

Critique of “Focusing on Language and Content with Adolescent English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom” by Trahey, M., & Spada, N. (2020), *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 76(3), 218-242.

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Abstract: The major objective of the paper was to investigate the effectiveness of integrating form-focused instruction (FFI) within a high-school mainstream social studies course for the development of metalinguistic knowledge of adolescent English language learners (ELLs). The study was able to fill in the research gap on ELLs by measuring the ELLs’ accuracy in the target language structures in both written and oral forms rather than making the holistic ratings as measures of linguistic performance. However, since the study only involved one group of participants in the time-series design without the comparison group, several threats to the internal validity of the study existed which made it difficult to conclusively evaluate the effectiveness of the FFI on the participants.

Keywords: Form-focused Instruction (FFI), Metalinguistic Knowledge, Adolescent English Language Learners (ELLs).

1. Introduction

The major objective of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of integrating form-focused instruction (FFI) within a high-school mainstream social studies course for the development of metalinguistic knowledge of adolescent English language learners (ELLs). In reaction to the predominance of mainstream classrooms for the newcomer English language learners in North America, this paper drew our attention to the challenges of content-based language teaching (CBLT) for facilitating and promoting the grammatical accuracy of ELLs in the mainstream classroom context. Drawing on reports of students’ failure to attain high levels of grammatical accuracy either in the CBLT programmes or in the mainstream school environment, this study highlighted the need to integrate explicit grammar instruction into subject knowledge to optimally promote ELLs’ target language development. Although previous research had proved the effectiveness of FFI on students’ development of linguistic accuracy in various contexts, what was not yet clear in the literature was the impact of FFI on high-school adolescent ELLs who arrived at an older age in the mainstream classroom. Therefore, this study aimed to address this gap by exploring the effectiveness of FFI on those late-arriving adolescent ELLs in the context of publicly funded high schools far from the central urban area with a small population of newcomers in North America and measured the ELLs’ grammatical accuracy of two target language features—passive voice and simple present. The key research question of this study was whether the FFI effects varied with respect to the two language structures as well as productive and receptive tasks. Eighteen students who took the senior-year social studies class were recruited as the sample. The participants, including 14 boys and 4 girls, had mixed educational and linguistic backgrounds, and registered in four different classes.

2. Literature Review

In the literature review session, Trahey, M., and Spada, N. (2020) first focused on the popular enactment of the mainstream curriculum, and CBLT in general, for the newcomer students due to the preference among the teachers and reducing of costs at the institutional level. However, the implementation of CBLT had met with challenges and failed as a means of linguistic instruction to enhance students’ communicative and grammatical automaticity. The areas of concern in response to the failure of CBLT were teachers’ beliefs of what made effective language education and the demands on teachers’ proficiency to address language and content during the classroom instruction. Different form CBLT which is based on the theoretical foundation of Krashen’s (1985) comprehensible input hypothesis, focus on form enables language learners to attend to meaning and form simultaneously (Long, 1991). In the following session, Trahey, M., and Spada, N. (2020) summarized and commented on the various theoretical conceptualizations of the pedagogical approaches that attended to language and content. The earliest was Long’s (1991) focus on form (FonF) approach, referring to the instruction that explicitly drew learners’ attention to the incidentally arising linguistic issues during the lessons whose overriding priority was on subject content. Spada’s (1997) rationale on form-focused instruction (FFI) combined the incidental attention with teachers’ predetermined plan to direct students’ attention to the language elements within meaning-based language instruction. Finally, Rod Ellis (2001) provided a broader definition of FFI which included the traditional ways of language instruction which stuck to the structural syllabus and the practice of embedding the focus on language in the content-/meaning-based instruction. This study adopted the interpretation of FFI consistent with Ellis’s (2001) definition of the FFI because the implementation involved preplanned instruction to students’ metalinguistic

awareness embedded in the overriding subject-matter instruction. In contrast to CBLT, the theoretical rationale behind FFI is Schmidt's (1990, 2001) Noticing Hypothesis, which emphasizes the crucial role of attention in transforming input to intake and advancing learners' language proficiency.

3. Methodology and Findings

The existing research investigating the implementation of FFI targeting at adolescent learners showed that FFI exerted a positive influence on learners' second language development, which were congruent with the positive evidence from research investigating the effectiveness of language and content instruction within different pedagogical and theoretical rationales (e.g., systemic functional linguistics). Those results suggested the need for a pedagogical interplay between explicit metalinguistic knowledge and the dynamics of subject knowledge in the mainstream classes. In the remaining part of the literature review, the study provided justification for the appropriateness of FFI for high-school ELLs based on the lack of linguistic focus in the mainstream classrooms, the appropriateness of FFI which would accelerate the learning process of students within a tight graduation schedule, and the characteristics of the high-school students being cognitively and linguistically mature thus ready to benefit from FFI.

For this study, a time-series research design was employed to compare students' performance before and after the intervention, which consisted of 10-15 hours of instruction spanning 15 weeks. The instructional materials were specially developed combining the subject content of mainstream classes and language focus instructions containing the target linguistic elements, namely, the passive voice and simple past tense. In this single case time-series design, three pre-tests were administered prior to the intervention, which served as the baseline score compared with the participants' mid-test results after eight weeks of intervention and their immediate post-test results after 15 weeks of intervention. The data was collected from six task results at each of the testing sessions intended to measure the participants' performance on oral and written tasks, including two productive tasks and two receptive grammaticality judgement (GJ) tasks covering both target structures. In addition, results from the participants' educational background questionnaire and post-treatment questionnaire capturing students' responses to the intervention were collected. The non-parametric statistical analysis including the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test and McNemar's Tests in combination with visual analysis were used to assess the performance of the whole group of students, to evaluate the development trajectory of subgroups of students, and finally analyze the language learning of individual students.

Regarding overall group performance, the results obtained from the group's immediate post-test indicated little improvement, with significant gains on students' linguistic accuracy observed only on measures of oral production task and aural grammaticality judgement task. Further statistical tests on subgroup and individual performance revealed that there were no significant changes in the participants' placement in the subgroups between pre-test, mid-test, and immediate post-test. In addition, no sustained increase in individual students' test results on more than two tasks was detected. However, visual analysis showed evidence of individual and subgroup development on the passive tasks, with movement of participants into the higher-level

performance groupings on all the passive tasks. These results suggested that FFI effects didn't vary with respect to productive and receptive tasks, and that FFI tended to have more beneficial effects on the passive tasks than on the simple present tense. There were several possible explanations for the overall modest effects of FFI. First, learners may allocate their limited attention to meaning before form given the competition between meaning and form for learners' consciousness; Furthermore, the focus attention on subject matter in the instructional materials might be too heavy, leaving little room for learners' focus on the linguistic elements. Finally, learners' English language proficiency might exacerbate the difficulty of attending to the target language structure.

4. Conclusion

The study was able to fill in the research gap on ELLs by measuring the ELLs' accuracy in the target language structures in both written and oral forms rather than making the holistic ratings as measures of linguistic performance. The study was conducted rigorously using the time-series design by involving higher number of participants and increasing length of the data than other studies adopting similar designs. Since this study involved a sample size of 18 due to the relatively small newcomer population in the research setting, the true experimental study which was traditionally used for educational evaluations was not feasible in the research context. The time-series design as an alternative method of causal inference (St.Clair et al., 2016) was adopted by the authors in this study to estimate the effectiveness of FFI on high-school ELLs' development of linguistic accuracy in mainstream classrooms. The researchers had close control over the intervention and establishment the baseline to increase the internal validity and internal reliability of the study. For example, pre-tests were administered at three pretreatment time points to establish the stable trend of the pretest group differences. The demographic information of the participants was collected to match with their pretest scores and development trajectories. In addition, the justification and adoption of the theoretical model of FFI provided grounding for the study and enabled the research to be theoretically and empirically robust. To increase the reliability of FFI treatment, the researchers made sure that instructional materials met the principles of FFI by focusing on linguistic elements within meaning-based instruction. The enactment of FFI was realized through a variety of activities ranging from metalinguistic explanation to phonological input enhancement. Furthermore, the researchers verified the success of FFI in integrating both language and content by audio-recording the class and coding the process. In terms of data collection and analysis, multiple tasks measuring students' oral and written performance on dimensions of productive and receptive forms were assigned at each testing session, enabling triangulation of the findings. The non-parametric statistical analysis and the visual analysis of the results perfectly complemented each other to explore different patterns of data and capture the differential effects. Based on the combination of analysis, this study depicted a full picture of the effectiveness of FFI on ELLs by assessing the whole group, subgroup, and individual performances, reflecting the changes in mean levels, in the subtle variation among the trends, and in the pattern of variability over time. This empirical research extended our knowledge and shed light on the effectiveness of FFI on the development of high-

school ELLs' linguistic performance. Recognizing the competition between content and language for ELLs' limited attentional resources, the authors advocated the isolated FFI and coordinated collaboration between the ESL and subject teachers as models of L2 instruction.

Since the study only involved one group of participants in the time-series design without the comparison group, several threats to the internal validity of the study existed which made it difficult to conclusively evaluate the effectiveness of the FFI on the participants. The first confounding factor is maturation. Normal developmental changes may occur over time in the absence of intervention (Cook, 1979), given the length of six months (including the delayed post-test) of this study. History may be another confounding factor which involves events other than the intervention that might have exerted influence on the participants' mid-test and immediate post-test results (Cook, 1979). Furthermore, the carry-over effect would make the results from the repeated-measures challengeable. Other internal validity threats such as selection, instrumentation, and regression also exist which render the one-group time series design causally problematic (St.Clair et al., 2014). One solution is that a non-treatment time series group of ELLs attending mainstream classes could be added to the treatment group to enhance the empirical validity of the study. Since the author stated the relatively small number of newcomer ELLs in the research context, the number of participants in the comparison group could be smaller than that in the treatment group.

Another weakness of the study is the relatively small sample size of eighteen, and the authors didn't state the sampling procedure, (e.g., whether this is a convenience sampling or random sampling). In addition, it would be better to report the median values of test scores (instead of mean ranks) due to the adoption of the non-parametric test. Since this study targets at the population of newcomer ELLs in a high school setting in a small urban center in North America, the result lacks generalizability to other research contexts. However, in this case, qualitative methods could be employed to determine the understanding and meaning of the quantitative methods assessing the participants' test results. The authors had tried to employ results from students' post-treatment questionnaire containing their feedback to the FFI to analyze the three individual students' salience in their language improvement and found no results. Considering this situation, focus group, in-depth interviews, and stimulated recall interviews could be adopted to explore students' experiences and perceptions about the FFI and to help examine the trends from the statistical analysis. Furthermore, a qualitative investigation through an intense contact with the specific field of the study and capturing data on the perceptions of both students and instructors would enhance the ecological validity of the research and present a comprehensive exegesis of the contrasting results compared with previous literature which showed greater positive effects of FFI on young ELLs. To summarize, the sequential

Quan→Qual MMR design (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009) could be adopted.

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