Rehearsed oral L2 output and reactive focus on form

Paul Mennim

Rehearsed oral L2 output and reactive focus on form is a way of focusing students’ attention on their own output. This paper describes a reactive focus on form task, which was part of a university EFL oral presentation course. The students in this study were encouraged to focus on their oral output by taping and transcribing a rehearsal of their presentation. They scrutinized and corrected the transcript before giving it to the teacher, who provided further feedback on points that they had missed. The paper describes the effect of this treatment by comparing the language of the rehearsal transcript with a transcript of the students’ presentation two weeks later. It shows how they managed to recall many of the corrected forms and reformulations; the final presentation showed improvements in pronunciation and grammar, and in the organization of content.

Introduction

My first-year university students in Japan follow an oral presentation course in which they give, in small groups, three different oral presentations over one academic year. It is one of the English department’s ‘upper level’ courses, which means that it is only taken by students who have an institutional TOEFL score of 500 or over. The course syllabus is task-based; students choose topics that they are interested in, and they must use their English to research their topic and to negotiate in their groups about the organization and the individual responsibilities involved in creating and performing each presentation. The course runs for the whole academic year, consisting of approximately 25 classes of 90 minutes each.

This kind of presentation is a common classroom task, and the key to successfully completing it is to take interesting ideas, back them up with relevant sources, and organize them into an informative talk. Such a process results in students learning a great deal about their research topic, yet I felt that the inclusion of some kind of focus on language was also desirable. A focus of this kind is popular with my students anyway, especially during presentation work, when they are keen to avoid making major errors in front of the whole class. My students take English as a subsidiary subject, and have only four English classes per week; I therefore felt that this 25-week course should allow adequate time for language work as well as student research.

The relative autonomy granted by this syllabus (the freedom students have to work on individual projects) also raises questions about whether
such a syllabus is able to encourage students to concentrate on language form. The course is process-oriented rather than product-oriented, that is, it does not present a list of structures and vocabulary for students to learn and be tested on. Instead it aims to give students the chance to come into contact with whatever forms come up during their research. Task-based approaches to language teaching are sometimes criticized (Sheen 1994, Seedhouse 1999) for neglecting grammatical accuracy. Neglect can be inferred if students are able to complete a task successfully by getting their meaning across in language that is inaccurate yet broadly intelligible. My response was therefore to include focus on form activities in this course.

Proactive and reactive focus on form

Classroom activities that focus on form involve the following process. A classroom task encourages learners to attend to the language forms that the students are either using themselves or are exposed to through input. Next, learners notice ways in which their own interlanguage differs from the target language. This in turn leads to the learner rethinking his or her hypotheses about the target language, and to the subsequent modification, hopefully in a target-like direction, of the learner’s output.

Doughty and Williams (1998), in their extensive discussion of focus on form, make the distinction between proactive and reactive focus on form. Both approaches seek to focus on language forms in a communicative context: those that come up while students are involved in the communication of meaning. Although Doughty and Williams suggest no particular benefit of one over the other, they point out that classroom circumstances might lead a teacher in his or her choice of focus on form. For example a proactive focus on form might be useful if a teacher has a clear idea of common language problems in a class with the same L1, or if a particular language form will be useful or necessary for the completion of a communicative task. On the other hand a reactive focus on form can more effectively deal with linguistic problems that arise while students are engaged in the communication of meaning.

Proactive focus on form

Proactive focus on form is where the teacher chooses a form in advance to present to students in order to help them complete a communicative task. This can be done explicitly through formal instruction, while a less explicit focus might involve asking students to alter or manipulate a text that contains a target form. This differs from traditional grammar instruction as the grammar focus is not centred around a set of language structures imposed by the syllabus. Instead the choice of form is determined by the communicative needs of the learners. The choice of forms is also influenced by other factors such as individual learner differences, developmental language learning sequences, and L1 influences (Doughty and Williams 1998: 198).

An implicit proactive focus on form can be achieved, for example, by playing a game that requires the use of a target form, or by exposing learners to modified input where a form is made salient. A desired link to the communicative use of these forms is explained by Fotos (1998: 303):
... after awareness of grammatical structures has been developed by formal instruction or some type of implicit focus-on-form treatment, many learners tend to notice the target structures in subsequent communicative input.

Reactive focus on form treatments can deal more specifically with student output where the focus is on structures that students themselves have used, or have tried to use, during a communicative task. Again, there are explicit and implicit ways of achieving reactive focus on form.

At the explicit end of this continuum students can be encouraged to discuss language form as part of a task. Swain (2000) has made use of the dictogloss, which involves the teacher reading out a short passage to the class, who must then reconstruct it in groups by pooling their linguistic resources. The dictogloss in Swain’s study resulted in student dialogue that was concerned specifically with the language problems the students had in recalling the original text. In this way there was a collaborative, or joint, reaction to students’ output. If there was uncertainty about the L2, or if an L2 error was made, dialogue about form helped students correct their own errors.

Lyster and Ranta (1997: 57) believe that students’ self-generated repairs are likely to benefit second language acquisition:

First, they allow opportunities for learners to automatize the retrieval of target language knowledge that already exists in some form . . . Second, when repair is generated by students, the latter draw on their own resources and thus actively confront errors in ways that may lead to revisions of their hypotheses about the target language.

Yet we must also accept that students will be unable to repair all of their L2 errors. They may make only a partially successful repair, or a wrong repair, or indeed may be unable to see where some errors have occurred. It is not surprising, then, that many students are keen to hear teacher feedback, or see it in the form of red ink on the page. Because of this, the reactive aspect of focus on form might best be made up of student and teacher reactions to student output. Lynch (2001) employed a similar task to the dictogloss which encouraged a reactive focus on form on his students’ own output, and involved both student and teacher scrutiny of that output. In this study, pairs of students transcribed verbatim a recording of their own English role-plays, and then discussed ways in which they could make improvements to the language forms in their transcript. After the students had finished making their corrections, the transcript was handed over to the teacher, who went on to provide further reformulations.

A less explicit way of focusing on form involves less scrutiny of output and, instead, making conditions for output more favourable for the production of accurate language. Skehan (1996) uses the term ‘spare attentional capacity’ to refer to the tension that exists between the cognitive and linguistic demands on speech production. He believes that students will be better able to attend to form if their attention is not overburdened from having to prepare the content and the form of an utterance simultaneously.
This kind of freeing of cognitive resources has been tried in different ways, and has produced some evidence that it has a positive effect on L2 performance. Foster and Skehan (1996) allowed students planning time before they performed a language task. Students therefore had the chance to think about the content and the language of their performance beforehand. Their study provided evidence that students focused on form during the planning phase, and that this benefited their subsequent oral output. They observed greater fluency (fewer pauses and less silent periods) in the students who were given planning time. The planning students also used more complex clauses, and a wider use of conditionals and modal verbs compared to the students who were not given planning time.

A related approach is that of task repetition. Bygate (1996) looked at whether ‘another shot’ at a task would result in more accurate language, again with the assumption that the planning of the utterance from the first run could be drawn on during the second, with the result that spare attention could be directed towards form. A student who had two chances to view and describe a cartoon made improvements in syntax, vocabulary, and fluency. Lynch and Maclean (2001), and Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres, and Fernandez-Garcia (1999), guided by similar assumptions, allowed students to repeat communicative tasks, and observed improvements in student output. Lynch and Maclean’s students improved their pronunciation, made improvements in word order, and were able to access vocabulary faster during subsequent turns. Gass et al. observed that students who repeated a task managed to access more advanced vocabulary compared to a control group who took just one turn at a task. They also found evidence of improvements in syntax.

The study

The aim of the task in this study was to find out whether students could take advantage of a rehearsal of their final oral presentation in order to make improvements to their spoken output. It was hoped that the rehearsal, by allowing a repetition of the presentation task, would help students to focus more effectively on language form in the same way that repetition is thought to free spare attentional capacity. The task therefore employs a focus on form in the implicit way described above. However, the benefit of the repetition task was supplemented here by an extra component that encouraged a more explicit scrutiny of form. As in Lynch’s transcription task, students also examined their output from the rehearsal, and made corrections before the task was repeated in the form of their final presentation. There was, therefore, a combination of encouraging favourable conditions for real-time language processing, and a more explicit language focus that could allow more time for the noticing of individual language forms.

Two weeks before their scheduled final presentation, each group of three students performed a private rehearsal, with me as the only listener. The rehearsals lasted approximately 20 minutes, and were tape-recorded. These rehearsals, like the final presentations, were given without the use of scripts, though students were allowed to use small cue cards. I asked the students to transcribe a five-minute segment, which included equal contributions from each of them. They first of all transcribed the extract...
warts and all’, including any errors that they made. They produced a typed transcript with double-spacing, and made their own corrections in red pen. When they were finished, I took the copy and indicated any corrections or improvements that they had missed. This completed the task, and the paper was returned to them one week before they were due to give the final presentation. The final presentation was also recorded, and I then transcribed the section corresponding to the part that had been transcribed from the rehearsal.

In order to find out if this process led to the students paying attention to language form, and subsequently modifying their language, I compared the rehearsal transcripts with the final presentation transcripts. The following analysis focuses on just one group of students, M, Y, and A, who were presenting on the history of Malaysia. Their TOEFL scores, recorded a month before the rehearsal, were in a range between 500 and 550. Here I discuss changes to pronunciation, grammatical forms (articles, prepositions, and passive forms), and also some changes in content. While the latter are not strictly a part of focus on form, they show how the post-task discussion can go beyond a linguistic focus on form.

**Articles**

The group made few changes to their use of articles when they reviewed their rehearsal transcripts. Only two corrections were noted on Student Y’s transcript. She recalled both of these during the final presentation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rehearsal</th>
<th>Final Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boy</td>
<td>a young man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fourth Prime Minister</td>
<td>the fourth Prime Minister.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I reviewed the rehearsal transcript I spotted 37 more occasions where articles were either absent or used incorrectly, and I pointed these out to the students. The final presentation transcript shows that the group repaired 24 out of these 37. Although six of these were non-targetlike repairs, the students made 18 targetlike corrections during the presentation.

**Response to teacher feedback: article repairs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Number of suggested repairs on transcript</th>
<th>Targetlike repairs in final presentation</th>
<th>Non-targetlike repairs in final presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Y</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student M made the largest number of targetlike repairs to articles: 11 out of a possible 14. This could be partly due to the fact that many involved the same grammatical point: that most names of political parties require a definite article (e.g. the Alliance Party/the Democratic Party). When I pointed this out, it resulted in a large number of repairs: 6 improvements on this point were observed in the final presentation. Potentially, students A and Y could also have made a number of similar
corrections, as they also often failed to use articles before party names, yet my feedback did not seem to result in as many repairs.

Prepositions

Only one student made her own alterations to her use of prepositions; Student A changed the originally correct ‘on the night of May 13th’ to the non-targetlike ‘at the night of May 13th’ on the transcript sheet. Nevertheless she kept to the correct original during the final presentation, possibly due to my feedback. My feedback therefore provided most of the focus on this form; I highlighted 10 instances of non-targetlike uses of prepositions. The final presentation transcript showed that students successfully modified the majority of these.

Response to teacher feedback: preposition repairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Number of suggested repairs on transcript</th>
<th>Targetlike repairs in final presentation</th>
<th>Non-targetlike repairs in final presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Y</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student M</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Passive structures

Student Y was the only student to include changes to passive structures on her rehearsal transcript. She made two changes, and both of these were recalled during the final presentation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rehearsal</th>
<th>Final presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>two months before the election</td>
<td>two months before the election was held</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a Malay labour killed by a mob</td>
<td>a Malay labourer was killed by a mob</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I pointed out two instances in Student M’s rehearsal transcript that required correction. This elicited the following changes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rehearsal</th>
<th>Final presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>which named Singapore</td>
<td>which they named Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>only Malay was decided to use as a national language</td>
<td>only Malay was chosen as a national language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student A improved one passive structure in response to my feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rehearsal</th>
<th>Final presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>people injured</td>
<td>people were injured</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pronunciation

The only feedback I gave to the students immediately following their rehearsal concerned pronunciation. I pointed out to Student M that her attempted pronunciation of [si:] was often [ʃi:], and that this was especially noticeable due to eight instances in her talk of the word seat, as she was describing the results of an election. She responded to this feedback by circling the instances of the [si:] pronunciation of seat on her transcript. A week later her pronunciation of [si:] in the final
presentation was almost always targetlike. She also managed to correct a slip in her own pronunciation of the [si] in *Singapore* during the final presentation.

The students themselves tended to notice instances of individual words that they had trouble with during the rehearsal rather than general characteristics of their pronunciation. To take another example, Student M was unfamiliar with the word *favourable*, and during the rehearsal she stumbled over its pronunciation: [fe-fe-feva-fe-favourable]. She consequently underlined this word on her transcript sheet. During the final presentation she managed to pronounce *favourable* without stumbling at all.

Elaboration of content

This was a more unexpected aspect of student focus, yet two of the three students inserted a number of words and clauses into their transcript. These elaborations sometimes make the content more comprehensible, for example, on the students’ transcript, a single pronoun, *them*, was replaced by a clause, ‘Its majority of members is Malay people . . .’, and this helped to explain a link between ethnic identity and political allegiance. The elaborations sometimes resulted in a more sophisticated or objective voice: the rehearsal’s ‘He is not following the constitution’ became ‘His policy is not following the constitution’ in the final presentation. Others make alterations to the content of the presentation: for example, ‘Chinese boy’ becomes ‘a young Chinese man’.

Student Y inserted by far the most additions after reviewing her transcript. She wrote down nine of these on the rehearsal transcript sheet, and managed to include all of them in her final presentation. Student A wrote two elaborations on the transcript sheet, but neither of these appeared in the final presentation.

Conclusions

The study’s primary aim was to investigate whether or not the transcription task would direct the students’ attention towards the language forms that they had used during the rehearsal. First of all, in making their own corrections, they noticed 49 possible errors in a transcript of five minutes’ talk. Taken as an average of about 16 points of language form per student over five minutes, this is a lower rate than the students in Lynch’s (2001) study, when each student noticed around 14 such points in just two minutes of speech. Nevertheless, the number of changes the three students made to their transcript, coupled with the questions about pronunciation that they put to me immediately after the rehearsal, satisfied me that the task had been taken seriously, and had succeeded in focusing the students’ attention on form.

The next question was whether making corrections to the transcript would encourage students to modify and improve their L2 output. There was, of course, no guarantee that the students’ observations about form from the correction task would re-emerge in the more interactive context of the final presentation. Nevertheless, two weeks later the students went on to recall many of the changes from the transcript task: 20 article changes, 9 preposition changes, 7 changes to passive structures, and a number of pronunciation points.
Teacher feedback seems to have been an important component of the task. I was able to indicate to the students more errors than they found themselves (73 compared to the students’ 49) and my feedback was more influential on the correcting of some aspects of the target language. This can be observed, in particular, in my indication of 42 article errors—an area that did not much attract the students’ attention while they made their own corrections. Nevertheless, the students still managed their own corrections and improvements, as we have seen.

A striking point about the above analysis is that the students seem to have used the transcription task for different ends. This is apparent from the observation that students varied in their focus on language and content. Student Y certainly focused on language during her transcript task (she corrected passives, prepositions, and articles) but she used the transcript much more than the others to help her concentrate on improving and expanding on the content of her presentation. This is in contrast to Student M, who seemed to focus exclusively on language. Students are likely to have their own agendas when presented with this kind of task. Morita (2000) found that non-native-speakers’ perceptions of the difficulties of making an oral presentation were more determined by linguistic factors compared to the perceptions of native speakers. This could be why Student M’s agenda was exclusively linguistic. Moreover, four weeks before the rehearsal, there was a difference of almost 50 points between the TOEFL scores of Students Y and M. Student Y’s more proficient English may have given her the confidence to expand her focus further into the domain of content.

The rehearsal transcription task set out here puts various demands on teachers’ and students’ time. The language correction and feedback was not overly demanding for either party, as I told students that it was not necessary to transcribe the whole of their rehearsal. I advised them that one side of A4 paper would be sufficient to give them some indication of the kind of mistakes they were making. It was necessary, though, to find extra time to meet up after class in order to do the rehearsals. Nevertheless, before I made them an obligatory part of the course, I was aware that rehearsals were something that students often did in their own time anyway, so the transcription exercise was just an extension of this. After this first trial, I believed that my students should be able to record and transcribe their rehearsals without my being there. The students were positive about the task. No doubt the prospect of language focus and teacher feedback was especially welcomed at a time when they were anticipating a public performance. The public nature of their performance may have supplied some of the motivation for their noticing language errors.

The focus on language form discussed here is clearly just a small part of these three students’ language development over the academic year. Although the fact that a single performance improved is encouraging, the time between the rehearsal and the final presentation was just two weeks, and we cannot tell whether such tasks might have a cumulative and permanent effect on interlanguage development.

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I am now working on a longer-term study, which is intended to explore the evidence of long-term gains. Students will give three presentations over one academic year and scrutinize their output after each performance. I will also introduce an element of peer feedback to see if other students’ feedback might help students notice gaps in their language. It is hoped that language gains can be tracked from the earliest stages of the course in order to see whether corrected changes, such as those we have discussed, reappear during subsequent presentations or rehearsals. In this way we might be able to point to specific reactive treatments that help students focus on form, and make gains in the second language.

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References

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