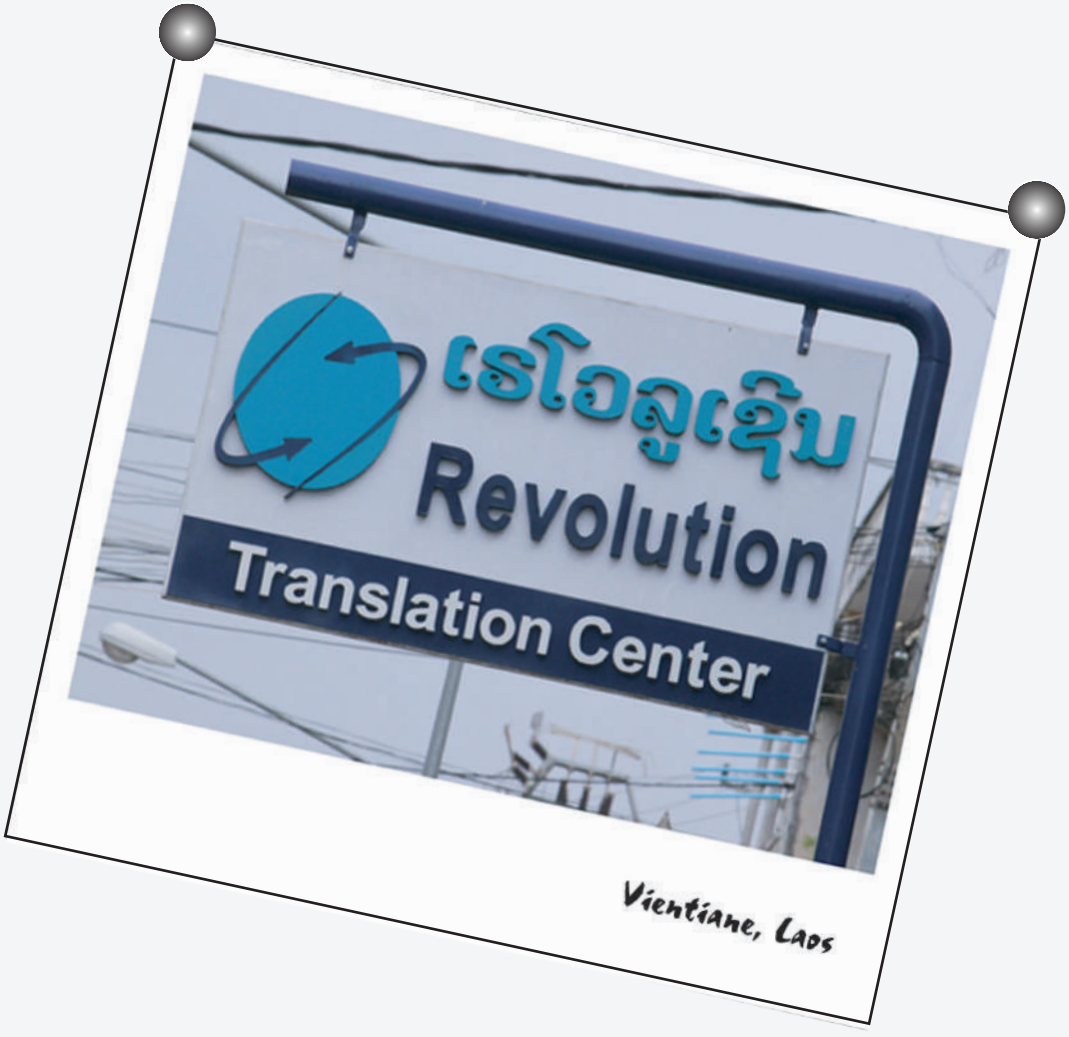
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Artículos de
Reflexión

Towards the Use of Focus on Form Instruction in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in Colombia *

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The present article seeks to encourage reflection on the meaning and potential of focus on form instruction as an alternative to improve the foreign language learning and teaching process of young and adult learners in Colombia. Initially, the concept and types of focus on form instruction are introduced, a brief rationale follows and findings from studies in this area are presented. Similarly, this manuscript discusses how this type of instruction might help students of English as a Foreign Language, especially young and adult learners, to communicate successfully as they gain knowledge of English linguistic forms. Finally, pedagogical implications are discussed and suggestions are offered regarding the use of focus on form instruction in the Colombian context.

Keywords: English linguistic forms, focus on form instruction, foreign language learning and teaching.

Este artículo busca motivar una reflexión alrededor del significado y el potencial de la instrucción centrada en la forma, como una alternativa para mejorar el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en aprendices jóvenes y adultos en Colombia. Inicialmente, se presentan el concepto y los tipos de instrucción centrados en la forma, seguidos de una breve justificación para esta instrucción, junto con lo que algunos estudios en esta área han revelado. De igual manera, se discute cómo este tipo de instrucción puede ayudar a los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, especialmente a los

* Recibido: 15-07-11 / Aceptado: 03-10-11

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aprendices jóvenes y adultos, a comunicarse exitosamente, al tiempo que adquieren un conocimiento de las formas lingüísticas de dicho idioma. Por último, se discuten las implicaciones pedagógicas y se dan sugerencias en relación con el uso de la instrucción centrada en la forma en el contexto colombiano.

Palabras clave: formas lingüísticas del inglés, instrucción centrada en la forma, aprendizaje de lenguas, enseñanza de lenguas.

1. Introduction

There seems to be a general claim in Colombia that the teaching of grammatical forms has been overemphasized in English language classes at almost all levels of education. This is supported by authors like Tello (2006) who states that the teaching and learning of English in the country has been traditionally equated with linguistic or grammatical accuracy. Cohen and Fass (2001) similarly affirm that in addition to an emphasis on the written language, there has been a focus on learning grammatical forms rather than on promoting oral communication in English language teaching.

This is equally reinforced by the widespread belief that many EFL teachers in Colombia have been teaching about the language and not the language in light of its function in communicative situations. In other words, students have been learning about the language from the perspective of assimilating and understanding how grammatical structures are formed rather than using them in communication. This situation has generated some frustration since many learners think they have been studying for a long time without making progress in terms of being able to use the target language for successful communication. Hence,

> […] many students feel that success in English language learning is only achieved outside the realm of the public school and the ideas that teachers have about the possibility of learning English in public school contexts are equally pessimistic (Valencia as cited in Usma, 2009, p. 127).

A reaction to this trend came along with the emergence and promotion of Communicative Language Teaching by researchers and teachers around the world (Savignon, 1987, 1991). Thus, less emphasis on grammar forms

and more attention to meaning to achieve communication were expected to occur. However, despite a tendency to move away from linguistic forms towards meaning-focused instruction in Colombia, students still continue to give evidence not only of limited knowledge of the English linguistic forms as revealed by tests administered by the Colombian Ministry of Education (Cely, 2007) but also of an inability "to cope with a simple communicative situation after several years of classroom instruction" (Vélez, 2003, p. 191). A study carried out by the British Council and the Ministry of Education in Colombia revealed that "only 6.4% of students finishing high school performed in English at an intermediate level, whereas an overwhelming 93.6% did at a basic level and no students were found to perform at an advanced level" (Usma, 2009, p. 128).

Not long ago, Sánchez and Obando (two Colombian authors – 2008) claimed that focus on form could be "the most effective way to combine meaning and accuracy and to allow learners to discover grammar through real life examples, rather than memorizing sterile rules" (p. 186). It follows that in the context of the low results that traditional approaches have offered to most English learners, it is indeed likely that focus on form instruction will end up playing a significant role in English language teaching in Colombia. This might be due to the fact that focus on form:

> Seeks to overcome the problems associated with traditional, grammar-based approaches to language teaching, in which form is often the sole focus of teaching (focus on forms, as Long, 1991, put it), and a strictly meaning-based approach, in which communication, not the language forms, is considered primary (called focus on meaning) (Izumi & Bigelow, 2001, p. 187).

Accordingly, it is my goal in this paper to promote the use of focus on form instruction as an alternative to improve the English learning process, particularly of young adult learners in Colombia. I believe that this type of instruction might help this kind of learner reach their goals of communicating successfully in the target language without losing sight of the relevance that linguistic forms have in such a process. Initially, I will introduce the concept of focus on form, followed by a description of the options in which this type of instruction is usually carried out. Then, I will provide a brief ra-

tionale for focus on form instruction along with an overview of what some studies in this area have revealed. Next, I will briefly discuss various pedagogical implications in connection to the use of focus on form instruction in the Colombian context. Finally, I will draw conclusions and suggestions for further research in the area of focus on form instruction.

2. Defining Focus on Form Instruction

Although the word 'form' has often been used to refer exclusively to grammar, Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001, p. 415) argue that "it needs not and, indeed, should not […] [since] focus on form can be directed at phonology, vocabulary, grammar and discourse." Today, focus on form instruction has been defined by various authors with mostly the same considerations in mind, so any of the following definitions would suit the purpose of this paper. To begin with, Long (1991, p. 45) defines focus on form as "drawing students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication." Then, in a similar way, Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2002, p. 420) affirm that "in focus on form instruction the primary focus of attention is on meaning. The attention to form arises out of meaning-centered activity derived from the performance of a communicative task." Still more recently, Ellis (2006, p. 100) states that focus on form "involves a focus on meaning with attention to form arising out of the communicative activity" and can be of two types: planned or incidental.

Focus on form can be planned when attention is paid to a predetermined grammatical structure and it can be incidental when attention to form is not predetermined but occurs as the activity develops. Both of these types of focus on form may occur as lessons are at times unpredictable; what teachers do in class is typically a response to what they have previously planned, however, they may also come across elements (e.g. grammatical structures) that they did not anticipate or that were not part of their lesson plan. For Ellis (2006), focus on form implies no separate grammar lessons but rather grammar teaching integrated into a curriculum consisting of communicative tasks. It is here when alternatives such as Task-Based Language

Learning (TBL) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) can be of great interest given their emphasis on providing meaningful tasks and using the language to help learners gain knowledge in other subjects.

Likewise, Ellis et al (2002) present two options to accomplish focus on form: reactive and pre-emptive. According to these authors, the reactive focus on form occurs when the teacher or another student responds to an error that a student makes in the context of a communicative activity. It can take place as negotiation of meaning (the students and the teacher discuss what a student meant within a given communication exchange) or negotiation of form (the students and the teacher talk about the language forms a student used or misused in a particular communicative situation). In like manner, reactive focus on form could also occur by means of implicit feedback (usually through a recast – the teacher reformulates an utterance of a learner containing an error, in such a way as to maintain the student's intended meaning – Ellis et al, 2002) or explicit feedback (usually by either directly correcting the error or by using metalanguage – vocabulary or language terminology used to analyze or discuss specific elements of the language – to draw the student's attention to it). In contrast, the pre-emptive focus on form happens when a student or the teacher makes a linguistic form the topic of discussion even though no error has occurred. This option can be student-initiated (a student asks a question concerning a linguistic form) or teacher-initiated (the teacher gives advice about a linguistic form he/she thinks might be problematic for the learner).

Having introduced the concept and types of focus on form, and in order to provide further background information about focus on form, it is now necessary to briefly consider the approach to second language acquisition that this type of instruction is usually attached to; that is, the interactionist hypothesis of language learning. Long (as cited in Mackey, 1999) claims that "interaction facilitates acquisition because of the conversational and linguistic modifications that occur in such discourse and that provide learners with the input they need" (p. 558). Then, the same Long (1983) states that it is widely assumed that at least some of such modifications make input comprehensible. This comprehensible input along with the premise that explicit

grammar instruction plays no role in acquisition is, according to Krashen (1985), what learners need in order to acquire a second language. Following this line of thought, such comprehensible input would be generated by interacting with other, possibly more competent, users of the language.

Later studies by Krashen (1989) and Pilgreen and Krashen (1993) also "offer support for the comprehensible input hypothesis, especially that corollary of the hypothesis which suggests that the best form of comprehensible input is 'reading for pleasure'" (as cited in Lightbown, 2003, p. 4). Adding to this theory, Elley (1989) claimed that learners benefit much more when that reading is supplemented by interaction with a teacher. This would be somewhat reinforced by Long (1996) who, despite considering comprehensible input relevant, also placed more importance on interactive input.

> Negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS [Native Speaker] or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects the input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways (p. 451).

In other words, this negotiation will lead to various forms of interactional modifications. Some of these interactional modifications include use of questions, comprehension checks, confirmation requests, clarification requests, relinquishing topic and self-repetition. Most of them are usually created by the more competent speaker who seeks to draw the learner's attention to disparities between the input he receives and the output he produces. This process generates a great deal of awareness since it is a recurring phenomenon easily observed in several studies (Derwing, 1989; Long, 1981; Scarcella & Higa, 1981) where oral interactions between NS (Native Speaker)/NNS (Non-Native Speaker) and NNS/NNS in the target language were analysed. Gass (1997, p. 131) also recognizes negotiation as a facilitator of learning and claims that "negotiation draws attention to erroneous or inappropriate forms, and also creates a situation in which learners receive feedback through direct and indirect evidence, and, as a result, negotiation becomes a facilitator of learning."

Nevertheless, an important question remains: To what extent do the interactional modifications that occur as negotiation takes place result in learning? In this respect, Gass and Varonis (as cited in Gass, 1997) describe how some language forms that were corrected through negotiation work appeared later in a learner's production and, as these two authors noticed, the same negotiated forms were subsequently incorporated into the learner's speech. Despite this evidence, it is hard to guarantee that learning will indeed take place as a result of negotiation in conversational interaction. After all, we as learners are exposed to a great amount of interactive input when learning another language but might not always learn whatever forms are derived from such interactive input.

Attention is another important aspect of the interactionist hypothesis. In this sense, Schmidt's (1990, p. 139) related concept of the noticing hypothesis proposes that "intake is that part of the input that the learner notices." It does not matter if the learner notices a linguistic form intentionally or inadvertently in the input; what matters is that once it is noticed, it becomes intake. This implies, as Schmidt argues, that noticing is a necessary condition for learning. However, Truscott (1998) suggests reformulating this hypothesis. He argues that noticing is necessary for gaining metalinguistic knowledge, but not for developing competence. Yet, what can be highlighted here is that noticing may have a role to play within the interactionist position because learners are expected to attend to language forms (e.g. through negotiation or recasts as mentioned earlier) and as they notice such forms, they should be more likely to learn them.

Equally relevant within the focus on form, and therefore the interactionist perspective, is the concept of explicit knowledge. Ellis (2006, p. 95) states that "it consists of the facts that speakers of a language have learned." These include knowledge about how a structural feature works and understanding of rules. Explicit knowledge is also "conscious, verbalizable and typically accessed through controlled processing when learners experience some kind of linguistic difficulty in using the target language." Thus, the role of explicit knowledge is aimed at helping learners observe the structure in the input and compare what they notice in that input with their own output

(Ellis, 2006). Incidentally, this well may be one of the underlying characteristics of focus on form instruction.

Different from focus on form, focus on forms "is equated with the traditional teaching of discrete points of grammar in separate lessons" (Sheen, 2002, p. 303); that is, a strict adherence to a conventional and long-standing tradition in many English language teaching settings. Focus on forms has also been defined as "instruction involving a structure of the day approach, where the primary focus is on the form that is being targeted" (Ellis et al, 2002, p. 420). Interestingly, Sheen (2003) seems to be concerned that too much attention has been devoted to focus on form to the point of almost ignoring the potential of focus on forms and the positive results the latter has offered through various studies. In fact, Sheen (2003) claims that focus on forms: "allows the students to understand the underlying grammar, and then use it in producing accurate language orally", offers understanding of grammar by different means (including explanation in the L1, identifying differences between the L1 and the L2), and provides "frequent opportunities for communicative use of the grammar to promote automatic, accurate, use." (2002, p. 304).

Despite the previous arguments in favor of focus on forms instruction, I cannot help but think about the Colombian context where a focus on forms has been perhaps the most common type of instruction and where, unfortunately, it has not yielded the desired results for English language learners, as I mentioned earlier in this paper. Additionally, Norris and Ortega (2000) examined several studies, mostly centered on the focus on forms type, and realized that the efficacy of focus on forms instruction was clearly reduced when measured by the learners' ability to use the targeted forms spontaneously in communication. Consequently, I believe that focus on form deserves more attention in Colombia given the apparent inefficacy of focus on forms instruction. However, this does not entail a complete exclusion of focus on forms as another viable alternative in other settings in Colombia where it may still be offering the expected results.

3. Rationale for Focus on Form Instruction

English learners in Colombia do not appear to have acquired strong linguistic competence just from meaning-focused instruction as promoted by the strong version of Communicative Language Teaching as observed in the low results in the English section of the ICFES exam and in the diagnostic tests administered by the Colombian Ministry of Education (Cely, 2007). It may well be that, as claimed by Long (1991), learners still need exposure to language forms as they incidentally occur in interaction without having to set aside the overall goal of communicative language use. In other words, focus on form allows meaning-focused interaction to become a means for learners to acquire linguistic forms without necessarily placing great emphasis on traditional grammar-based approaches. This is something that certain EFL learners in Colombia may still be going through, and that has not offered the expected outcomes in terms of their level of language competence, as mentioned above.

On the whole, focus on form instruction is supported by the fact that learners need to develop more than just communicative language use, and that attention to form should not be overlooked. This means that learners need the opportunity to use new linguistic forms communicatively and to engage in meaning-focused language use (Ellis, 2006). Further arguments to justify focus on form instruction are provided by Ellis et al (2001), who argue that

> […] focus on form stimulates the kind of attention to form that occurs in natural language acquisition, addresses linguistic problems that individual learners are actually experiencing, and encourages the kind of noticing that has been hypothesized to aid acquisition (p. 410).

Furthermore, as pointed out by Izumi et al. (2001, p. 187), "focus on form stresses the need to integrate form and meaning without excluding either for the sake of successful language learning." In this respect, authors like VanPatten, Williams and Rott (2004) stress that establishing connections between form and meaning is an essential aspect of language acquisition. Along the same line of thought, Ellis (2006, p. 87) argues that "any grammar that fails to describe the form-meaning connections of the target language must necessarily be inadequate."

However, VanPatten (1990) claims that it is difficult for language learners to pay attention to form and meaning simultaneously and that when performing a communicative activity, they will prioritize meaning over form. It follows that it is precisely through focus on form instruction that teachers can draw learners' attention to form during a communicative activity. As noted by Doughty (2001, p. 211), "the factor that distinguishes focus on form from other pedagogical approaches is the requirement that focus on form involves learners, perhaps simultaneously, attending to form, meaning and use during one cognitive event."

So far, I have provided a brief account of what is meant by focus on form instruction, its types and options, along with a brief rationale for this approach. It is time now to consider some of the various studies available in the literature of this area in an attempt to see some possible advantages of this type of instruction for young adult EFL learners in Colombia.

4. Previous Studies on Focus on Form Instruction

Focus on form instruction has been implemented through a variety of studies. Given the scope of this paper, it is not my intention to cover all of them. Instead, I will briefly focus on just a few, especially those studies that have offered more positive gains in the settings where they were conducted. In the first place, a study by Doughty and Varela (1998) used reactive focus on form by means of recasts in dealing with the simple past tense of regular verbs and conditional *would* in the production of ESL students' oral and written science reports. The results showed that students who received recasts, as opposed to those that received no feedback, had gains in oral report task tests administered two months later. However, gains in terms of written science report tasks were less clear and durable.

Next, a study by Ellis et al. (2001) examined how pre-emptive focus on form was accomplished in the meaning-focused lessons taught by two experienced ESL teachers. The participants were ESL students in two classes (intermediate and pre-intermediate) consisting of twelve students each. The study initially consisted of identifying Focus on Form Episodes (FFEs) in a corpus of audio recordings taken from naturally occurring language les-

sons. Then, a detailed description of the focus on form episodes found in the data was produced and analyzed. Results showed that 448 FFEs were identified in the 12 hours of meaning-focused teaching. These episodes were evenly divided between reactive and preemptive (223 and 225, respectively). That is, pre-emptive focus on form occurred as frequently as reactive focus-on-form, suggesting that in some classrooms at least it is a common phenomenon. This study also suggests the need for further research to recognize the benefits of pre-emptive focus on form.

In another study, Loewen (2005) analyzed the efficacy of incidental focus on form in promoting L2 learning. 17 hours of naturally occurring, meaning-focused interaction were observed and recorded in 12 diverse classes of young adults in a private school in New Zealand. After the FFEs were identified, individualized test items were elaborated and the learners responsible for triggering those FFEs were tested on those items. The results showed that learners were able to recall the targeted linguistic forms correctly or partially correctly nearly 60% of the time one day after the FFE, and 50% of the time two weeks later. This particular study is relevant because it provides evidence that incidental focus on form might benefit language learners within communicative lessons since learners are likely to correctly use the forms they attend to.

Despite the evidence suggested by these and other studies (Harley, Allen, Cummins and Swain, 1990; Lightbown, 1991; Lightbown & Spada, 1990), the strong version of Communicative Language Teaching which aims at meaning and fluency over form and accuracy as the essential requirements to achieve successful communication in the target language seems to prevail in English teaching settings like Colombia. Having looked at some studies regarding the use of various types of focus on form instruction in different settings, I will now move to present some pedagogical implications for the use of this type of instruction with young adult learners in the Colombian EFL context. Although focus on form studies may not have been conducted so far in Colombia, I think it is time to begin to use and experiment with this type of instruction so as to generate evidence of its effectiveness (or ineffectiveness).

5. Pedagogical Implications

As discussed earlier, researchers like VanPatten (1988) have argued that a simultaneous focus on form and meaning can overload the learners' cognitive processing system, particularly beginner-level learners. While this might be true, Spada (1997) argues that this can no longer be an obstacle if tasks are carefully designed with close links between form and meaning. It is here when focus on form instruction can contribute to help establish such links.

EFL teachers in Colombia may be inclined to advocate an emphasis on meaning to achieve communication in the target language; however, I think that attention to linguistic forms should not be ignored as these help learners understand and convey meaning in communicative situations. This is not to imply that focus on forms instruction should be encouraged as it would eventually lead learners to a strong emphasis on the study of the grammatical forms and accuracy at the expense of fluency or meaning-focused interaction. What needs to be sought is to draw students' attention to language aspects as they occur in meaning-focused activities or communication, which is what focus on form instruction promotes.

The old tradition in many EFL teaching settings has also debated on whether there are more convenient moments to draw the learners' attention to language forms. On the one hand, some (Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Doughty et al., 1998) would argue that interrupting learners during a communicative activity would hinder interaction and eventually affect the learner's motivation to maintain communication. Thus, it is often suggested that teachers take note of the forms that cause learners trouble during a communicative activity and deal with them when the activity is over. On the other hand, others (Ellis et al, 2002) declare that this reaction ignores one of the key reasons for employing focus on form, namely to make learners aware of specific forms at the time they need to use them. This claim seems to reinforce the view that it is better to provide corrections and explanations at the moment of a communicative activity and so take advantage of the fact that the learners are engaged with the language and therefore might assimilate the correct forms appropriately.

The above argument is not to be followed to the letter, though. The answer as to which approach to correct learners' language forms may be more effective, lies in the teacher's knowledge of the context, the students, and the types of errors, and corrections that need to be made. As an illustration, teachers need to be particularly cautious in the case of pre-emptive focus on form especially when it is teacher-initiated since this option is more likely to interrupt or disrupt the communicative flow. Furthermore, Ellis et al (2002) stress that teacher-initiated focus on form usually tells the students that the teacher is really concerned about form rather than meaning; and it may well be that the forms the teacher pre-empts may not constitute actual gaps in the learners' L2 knowledge.

In the context of focus on form instruction, one common challenge for EFL teachers should be to think of activities that involve attention to form while retaining meaningful communication. As stated by Nassaji (2000), if the goal of language learning is to develop fluency and accuracy and if the latter is not achieved unless students pay attention to form, learning may be more effective if learners focus on form while using language for communication. A sensible conclusion here is that linguistic forms might be more easily recalled and therefore effectively used by learners if they relate such forms to the context of communication where they learned them.

Similarly, Nassaji (2000, p. 245) suggests that what teachers need to do is to think of "integrative activities which can integrate a focus on form into existing L2 communicative activities." Such activities can serve the purpose of bridging the gap between attention to linguistic forms and focus on meaningful interaction. Needless to say, teachers can work on constructing new tasks or adapting some of those already available in the field of language teaching so as to achieve such integration.

6. Conclusions

I have provided an overview of what focus on form instruction entails together with the types and options usually considered for this type of instruction. I have similarly offered a short rationale for focus on form ins-

truction, briefly referred to some previous studies on the use of this approach in different learning contexts, and presented a series of pedagogical implications underlying the potential use of focus on form instruction with young adult learners in Colombia.

It has also been claimed that it is not enough to focus on studying the language forms as might have been the case in ELT in Colombia for several decades usually by means of a structural syllabus in a coursebook, nor is it enough to focus entirely on meaning to achieve communication as has been proposed by followers of the strong version of the communicative approach. Perhaps, what needs to be done is to bring language forms to the learners' attention deliberately or as they occur within meaning-based communicative activities as suggested by the principles of focus on form instruction.

It must be noted that although focus on form instruction may not be the ultimate alternative to improve the process of English language teaching in Colombia, it is definitely worth exploring in view of the gains it has provided in other settings as can be detailed in the studies mentioned previously in this paper. Teachers should be cautious not to rigidly adopt a specific type of instruction since there is considerable disagreement as to which type (focus on form or focus on forms) might be more effective (Ellis, 2006). In fact, there have been several studies that seem to give evidence that either one works. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no research in the area of focus on form instruction in Colombia. Therefore, initiative needs to come from EFL teachers and ELT researchers to explore the potential usefulness of this type of instruction and determine to what extent it might satisfy teachers' and learners' needs and expectations.

Teachers need to be informed of the several alternatives and options in which focus on form instruction can be implemented. A lot has been said about the importance of conveying meaning when learners use the target language for communication. However, drawing our students' attention to form should not be overlooked if we want them to be successful users of the language they are learning. TBL and CLIL remain two alternatives that may

facilitate focus on form instruction in ESL or EFL settings. Even though meaning seems to be at the core of both of these approaches, the context they generate is enriched with opportunities to bring students' attention to linguistic forms as they emerge in the process of interaction and communication. It is nevertheless beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the principles of any of these two approaches, for further insights see (Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996).

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How to reference this article: Macías, D. F. (2011). Towards the Use of Focus on Form Instruction in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in Colombia. *Íkala*, *16*(29), 127-143.