

Attention as a Controversial Issue among SLA Scholars

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Abstract –The history of language teaching has witnessed a shift towards "attention" issue in the cognitive approaches because of emphasizing meaningful language learning. This paper considers the current debate on attention into two camps of SLA scholars. It supports the camp which is *pro* attention by positing some reasons. It is noted that it is necessary for learners to pay attention to some aspects of the foreign or second language while communicating it. So teachers should provide learners with the opportunity to construe the nuance between their output and the target language, especially in non-native language milieu.

Keywords: attention; second language acquisition (SLA), noticing

I. INTRODUCTION

The function of attention and noticing in learning a second language has been a controversial subject. In one camp, scholars including Truscott (1998), Krashen (1985,1994), Terrell and Krashen (1983), and Taylor (1983) argue that second language forms are learnt spontaneously when learners primarily focus on meaning. Taylor (1983) states that language forms are gained naturally during language use "syntax seems to be acquired as a result of natural developmental process rather than a grammatical study" (Chastain, 1988, p. 281). In the other camp, Schmidt (1994) claims, unlike other learning skills, "noticing" should accompany by learning a second language otherwise, learning does not occur. He continues noticing that is different from awareness, rule understanding, can facilitate learning (Doughty et al., 2005, p.637). We know the 1970s was a decade of communicative approaches such as functional notional, community language learning, communicative language teaching approaches that put emphasis on language use rather than language usage. So there was a shift from accuracy to fluency and appropriacy. In other words, focusing on form had lost its prestige and status for at least two decades (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 121). Nowadays a lot of evidence has revealed that while completing a task some attention should be given to the form that is necessary for doing that task. This paper was going to reveal which camp could benefit SLA more. We drew a conclusion that both camps had a lot in common. They both placed stress on implicit language instruction and learning that the main goal was focusing on meaning without explicit rules but the major difference was that the advocates of noticing hypothesis wanted to capture students' attention to specific form when arose during negotiation in order not to block the interaction and communication. So we as teachers should understand the real meaning of attention and try to apply it in SLA classrooms since it can make the process of learning possible and easier.

II. NOTICING HYPOTHESIS

Comprehensible input proposed by Krashen, (1985) considers input as the only and crucial factor that the second language learners need to learn and internalize the language. Over the years, input has had different roles, in other words some approaches like ALM heavily relied on input because it believed in imitation a lot (Doughty et al., 2005, p.228). Long, a constructivist, suggests the interaction hypothesis and believes that comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient and the input that is the result of modified interaction is effective in other words, the input that is changed through interaction, when learners have to negotiate for meaning, causes learning to happen (Brown, 2006, p. 305). But what happens through interaction that leads learners to learn? Long introduces "attention" (1996). Schmidt (1994) claims that learning may take place without noticing, a level of attention, but it is forgotten quickly and in the domain of SLA learning never happens without attention or noticing. During the phase of attention the learner grasps the differences and discrepancies between his/her inter-language and the target language (Doughty et al., 2005, p, 244).

III. ATTENTION, AWARENESS, CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

Al-Hejin (2004) sheds light on attention as an important factor in the phases of learning a second language such as "input, processing, development, variation, and instruction". Some believe that attention and consciousness raising can be used interchangeably and are related to each other, that is, they are two sides of a coin. Conscious raising is a technique that allows learners to focus on a language point indirectly, for example they compare and contrast their sentence with a correct form of a native's one to understand the differences indirectly. It is believed that there is a difference between consciousness raising and awareness, what the traditional methods put emphasis on it (Richard et al., 2010, p.119). Long's focus on form (1991), Ellis' consciousness raising (1993), Fotos and Ellis (1991), Sharwood's input enhancement (1991) clarify the meaning of attention by Schmidt that consciousness raising of input is essential to understand a second language. Teacher should draw learners' attention to language form so that the phases of intake occur, that is, L2 becomes a part of learner's competence. Teaching should create some chances for learners to attend to features of the L2 (Gilakjani et al. 2011, p. 436). Mayo mentions the importance of some kind of attention to form in her article and insists on integrating grammar and communication in non-native language teaching. She believes in a return of grammar instruction to L2 communicative language classrooms and reminds us the results of the research on immersion programs that the learners were very fluent in language use but they did not arrive at grammatical accuracy such as "gender agreement, tense marking, and politeness markers" (2011, pp.11-14). William (1999) argues the relationship between memory, attention, induction in his article. He believes in induction procedure that learners themselves discover rules inductively, it helps them to form patterns in long-term memory. This reveals the importance of attention in forming properly structured patterns for learning. It also supports that attention can facilitate learning when learners attend to or process the input. Farrokhi et al. (2011) mention that teaching English to non-native speakers has a lot of controversies and challenges at all levels of language because the teachers want to select the best way of teaching. They reviewed the history of language

teaching methods and their different attention and opinions about focusing on language form from traditional methods to communicative language teaching ones. They concluded that communicative methods that gave special importance to form to help learners grasp not only the importance of the communicative language aspects but also the value of grammatical forms.

IV. ASSUMPTIONS DENYING THE ROLE OF NOTICING IN SLA

Truscott argues (1998) that there are two versions for noticing hypothesis, strong and weak ones, strong version cannot claim that noticing hypothesis causes learners to acquire grammar if they notice the grammatical form, since it does not have any serious evidence in cognitive psychology, its weak version can be supported in the acquisition of metalinguistic knowledge that it is forgotten because it does not become a part of learners' competence. Terrell (1985) states that awareness attracts learners' attention to ungrammatical points directly that it does not guarantee and lead that learners do not make that error in the future, he continues " it may result in negative affective feelings that interfere with learning and it will probably cause students to focus their attention on language rather than meaning" (cited in Chastain, 1988, p.284). Truscott (1998) believes in global awareness sense of input that equates to weak version not its strong version that means learners should be aware of any details of its form. Lightbown et al. (1980) were not in agreement with noticing hypothesis because they claimed what was learnt consciously remained in mind temporarily and was forgotten quickly and was not acquired fully. Truscott (1996) in a review article stresses that even in writing when teachers catch students' attention to the ungrammatical form it has no effect on subsequent development of writing. CLT emphasizes through social interaction and communicative orientation learners learn forms spontaneously without any essential attention to forms (Farrokhi et al., 2011). Terrell and Krashen (1985) believe that learners pick up the rules of language subconsciously when they take part in communication. They believe in acquiring forms of language through natural exposure (cited in Chastain, 1988, p.).

V. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

With these contrasting claims and results of the noticing hypothesis, which camp can benefit SLA more? In our opinion and experience, some kind of attention is essential in SLA classroom and Schmidt and his proponents are supported by a lot of evidence. Truscott (1998) believes in weak version of noticing hypothesis and claims that it can have only a temporary effect on learning since the materials which are learnt consciously are forgotten rapidly. There are some procedures that can help like elaboration. It prepares these materials to be stored in long term memory by chunking them into meaningful units and relating new knowledge to prior knowledge, in other words the meaningful chunks become a part of previous knowledge (Madrid, 2000). As mentioned earlier, attention is a type of induction learning, that is, learners themselves discover the points so this kind of learning is almost permanent. Lightbown (2000) reports that this sentence "practice makes perfect" is considered a myth by some linguists, like, D. Brown, she expresses it is true in its meaning of ALM because rote practicing in decontextualized setting has no impact on learning but practice that involves meaningful and

thoughtful interaction is likely to be successful and everlasting so temporary effect of attention by Truscott may be rejected once more by meaningful rehearsal. Another theory that supports attention concept is by Long's (1991) that grammar instruction is taught in two ways: focus on form and focus on forms. Focus on form is done while providing chances for learners so that they can negotiate meaning, teachers allow students to focus on form instruction in classroom. But focus on forms aims at teaching only particular grammatical structures, it is equated with GTM that the primary focus is on teaching of language forms and discrete forms of grammar without creating context (Sheen, 2002). Dörnyei (2010) sheds light on the meaning CLT in the decade of 1970s that centered around learners' participation in meaningful interaction in order to acquire language by completing some tasks and also indicates some defaults in immersion programs that accuracy was sacrificed for fluency so it resulted in a new language teaching called "principled communicative language teaching " that some attention was paid to form too. Connectionism theory argues in favor of consciousness and attention. It is a cognitive theory that is going to reveal how human learns and it considers attention as a key concept in learning. This model explains how brain makes associations between elements of language based on language input (Gass and Selinker, 2008). Constructivists posit learning is shaped in the context of experience and gained socially not individually. They consider classrooms as social events in which acquiring second language can happen. In these classrooms or environments the students are provided with a lot of instructions that one of them can be capturing of students' attention to specific form of language while communicating and interacting. In other words, constructivism is concerned with how people learn and construct new knowledge in a social context like classroom. Students activate techniques to discover new information inductively that needs a type of attention too (Schell et al. 2013). As said earlier, Lightbown (1980) rejected noticing hypothesis and believed what was learnt consciously was not permanent, but she (2000) publishes a paper based on her experience in teaching courses at university of teachers training programs in Quebec that it is better for teachers to have a method that is mixture of communicative interaction and form focused instruction. Nation (2007) believes knowing some metalinguistic facts about language permits learners to use these facts as temporary supports while practicing and using language meaningfully.

VI. CONCLUSION

The important role of attention indicates that teachers should provide students with some opportunities through completing tasks to understand the mismatches between their interlanguage and target language so some level of attention is necessary for SLA as Schmidt (1990) claims "intake is that part of the input that the learners notice"(cited in Buriro et al. 2013). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) claim learning will be effective if learners apply metacognitive strategies, one of them is selective attention since it increases the understanding of new information (cited in Oishi, 2007). Although induction and deduction procedures both are cognitive methods it seems that induction way has a lot of merits because learners discover and reconstruct the meaning that results in a kind of almost everlasting learning. Designing focused-task language courses, teachers create some chances so that students not only produce specific linguistic features they also are involved in completing tasks, eliciting language use

(Ellis, R. 2004, p. 141). Learners are guided to the message content and pre-determined lexis and linguistic features through doing some tasks they have to use a set of strategies including "comprehension checks, confirmation checks, clarification request, and recasts" in order to negotiate the meaning.(Ellis, R. 2004, p.71). Attention is one of the central and controversial issues in SLA that needs empirical research but its result can promote the quality of language acquisition in second language classrooms.

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