

Consciousness-raising about grammar in the second-language classroom: Utilising authentic samples of learner-learner interaction in a task-based oral activity

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the focus in second-language teaching programmes has been on task-based activities which are characterised by “a real-world relationship” (Skehan, 1998: 268) or ones that are aimed at empowering learners to use the target language with a view to accomplishing specific tasks outside the classroom situation. Where meaning is regarded as primary in task-based instruction, some researchers have argued that fossilisation of incorrect structures by learners may occur (Higgs & Clifford, 1982; cf. Richards & Lockhart, 1994: 107). More recent studies argue that linguistic support must not be omitted from language teaching programmes within a task-based, communicative approach (Swain, 1996; Doughty & Varela, 1998). The main aim of this research article is to consider how language practitioners can sensitise learners to aspects of linguistic form and provide feedback on form within task-based instruction. This article reports on the findings of a critical-reflective, Conversation Analytic (CA) study of two task-based, role-play activities undertaken at the University of the Free State in 1996. The analysis of the patterns of discourse reflected in the first activity revealed that learners were not offered form-focused input and feedback. Form-focused instruction was thus included in the second activity. In modifying the activity, the authors argued that the language practitioner could heighten learners’ awareness of grammatical structures in context by structuring the activity around authentic samples of learner-learner interaction generated during the role play. Once the modified activity had been implemented in the classroom, the authors analysed the discourse patterns in the activity in order to verify or disprove their claim. Although the second activity included form-focused input and feedback, it did not give learners sufficient autonomy to explore the possible directions in which their self-generated discourse could have gone. Specifically, the activity did not exploit the potential within learners’ interlanguages. For this reason, other kinds of form-focused input strategies are considered.

Keywords:

Authenticity; Task-based oral activity; Form-focused input

1. Introduction

In recent years, second-language practitioners have experienced a shift in emphasis from a focus on linguistic form to predominantly message-oriented practice in the classroom. Following this transition, teaching programmes have focused increasingly on so-called task-based activities, which are aimed at helping learners “to achieve communicative competence in the kind of tasks they will encounter in the world [outside the classroom]” (Cheung, 1997: 119; cf. Skehan, 1998: 268; Widdowson, 1998: 328). According to Skehan (1998: 268):

... a task is regarded as an activity which satisfies the following criteria:

- Meaning is primary.
- There is a goal which needs to be worked towards.
- The activity is outcome-evaluated.
- There is a real-world relationship.

Some researchers argue that this holds a number of disadvantages for language learners. Among others:

Higgs & Clifford (1982) argue that giving learners unstructured or free conversational tasks to complete without providing sufficient linguistic support may lead to fossilization of incorrect speech (i.e. permanent establishment of incorrect grammatical structures), particularly with less proficient learners. Porter (1986) found that learners carrying out communicative classroom tasks sometimes used forms that were sociolinguistically inappropriate, such as inappropriate ways of expressing opinion, agreement, and disagreement (Richards & Lockhart, 1994: 197).

Recent studies carried out by Swain (1996) and Doughty & Varela (1998) support the view that form-focused instruction should not be omitted from teaching programmes which follow a task-based, communicative approach (cf. Turnbull, 1999; Koprowski, 1999).

Nassaji (2000: 242) takes a particularly strong line, arguing that an integrative approach to form and meaning in second-language teaching has become the norm:

New perspectives advocate a principled, form-focused approach to L2 learning, arguing that a totally message-based approach is inadequate for the development of an accurate knowledge of language. However, despite this theoretical shift, much less is being written about how to foster this objective in classroom contexts.

Given the shift away from a transmission-based mode of teaching towards a more learner-centred, constructivist-participative model of second-language learning, the authors of this research article attempt to address the following question: How can language practitioners deal with grammar within task-based instruction? Linked to this is the question of how practitioners can provide feedback on form without distracting learners from their principal task of engaging in message-oriented communication.

In considering these questions, the focus falls on two task-based, role-play activities which were carried out by second-language learners during English tutorials presented by one of the authors at the University of the Free State in 1996. The first activity is entitled “The Party”, while the second is entitled “An Invitation to Dinner”. Both have been adapted from a pedagogical device known as strategic interaction which was developed by Di Pietro (1987). It should be noted that Di Pietro (1987) uses the term role play to mean playing a part, which is different from a more orthodox definition of role play.

Adhering to the principles of qualitative research, and adopting a critical reflection model (outlined in section 3.3), the authors conducted a discourse-based study of the patterns of interaction reflected in the first role-play activity, showing that form-focused input and feedback were lacking in the activity. Based on the discourse findings of this initial analysis, the second role-play activity was modified to include form-based instruction. In modifying the activity, the authors hypothesised that language practitioners can simultaneously sensitise learners to form and provide feedback on form in context by exposing them to authentic samples of their interaction with one another. Specifically, the activity was structured around audio recordings of learner-learner interaction generated during the role play. The modified activity was implemented in the classroom and a discourse-based study was made of the activity, the main aim being to verify or invalidate the claim that authentic samples of discourse generated by learners can be used to heighten their awareness of grammatical structures in context.

2. Literature Study

Several researchers, including Rost (1990), Lynch & Anderson (1991), and Burns (1998), support the premise put forward in the introduction to this article that learners should have access to authentic material. Lynch & Anderson (1991: 99), for example, contend that, if the aim of the language practitioner is to empower learners to reflect consciously on the organisation of discourse in a particular setting, they should have “access to recordings...rather than secondary pedagogic material”.

By structuring activities around authentic samples of learner-learner interaction, one could argue that language practitioners will be adhering to the principle that “awareness should emerge from the production and interpretation of real language...” (Clark & Ivanic, 1992: 170). In their work on consciousness-raising about the writing process, Clark & Ivanic (1992: 177–184) have identified several advantages of focusing on authentic language in the classroom. One of these is that authentic language “[helps] learners to become consciously aware of aspects of language they already know” (Clark & Ivanic, 1992: 179). By changing their tacit knowledge into overt knowledge, learners can focus on specific aspects of the target language they find problematic.

3. Methodological Orientation

3.1 Research Setting and Data Collection

As already noted, this research article reports on a discourse study of the interactional patterns reflected in the two role-play activities referred to in the introduction. These activities are described below:

Scenario title: **The Party**

Role A: You have been invited to a party. An acquaintance of yours (role B) needs a ride to the same party because his/her car is in the repair shop. Towards the end of the party, this acquaintance suddenly expresses great reluctance to drive home with you. What has caused this sudden change in behaviour?

Role B: Your car is in the repair shop, and as you have been invited to a party, you ask an acquaintance of yours (role A) to drive you there. Towards the end of the party, you suddenly notice that this acquaintance appears to be a little bit tipsy. You do not want to drive home with him/her for fear of an accident. What will you do? (Di Pietro, 1983: 348; abbreviated).

Scenario title: An Invitation to Dinner

Phase 1: A man invites a woman to dinner at a restaurant. The woman may either accept or reject the invitation. The interactants are to develop a conversation in either case.

Phase 2: If the woman accepts, the two go to the restaurant, where they encounter another man who appears to be the boyfriend of the woman. Develop a conversation among the three individuals.

If the woman rejects the invitation, the man asks someone else, who accepts. They go to the restaurant, where they encounter the woman seated at a table having dinner with another man. Develop a conversation with the four persons. (An abbreviated version of a scenario cited in Roberts, 1986: 83).

A scenario resembles a role-play activity in so far as it requires learners to assume specific roles and to carry out a variety of communicative tasks. However, unlike traditional second-language role-play activities in which learners have to carry out rehearsed or pre-scripted dialogues (Littlewood, 1992: 89), the scenario, which is structured around group work, is based on an information gap between learners. That is, learners representing specific roles may not share their agendas with one another, and must convey new information to one another. Di Pietro (1987: 48) points out that, since learners cannot predict each other's lingual contributions, "dramatic tension is introduced naturally into the scenario," an element which is an authentic part of everyday conversation.

The role-play activities outlined above were carried out by second-language students enrolled in the English Special (ENS) course at the University of the Free State in 1996. These students formed a diverse group, and included mother-tongue speakers of Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, Southern Sotho and Afrikaans. Audio recordings of the activities carried out by the students were made and transcribed on a turn-by-turn basis.

3.2 Data Analysis

Since the activities described in the previous section were predominantly fluency-based (see section 4.2 below), Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson's (1974) Conversation Analytic (CA) model for turn-taking in everyday conversation was employed in the analysis.

Although devised almost three decades ago, Sacks et al.'s (1974) CA approach has proved to be influential in the analysis of interaction in institutional settings such as courtrooms (Atkinson, 1992), clinicians' offices (Heath, 1992), and news interviews (Clayman, 1992). CA has also been exploited in the study of classroom discourse (McHoul, 1978; 1990). Indeed, Van Lier (1996: 5) points out that CA serves as an appropriate research tool for language practitioners when it comes "to a close monitoring of interactional work" in the classroom (cf. Kinginger, 1994: 4).

Drew & Heritage (1992: 17–19) contend that CA – "the study of talk-in-interaction" (Psathas, 1995: 1) – is relevant for the analysis of institutional discourse for several reasons. First, since a CA perspective is concerned with the underlying social organisation of interaction, it does not give a static and partial impression of the discourse process, but captures the dynamic turn-by-turn process of interaction: "CA [has] emerged with an approach to sequence in social interaction that [avoids] the sterile formalism that has constricted speech-act approaches to dialog" (Drew & Heritage, 1992: 16; cf. Mehan, 1991: 90). Second, the methodological constraints that inform the CA approach promote the efficacy of one's discourse findings. These constraints are considered in section 3.3 below.

It should be noted that, while Sacks et al.'s (1974) discourse model can deal with learner-learner exchanges which simulate everyday conversation, the model cannot accommodate Teacher-Pupil-Teacher sequences in the classroom data selected for this article. To account for the normative orientations encapsulated in the lingual data, aspects of Sinclair & Coulthard's (1975; 1992) Discourse Analytic (DA) model for classroom discourse were employed in the analyses.

The analyses entailed complying with the principles of qualitative research. Thus, in a preliminary analysis, the lingual data were perused in terms of the specified CA and DA models to identify recurrent patterns of discourse. To cross-validate the initial discourse findings, the full corpus of data was then examined in detail. Thereafter, new data were transcribed, and the authors examined the data to further corroborate the findings (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989: 121–124; cf. Chaudron, 2000: 7; Silverman, 2000: 178–198).

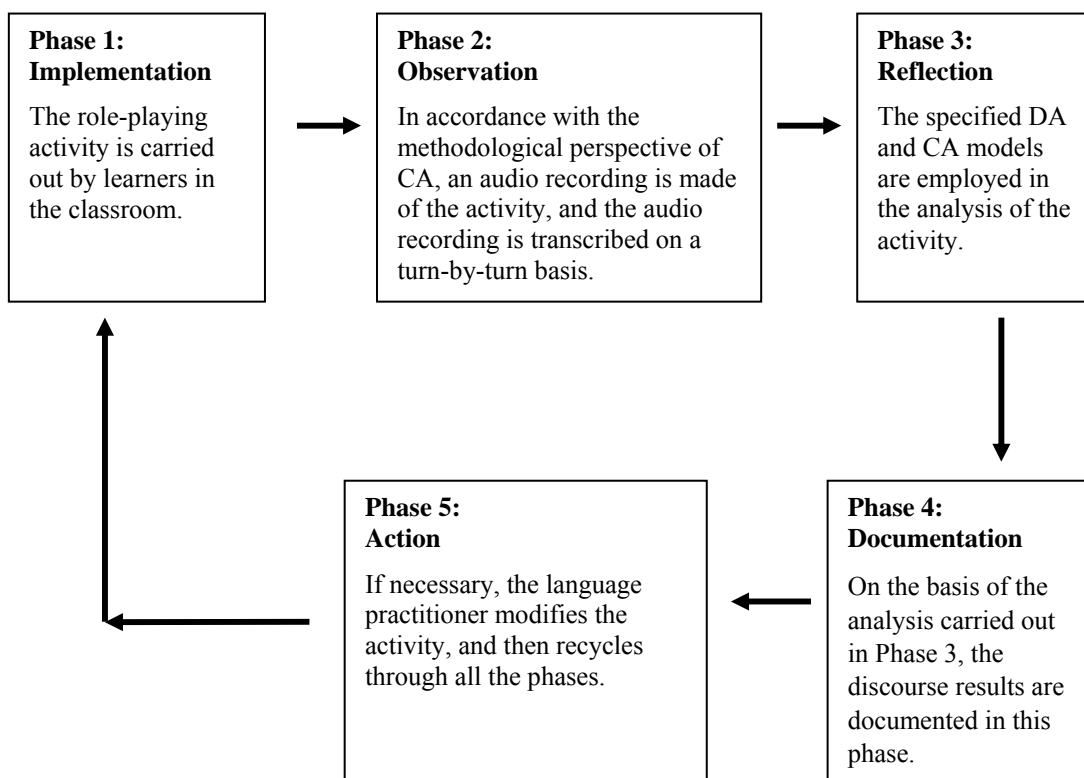
3.3 A Critical Reflection Model

In his “look”, “think”, and “act” research model, Stringer (1996: 16–17) characterises research as a process whereby practitioners continually recycle through a set of activities by means of “observation, reflection, and action” (cf. Kinginger, 1997: 8). In the observation (“look”) phase, practitioners collect the relevant data they intend to analyse. By gathering classroom data, language practitioners are able, as Stringer (1996: 16) puts it, to “[build] a picture” of a particular aspect of the classroom situation they wish to investigate.

Next, in a phase Stringer (1996: 16) refers to as the reflection (“think”) phase, practitioners analyse the data they have collected in terms of their chosen frameworks in order to determine whether or not it is necessary for them to rethink their initial assumptions about their activities.

If language practitioners discover that there is a discrepancy between their claims and what occurs in the classroom, they will be in a position to implement changes in the action (“act”) phase of their research (cf. Richards & Lockhart, 1994: 6). Once the practitioner has recycled through these phases, he or she can spiral backwards through the various phases. By repeating each phase, the practitioner “will find [him- or herself]...revising procedures, rethinking interpretations...and sometimes making radical changes in direction” (Stringer, 1996: 17; cf. Kinginger, 1997: 9).

For the purpose of this research article, it was necessary to expand upon Stringer's (1996: 16–17) reflection model. In order to conduct a critical-reflective analysis of the role-play activities selected for this study, the authors cycled through the phases summarised in Figure 1 below.



The reader will note that, in accordance with one of the methodological constraints of the CA perspective, researchers are required to make recordings of the discourse phenomena to be examined (Psathas, 1995: 46). Clearly, this constraint is a means of demonstrating that one’s findings are trustworthy. Recordings – whether audio or visual – “confront [the practitioner] with a mirror-like ‘objective’ view of what goes on in class” (Schratz, 1992: 89). Coupled with the requirement that CA analysts must record their lingual data is the constraint that they must retain their original recordings in retrievable format (Psathas, 1995: 49). Accordingly, the recordings that were analysed in this article are lodged with the Department of English at the University of the Free State. Retrievable data in the form of tapes and transcripts are essential, since they enable other analysts to examine and review the discourse phenomena in them (Sacks, 1992: 622; cf. Silverman, 2000: 148–149).

4. The Analysis

4.1 Phases 1 and 2: Implementation and Observation

Based on Phases 1 and 2 of the critical reflection model outlined in Figure 1, the first role-play activity (“The Party”) was carried out by learners in one of the author’s classes and recorded. Specifically, an audio cassette was switched on at the beginning of the lesson, and was not

switched off until learners had completed the activity in its entirety.¹ The activity was transcribed on a turn-by-turn basis, and the abbreviations and transcription conventions summarised in Figure 2 below were used in the transcripts.

Figure 2. Transcription Conventions and Abbreviations

F	Facilitator
S/Ss	Student/Students
(Inaudible)	Utterances that could not be transcribed because of sound distortions
()	Non-verbal actions
O→	A possible transition-relevance place (TRP)
→	Draws the reader's attention to a particular aspect of the lingual data/Marks a transition-relevance place (TRP)
—	An abruptly-checked utterance
/ /	Interruptions/overlaps between turns

In order to overcome the problem of not having access to visual material, field notes were made to supplement the transcripts (Cf. Bailey & Nunan, 1996: 3; Silverman, 2000: 126).

4.2 Phases 3 and 4: Reflection and Documentation

As excerpt (1) taken from “The Party” illustrates, learners were divided into groups so that they could create their own dialogues around the scenario outlined in 3.1. Dividing the class into two separate groups ensured that what the learners who assumed roles A and B would say to each other during the actual performance phase of the scenario would be unpredictable. In other words, a scene was deliberately set for the participants to engage in unpredictable and reciprocal language activity. This is in keeping with one of the tenets of communicative, fluency-based teaching, which stipulates that language practitioners are required to structure activities in such a way that learners will engage in message-oriented communication (Greyling, 1995: 20; cf. Nunan & Lamb, 1996: 15).

Excerpt 1

1 F: Right. Okay, now the derived situation is this, all right: A gets invited to a party...okay...and then a male acquaintance of hers – this is now B – needs a ride to the same party...because his own car is in the repair shop, and she agrees to give him a ride to the party and they go to the party. So that is the information that you all share. Now

1. On several occasions preceding this recording, the author had regularly employed an audio cassette recorder in the classroom. By the time this particular activity was recorded, learners appeared to be comfortable with the presence of the recorder in class.

as you all know, I'm going to give you information which...you don't share. Okay, remember, you don't share this information with any other group. So let me just see which belongs to which...Okay, so this is yours. Okay, so that is your agenda. All right, I think it would be a good idea if you just moved one row up, otherwise you're going to know each other's game plans. (Laughter from students) Okay. (The students form two groups).

It was postulated that, by structuring the activity around a role play, interaction in the performance phase of the scenario would replicate the turn-taking patterns characteristic of everyday conversation. To test the validity of this assumption, the patterns of discourse reflected in the performance phase were analysed in terms of Sacks et al.'s (1974) CA model for turn-taking in everyday conversation. Sacks et al. (1974) state that:

- (1) For any turn, at the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn-constructive unit:
 - (a) If the turn-so-far is so constructed as to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then the party so selected has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak; no others have such rights or obligations, and transfer occurs at that place.
 - (b) If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then self-selection for next speakership may, but need not, be instituted; first starter acquires rights to a turn, and transfer occurs at that place.
 - (c) If the turn-so-far is so constructed as to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then current speaker may, but need not continue, unless another self-selects.

A detailed analysis of the discourse patterns in the performance phase indicated that all of the above rules operated, thus supporting the authors' assumption that interaction in this phase would simulate real-life interaction. Consider, for example, excerpt 2 below, in which student 1's intention was to persuade student 2 not to drive under the influence of alcohol.

Excerpt 2

129 S1: If you drive tonight, the police are going to confiscate your car.

130 S2: → Why?

131 S1: I've just heard...that they are building a road-block just a few blocks from here...searching all the cars, checking if there's anybody drinking and driving.

132 S2: Well, I didn't drink. I have my licence. I have my dad's permission for the car, so...I mean, I don't really see what's the problem.

It is evident that rule 1a operated in this particular excerpt of classroom data. That is, at the initial transition-relevance place of turn 130, student 2 made use of the "current speaker selects next" technique in order to select student 1 to take the next turn. This is in marked contrast to the situation which occurs in a traditional, teacher-dominated classroom, where learners do not have the freedom to select one another to take turns (cf. Nunan, 1993: 35).

As stipulated in Sacks et al.'s (1974) model, in addition to a current speaker being able to select another party, a next turn may also be allocated by self-selection in everyday conversation (rule 1b) (cf. Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991: 98). In excerpt (3) below, for instance, it is clear that,

at the end of turn 146, student 2 chose neither to continue speaking nor to select another participant to speak next. Student 1 therefore self-selected in turn 147.

Excerpt 3

- 144 S2: ...But I'm going now. David, would you please be so kind at to take Sean home?
145 S3: Yes. I will. I will take him home. (Laughter from students)
146 S2: Thanks. (Laughter from students)
147 S1: → Susna, do you know how many BMW's I've seen folded around telephone poles?
148 S3: She can't hear you. Her car's here. (Laughter from students)

The rule system for everyday conversation is such that it also allows a current speaker to continue speaking without fear of being interrupted by another participant (rule 1c). In the exchange below, it is evident that, in turn 68, student 2 continued speaking at the first three transition-relevance places of her turn-constructural unit, which did not include a "current speaker selects next" technique. It is only at the fourth and final transition-relevance place at the end of turn 68 that student 1 self-selected as the next speaker.

Excerpt 4

- 67 S1 Okay. Now can I have the car?
68 S2: O→ I'm sorry,
O→ but I have to go without you.
O→ I'll ask somebody else like David to take you home.
O→ He drives... (Inaudible: laughter from students)
69 S2: Susna, wh- what car are you driving? Just tell me quickly.
70 S2: I don't know. You told me I've got a nice car. (Laughter from students)

Based on the analysis of the role-play activity, the authors concluded that it fulfilled all the criteria for a task-based activity:

First, it is clear that, although both groups were aware of the fact that the action would take place at the scene of a party, each group also possessed a personal agenda of which the other was unaware (see section 3.1). The activity was therefore structured around an information gap in which learners had to negotiate meaning and understanding with a view to achieving their personal goals. Since the activity compelled learners to listen "with more than a passing interest to what the other [was] saying" (Di Pietro, 1987: 42), one may conclude that it adhered to the primacy of the meaning criterion (Skehan, 1998: 268).

One may in turn argue that the activity satisfied the second criterion identified by Skehan (1998: 268) (see section 1) because it required that learners carry out specific agendas. That is, on learning that the student representing role A was under the influence of alcohol, the student who assumed role B decided not to accept her offer of a lift, and tried to persuade her not to drive home. The student representing role A, on the other hand, attempted to convince the student representing role B that she was not under the influence and that she was capable of driving.

Since the success or failure of the activity depended on whether or not the students were able to achieve their personal agendas, one may argue that the activity was outcome-evaluated (Skehan, 1998: 268).

Finally, the activity satisfied the criterion of the real-world relationship, since it was aimed at preparing learners to engage in communication outside the classroom situation (Skehan, 1998: 268).

As noted in the introduction to this article, what is of concern to the authors is that, since task-based activities, such as the one analysed here, are aimed at developing the learner's communicative competence in the target language, little, if any, attention is paid to grammar (cf. Lightbown, 1990: 91). Indeed, the analysis of the interactional patterns in "The Party" has revealed that at no time did the author focus learners' attention on grammatical structures. This is despite the fact that the lingual data show tangible evidence of learners' grammatico-syntactic errors in the target language. Consider, for example, the excerpts below.

Excerpt 5

59 S1: No no no. Susna, I think your eyes are...are deceiving you.

60 S2: Serious, everybody told me I should... (Continues)

Excerpt 6

91 S1: Susna (Laughter from students) ...that's- That's just- You see those guys at the bar...They thought you were really nice and they had a little joke...planned for you. Susna, these things you drink was not lime juice...

92 S2: Well, what did I drink?

93 S1: What you drink...Witblits. (Laughter from students)

Excerpt 7

102 S2: ...(Inaudible) ...I don't drink anything. I had lime juice the whole evening because I knew I had to drive you home. You did have beers to drink, everybody told me that. I'm just- I'm looking at you at the moment and quite frankly, you're not looking too good. So, if you're not coming with me, I'll fetch you another ride, but I'm going now. (Student A picks up her car-keys)

103 S1: Um...I'm agreeing with you. Of course I'm not leaving with you because you're seeing two of me now. (Laughter from students)

104 S2: I'm going now... (Continues)

In excerpt (5), it is evident that student 2 should have used "serious" as an adverb. In excerpt (6), concord error is demonstrated in "...these things you drink was not lime juice" (turn 91). In the same construction, student 1 mistakenly made use of the present tense verb "drink". In turn 93, student 1 once again used "drink" instead of "drank", and omitted the simple past tense form of the infinitive "to be". Finally, in excerpt (7), student 2 generated the awkward, ill-formed expression "I'll fetch you another ride" (turn 102), while in the first utterance in turn 103, student 1 used the present continuous ("I'm agreeing") instead of the simple present tense.

4.3 Phase 5: Action

In view of the above finding, the authors concluded that the role-play activity would have to be modified to include a focus on form. As noted in section 1, the authors hypothesised that, by exposing learners to authentic samples of their interaction with one another, they would be sensitised to grammar in context.

Consequently, the second role-play activity – “An Invitation to Dinner” – was modified in such a way that it was followed by a feedback session during which learners were required to listen to an audio recording of the interaction they had generated during the performance phase of the activity. Learners were provided with a turn-by-turn transcription of the recording. In addition to focusing on learners’ performance, the feedback session was aimed at heightening learners’ awareness of grammatical structures in context. To verify or disprove their hypothesis that authentic samples of discourse may be used to sensitise learners to grammar, the authors recycled through the phases of the critical reflection model summarised in Figure 1.

4.4 Recycling through the Phases of the Critical Reflection Model

The second scenario entitled “An Invitation to Dinner” was implemented in the classroom and recorded. Again, Sacks et al.’s (1974) CA framework was employed in the analysis of the patterns of discourse reflected in the activity. As was the case with the first activity, an interactional space in which interaction would replicate the local-allocational system of turn-taking characteristic of everyday conversation was constructed. The fact that the activity simulated natural conversation is illustrated in excerpts (8) and (9) in which it is clear that learners exchanged information with one another as equals-at-talk across several turns-at-talk.

Excerpt 8

31 A: Okay. Hi Laura, how are you?

32 B: Fine and you?

33 A: I’m fi- I’m fine. Have- Where have you been hiding? I haven’t seen you in two days.

34 B: Um...I’ve been studying really hard for all these tests that just bug me to the ground.

35 A: Okay. I was thinking maybe we should get together some time. How about- What about dinner?

Excerpt 9

116 D: What do you have to do with her studies anyway?

117 A: She has to pass at the end of the year. (Laughter from students)

118 D: Oh, so you don’t have to?

119 A: Ya, we do, but er I make time for everything... (Inaudible) Jealous, jealous. (Laughter from students)

120 D: It’s not about jealousy... (Continues)

The debriefing phase that followed was structured around an audio recording and turn-by-turn transcription of the activity, and the facilitator led the class in a discussion of their performance as is evident in excerpt (10) below.

Excerpt 10

30 F: Do you think so? (Laughter from students) All right, and then what happened over here? The strangest resolution: You guys decided you'd go and have some beers...and you left Laura and Taryn on their own. (Laughter from students) All right, so that was the outcome. Do you think there could have been another resolution?

31 S1: Ya.

32 S2: There might have been, but they were so spiteful, we thought we would just be by ourselves... (Continues)

As illustrated in excerpts (11) to (13), the facilitator also drew learners' attention to aspects of language they had generated during the course of their performance.

Excerpt 11

10 F: All right, then you asked her out...and she made an excuse. Let's see, what did she say here? Oh ya, she said: I've been studying really hard for all these tests that just bug me to the ground. Do you think that's right, bug me to the ground, as an expression?

11 Ss: (Students consult one another, but no response is given)

12 F: Does it sound a bit strange to you? Bug me to the ground?

13 Ss: (No response)

14 F: Would you use that in English do you think?

15 Ss: (No response)

16 F: ... (Several lines omitted. The facilitator writes on the board) She's actually confused two expressions. Okay. The first one, obviously, to bug someone, to pester or irritate them, and the other one is the expression down to the ground which actually means completely. Okay, in other words...For example: I want to buy this house; it suits me down to the ground.

Excerpt 12

16 F: ... (Several lines omitted. The facilitator writes on the board) There's a difference between the ...the S-U-I-T-E and the S-U-I-T. Does anyone know?

17 S1: S-U-I-T-E?

18 F: Mm hm.

19 S1: And the one's without the E?

20 F: That's right. Anyone know?

21 Ss: (No response)

22 F: The one with the E is...is pronounced sweet like a furniture suite, and the other one S-U-I-T refers to a suit... (Continues)

Excerpt 13

24 F: ...you really had a good conversation going there. Um...Let's see here... (Inaudible)

You said: Hi Laura, how are you? I see your studies have taken second fiddle tonight. And I think that...that um...that Laura was played by Martha, I think. And she was deathly silent because she didn't know what the...what the expression to take second fiddle means. Do you all know what to take second fiddle means?

25 Ss: No response.

26 F: Okay, all it means is that you are second best, in other words, that you take an inferior position to someone else...

What is significant about the analysis of the debriefing phase, is that, while it revealed a focus on aspects of language (see excerpts (11–13)), it also revealed that the interaction was characterised mainly by the initiation-response-feedback pattern (I-R-F) typical of teacher-directed teaching (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; 1992). The implications of preventing learners from talking about the language in their self-generated discourse are discussed in the section below. The kinds of form-focused input strategies that could have been employed are considered.

5. Discussion of the findings

It is clear from the preceding analyses that, in contrast to the first role-play activity, the second activity included a debriefing phase, which was deliberately structured around an audio recording of learners' self-generated dialogue, the aim being to raise their consciousness of specific discourse features. The rationale behind employing recorded learner samples in the debriefing session was based on the assumptions that (i) the samples would provide tangible evidence of learners' current levels of interlanguage ability, and that (ii) this evidence could serve as the starting point for sensitising learners to discourse features in context.

However, the analysis of the debriefing phase has revealed that interaction was predominantly characterised by the initiation-response-feedback (I-R-F) pattern typical of teacher-dominated talk (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; 1992). That is, the facilitator simply focused on specific aspects of language, and provided feedback to these aspects without any input from the learners themselves. As a result, learners were not provided with the opportunity to reflect and talk about form – and therefore to raise their metacommunicative awareness – while engaged in talk (a communicative skill). A study conducted by Hedgecock & Lefkowitz (1996: 299) suggests that both foreign-language and second-language informants possess very specific views of what they regard as desirable aspects of expert feedback, which include more student control over the nature and extent of instructor/expert feedback.

In attempting to make a case for comprehensible, form-focused input to modify and support learner interlanguage performance, where both input and performance promote language acquisition (cf. Krashen & Terrell, 1983: 35), the question the researchers had to address is this: What kind of input strategies could the facilitator have exploited? To answer this question, we need to take a look at the notion of “input processing”, which has been the focus of the work of researchers such as VanPatten (1993; 1996), Sharwood Smith (1993), and Boyer (1994). VanPatten (1993: 435–450) contends that instruction that assists learners in processing discourse features that promote comprehension is more beneficial than traditional instruction (cf. Spada, 1997: 82). VanPatten (1996) also asserts that, when it comes to teaching grammar, and in keeping with one of the principles of input processing, learners need to be given the means to make connections between form and meaning.

In this research article, the authors contend that one strategy facilitators can employ to give learners the means for making form-meaning connections is to assist them in constructing the

possibilities that exist at various transition-relevance places in their self-generated discourse. Consider, for instance, turn 116 in excerpt (9):

116 D: What do you have to do with her studies anyway?

There are a number of predictions that one could make about the relevant next turn-at-talk:

- 117 A: (a) She has to pass at the end of the year.
(b) Well, her parents are paying for her studies, and I know that if she does not pass, she will have to discontinue her studies.
(c) I am her best friend, and I care about whether she is successful or not.
(d) Why shouldn't I be concerned?
(e) I am her roommate, if you don't mind.

Preferably, learners should come up with these possibilities. At every transition-relevance place, there are possibilities, and if learners diversify the options available to them and they become aware of these options (or are made aware of the possibilities in the input-processing phase), they may develop their discourse competence, specifically their grasp of inter-turn relevance. Moreover, each of the responses above may take the learners in different directions, allowing them to generate five different dialogues. We could call this kind of input learner-initiated and facilitator-mediated next-turn possibilities input.

Another strategy that could be employed is learner-initiated and facilitator-mediated current-turn restatements, where learners have to think of various ways in which an utterance may be reformulated so that its implicatures are clarified and/or extended. Consider, for example, turn 119 in excerpt (9):

119 A: Ya, we do, but er I make time for everything.

This utterance may be reformulated as follows:

- 119 A: (a) Yes, I have to, of course. That's the reason that I believe in time management.
(b) Well, of course I have to pass. Do you think for one moment that I am not ready for the test?
(c) Don't pull my leg. You know that I follow a rigorous schedule of studying

Yet another strategy that could be employed is learner-initiated and facilitator-mediated clarifications, where learners have to decide what strategies to adopt in order to cope with utterances they have difficulty comprehending. These strategies could include requests for clarification, paraphrasing of a previous speaker's turn-at-talk, confirmation requests, or appeals for help (cf. Koprowski, 1999; Shehadeh, 1999).

In addition to these strategies, and following Long (2000: 3), the facilitator could use "the direct approach...of teaching fixed expressions". Thus, for example, the facilitator could help learners to reformulate their dialogues using "fillers, topic-shifts, hesitation devices, and various kinds of closings ..." (Long, 2000: 3).

These strategies focus on the potential within the learners' interlanguages, and as they generate other possibilities, the facilitator may process their input and extend these contributions to the input + 1 level, to use the terms of Krashen & Terrell (1983: 32-33).

Conclusion

The principle aim of this article was to prove or disprove the claim that language practitioners can raise learners' awareness of grammatical structures in context by structuring activities around authentic samples of their discourse. A discourse-based study was done using two role-play, task-based activities. In the first role-play activity, there was no form-focused input and feedback was noticeably absent. The second activity was therefore modified to include a focus on form. Specifically, the activity included a debriefing phase, which was constructed around recorded learner samples, the objective being to sensitise learners to aspects of language they had generated during the performance phase. However, the authors also found that, while the latter activity included a focus on form, learners were not provided with opportunities to reflect on (and engage in talk about) form. Adopting Van Patten's (1996) input processing model, the authors argued that form-focused input processing strategies could have been used to assist learners in constructing the possibilities that exist at various transition-relevance places in self-generated discourse. Various strategies that could have been utilised to modify and support learner interlanguage performance were thus considered. These strategies include the following:

- Learner-initiated and facilitator-mediated next-turn possibilities input.
- Learner-initiated and facilitator-mediated current-turn restatements.
- Learner-initiated and facilitator-mediated clarifications (e.g. clarification requests, paraphrasing of previous turns-at-talk, confirmation requests and appeals for help).
- Teaching of fixed expressions (e.g. fillers, topic-shifts, hesitation devices and closings).

In keeping with one of the principles of VanPatten's (1996) input processing model, these strategies could provide students with the means to make form-meaning connections, and thus facilitate the production of comprehensible input (cf. Shehadeh, 1999: 2).

Recycling through the phases of the critical reflection model adopted in this article, the authors propose that future research should focus on a discourse study of a role-playing activity that includes the strategies outlined in the previous sections.

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<p>Willfred Greyling is an applied linguist in the Department of English at the University of the Free State. His research interests include discourse analysis, particularly the analysis of classroom talk, and psychotherapeutic as well as news interview interaction.</p> <p>Department of English, University of the Free State, P.O. Box 339, Bloemfontein, 9300</p> <p>greywj@hum.uovs.ac.za</p>	<p>Susan Brokensha is an applied linguist in the Department of English at the University of the Free State. Her research fields include the discourse study of professional contexts, ESP, EFL and ESL.</p> <p>Department of English, University of the Free State, P.O. Box 339, Bloemfontein, 9300</p> <p>broksha@hum.uovs.ac.za</p>
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