

# **Reformulation and reconstruction: tasks that promote 'noticing'**

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*In various guises reformulation and reconstruction tasks have a long tradition in ELT methodology. Since both task types foreground meaning, they fit well into a task-based model of instruction, and because the starting point in both cases is whole texts, their use is consistent with a discourse-oriented view of language. However, their potential for focusing learners' attention on form (that is, noticing both what is present in input and absent in output) has received little attention. This article rehabilitates techniques that exploit both the meaning-driven and form-focused potential of these two task types.*

## **Noticing**

The role of noticing in second language acquisition has been the subject of some attention recently (see for example Batstone 1996, Schmidt 1990). It has been suggested (Schmidt and Frota 1986) that two kinds of noticing are necessary conditions for acquisition:

1 Learners must attend to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to, without which input cannot become 'intake'.

2 Learners must 'notice the gap', i.e. make comparisons between the current state of their developing linguistic system, as realized in their output, and the target language system, available as input.

'Matching' is the term used by Klein (1986) for this second type of noticing: 'the learner must continuously compare his current language variety with the target variety' (1986: 62). Ellis (1995) prefers the term 'cognitive comparison', since this 'better captures the fact that learners need to notice when their own output is the same as the input as well as when it is different' (ibid.: 90). Noticing operations occupy a key role in Ellis's model of second language acquisition, facilitating the process whereby explicit knowledge becomes implicit knowledge. In short: 'No noticing, no acquisition' (ibid.: 89).

It follows that language teachers should try to promote noticing, by focusing their learners' attention on the targeted language in the input, and on the distance to be covered between the present state of their interlanguage, on the one hand, and the target language, on the other.

In the classroom, the first kind of noticing is customarily promoted through activities and procedures involving input enhancement

(Sharwood Smith 1993), whereby targeted features of the input are made salient in order to facilitate their becoming intake. The presentation stage of the traditional Presentation–Practice–Production (PPP) model of instruction is designed to do just that. However, the effectiveness of this kind of approach has been called into question on a number of grounds, not least because, given the current state of our knowledge of acquisition order, this kind of pre-emptive strike on targeted forms ‘could only be appropriate by chance’ (Allwright 1977: 170).

The second kind of noticing is traditionally mediated through corrective feedback. Evidence suggests, however, that, when it comes to correction there is a considerable mismatch between teacher intentions and learner outcomes, and that ‘the greatest error teachers make may be the assumption that what occurs as ‘correction’ in classroom interaction automatically leads to learning on the part of the student’ (Chaudron 1988: 152). Schmidt’s own experience of learning Portuguese suggests that, in order to benefit from correction, he had to know he was being corrected: implicit correction techniques such as clarification requests made no impression, whereas hearing the correct version immediately after making an error allowed him to match his present level with the target (Schmidt and Frota 1986).

Given, then, the somewhat hit-and-miss nature of both presentation and correction, what other kinds of activities and procedures might be conducive to noticing and matching?

Tasks that provide opportunities for noticing are ones that, even if essentially meaning-focused, allow the learner to devote some attentional resources to form, and, moreover, provide both the data and the incentive for the learner to make comparisons between interlanguage output and target language models. Two generic classroom task types that meet these criteria are, I will argue, reformulation tasks and reconstruction tasks.

Opportunities for noticing alone are not enough, however, if the learners lack the strategies to take advantage of them. Since noticing is a conscious cognitive process, it is theoretically accessible to training and development. This suggests that the teacher’s role is to develop noticing strategies that the student can apply independently and autonomously. This, too, is an issue I will address.

### **Reformulation activities**

Reformulation has gained currency in recent years as a technique in the development of students’ writing skills: rather than simply correcting student’s composition, which usually involves attention to surface features of the text only, the teacher reformulates it, using the content the student has provided, but recasting it so that the rewritten draft approximates as closely as possible to a putative target language model. It is then available for comparison with the student’s own draft. (See Hedge 1988 for a more elaborated description of this procedure.) The technique has also been promoted for the teaching of speaking skills

one-to-one classes (see Wilberg 1987) since it is an effective way of tailoring instruction to the individual student's needs and interests: 'The content is dictated by the student, the form only by the teacher, in contrast to most language learning where the student has little or no control over the content' (ibid.: 27).

Reformulation, then, reverses the order of traditional models of instruction, which move from accuracy to fluency, as, for example, when learners are required to imitate model texts (as in a product approach to writing) or to drill pre-selected structures for subsequent use in 'freer practice' activities (as in the PPP model). Reformulation is consistent with a fluency-to-accuracy, or task-based, model of instruction, that is, one that 'encourages learners to make the best use of whatever language they have. It assumes that learners will find ways of encoding the meanings they have in order to achieve the outcome' (Willis 1990: 128). Once encoded by the learner, these meanings are then 're-encoded' (or reformulated) by the teacher.

*Reformulation and noticing*

Why should reformulation be conducive to noticing? Johnson (1988), drawing on skill acquisition theory, argues that exposing learners to the target behaviour after the event—rather than providing a model beforehand—has greater psychological validity, in that the learners are predisposed to look out for (and notice) those features of the modelled behaviour that they themselves had found problematic in the initial trial run (or first draft). Moreover, it allows for learners at different stages and with different needs to notice different language features, in contrast to the convergent and exclusive focus of the presentation (accuracy-to-fluency) model of instruction: 'When reformulation takes place, it may be that the most useful feedback comes from those areas of mismatch which students are themselves able to identify, because those areas will accord with the stage of their skill (or interlanguage) development.' (ibid.: 93)

In Johnson's instructional model, reformulation follows an initial trial, and is in turn followed by a re-trial, into which noticed features of the reformulated behaviour may be incorporated in full operating conditions: 'Reformulation provides a model of what the behaviour should look like; and though its clearest use is for writing, there is no reason why spoken language should not be reformulated.' (ibid.: 92)

**Community Language Learning**

A methodology, one of whose core pedagogic principles is the reformulation of spoken language, is Community Language Learning (CLL), sometimes called Counselling-Learning (Curran 1976). In its original conception, CLL was predicated heavily on principles of humanistic counselling, and its borrowing of some of the procedures and jargon of group therapy has given it an undeserved fringe status. However, it is relatively easy to bypass the psychotherapeutic features of CLL and to uncover a methodology that is not only reformulative, but also incorporates explicit form-focused, noticing-type procedures.

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In orthodox CLL the learners, seated in a closed circle around a tape recorder, jointly construct and record a conversation, line by line, on a topic or topics of their choosing. The teacher, outside the circle, is available on request simply to model what the learners want to say, either by translating from their L1, or by reformulating, where necessary, their flawed L2 trial runs. In this way, the content is provided by the learners, the form by the teacher. Since learners are constrained neither by a pre-selected topic nor a pre-selected linguistic agenda, the activity is inherently heterogeneous, in Ur's (1988) sense that all students, irrespective of level, may participate.

Once a suitable body of text has been recorded, it is then replayed in its entirety, thereby giving the learners a sense of its overall cohesion. It is then transcribed line by line onto the board (or a transparency) by the teacher, who subjects it to some form of linguistic scrutiny, e.g. by pointing out features of the language that he or she feels the students are not ready for. (For a fuller treatment of CLL see Stevick 1980, Bolitho 1982 and Larsen-Freeman 1986.)

### *CLL and noticing*

The procedure thus allows for noticing at least two stages:

Firstly, incidental noticing may occur during the initial 'conversation' when the teacher reformulates individual learner utterances and the learner commits these to the tape (as in writing activities, the form of which requires the requirement of recording the utterance, plus the time spent rehearsing the utterance prior to recording, will require the learner to allocate more attention to form than if the conversation had been unrecorded and unrehearsed (see Skehan 1996)). Secondly, focused noticing is the aim of the final stage, when the teacher explicitly directs learners' attention to language items in the transcript. Of course, this stage need not be teacher-led: the learners can be encouraged to ask questions themselves about features of the transcript, consistent with the principle that what the learners choose to notice is more likely to become intake than what the teacher chooses to highlight (Slimani 1989). However, if the teaching programme is grammar oriented, it requires only a little ingenuity to structure the conversation in such a way that targeted grammatical structures are likely to occur, and are therefore available for subsequent analysis. For example, to elicit exponents of futurity, the teacher might introduce the topic: 'the next summer holidays'. Likewise, when reformulating students' utterances, the teacher can choose either to introduce or to avoid certain language items, according to their appropriacy in the course programme.

However, from the point of view of noticing, there is one possible weakness in the CLL procedure. Since learners do not have on record their original, unreformulated utterances, there is no opportunity to compare 'before' and 'after' stages, to notice the mismatch, as there is in the reformulation of students' writing drafts, for example. However, Bolitho's (1982) variation, learners can choose whether or not to have their utterances reformulated during the recording stage. This mea-

that the recording includes more 'first draft' errors than if each utterance had been painstakingly reformulated and rehearsed. The transcribed conversation, errors included, is subject to reflection, analysis, and reformulation, and the final 'draft' is then available for comparison with the original. Nor need the analysis be explicit, as Johnson (1988: 93) points out: 'One of the benefits of reformulation is that if, without comment, one merely presents students with a model performance to be compared with their flawed performance, it is left up to them to note and learn what they will from the comparison'.

And, finally, on the subject of reformulation, Stevick (1989), concluding his case studies of seven successful language learners, describes one of his own preferred strategies:

Another of my favourite techniques is to tell something to a speaker of the language and have that person tell the same thing back to me in correct, natural form. I then tell the same thing again, bearing in mind the way in which I have just heard it [i.e. having noticed the gap]. This cycle can repeat itself two or three times ... An essential feature of this technique is that the text we are swapping back and forth originates with me, so that I control the content and do not have to worry about generating non-verbal images to match what is in someone else's mind (Stevick 1989: 148).

### **Reconstruction activities**

Unlike reformulation activities, in which the learner's text is reformulated by the teacher, the starting point for reconstruction activities is the teacher's text (or, at least, a text provided by the teacher) which the learner first reads (or listens to) and then reconstructs. The reconstructed version is then available for 'matching' with the original.

In reconstructing a text, learners will deploy their available linguistic competence, which (depending, of course, on the choice of text) is likely to fall short of the target model. This process alone, it is argued (e.g. by Marton 1988), in forcing attention on form, activates bottom-up processes that, in comprehension, and communicative activities, are not necessarily engaged. Moreover, the extra effort involved may in itself trigger noticing. 'The activity of producing the target language may prompt second language learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems; it may bring to their attention something they need to discover about their L2' (Swain and Lapkin 1995: 373).

But the real benefit may be in the matching: the comparison by learners of their version with the model provides them with positive evidence of yet-to-be-acquired language features, and this process of noticing, theoretically at least, converts input to intake, and serves to restructure the learner's developing linguistic competence.

Many tried-and-true classroom activities fall within this generic type. For example, copying (an innovative use for copying for cognitive comparison purposes is described by Porte 1995); memorization and recitation of texts; dictation; 'rhetorical transformation' (see Widdowson

1978: 146); translation and re-translation (see, for example, Edge 1986) and *Storyboard*-type computer games (see Brett 1994 for a discussion of these games). Linguistic heterogeneity may be a priority in all of these activities, and this can be achieved simply through the use of authentic texts. On the other hand, if need be, the dice can be linguistically loaded to meet the needs of a traditional, form-driven syllabus: a targeted item can be deliberately embedded in the text, on the assumption that the learners are ready for it.

### **Dictogloss**

A reconstruction activity that has been popularized recently is known variously as dictogloss, dicto-comp (dictation/composition), or grammar dictation (Wajnryb 1990). The basic procedure consists in the learner simply listening to a short text once, maybe twice, in its entirety, and reconstructing it from memory, either individually or in pairs or groups. The reconstructed text is then compared with the original, a distinction being made between differences that are acceptable—that is, where the propositional content is the same, albeit differently realized—on the one hand, and unacceptable: where either the propositional content is different, or as is more often the case, the realization is linguistically flawed.

Like dictation, dictogloss involves both top-down and bottom-up processing: whereas the input might be decoded through attention to content words and activated background knowledge, the encoding stage will require lower level syntactic processing, where the remembered lexis is 'grammaticised' (Rutherford 1987), as the following sequence demonstrates.

Students were told they were going to hear a short text once, that they were not to write while listening, and that, immediately afterwards, they had to try and reconstruct the text from memory. This was the original text, which was read aloud at natural speed:

There was a young woman of Riga  
Who went for a ride on a tiger  
They returned from the ride  
With the woman inside  
And a smile on the face of the tiger

This is how one (mid-intermediate) student reconstructed the text working alone:

There was a woman from Riga who were on a tiger to make a ride  
When they come back the woman was in tiger and the tiger were smiling.

Working with two other students they then came up with this version

There was a young woman from Riga who go for ride on a tiger. The tiger come back with the woman inside and a smile on the tiger.

Finally, the class (of nine students) working together came up with this version:

There was a young woman of Riga who went for a ride on a tiger. The tiger returned with the woman inside and a smile on its face.

This steady improvement in accuracy during each successive draft confirms Wajnryb's (1990: 12) contention that 'in the reconstruction stage, specifically in the group effort to create a text, learners expand their understanding of what options exist and are available to them in the language'.

The noticing stage is equally important, either as a confirmation that input and output are matched (as they almost are in the case of the limerick example above) or in order to highlight mismatches, which, if the theory is correct, may then trigger restructuring. There is an element of 'down the garden path' learning in dictogloss (Tomasello and Herron 1988): texts can be chosen that contain examples of an item known to be unfamiliar to learners so that errors of omission are virtually guaranteed. The cognitive comparison stage forces attention on these errors: 'In learnability terms they [the learners] are made to generate their own negative evidence with a little help from the teacher' (Sharwood Smith 1993: 24). Another advantage of the dictogloss technique is its built-in heterogeneity: different learners, depending on the state of development of their interlanguage, as well as their interest and motivation, will notice different things.

Adaptations of this technique include exposing students to the text in its written, rather than spoken, form, e.g. by means of an overhead projector, before they attempt to reconstruct it. Similarly, text reconstruction software often provides the option of seeing the text first, as well as allowing the user to call up the initial letters of words (Brett 1994). The 'partial dictation' technique, of providing some of the text (e.g. content words) eases the memory load, thereby allowing more attention to be allocated to syntactic processing: either students read or hear the complete text first or they attempt to reconstruct it unseen, using only the existing prompts. As in all reconstruction tasks, they then compare their version with the original.

### ***Training 'noticing'***

'You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.' What if learners do not, in fact, notice items in the input, or do not notice items missing from their output? While O'Malley and Chamot, in their review of learning strategies (1990), do not specifically identify as strategies either noticing or noticing the gap, the metacognitive categories they label as 'selective attention' and 'self-evaluation' seem, respectively, to share some of the characteristics of the two kinds of noticing.

Selective attention involves 'attending to specific aspects of language input during task execution' (ibid.: 137), while self-evaluation includes 'checking the outcomes of one's own language performance against an internal measure of completeness and accuracy' (ibid.: 137). Substitute 'external' for 'internal' in this definition, and it is consistent with definitions of matching. (In fact, it is arguably easier, and more easily verifiable, to check one's output against an external model than against

an internal one). If, as O'Malley and Chamot claim, learning strategies are accessible for development and can be 'used to assist learning, instead of being relegated to the uncertainty of unconscious mechanisms' (ibid.: 91), then it follows that the two kinds of noticing are also amenable to training.

Below is a short and by no means exhaustive list of possible awareness-raising activities targeted at noticing strategies, with special reference to reformulation and reconstruction tasks.

- Provide opportunities in class for silent study and reflection. Noticing requires the marshalling of attentional resources, which, in turn, requires time and the absence of distractions.
- Introduce the term 'noticing' into classroom metalanguage: for example, 'What differences do you notice?', 'Did you notice...?', and 'This is a noticing activity'.
- Exploit vocabulary acquisition experiences to introduce the value of noticing: having once learnt a new word, many students may be unfamiliar with the experience of encountering it with surprising frequency in different naturalistic contexts.
- Develop selective attention by, for example, playing tapes and asking students to count the number of instances of a particular word or structure.
- Develop text-scanning skills, e.g. spot the difference between two similar texts, or between a recorded and a written text.
- Develop proof-reading skills, e.g. ask students to mark the differences between first and reformulated drafts (by underlining or circling), or between an original text and its reconstructed version; they then exchange their work to double-check that no differences were missed.
- Ask students to report on the differences between drafts, using reformulated sentences, e.g. 'In the original text they used 'would' but used the past simple...'
- Repeat reconstruction activities (e.g. dictation) after an interval of time, and then ask students to compare the number of differences between first and second attempts.
- Supply students with dictionaries and student grammars so that they can research the differences between their versions and the original (in the case of reconstruction), or their version and its reformulation and explain these differences to the class. They could be asked to classify the differences according to whether they are mistakes or simply different ways of saying the same thing.
- Suggest to students that they keep a list of significant differences that they have noticed as a result, for example, of doing reconstruction activities such as dictogloss.

*Tasks that promote noticing*



**Conclusion** I am not necessarily advocating the exclusive use in the language classroom of reformulation and/or reconstruction activities. My claim is that these kinds of activities, because of their built-in noticing potential, can be integrated into existing approaches and successfully deployed for consciousness-raising purposes in conjunction with the development of the appropriate cognitive strategies. A further attraction is that, since the objective of tasks involving reformulation and reconstruction is the production of whole texts or stretches of discourse, they allow for consciousness-raising at a whole range of levels: discursive, syntactic, lexical, and phonological. Moreover, by the manipulation of task design or the choice of text, they can be harnessed to the needs of an essentially grammar-driven programme. Alternatively, they can form a sub-set of task types within a meaning-driven, task-based syllabus.

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