

## **Efficiency of Dual Processing Taxonomies in Moroccan EFL Learners' Speaking**

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**Abstract:** *This article claims that one efficient way to avoid learners' hesitation and push them towards more speech delivery in EFL Moroccan settings is the applicability of compromise or dual processing taxonomies (DPT) aiming to establish link between utterances form and meaning during oral production, rather than on focusing on either meaning or form as two separate entities. To this end, an overview to the meaning/form dichotomy as it has traced route in the history of language teaching/learning will briefly be presented. A correlating recognizable lack of form-negotiation will be recapitulated and compared to a resulting error anxiety which both will be empirically evidenced. The case will also be to extrapolate FonF (Focus on Form) approach to L2 learning which -basing on current findings- proves very important but lacking during speaking situations in Moroccan secondary classes. Two hundred students and forty teachers have contributed to current research. Design is both qualitative and descriptive. Instruments used vary from open interviews to closed end questionnaires to classroom observation grids.*

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### **I. Theoretical Stands**

#### **Meaning or Form?**

It is agreed upon in L2 literature that language study within the structural framework was primarily concerned with the formal aspects of spoken language with an aim of discovering the regular patterns and structures. The focus of linguistic enquiry was the structure of language not its functions. For instance Saussurean belief that "la langue est une forme et non une substance" tremendously impacted the field of linguistics. Saussurean Syllable Theory (ST) together with his concern with Latin and Greek phonology fall within the same enterprise. Bloomfield was inspired greatly by Saussure since American linguists laid more emphasis on spoken languages too and on synchronic descriptions because the languages of aborigines in America did not have written codes.

This emphasis on the formal mode has predominated and shaped famous linguistic trends especially after the introduction of Saussure's semiology science. In structuralist terms, sign is a complex entity of two distinct elements 'a signifier' and 'a signified' (Eugenio Donato, 1967:550). The idea here is that structures represent a shift from a surface code of language to an infrastructure layer of meaning and the discovery of this meaning proceeds not by general axioms but rather by the systems governing those relations (William Free, 1974:66). The argument of whether the signifier holds any presupposed kinship to the signified or that the relationship between them is arbitrary has mapped the route of thought in structural linguistics.

As an illustration, some of the key Saussurean notions of opposition in language "in which one element only acquires or signals meaning in contradistinction to some other element with which it contrasts" (Kronenfeld and Decker, 1979:512) have largely influenced structural linguistics. It could be argued that emphasis on the formal analysis of language, and its dwelling on the relations among structures impacted language teaching too. For example, speaking has been treated through the dichotomy accuracy (form) as opposed to fluency (meaning).

However, the impact of psychological schools on language study and language learning came as a reaction to the criticism addressed to linguistic theory for its emphasis on the linguistic structure and the formal analysis of language, and its dwelling on the relations among structures. The need to go beyond linguistic description and observation helped to promote psychological theories and sociolinguistic theories which presented an extension and a development of language learning theories. One prominent theory among these is what has been identified as Speech Act Theory (SAT).

#### **Speech Act Theory**

Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1961, 1962; and Searle, 1969, 1979) particularly has further contributed to our understanding of language as a social phenomenon. It holds that the effect of an utterance is analyzed in relationship to the speaker and listener's behavior. Speech Act Theory helps analyze utterances and examine them from the perspective of their function, rather than their form. In Kearns (1994:51) terms, speech acts are defined as:

Speech acts would simply be acts displaying the independently meaningful, independently structured expressions internal mechanisms in people generate the meaningful structured items, and then production mechanisms turn these into speech.

Any speech act will hold a functional meaning most of the time preceded or based on a referential meaning as well. The performance of functions by speakers according to speech situations is a major advocacy held by speech act research.

The same view is held by Searle (1979) when he describes the form/function problem with reference to meaning and defines the linguistic items in communication as units holding a function (Bierwisch, 1980:1-36). Searle suggests five general ways of using language namely (a) Assertives, where speakers assert how things are; (b) Directives, where speakers can direct their interlocutors to do things; (c) Commissives, where speakers commit themselves to perform things; (d) Expressives, where speakers express their feelings and attitudes; (e) Declaratives, where speakers utter things that result in changing the world.

Speech act theory has thus led to the recognition that speaking should be treated in terms of the functions it serves among social groups and not only in terms of its form or structure. In this way, the theory has paved the way for further reconsidering and analyzing human speaking.

Nevertheless, this theory has been criticized for being based on language not produced by participants in real interactional situations. It is, rather, language which is supposed to constitute plausible responses for hypothesized contexts. Weber (1993:11) reports how the function of any utterance is dependent on its sequential position in the talk in which it is produced taking into account that functions are interactional units not linguistic or grammatical ones. Weber (ibid), for instance, indicates that when language is isolated from the communicative situation, it is impossible to discover what speakers are doing or how the language is being used. In this respect, she states that "interactional functions cannot be attributed to individual sentences when plausible contexts are merely imagined" (p.12). This is the reason why researchers in the field of conversational analysis advocate that the study of speaking should be concerned with talk as it occurs in real-life situations. This is what has been called discourse analysis or conversation analysis as exemplified in recent research too (Moeschler, 2001; Fitzegerald, 2003; Roy, 2005).

### **Discourse Analysis**

Proponents of this trend advocate that basic answers related to speaking comprehension, manipulation, interaction and production are to be found in spoken discourse itself. That is why, unlike quantitative research, Cameron (2001:13) sees discourse analysis as an increasing popular qualitative alternative to statistical data. She explains how discourse analysts record subjects' talk, transcribe it and analyze it. She holds that if statistical quantitative research aims at objectively finding out what people say, then discourse analysis sheds light on how they say it and gives additional depth to the way people say it. Judged from this angle, the reality of speaking becomes a discursively constructed phenomenon, and it is up to speech transcriptions to reveal its fluctuating nature.

From a discourse analyst perspective, the dichotomy of linguistic form versus communicative meaning is again highlighted (Thompson,1993; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2005; Hughes, 2006). Mauranen (2006:144), for example, highlights the importance of a sentence-based model of discourse analysis, as a much more organized model than the traditional clause-based one. Indeed, the focus of recent research has been redirected towards language in use and reports how a linguist's field of interest may now go beyond the clause into text and the context of situation. Here again, Mauranen (2006) emphasizes how discourse particles have served to redefine the gap between pragmatics and semantics and how the analysis of dialogue has foregrounded the redefinition of lexical as well as grammatical structures. However, one basic challenge to the sentence based model or the discourse analysts is remains undoubtedly grammar. Referring to how grammatical errors have been treated may clarify certain aspects of these redefinitions. Below is how the philosophy about errors has been developed.

### **Audiolingualism and Error Treatment**

Founded essentially on structural linguistics, especially Bloomfield (1933) and behavioral psychology (Skinner, 1957), audiolingualism is one of the most important approaches to language teaching which advocates the primacy of speech in the language classroom. Among its major tenets "Language is speaking not writing", "Language is set of habits", and "Language is Verbal behavior". In this regard, Skinner (1957:5) states:

What happens when a man **speaks** or responds to speech is clearly a question of human behavior and hence a question to be answered with the concepts and techniques of psychology as an experimental science of behavior

Skinner thus advocated that, like all other behaviors, language is learned through repetition and reinforcement (positive or negative). Adhering to notions such as stimulus-response and operant conditioning, a behaviorist, quite expectedly, might consider effective language behavior to be the production of correct

responses to stimuli. If a particular response is reinforced, it then becomes habitual or conditioned. Brown (1994:17) considers this to highlight the 'immediately perceptible aspects of linguistic behavior, the publicly observable responses and the relationships or associations between those responses and events in the world surrounding them'.

Therefore, the idea that has characterized behaviorism- that observable behavior is perpetuated if reinforced- has affected language classroom. Accordingly, teachers used to rely on reinforcement or positive feedback presumably used as a result of the ultimate success on the part of the learners having showed total grasp of a certain pattern.

In this regard, Williams (1997)(( and Burden (1997:10) in explains how behaviourism has largely influenced language teachers, ))) noted that within the audiolingual approach framework, much analysis had been done to consider the role of the learners who should be positive respondents to teachers' stimuli using such mechanisms as repetition and substitution. Blair (1991:24), on the other hand, clarifies how from an audiolingual perspective, language was considered as:

A definable set of structures with lexical exponents, which could be learned inductively, pattern by pattern, by means of a rigorously planned and carefully executed program of instruction based on the laws of conditioning and reinforcement

Thus, audiolinguists advocate a considerable control over learners' oral production. A great effort is deployed to manipulate learners' errors in such a way that structural or grammatical correctness is the ultimate motive during the learning process. Thus, learning how to speak a language is seen as acquiring a set of mechanical habits or as Gass (2008:49) puts it "learning a language involved imitation as the primary mechanism, the language that surrounded learners was of crucial importance as the source for imitation". In this way, behaviorist psychology along with principles drawn from structural linguistics shaped language teaching and directed it towards a mode of teaching advocating the supremacy of speech over writing, form over function and accuracy over fluency.

This reductive perception has been criticized for the inactive engagement of learners both at the level of negotiation which lacks in this mode of teaching between the teacher and the learner and between learners themselves, as well as at the level of the passivity of the learner whose mission does not transgress mere responding or consumption of the structural patterns according to sequential or repetitive steps.

### **Focus On Form (Fonf) Theory**

Williams (2008: 671-691) presents what is referred to as a FonF (focus on form) Taxonomy (p.677) which she explains as:

Focus is taken to mean any brief turning or dividing of learner attention during an act of communication, such as reading, conversing, listening, and so forth toward some feature of language. The essential characteristic is that although there is a brief or simultaneous focus on code features: pronunciation, inflectional morphology, word form, word definition, and the like, the overriding focus is on the processing of meaning as part of an act of communication...the diversion to form is in service of communication of meaning.

Williams thus explains how, even though form is assumed to be a structural feature, it can equally involve the drawing of learners' attention to a second language pragmatic convention. In this regard, she reports the example of Cook (2001) who describes the morphological contextualization cues that are crucial to pragmatically appropriate discourse in Japan, and which should be drawn to the learners' attention because they are not salient, and thus not easily noticed by students. She also refers to Long (1996) who offers an example of using FonF to call attention to problematic words, in which case the form would be lexical. And this is what Williams qualifies as:

FonF might include the use of a typographic enhancement or glossing of words...signals learner attention to a word's meaning, not just its structural features. This flagging of lexical items and in particular, their meaning rather than a grammatical form, is a broader view of FonF; in that instead of processing form along with meaning, the learner is processing word meaning in the context of comprehending spoken or written text...this falls within the general perspective of simultaneous or dual processing, which is at the heart of FonF. (p.673)

In literature, the underlying conception of FonF is that enriched input or instruction may make it easy for learners to achieve tasks, and that textual enhancement and flooding may serve this goal. Williams reports Ellis who uses the term structured input (1998, 2001) where it is held that it is precisely when activities initiate learners to attend to form in order to process meaning that they are more effective.

## **II. Method**

The present article adheres to a mixed design or what has been identified in research methodology as ex-post facto (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2007) it is both a qualitative and a descriptive one. In the first place, a descriptive study may be used to elaborate on a theory, affiliate problems to current practice, gauge current

action or practice and associate what others in similar situations are doing. Therefore, it catches the events and provides factual and accurate description of the population being studied and registers statistical frequency of occurrences about the population (Kultar, 2007: 65). Whereas a qualitative one is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, concerns, and in this instance learners' perceptions, teaching styles and methods of instruction. It also aims at detecting interrelatedness of these with current practices and tries to incorporate the value of context and setting and find correlations for deeper understanding of the participants lived experiences of the phenomenon under study (Rizzo, 2001; Marshall, Rossman, 2011). It is agreed upon that it involves focus groups, in-depth interviews, content analysis, ethnography of communication (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:116), as well as evaluation and analysis of any unstructured interviews or checklists.

Therefore, the study attempts to explore teachers and learners' perceptions, the type of speaking activities implemented, the type of teachers' feedback, the teaching material, and the difficulties encountered (as independent variables) and the speaking skill as a dependant variable. It examines whether and to what extent modification or alterations in the independent variables cause or are linked to any observed differences in the dependent variable (Hatch, Lazaraton, 1991).

Since in the human sciences, in addition to pure experimental research, many adaptations of exploratory designs, called quasi-experimental, non-experimental or mixed designs have been developed, the nature of the present thesis required the adoption of a mixed design. Thus, two hundred (200) students' questionnaires, forty (40) teachers' questionnaires including twenty (20) teachers' interviews and twenty (20) observation checklists have been compiled.

The aim is to find out what perceptions EFL secondary school teachers and learners have, what practices are used in class and what problems are encountered during the teaching learning process of the speaking skill. In addition, the correlation between teachers' experience and the feedback they provide students with while teaching this skill will be investigated. The following section will shed light on the sampling technique that has been adopted in the study.

### III. Results

**Table (8): Students' Perceptions Of The Rate Of Their "Meaning Negotiation" In The While Speaking Phase**

During speaking activities in class:	A	U	S	R	N	M	T	q	p
Students negotiate (discuss) meanings with Teacher	75 37.5%	45 22.5%	48 24%	11 5.5%	14 7%	7 3.5%	200 100%	772	.000

Above chart shows that learners perceptions reveal how a good proportion confirm their ability to negotiate meanings with teachers during speaking activities that do indeed entail a sequence of meaning-negotiation

**Table 1: Noticeable Error Anxiety And Lack Of Form Negotiation**

Lack of talk in class because	A	U	S	R	N	M	T	q	p
Afraid of making mistakes	54 27%	36 18%	60 30%	25 12.5%	22 11%	3 1.5%	200 100%	788	.000
Not know how to make correct sentences to convey the meanings	37 18.5%	46 23%	58 29%	31 15.5%	25 12.5%	3 1.5%	200 100%	788	.000

On the other hand, as shown above, the major difficulties as viewed by learners concern speech and error anxieties ((( ni high proportions as nearly (75%) reported to be afraid of making mistakes totaling 27% (always) 18% (usually) and 30% (sometimes) from item 1 above at a chi-squared value estimated at (q=788). In addition, according to the chi-square values and the significance registered in this study, other highly significant perceptions of the difficulties encountered are: perplexity in front of large groups (q= 796) (item 6), peer criticism (q=792) (item 11), difficulty in formulating sentences (q=788) (item 9), withdrawal from the learning of foreign languages and the negative experience with French in particular (q= 788) (item 18), misunderstanding teachers' questions or instructions ( q=772) (item 12), and all these are stressed through highly significant corresponding p values (.000.)))

### IV. Discussion And Pedagogical Implication

In an attempt to establish a compromise or a link between form and meaning, and basing her argument on a FonF (Focus on Form) approach to language, Williams (2008:686) adheres to the belief that for the learners to recognize the gap between their production and the teachers' language, they have to notice the teachers' response as being corrective increasing therefore their need for a clearly signaled negative evidence. Based on the above mentioned studies, this becomes absolutely crucial to speaking situations in L2 classes.

Williams points to the importance- within a FonF activity- of the manipulation of task features, believed to help free up learners' attention so that they can focus on form independently and as needed. She particularly evokes task familiarity which can join the above mentioned recurring types of information structures that help learners speak. As mentioned by Williams, Skehan (1996) suggests that if task familiarity is increased or complexity is decreased, learners may be more able to focus on accuracy. She also mentions that Skehan and Foster (1999) found that fluency was more likely to be influenced by the predictability of a task than accuracy.

Literature thus lends support to the crucial role of instruction in the learning process of language skills particularly speaking. The FonF theory, for instance, evokes the importance of input in noticing which Williams defines as 'the registration of a form or word that has not been attended to before'. She also puts forward that 'what gets noticed' is influenced by a number of factors like frequency, salience, situational factors, and time pressure. Williams explains how for a new form to be recognized or noticed, these factors are/ should be manipulated during an activity.

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