Measuring Effectiveness: Musings on the What and the How

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Norris and Ortega's (2000) article on L2 instruction permits a helpful overview of the domain of instructed SLA. The authors' detailed description of the coding process provides a useful matrix of instructional techniques in terms of Focus on Form (FonF), Focus on Forms (FonFS), Focus on Meaning (FonM) and implicit/explicit techniques. It is also helpful to follow the different types of measurements that SLA researchers have employed. However, while helpful and essential to the purpose of the study, Norris and Ortega's coding scheme has its limitations as some instructional treatments do not readily fit into one cell or another. As Norris and Ortega themselves state, we need to exercise caution when comparing studies with seemingly similar constructs, and we might need to extract and separately analyze parts of a treatment to arrive at a clearer picture of its effectiveness. For instance, while VanPatten (2002) himself has identified Processing Instruction (PI) as an explicit treatment, a closer analysis of PI's components reveals that it may be a hybrid of both explicit and implicit treatment. Similarly, treatments that are labeled as *output practice*, *input practice*, or *feedback* can have many manifestations depending on how they are actually executed in each individual study.

A startling finding in Norris and Ortega's (2000) analysis is the lack of a discernable difference between FonF and FonFS instruction. It is difficult to believe that the FonF approach, driven by the learner's readiness to acquire the target form, does not fare better than the FonFS approach, which is driven by an external, predetermined syllabus. As the authors point out, one possible explanation for this conclusion may lie in the insensitivity or inadequate application of the measurements, and not necessarily in the treatments themselves. The metalinguistic judgments, selected response, and constrained constructed response measurements often employed in the cited studies are only able to capture learners' existing representation system and their declarative knowledge. But what about assessing qualitative and quantitative differences in the way these systems are built?

Perhaps the real difference between FonF and FonFS instruction is not so much the manner in which mental representations are created, but how restructuring is effectuated longitudinally. By comparing the series of results collected over time, distinctions between the two approaches may be revealed via the stability of the established system, or in a learner's efficiency in noticing gaps and processing newly-encountered information. The differential effects of FonF and FonFS may ultimately lie in a learner's gradual process of cognitive restructuring, which cannot be detected via a one-shot investigative approach.

In conclusion, although Norris and Ortega (2000) point out many limitations and biases in the instructed SLA research, their synthesis and critique are extremely helpful in understanding how we might proceed. It is rather exciting to consider how the L2 research community might make adjustments in light of their insights, and move more cohesively toward a clearer, more conclusive answer with respect to what constitutes effective L2 instruction.

REFERENCES

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