SIG Report

Form-awareness & Strategy use

Background

About the role and necessity of rule knowledge in SLA very roughly two views can be distinguished:

FoFS:
Believes in the PPP-model
Present the rule,
Practice application, first slowly manipulating (maybe meaningless) language elements, gradually speeding up the rule application process, in the end resulting in
more or less automatic (meaningful) Production.
Process proceeds from accuracy to fluency.
It corresponds to what teachers perceive as teaching and learning.
Corresponds to ´common sense` on what education is about.
Very little confirmation from research and experience of many language learners.

FoF:
Believes in priority for content and meaning in the acquisition process. Getting the message across is the first and dominating concern of the working memory if asked to produce language. If overburdened by the requirements of processing meaning and form at the same time, the brain chooses for meaning first and leaves out attention to form. (The short-circuit hypothesis). Only if meaning can be produced so easily and smoothly that there is working memory capacity left, form aspects will be processed.
It is assumed that the acquisition process proceeds from fluency to accuracy. Which means that in the early stages of SLA, there is much emphasis on the acquisition of basic vocabulary and chunks and formulas and a high tolerance towards form mistakes.
Does not correspond to teachers reflexes and believes. A lot of confirmation from research and experience of language learners. Corresponds to the descriptors of the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF)

However, as also is confirmed by research outcomes, there should be attention to and awareness of form-aspects of language utterances right from the beginning of the acquisition process.
The main procedure to implement this attention and create this awareness is: giving learners so called ´corrective feedback´. Which means: confirming, awarding and reinforcing what is correct in the content of the language utterance and echoing or modeling form corrections in reaction to learners utterances
(S: "These knee hurts"
T: "Oh, terrible. Come here! I will look at it. This knee?")
Note that the feed back is functional and ad hoc and does not address the language system nor the issue of the morphology of deictive pronouns.

The LQ-concept is a form of task based learning, which in the case of SLA draws heavily on and find its main justification in the FoF assumptions.
Problem:
How to organize FoF in L-Quests?
The more discrete items are made explicit, the less lifelike and functional the learning activity will be.
It is very difficult to build in corrective feed back in an LQ because the need for specific feed back will be:

- Unpredictable
- Learner dependent and
- There will be no direct or functional relation to the content of the LQ

Discussion

We started with a look at the CEF. In the CEF the use of rules (e.g. for self repair of formal mistakes) is one of the markers of the difference between B1 and B2.
Represented in a graph the relation between tolerance towards form mistakes and ability to produce meaning could be made visible

Tolerance towards formal mistakes

Ability to produce meaning

A1   A2   B1   B2   C1   C2
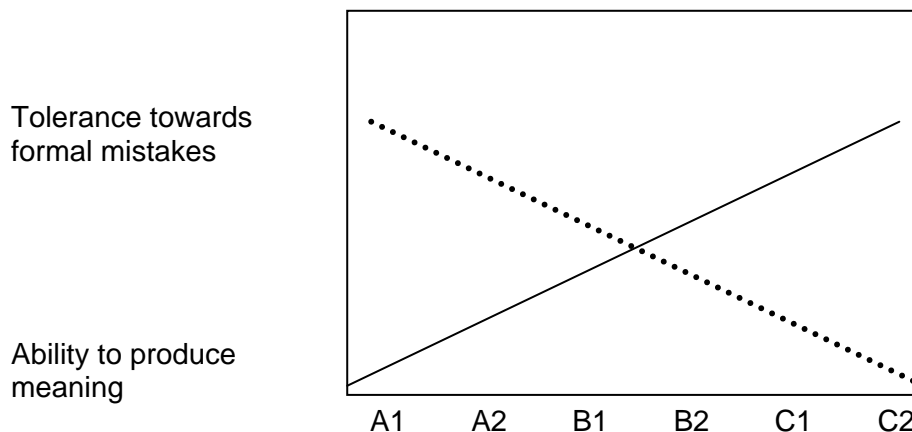
A look at this graph leads to the following conclusions:
Also according to the descriptors of the CEF formal correctness is the eventual aim.
This does NOT mean that it is the most efficient way to achieve that by requiring formal correctness by applying instructed rules regarding formal correctness right from the start.
According to SLA-theory and the CEF descriptors, systematic work on rules regarding discrete form items does not seem to be useful earlier than from B2.
On the contrary: Ultimate correctness may even be achieved sooner if the training in the earlier stages (up to B1) is mainly focused on producing meaning and using formulaic speech with gradually more attention to formal correctness and (if helpful) providing very simple rules.
It does not to seem just and effective to focus heavily on rule-directed grammatical correctness ('creative speech') in school examinations as long as the achieved level cannot be assumed to be B2 or higher. If it is not, examination would better focus more on the ability to communicate meaning with a relative high tolerance towards grammatical mistakes and/or the possibility to use 'formulaic speech'.

Yet there should be some focus on form right from the beginning.

Suggestions for application of these conclusions in LQs
First solution could be the request to describe in the teacher pages generic procedures for giving corrective feedback
The only build-in facility to provide corrective feedback we could think of, was the systematic use of spelling and grammar checkers where learners are producing written text. In that case teachers will have to be skilled in using 'scaffolding' techniques like helping learners with helpful questions guiding them to solving the problem by themselves (hints or instructions should also be in the teacher page)
In that cases it would be useful if learners could be referred to URLs where they can find information about formal items and on demand also exercises to practice if they think that is useful in their situation and/or task. This could also have the form of an online toolkit.

About debriefing
In the course of our discussion we more and more saw the possibilities and importance of a debriefing stage. It could be incorporated in the reflection part of the task. It could be structured by the following sequence of questions, to answered by the learner:
What linguistic problems did I encounter in trying to perform the task?
How did I solve those linguistic problems?
Would it be worthwhile to memorize that solution e.g. in the form of a rule or a statement?
How am I going to make sure that I will not forget this rule/statement?
If I did not succeed to solve that problem would it be worthwhile to solve it as yet? And if so, what do I need to do in order to solve it? (Look it up with the help of the teacher? Asking the teacher directly?)
Again there should be hints in the teacher page and examples of procedures

About FoF and assessing linguistic correctness
In case teachers would want to assess their learners´ products with respect to accuracy, the following considerations were formulated:
The required level of formal linguistic correctness should be specified clearly in advance. In the formulation of the task there should not only be indications regarding content (like: issues to be addressed, type and quality of given information, solutions or proposals etc), physical form (magnitude, medium, layout, etc), but also regarding tolerance towards linguistic mistakes in language forms (see assessment tool, question 5, for some further elaboration)
The requirements regarding linguistic form correctness should not exceed the learners´ actual level of competence, according to the CEF. This means that ´total correctness´ for beginners (Let us say: at the A levels) only can be expected if the learners can complete the task using almost exclusively formulas, given chunks and the like.
Before presenting their final products, learners should be asked to submit a draft version first. Feedback should be organized so that they are able to correct it up to the required level of linguistic form correctness, according to the given task specifications. Sufficient help should be provided for them to do so. E.g. in the form of scaffolding by the teacher, hinting towards sources, or in some cases maybe even giving them ready made solutions.
For the development of form awareness and further acquisition of linguistic knowledge about form aspects of the language, a debriefing stage can be used. For this purpose learners can be asked to establish what deficiencies regarding linguistic formal correctness prevented them to produce what they really wanted to. It may be discussed then whether this deficiency should be tackled, and if so, how this could be done effectively and efficiently. The teacher may help the learners to design and execute a plan of action to mend the established deficiency.

Appendix on reflection and strategy use

As a follow-up Gerard Westhoff made some additional personal notes that were not discussed because there was not enough time.

In principle the reflection stage (which question 6 in the assessment tool refers to) can have two functions:

a) Fostering learning to learn
b) Fostering memorization

Re a: The most important learning activity to foster the knowledge and use of learning skills and strategies is awareness raising. In principle this is done by having learners ask themselves the following questions:

How did I tackle the assignment or learning problem

Did it work?

How could I explain that it did or did not?

What do I learn from that?

In what respect does this new insight makes a difference for the way I will tackle such problems or assignments in the future?

Re b: In this case we should not only evoke awareness raising, but also identification of solutions and making plans. This process could be scaffolded by having learners answer the following questions:

What words or linguistic forms did I encounter that I needed in order to be able to express what I wanted to and might be worthwhile to remember for future use in other situations?

What would be a good way to memorize this?

How am I going to execute and monitor this process?

Like in the case of organizing FoF, it is difficult to build in specific directions in individual L-Quests. The same things that were said above about corrective feedback and the debriefing stage could be repeated here.