Form-Focused Discovery Activities in English Classes

Muhlise Coşgun Ögeyik
Trakya University

ABSTRACT

Form-focused discovery activities allow language learners to grasp various aspects of a target language by contributing implicit knowledge by using discovered explicit knowledge. Moreover, such activities can assist learners to perceive and discover the features of their language input. In foreign language teaching environments, they can be used for various teaching purposes. This study investigates form-focused instruction in developing implicit knowledge of a language by a poetry-discovery process. Although most language learners avoid poetry due to its complex linguistic and semantic components, poetry holds implicit knowledge (and other qualities) that make it an excellent means by which language rules can be learned. This study was aimed at defeating learners’ prejudices about poetry by prompting their deep processing and creativity through the inquiries into the complexity of poetry’s structure.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning styles may differ in many aspects of the learning process, and making allowances for learning styles (based on the notion of multiple intelligences) is helpful in teaching, providing each student with an opportunity to discover his or her abilities and interests. Directing learners to integrate a variety of styles for mastery at different stages of language learning may boost learners' learning ability and creativity (Strong, Silver, & Perini, 2000), activating their implicit and explicit knowledge about the target language which is a primary concern of classroom instruction in foreign language education. In this context, Form-Focused Instruction (FFI), which is thought to be functional for activating both implicit and explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2006), can be considered as an alternative teaching strategy.

In lessons where the overriding focus is on meaning or communication, focusing on form draws learners’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally (Long, 1991) in order to consciously gain explicit information. FFI, in foreign language education, is concerned with the differences between implicit and explicit knowledge, and the ways in which these might interact (Ellis, 2006). FFI is more productive than simple exposure to a second language, and learners exposed to FFI perform better than those who have not been instructed in it. Furthermore, second language proficiency gained from FFI seems to be longer lasting (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Although explicit FFI has been demonstrated to be more effective than implicit grammar and language instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000), there are theoretical concerns about the outcome of FFI in the sense that it is only peripheral, and can affect only the learning of simple structures, (Krashen, 1993). But Ellis (2006)
provides evidence of learner ability to acquire explicit knowledge of complex grammatical rules through FFI. There is no such thing as unconscious acquisition of a second language; awareness is necessary for learning, and intake (conscious acquisition) is that part of the input which has been noticed (Schmidt, 2001). Noticing, in this sense, enhances discovery.

Discovery activities are a way for learners to consciously acquire complex aspects of the target language (Tomlinson, 1994). Within the framework of FFI, discovery activities enable learners to realize the functions of language forms, and contribute to the development of cognitive skills such as connecting, generalizing, and hypothesizing (Tomlinson, 1994). By noticing and discovering the features of their input, students may learn how to use explicit knowledge to acquire consciously implicit knowledge; learners’ awareness is boosted toward the recognition of complex structure by distinguishing surface features of a language form. Accordingly, both cognitive and affective sides of language learning and teaching emerge in consequence of transmission of experiential knowledge into meaning-oriented performance by using form-focused learning. Such a transformation may prompt creativity within the framework of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In general, discovery activities seem to be helpful for deep processing in all language skills, assisting students in grasping learning strategies. For example, FFI can positively impact reading strategies, encouraging those who might be put off by a complicated or formal structure.

Poetry is the most challenging task for foreign language learners. Students generally have negative attitudes toward poetry in English, mainly because of the jumbled language structure, but also because the vocabulary is loaded with connotative meaning and implicit reference, and because cultural codes exhibit ambiguity at the macro level. Although poetry includes disorderly language forms, it is also rich in language features (Murray, 1997). As long as a poem is read with certain functional behaviours, it should not be a tough task for readers (Culler, 1987); if a second language learner perceives the surface language structure of a poem, it goes a long way toward comprehending the complex structure. In this context, the forms (grammar, sentence structure, etc.) essential for the comprehension of specific poetic structures need to be verified. Thus, poetry can be used as the basis for generating at once linguistic competence, language awareness, cultural awareness, and individual creativity.

This paper aims to explore the pragmatic and creative learning of English through the use of FFI in English-language poetry classes by presenting discovery activities used for analyzing the grammatical irregularities of poems.

**METHOD**

In this study, research was conducted on teaching poems through FFI. The research was carried out for a few weeks (for three hours each week). The participants were first directed to clarify grammatical complexities of the course poems in order to decode the irregular and jumbled linguistic features by restructuring and simplifying and to then discuss their poems with each other. FFI was used during the analysis and poetry-reading phases. In the process of accomplishing the three steps, the simplified forms of the poems were transformed into prose versions, assisting the students to grasp the meaning behind complicated language structure and ambiguous words. Subsequently, each participant created his or her own text (which most read out loud) and discussed with each other the story hidden in the poem.
Participants and Data Collection

The participants of the study consisted of nineteen second-year students attending the English Language Teaching (ELT) department. At the initial phase of the study the participants were interviewed about the difficulties of reading poetry in English (which were recorded), after which the researcher created the lessons for the poetry classes. Data was then collected during the course hours.

Discovery Activities

FFI discovery activities were applied in the following steps for each poem:

First-Step Activities:

1. Compose the lines in the correct sequence
2. Decode ambiguous lines into daily language
3. Transform the complicated lines into usual language structure
4. Rewrite those lines with the students’ own words.

Second-Step Activities:

1. Paraphrase the parts of the poem
2. Transform the whole poem into a prose text.

Third-Step Activities:

1. Decode the stylistic features (i.e., adjectives, adverbs, verbs, images, metaphors) of the poem
2. Find the main idea in the poem
3. Discuss the story of the poem
4. Compare their own text with the original poem.

The first poem used for the classroom implementation and presented as the sample in this paper was written by Dickenson (1830-1886). The poem was originally published in 1924.

There is no Frigate like a Book
There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry --
This Traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll --
How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human soul.

Practice of First-Step Activities

First, participants reordered the jumbled lines into a sequence by decoding them into daily language, transforming the complex lines into usual sentence construction with their own words. The students had some problems while decoding the cultural references. To address this problem, those references were explained, after which they searched on their own for any deeper meaning. For example, in Dickenson’s poem, students did not know the meaning of the two vehicles, frigate (a small, fast-moving ship owned by the navy that serves
to protect other ships) and chariot (an ancient, horse-drawn, fast-moving vehicle with two wheels). After students were informed about the meaning of those two words, attention was drawn to their function in the poem. Below are some samples of the students’ works:

Student #1: There is no frigate like a book which will take us to distant lands
Nor are there coursers like a page of poetry that is more energetic than everything.
Such a travel is free for the poor.
The chariot that tolerates human soul carefully spends money.

Student #2: A book is more than a frigate.
It can take people to distant countries.
A page of poem is more active than a courser.
Without paying money, even poor people can enjoy this travel.
The chariot that bears human soul is free.

Student #3: Frigate through a book
To distant countries
Is more than a real journey;
And each page of a book is more vigorous than a courser.
You, rich or poor, pay no money for this journey
For travelling in distant countries as your soul is free.

Practice of Second-Step Activities

Next, students paraphrased parts of the poem, and then put the parts together to create an original text based on the poem. A sample is given below:

Books are more functional than ships; because they can take readers to distant countries which are unknown. A piece of poem is faster than a horse. It is more energetic. While reading a poem, even poor people can travel without paying money. It is a free vehicle that stands for human soul.

Since books comprise a variety of information, they are effective tools for taking their readers to unknown places. A poem is so rich that everybody, rich or poor, can travel within the lines faster than chariot without paying money.

Books as rich sources for human beings can take them to distant countries like a frigate. Sometimes a piece of poem is richer than a book and may take its reader to distant countries. In this journey, your soul as a reader is free.

Practice of Third-Step Activities

After decoding and restructuring the lines of the poem, the students attempted to identify the linguistic features of the poem by paying close attention to each detail. They mostly questioned the words with capital letters—Frigate, Book, Lands, Coursers, Page, Poetry, Traverse, Tolls, Chariot. They declared that such markings would take readers’ attention from surface features to deep structure. Moreover, they focused on the importance of the linking words interconnecting the ideas as unified in the poem. They examined the theme and discussed the story of the poem and then compared their own text with Dickenson’s poem. Producing their own poem-based texts encouraged them to notice and discover the implicit meanings from the deep structure of the poem. Most of the students agreed that the words (the surface structure of the poem) had rich metaphoric references. For instance, they listed the words Frigate, Lands, Coursers, Traverse, Chariot as metaphors for a journey, and the words Book and Poetry as the vehicles of this literary journey. The reader as the traveller in this journey was the common point shared by all the students.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The poem above was difficult for the students to read at first, but the FFI activities assisted the students to not only comprehend the poems they read, but also to produce their own texts—a valuable creation in itself. Following the classroom activities, it was observed and reported that the students felt themselves engaged and at ease while participating in the activities, and were able to grasp different aspects of English usage by transforming the language structure of the poem into their own English words. They all performed well and were also able to recognize the value of the expression of their creativity. Even more importantly, they became more confident after processing Dickenson’s poem and were eager to read the other poems without hesitation, managing the stylistic features of the poems, while grasping the complex structure, thereby seeing the deep meanings. They could read poems ornamented with obscure and ambiguous items without anxiety, and managed to analyze the surface structure of such poems by taking their formal features into account. Moreover, it was repeatedly noted that by recognizing the complex structure, they paid attention to the semantic features and their language input. Thus, they noticed and evaluated their language outcome. While analyzing the meaning of the poems, the contextual words were considered in both denotative and connotative meanings. Problematic cultural references were explicitly discussed in the classroom, and then researched by the students.

Another positive outcome of the study appeared in the writing skills of the students. By connecting the linguistic items of the poems in their minds, they were able to write in English, and confidently create their own texts. Such activities activated their schemata by giving them fortitude for future English writing endeavours.

FFI offers learners opportunities to deal with different language styles, and teaching poetry through FFI can be introduced into the programs of English language learners at all levels, their successful, active engagement serving to overcome their fear of poetry. Since the participants of the study were student teachers, the process of overcoming their prejudice toward poetry was also enhanced by demonstrating its potential for teaching. Discovery activities enabled the student teachers to realize the functions of language forms, and contributed to the development of cognitive skills such as connecting, generalizing, and hypothesizing. In short, FFI is efficient in developing implicit knowledge by discovering explicit knowledge in poetry and raising learners’ awareness while learning linguistic items within a context.

Muhlise Coşgun Ögeyik holds a Ph.D. in English Language Teaching and is an Assistant Professor of Education in the English Language Teaching Department at Trakya University in Edirne, Turkey. Her special research interests are foreign language teacher training, literature education, linguistics, methodology, culture teaching, research design, and methodology.

Email: muhlisecosgun@trakya.edu.tr

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