

FOCUS ON FORM APPROACH IN LEARNING AND TEACHING PORTUGUESE AS AN L2: A STUDY IN CAPE VERDE

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Resumen: El objetivo principal de este artículo es presentar una parte de un estudio de caso realizado en tres escuelas secundarias de Praia (Cabo Verde) que tiene como objetivo observar y describir la realidad del aprendizaje y de la enseñanza del portugués como segunda lengua (PL2), en general, y de la gramática en particular, y, en consecuencia, verificar si los profesores pueden utilizar las estrategias didácticas actuales para la enseñanza de la gramática, como el enfoque en la forma. En este sentido, por un lado, vamos a dar cuenta de la práctica pedagógica de los tres profesores participantes y de sus percepciones con respecto a la experiencia con el enfoque en la forma, realizada durante el mes en que tuvo lugar la aplicación de nuevas estrategias que se prepararon específicamente para el estudio. Y, por otro lado, demostrar cómo los alumnos evalúan el impacto que este enfoque tiene en su aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: enfoque en la forma, enseñanza y aprendizaje del Portugués como segunda lengua, tareas comunicativas, gramática, Cabo Verde

Abstract: The main purpose of this article is to present a part of a case study carried out in three high schools of Praia (Cape Verde) so as to observe and describe the reality of the learning and teaching of Portuguese as a second language (PL2), in general, and of the grammar, in particular, and, consequently, to verify if teachers are able to use up-to-date didactic strategies for grammar teaching, such as the focus on form. In this sense, we will give an account of the observed pedagogical practice of the three participating teachers and their perceptions regarding the experience with the focus on form during the month in which the implementation of new strategies planned specifically for the study took place. Moreover, we will also focus on how students evaluate the impact this approach has on their learning.

Key-words: Focus on Form, Portuguese Second Language learning and teaching, communicative tasks, grammar, Cape Verde

Resumo: O objetivo principal deste artigo é apresentar uma parte de um estudo de caso realizado em três escolas secundárias da Praia (Cabo Verde) para observar e descrever a realidade do ensino/aprendizagem do português como segunda língua (PL2), em geral, e da gramática, em particular, e, conseqüentemente, verificar se os professores são capazes de usar estratégias didáticas atualizadas para o ensino da gramática, como o foco na forma. Neste sentido, daremos conta da prática pedagógica observada dos três professores participantes e das suas percepções em relação à experiência com o foco na forma durante o mês em que ocorreu a implementação de novas estratégias, planeadas especificamente para o estudo. Além disso, também nos concentraremos em como os alunos avaliam o impacto que essa abordagem tem na sua aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: foco na forma, ensino e aprendizagem do português como língua segunda, tarefas comunicativas, gramática, Cabo Verde

1. INTRODUCTION

Tasks focused on a linguistic structure are important for teachers since they provide an approach for teaching specific linguistic structures in a communicative way, in real life situations for language use.

Long (1991) emphasizes the importance of focus on form to the learning of an L2 in the context of language use through meaning as a way of orienting students' attention to aspects of input that might otherwise go unnoticed and not learned. In the same line of thought, Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis (2002) argue that the focus on form leads students to pay attention to the grammatical forms in the input and that this attention allows the development of their interlanguage. Schmidt (1990) is also of the opinion that attention to form is important because acquisition only occurs if students have a conscious perception of form in input. For Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998), the focus on form is different from those ways of teaching which were normally intended to teach specific grammatical forms in L2 rather than presenting the language as a communication system.

In this sense, we present the partial result of the study carried out with a class from three schools in the city of Praia, in which a focus on form approach was adopted as an alternative to the more traditional teaching that still predominates in language classes there. Therefore, we consider it fundamental to verify in what way the students' perceptions, at the end of this experience with the focus on form approach, coincide with those of the teachers, and record their reactions to this new form of language learning since they were not used to it.

In order to obtain data that enabled us to reach the outlined objectives, we went through different moments, such as: class observation; construction of a script with strategies based on the focus on form approach for teachers to use as a resource during the month of experience; interviews to the three teachers, which allowed us to have feedback on their perceptions after the strategies have been applied; questionnaires applied to 104 students that have given us feedback on this form of language teaching and learning.

After observing the lessons and analyzing the interviews, we were able to conclude that teachers are neither scientifically nor pedagogically prepared to adopt this approach of grammar teaching. However, they have revealed that they have appreciated this approach more than the more traditional one they are accustomed to. The results of the questionnaires allowed us to perceive that the students consider that they understood the functioning of the language better since they worked with the different grammatical items in their contexts, in real life communication situations.

2. FOCUS ON FORM: AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH ON PL2 TEACHING

Long (1991) defends the focus on form approach as an attempt to keep students' attention targeted primarily on communication, simultaneously breaking with the problems faced in the focus on meaning. According to the author, communication remains the central goal of the instruction and the main difference is the attempt to solve problems that arise in the interaction, focusing the attention briefly on linguistic aspects.

For Long (Ibid.) and Long and Robinson (1998), teaching through the focus on the meaning limited a lot the time spent on the particularities of language; instead, the interest was essentially the use of the language in real life situations of communication. This type of teaching is present in the Natural Approach (Krashen, 1985), which in theory forbids the direct teaching of grammar. On the contrary, they argue that the occasional focus on L2 forms through correction, direct explanations, reformulations, etc., can help students become aware of them, understand them and, eventually, acquire those more complex forms.

An occasional change of attention to the linguistic form is observed, resulting in a reactive intervention since its origin is in the forms that generate problems in the interaction. In this case, teachers and students are primarily focused on the use of language for communicative purposes and not on language learning. Despite this focus in the meaning, there are moments when it is necessary to focus on form. Focusing on form allows students to make a pause in the focus on the meaning to pay attention to certain grammatical forms that usually pose a problem for them. This approach may enable language acquisition in another way: it provides the stimulus for what Swain (1985, 1995) called "pushed output", that is to say, the output increases students' competence as they need to express an idea using the language correctly and appropriately. For example, when the teacher responds to students' mistakes through corrective feedback, it creates conditions for students to produce the form themselves correctly in later uses, which Lyster and Ranta (1997) call "uptake moves". So, "uptake" can be seen as an indication that students have paid attention to linguistic forms and have tried to incorporate them correctly in their speeches. Although uptake may not be understood as evidence of acquisition, "[a] reformulated utterance from the learner gives some reason to believe that the mismatch between learner utterance and target utterance has been noticed, a step at least toward acquisition" (Lightbown, 1998: 193).

The focus on form occurs when a teacher isolates one or two specific forms to study, specific grammatical structures or functional realizations, and begins to work these forms out of the context of a communicative activity, which will later be integrated into the realization of another communicative activity (Willis & Willis, 2007).

Doughty and Williams (1998) suggest that the focus on form intervention should have three clear aspects, namely:

- before paying attention to language forms, students should have worked with the meaning, making sure that the target forms are necessary for the task to be completed;
- language forms should be chosen through a reactive or proactive analysis of students' needs;
- the treatment given to these forms should be brief and clear, ensuring that it does not constitute, on the one hand, any constraint to the main communicative activity, but, on the other hand, that it is relevant to the students.

Focus on form (that includes notions such as consciousness-raising, form-focused instruction, or form-focused intervention) can also incorporate modified conversational interactions to make the message understandable by drawing students' attention to the relationships of form, meaning and function of the L2 (Pica, 2002).

Another way in which the focus on form can be accomplished is through explicit comments on the linguistic form involving metalanguage (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2002). According to these authors, the use of metalanguage can play an important role making the linguistic forms more explicit and thus more noticeable. However, they also think that further studies are needed that clearly prove that the presence of metalanguage in the focus on form can help students to pay attention to language items and introduce them in their speeches.

How to select topics for focus on form?

The choice depends, in general, on the nature of the task and the associated texts. The teacher can identify the forms and isolate them from the context; he may also help students identify them themselves, or even chose to correct them as a part of a form-focused activity (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). According to Willis and Willis (Ibid.), this type of correction performs three important functions:

- it prevents fossilization: students are warned that they can still master a certain complex form;

- it motivates students (if used moderately): almost all students expect and want to be corrected by the teacher, as they see this as a necessity;

- it provides useful negative feedback: sometimes negative feedback is the most efficient way to get students on the right path.

Willis and Willis (Ibid.) also argue that the focus on form must occur only after the students are involved in the task, presenting three arguments for the focus to happen only at the end of the task:

- It helps students become aware of their use of the language. First, they had contact with the form through the teacher's speech or written and/or oral texts; then, this moment of focus on form gives them the opportunity to observe in detail the form they have been using that is based on a context that will help them understand the meaning of these new forms of the language.

- It highlights language aspects that students will surely use in the future. Once studied, this form of language is highlighted, that is, in the future, it will be more easily perceived and, in this case, more easily learned.

- It motivates. Students usually want to know what they have been studying, which means that they want to know what they have learned. The teacher should show them what learning opportunities have been provided to them in class. By putting the grammar at the end of the task sequences, there is a greater possibility of increasing motivation. While students were performing the earlier phases of the task, they were working with meanings and striving to use the language to express those meanings. The focus on form gives them answers to questions about language, aspects about which they had already begun to self-question.

Nunan (2004) also proposes that focus on form emerge at an advanced stage of the task. According to him, there are several reasons for focus on form to be addressed at an advanced time rather than at the beginning of the task. First, the sequence begins with the focus on communicative purposes and not on linguistic resources. In the following moments, students prepare to see, hear and use the target language in a communicative perspective. They will see and hear the language to be used, in a communicative context, by native speakers or proficient speakers in the L2.

These phases will facilitate the students to establish links between the linguistic forms and the communicative functions that they perform. The grammatical forms should be presented to students within a context that makes the communicative use of the structures clear to them.

It seems consensual, among the authors, that, in the learning of an L2, the activities of focus on form do not interfere in the processing of meaning, but rather serve the latter. What is important, according to Doughty and Williams (1998), is to give attention to the form in a communicative task, rather than starting from a communicative goal to approach a linguistic content. Also for Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) both teaching through the focus on form and through focus on meaning are valid, and must complement one another rather than exclude oneself. Teaching using the focus on form approach, in their point of view, maintains a balance between the two, leading the teacher and students to focus on form when necessary, in a communicative context.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Methodology

The characteristics of the issue addressed led us to opt for a qualitative research paradigm, which seems to us to be congruent with the object of the investigation. We have chosen this type of investigation because we want to interpret rather than measure and to seek to understand reality as it is, experienced by the subjects from their actions and their thoughts.

In the present study, we consider the ethnographic approach as one of the forms of qualitative research that concerns all stages of the process, from the collection of data to their interpretation. Our knowledge of what happens in the classroom can only be achieved by entering these spaces to collect the data, which, moreover, are interpreted in the context of the lesson, a context that is not only linguistic or cognitive but also social.

We opted for a case study strategy. This choice was based on the fact that the case study emerges as the most appropriate research strategy to understand the pedagogical practices of Portuguese Language teachers and their results in student learning.

The study is based on the direct, non-participant observation of twenty-seven Portuguese language lessons (7th grade) of nine graduated teachers, from three high schools in the city of Praia, in order to obtain objective data regarding language teaching, focusing particularly on the strategies used by teachers in grammar teaching.

Then, we tried to verify the competences of three of the nine teachers, involved in the first phase, in the application of strategies for language teaching that fit the new theories and the reality of Cape Verde - Portuguese as a second language. In order to operationalize this second phase, we previously developed a strategy guide for teachers and some worksheets for students. Then, we held working sessions with the three teachers involved in the study with the purpose of analyzing together the proposals, this new approach, the feasibility of the type of tasks, and the focus on form approach.

In order to obtain the teachers' reactions afterwards, we opted for semi-structured interviews, since the interviewees had the possibility of discussing their experiences based on the main focus proposed by us. We also decided to carry out a questionnaire to the students of the three groups involved in order to know their opinions about the Portuguese language lessons, and their reactions to this new form of language learning, as they were not used to it.

The subjects that integrated the two phases of the study constitute a non-probabilistic convenience sampling. In the first moment (observation of lessons), nine willing-to-collaborate teachers teaching the 7th grade were selected. In the second phase, of these nine, three teachers, who continued teaching in the 7th, grade were selected, one from each school (Cónego Jacinto Secondary School, Palmarejo Secondary School and Liceu Domingos Ramos). The only criterion used was that all of them had higher education and similar working conditions. The number of students per class varies between 33 in the Secondary School Cónego Jacinto, 37 in Palmarejo Secondary School and 34 in the Liceu Domingos Ramos, so, the total number of students questioned is 104.

3.2. The context of the study

In Cape Verde, Portuguese is the official language, the language of prestige, used mainly in formal situations, the media, public administration, literature and teaching, having the status of an L2. The Cape Verdean Creole is the national mother tongue (MT), used in daily life (mainly orally) and has been acquiring a greater space in relation to the first. The problem of the cohabitation of these two languages arises especially due to the non-teaching of the MT and the methodologies used in the teaching of the L2. The teaching of this one follows specific approaches to the teaching of a MT, which hampers the learning.

The teaching and learning process of Portuguese, in the 7th grade, as we could observe, is still very much rooted in the traditional teaching model. The strategies used by teachers reveal the sterile way grammar is worked in the classroom. The language, normally used in class to practice grammar, is situated at the level of the form and does not trigger in the students' minds any significant construction of meaning.

The teacher chooses strategies that lead students to essentially reproduce the language, rather than producing it, taking into account their experiences. There is a teaching that does not lead to a meaningful learning, to a contextualized use of the language. This practice has, thus, a clear negative impact on student's learning. They progress over the school years with handicaps that perpetuate and which are never solved, not even at higher education level.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Partial results of the interviews

The three teachers who participated in the second part of the study are aware that the now experienced focus on form approach may represent an improvement in the language learning process. They believe that the focus on form is more advantageous for language teaching in contrast with focus on formS (cf. Long, 1991) and focus on meaning.

The first one proved to be a positive development for these teachers since they were only familiar with the last two approaches. On the one hand, the focus on formS, with its vision of the language segmented in lexicon, grammatical rules, pronunciation, phonemes... (Long & Robinson, 1998), in which the contents are presented in a linear and cumulative form; on the other hand, the focus in the meaning, in which the model of acquisition of an L2 approaches the models of acquisition of an MT. However, this recognition does not invalidate their concerns and doubts about the consequences of replacing these more traditional practices with linguistic reflection practices, following a focus on form approach.

The new strategies that these teachers have tried during this study have shown that, like in other studies (cf. Lightbown & Spada, 1990), students' results in language learning are more positive. This is due not only to the approach itself, but also to students' motivation, who are more actively involved in the construction of their own knowledge and of their colleagues.

We noticed that the teachers' lack of practice gave rise to some difficulties in the implementation of the new strategies, especially at the task management level. Teachers revealed that the lack of theoretical knowledge hampered, in some way, the good execution of the lesson plans we had elaborated. In fact, the ignorance of the underlying theory and the fact that they had never used this approach before was detrimental to the successful implementation of the strategies.

As far as the potential of the task based approach to language teaching is concerned, the three teachers emphasized the students' positive reaction, their motivation to do the linguistic tasks, which were diversified throughout the month, and the very positive way they themselves faced this approach. Regarding the limitations, the teachers emphasized the number of students per class, which limits the performance of all the participants in class, and the fact that the support of the majority of the Portuguese teachers to this type of teaching may not be a reality since it implies more work and another type of preparation. We can verify that the limitations that the teachers mentioned are not directly related to the approach itself, that is, they are not didactic limitations, but external factors.

3.3.2. Partial results of the questionnaires

One aspect we tried to verify with this questionnaire was to understand if, with these new strategies used for the teaching of the language, the students felt that they improved their learning results, if they were the same or if, on the contrary, they got worse. With this in mind, we posed questions that directly related to the strategies and the direct reflexes they felt in their language skills.

Most of the students considered the new tasks they did during that period more interesting than the ones they had done in class before. The data we obtained as a result of the students' experience with the task-based approach and, particularly, with the focus on form, reflect the dynamic environment of participation in the tasks (cf. Table 1). The interest aroused helped to overcome the language difficulties they encountered in the performance of the communicative tasks.

This approach is, in fact, adequate to the teaching of PL2 in this context since it has awakened the students' desire to learn and participate in the construction of their language learning. Moreover, they also ended up valuing their training as students who are less dependent on the teacher and more prepared for an active and continuous education as the teaching by tasks and the focus on the form stimulated their interest in research and reflection on the language.

Table 1 – The tasks carried out promoted students’ participation

		Freq.	%
Valid	Strongly agree	67	64,42
	Agree	29	27,88
	Undecided	6	5,77
	Disagree	1	0,96
	Strongly disagree	1	0,96
	Total	104	100,00
	Without answer	0	0,00
Total		104	100,00

Another question was how the students understood and learned the grammar content taught during this period.

Table 2 – Better understanding of the uses of grammar

		Freq.	%
Valid	Strongly agree	48	46,15
	Agree	39	37,50
	Undecided	15	14,42
	Disagree	0	0,00
	Strongly disagree	2	1,92
	Total	104	100,00
	Without answer	0	0,00
Total		104	100,00

The focus on form aroused students’ interest in grammar and facilitated, according to them, their learning (cf. Table 2). As a matter of fact, because the students are given contextualized grammatical contents, specific to the tasks they are doing, their learning becomes more meaningful and stimulating. According to the questionnaire data, the task-based approach used to teach grammar led to a greater understanding of the grammatical items.

Most of the students stated that they understood and assimilated grammar better which is closely linked to the way this learning was done. Task-based teaching favors, therefore, the integration of tasks, where a natural use of the target language is privileged, which fosters interaction and reflection on the particularities of that language through focus on form.

With the focus on form approach, students are expected to reflect on grammatical contents, thus understanding their uses better. Therefore, we wanted to verify if the students did some re-reflection with their teacher and colleagues and if from that reflection resulted a better understanding of the use of the different grammatical items that they had studied.

Another positive aspect that we can see from the questionnaires (cf. Table 3) is that the students showed that they reflected on the language and that this reflection gave them a better understanding of the contents studied. As a matter of fact, the explicit knowledge of the language helps the student to observe characteristics of the input that could otherwise go unnoticed and, simultaneously, facilitates the process of perceiving differences between input and output, thus contributing to the development of their interlanguage.

Following the previous question, we intend to verify if the better understanding of the uses of grammar facilitated its application.

Table 3 – More uses of grammar reflection

		Freq.	%
Valid	Strongly agree	36	34,62
	Agree	40	38,46
	Undecided	20	19,23
	Disagree	4	3,85
	Strongly disagree	3	2,88
Total		103	99,04
Without answer		1	0,96
Total		104	100,00

The study of grammar, if done properly, following the approach we propose, is useful to develop students’ communicative competence, as opposed to prescriptive and decontextualized teaching that has proved to be inefficient in language learning for these students. The students were clear in their responses by revealing that language teaching which provides the analysis and reflection of the language in concrete situations of communication facilitates their use of the language (cf. Table 4), making them proficient speakers in L2.

The development of communicative competence is related to the students' ability to be able to interpret and use a greater number of linguistic resources, either in written or oral form, in a suitable way in varied formal or informal situations of interaction. To use the language better, students should be able to reflect on aspects of the language in real life situations of communication, that is, to use knowledge acquired through practice and linguistic analysis to expand their capacity for reflection and thus increase their ability to use the language in its different possibilities of production.

Table 4 – Better use of the language

		Freq.	%
Valid	Strongly agree	48	46,15
	Agree	35	33,65
	Undecided	15	14,42
	Disagree	5	4,81
	Strongly disagree	1	0,96
Total		104	100,00
Without answer		0	0,00
Total		104	100,00

The task-based language teaching, as it has been proved by the responses of the teachers and now also of the students, promotes the interaction among the latter, giving them the opportunity to learn the L2 through a social use of the language since this approach provides students with the skills to perform tasks that resort to situations that can help them in the real world.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In order to counteract this unsuccessful grammar teaching, we proposed a new approach, in that context, using the focus on form approach in order to prove that the teaching of grammar can be better than simple memorization and the use of decontextualized rules. Therefore, we recommended that the teachers resorted to the application of creative strategies which would involve students in collaborative tasks and would thus provide an integrated study of grammar in these tasks. As a consequence, students would end up understanding not only the rules but also their uses and would thus be able to produce new speeches autonomously, applying the knowledge acquired. The goal is to get students to acquire communicative skills in Portuguese, using the language according to the norms. Therefore, teaching decontextualized of grammar, unrelated to the production of meanings, becomes sterile and does not help students to achieve their own goals.

Despite the difficulties experienced by the teachers, these new strategies had a positive echo in the students. These reacted favorably to the task-based teaching and to the focus on form approach. It seems clear to us that focusing the class on students and selecting diversified and dynamic strategies can easily motivate students and arouse their interest in language learning. The language thus arises in the eyes of the students as a whole, in which grammar is articulated with discourse and not isolated from it. We think that this way of approaching grammar allowed the students, after the various proposed reflections, to develop their linguistic awareness and, consequently, to develop their communicative competence.

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