
within another. This episode was counted separately.

32 L11: he annoyed
33 L17: Ah, the next people the person next to him next to him
34 L11: annoyed
35 L17: Annoyed is next sentence. It gave some information the reason about the reason for.
36 L11: The person next to him were talking.
37 L17: Maybe, was talking loudly.

5. Outcomes

FFEs that failed or resulted in incorrect solutions were investigated. In an ‘incorrect’ solution the learners agreed on a non-target-like form, as in the episode below:

L5: I don't know. Cat surprised him jumping his chest?
L1: jumping [up] his chest
L5: [up] his chest? Is right the spelling? (laughter)
L1: Yeah, yeah.

A failed FFE was defined as the one in which the “problem not solved or disagreement about problem solution” (Swain, 1998, p.77). FFEs in which learners failed to come to consensus, gave up their negotiations, or moved on without a solution were marked in this way, as in the episode below.

L8: Hmm. He straight straighted? straighted?
L2: straight
L8: to the library
L2: Hmm. He straighted to the library.
L8: straight to the library
L2: he ran to straight [x] he went
L8: went straight
L2: Ah. He went to straightly
L8: Huh?
L2: He went straight to the he went straight to the library, ah?
L8: straightly went straightly
L2: Uuhh.
L8: No? I am not sure.
This episode is the example of learners giving up negotiations for the use of the word, *straight*. After the last turn they just moved on to the next sentence.

**IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

1. **Research Question 1: Is there substantial attention to form in the dictogloss task? Do learners attend to lexis or to a variety of forms?**

   There were 87 FFEs from 8 pairs. Fifteen of the total FFEs focused on the word level, with 17.24% of the total being lexical in nature; the majority showed attention to the sentence level, with a striking 79.31% syntactic; and 3 FFEs, or 3.45% had suprasentential foci.

   The sentence level, grammar-related FFEs, had the most variations. There were 14 subcategories including the target structure on which the original text focused. While the learners also drew attention to less salient features, such as third person and plural -s, and articles, verb forms received the most attention. The verb forms were mostly on tense (17 out of 24).

   The discourse level, higher order episodes, were infrequent. Part of the reason may be the choice of the original text which was written according to the temporal sequence. The pairs did not need to put much effort into writing a coherent text with transitions and some pairs just ordered sentences in number without discussing any structural devices relating to the sequence of the events. Table 1 summarizes taxonomy of FFEs.

   The description of FFEs indicates that the task facilitated discussions of a wide range of forms. Unlike the results reported in Ellis, et. al. (2001) and Williams (1999) in which learners tended to negotiate primarily lexical items, those items accounted for less than one fifth of the total FFEs, and the largest category was morphosyntax (73.26%). The difference seems to lie in the task type. Kowal and Swain (1994) pointed out that collaborative writing tasks in particular are helpful in directing learners’ awareness to morphosyntactic features that may not be salient in the course of communication. Collaborative metatalking during the dictogloss is more likely to engage learners in syntactic rather than semantic processing compared to meaning-focused activities which the data for those two studies cited above came from.

   While there were exchanges which consisted solely of text proposal with few or no additional words, many of them consisted of metalinguistic information. Therefore, insofar as metalinguistic discussion, suggestions and disagreement cause participants to reflect on their linguistic knowledge and articulate it, it could be claimed that there was substantial attention to form in the dictogloss task and it raised learners’ consciousness of a number of different linguistic features.
TABLE 1
Taxonomy of FFEs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Episodes</th>
<th>No. of the Episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word Level</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical search</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of a word</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence Level</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructing a sentence as a whole</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject/verb agreement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infinitive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive voice</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjunctive mood</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derivational morphology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflectional morphology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determiner</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective ending -ing and -ed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target structure</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suprasentential Level</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical organization</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regard to the number of FFEs for each single group, there turns out to be noteworthy differences. For pairs 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 the number of their FFEs was higher than or around the average (=10.88), but for pairs 2 and 3 far lower. The learners attempted to share metalinguistic knowledge but the willingness to give and receive this kind of knowledge varied from learner to learner. Some appeared to regard cooperating on the text as an opportunity to provide or exchange metalinguistic knowledge and insights, while others seemed to want to proceed towards a product with little discussion. These differences may be due to different conceptualization of the task and of their role in it. This result is in line with that reported by Foster (1998) who suggested the importance of the participants’ perceptions and goals in determining the kind of activity that tasks give rise to. Learners approach tasks differently and will benefit differently from the collaborative tasks implemented in a classroom. Table 2 presents the number of FFEs for each pair.

TABLE 2
Number of FFEs for Each Pair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th>Pair 3</th>
<th>Pair 4</th>
<th>Pair 5</th>
<th>Pair 6</th>
<th>Pair 7</th>
<th>Pair 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of FFEs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Research Question 2: How much attention was given to the target structure?

There were 11 occasions of the target structure in focus. Although the text contained seven instances of the target structure, the learners rarely discussed the target structure (11 out of 56 possible instances). Table 3 shows the number of FFEs on the target structure for each pair.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of FFEs on the Target Structure</th>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th>Pair 3</th>
<th>Pair 4</th>
<th>Pair 5</th>
<th>Pair 6</th>
<th>Pair 7</th>
<th>Pair 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Furthermore, the learners did not formulate any explicit rules about the use of the target structure although the target structure as a nonobvious form was expected to invite learners’ discussions. Leow (1997) showed that increased levels of meta-awareness correlated with greater conceptually-driven processing such as hypothesis testing and morphological rule formation. When the learners put a structure into question and discuss it and attempt to propose alternative structures, noticing is more likely to occur and contributes in turn to more recognition and accurate written production of noticed forms. The discussion was done mainly through self-correction or correction with no explanation as in the episode below:

L12: And *he saw a person speaking loudly*? and  
L3: Yeah, *on the cellular phone*  
L12: *he felt*  
L3: *[annoyed]*  
L12: *[annoyed]*  
L3: *annoyed him*

There was only one occasion on which a metalinguistic explanation was attempted, albeit unclearly

L2: Yeah, another sentence. *his cat*  
L8: *surprised him*  
L2: Yeah. *his cat*. What surprised him?  
L8: No. *He was surprised by cat and his cat surprised him.*  
L2: *hmm*
L8: Not active but passive.
L2: His cat surprised him. Hmm.

In the learners’ written versions, there appeared 39 sentences related to the target structure out of possible 56 slots. However, 14 sentences were written incorrectly or in the passive form suggesting that the learners were not quite aware of the linguistic problem they encountered. Although there were 25 sentences written correctly using the target structure, those structures that were used during the task but were not the focus of language-oriented discussions are less likely to be remembered and used accurately than those that were the focus of such discussions.

One possible explanation for these findings is that the target structure had not been dealt with explicitly in the class the learners were attending as suggested by Swain and Lapkin (2001). This might mean that pair interaction does not raise consciousness of a particular language item if the learners are not keyed into it. The fact that certain forms failed to be raised in pair discussion indicates that it may be difficult to predict forms that will be discussed, and that the learners’ focus on form appeared to depend to a greater or lesser extent on the linguistic interests and the general level of individuals because they became aware of the gap between what they wanted to say or write and what they could actually say or write.

On the other hand, there is evidence of some growing awareness of the target form and its use, even if the learners were unable to produce the full forms. It may be that the dictogloss task did have an effect in moving the learners into a stage of development. In terms of receptive use, they began to notice the target form in the input, and in terms of productive use, they began to use it in a non-target-like manner. In the episode presented below, the learners appeared to notice target forms and struggled with them.

L10: Also the lecture bored
L14: bored? bored him
L10: I didn’t catch. Just I catch main main word was the lecture bored
L14: OK.
L10: Also the lecture bored the lecture … bored because the subject is not interested him.
L14: Yes, I hear the sentence and the subject?
L10: Yeah.
L14: the subject was not?
L10: not interested? interesting? interested?
L14: interested him?
L10: No, no, just interest (laughter)
L14: bored Maybe we should put him.
L10: *bored him*
L14: And *the subject was not interested him.* [x]
L10: Yeah, we need to change.

3. Research Question 3: How successful were the FFEs?

The success rate in the FFEs was moderately high: around 60% of them (51 episodes out of 87) were successful and were resolved accurately. There were 13 instances of incorrect FFEs and 10 instances were unsolved. Self-correction could not by definition fail but they could have a non-target-like resolution. The remaining FFEs were those occasions on which the linguistic problem was not raised properly, so they could not be judged as correct or not as in the episode below:

25 L10: *Tony was waiting the bus a lot.*
26 L14: *a lot?*
27 L10: *a lot of time. Tony was waiting the bus.* I heard.
28 L14: OK. *a lot of time*
29 L10: Yeah. *waited a lot, a lot of time.*

L14 questioned the use of a quantifier, *a lot* in turn 26, L10 corrected the use of *a lot to a lot of time* and this resolution was agreed by L14 in turn 28. Actually both forms are correct. Furthermore, the error in turn 25 was not identified in their talk.

Some FFEs were unsolved. In the episode below the learners became aware that they did not understand the sentence, *Tony was fast asleep.* When they had to make a decision and write down the passage, they chose to abandon the phrase. Although they were instructed to try to write the story exactly as they hear it, they could excuse themselves and abandon the certain phrase because the collective memory of the dyad may still be missing information.

59 L6: *Tony was ... adverb in the sentence.*
60 L13: Hmm, hmm.
61 L6: You can listen?
62 L13: Adverb?
63 L6: Adverb. *Tony and past tense was*
64 L13: *was?*
65 L6: Yeah, hmm. something, hmm, something *sleeping*
66 L13: I can’t remember.
71 L6: Perhaps we don’t need. Ah, connect.
72 L13: The words we don’t hear in the tape?
73 L6: Hmm, yeah.
74 L13: OK. he was sleeping and?

The identification of problems will theoretically raise learners’ awareness; the time when they noticed their problems would be a desirable chance to learn the particular linguistic feature they identified as a problem. However, the learners had no way of knowing which linguistic forms to those problems were correct at the moment when they had to make a decision.

V. CONCLUSION

This study was motivated by the pedagogic interest in dictogloss as a procedure integrating grammar instruction and communicative language use and investigated some reservations about the dictogloss. The dictogloss procedure employed in this study indeed elicited discussions on a wide variety of forms. Discussions on syntactic rather than lexical features predominated. It is, however, noted that there was a difference in the amount of FFEs the learners produced. Learners seemed to approach the task differently based on their perception of the purpose of a task and the goals they established for the task.

A dictogloss text is manipulated so as to raise consciousness of particular linguistic features of an L2. However, the linguistic feature targeted by the study was less frequently noticed and discussed by the learners although one single chosen structure appeared in the text repeatedly. The possible reason was that the learners were not keyed to the target structure sufficiently to recognize it probably because the target structure had not been dealt with explicitly in the class they were attending. Ellis (2003) suggests a solution to this problem that teachers first go through a presentation stage of a specific linguistic item and then move on to a stage of communicative practice through focused tasks such as a dictogloss. Swain and Lapkin (2001) showed that a mini-lesson on the target structures prior to performing the task served to focus learners’ attention on those forms.

The investigation of FFE outcomes showed that the learners were not always correct in their solutions to the linguistic problems they identified. There were some occasions when they abandon the issue because of their limited comprehension of the original text and/or linguistic knowledge. Moreover, they did not identify all problems and mistakes or identified improperly. The results therefore indicated that there is the need for learners to receive some feedback on their product in order to learn. Although the learners in this study had the opportunity to read the original text with the target structure bold and italicized
after they performed the task, they did not receive feedback on their reconstructed text or on their hypotheses of how the language works due to time limit in the process of collecting the data. Thus, it is recommended that adequate feedback from the instructor on the recorded oral dialogue and/or the learners’ written product should be provided to assist learners’ negotiation of form.

However, the feedback stage may come too late in the task in the sense that the learners’ interest in language problems is peaked during the reconstruction stage when they have to make a decision on the proper linguistic forms. Murray (1994) suggests as a possible solution to this problem that dictionaries and grammar books could be made readily available at the moment when learners need a help, or the teacher could run an information desk answering questions brought up by the learners.

Finally, some limitations of this study have to be taken into account. The number of learners involved was relatively small. Thus, caution needs to be exercised to generalize the findings of the present study to other populations of learners. Learners’ familiarity with task procedures, for example, through the teacher modeling metatalk and role playing the reconstruction process, might have enhanced their task performance. Swain (1998) showed a demonstration of metatalk that included the explicit statement of rules and the use of metalinguistic terminology helped learners focus their attention on their own language use.

Dictogloss, as a communicatively oriented task that would still lead learners to focus on form, offers an interesting area for further study. Future research will need to address how the dictogloss procedure can be manipulated to be effective in bringing about learning outcomes and what other complicating factors (i.e. L2 proficiency, group dynamics) are involved when learners perform a dictogloss.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

*Dictogloss Text*

Tony was fast asleep. His cat surprised him by jumping onto his chest. He got up hurriedly, had breakfast, and left the house. At the bus stop the person standing next to him was talking loudly on her cellular phone. This kind of behavior annoyed him a lot. He waited for a while. Eventually the bus arrived. He jumped on the bus and traveled to the university. When he arrived, he was already late for class. The lecturer was handing back assignments. Tony got back his assignment. The grade disappointed him. The lecturer began to deliver the lesson but the lecture bored him. The subject did not interest him at all. After the class he went straight to the library. The next assignment worried him so he worked hard for two weeks. His next grade satisfied him.
Focus-on-form in a Collaborative Output Task: Exploring a Dictogloss

Applicable levels: secondary, tertiary
Key words: dictogloss, focus on form, interaction, collaborative dialogue, task-based instruction, sociocultural theory

Youngju Han
Dept. of Hotel Management
Youngsan University
249, Bansong-3dong, Haeundae-ku
Busan, 612-743, Korea
Email: yjhan@ysu.ac.kr

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