

Chapter 1

Overview

Focus on Form or Meaning?

One of the most debated topics in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been how language input should be presented to the second language learner in the classroom. For example, some SLA researchers claim an approach that includes a focus on the grammatical form of the second language (L2) is best (Schmidt, 1993; Sharwood Smith, 1993; Van Patten, 1989). In contrast, others contest that there is no place for a focus on grammar in the SLA classroom and it is meaningful communication that should be emphasized (Krashen 1982, 1985). This debate has recently been discussed in terms of focus on form vs. focus on meaning. A focus on the form (FonF) of the language consists of drawing the learner's attention to the linguistic features of the language. A focus on meaning, on the other hand, excludes attention to the formal elements of the language (Doughty and Williams, 1999). Thus, a focus on form approach would allow for the L2 learner to concentrate on the grammatical rules and constructs of the language. A focus on meaning approach, on the other hand, would be concerned with getting the L2 learner to concentrate solely on understanding the message being conveyed. If, for example, a student were given a text in the L2, he or she would be focusing on form if they were asked to analyze the text in terms of how it represents the rules of the language. The same text could be looked at but with a focus on meaning if the learner was told to concern him/herself only with understanding the text's message. In both cases the text is the same but what the student is being asked to focus on is different. The question that arises is which type of focus is most beneficial for second language learners. Is one or the other best or perhaps a combination? After over twenty years of research in the SLA field, this issue continues to be debated and divides both theory and research. Although research has been done in the classroom and the laboratory in search of a resolution, the question remains unanswered (Leeman; Arteagoitia; Fridman & Doughty, 1995, p.217).

The focus on form vs. meaning question is important to consider for both language learners and teachers. The answer would help to formulate part of a comprehensive account of how second languages should be taught. Over the years, theories have fallen in and out of favor. Teaching methods have in turn swayed from one end of the pendulum (grammar translation, consciousness raising) to the other (suggestopedia, natural approach, communicative method). A theory based solution to the problem would rescue teachers and students from the confusion and uncertainty these trends create. If it is determined which type or combination of focus most profoundly contributes to learning, teachers could select a method that helps their students. Without a clear idea of what type or combination of focus is best, language teachers cannot be confident that they are using the most beneficial approach.

The Self Access Center Context

The form vs. meaning debate raises important questions for SLA contexts outside the classroom as well. This would include the Self Access Center (SAC). A recent trend in SLA has been the promotion of autonomous learning in self access centers. Autonomous learning puts more emphasis on the student to be responsible for his/her progress (Dickinson, 1993). SACs are language centers that provide learning resources and materials where students can be autonomous language learners. The SAC is a resource the learner can use independently to support classroom learning (Littlejohn, 1985). The responsibility to ensure language learning occurs is shifted somewhat away from the teacher to the learner.

Self access centers are being discussed more and numerous books on the subject have been published in recent years (Benson & Voller, 1997; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Pemberton, 1996). Self access language learning centers have recently grown in popularity and number. For example, in central Mexico where the present study took place, SACs for second language learning have been actively promoted since 1994

(Dominguez, 2000). SACs encompass a wide context as can be seen by research and discussion that has been published on SACs in several different countries (Kell & Newton, 1997; Littlejohn, 1985; Yoke & Brown, 1994). Apart from the theoretical motivations, many universities have set up SACs for economic reasons. It is considerably cheaper to supply and staff a SAC than a faculty of qualified second language teachers (Yoke & Brown, 1994).

One very important aspect of the SAC is the material and resources placed in it. The autonomous nature of the SAC inevitably puts more emphasis on a learner's interaction with the language learning materials. Although there is discussion of mode (i.e. audio, video, textual, etc.), classification (according to level of difficulty for example), and organization (how materials should be stored and accessed) in these centers, the specific design of the material that should be in a SAC has not been addressed (Gremmo & Riley, 1995).

There is a tendency to equip SACs with a variety of different kinds of materials without paying close attention to which materials actually work best for students (O'Dell, 1992). This practice assumes that a variety of materials in a SAC provides the necessary exposure for students to improve. However, research in SLA has indicated that mere exposure to the L2 is not enough to fully promote acquisition (Harley & Swain, 1984; Schachter 1984; White, 1985). Therefore, it may be important to ensure sufficient materials that focus on the formal aspects of the L2 exist in the SAC. It is here that the form vs. meaning debate becomes relevant to the SAC context. Should a SAC have material that primarily focuses on meaning or form? Should there only be one type or the other? If both, what ratio would be of most benefit? Why have certain types of material in a SAC if it is not beneficial? These are questions that can be asked in relation to SACs that to date remain unanswered. Given the trend towards promoting SACs in language teaching, it is necessary that we investigate the factors which best contribute to students' success in these SACs just as thoroughly as the factors contributing to their success in the

classroom. Rather than arbitrarily equipping an SAC with resources, it is important to determine which materials are most beneficial (Gremmo & Riley, 1995).

One way to gain insight on this issue is to examine the preferences students have in SACs. Littlejohn (1985) points out that adults learn better when they are given a chance to determine the pace, sequence, mode of instruction, and the content of their studies. Kumaravadivulu (1991) noticed that teachers do not accurately predict what students prefer and claims that " the narrower the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation, the greater are the chances of achieving desired learning outcomes " (p.98). Thus, it may be beneficial to consider students' language learning preferences more closely. In a SAC context it is possible students' preferences may help to identify which type of material in a SAC is most useful. A SAC may be equipped with a lot of language learning material, but if none of it appeals to a student's preferences it may be less effective. The student may become frustrated and less motivated to learn (Littlejohn, 1985). In an autonomous environment such as a SAC it may be important that language learners have access to their preferred type of instructional material.

As a result, the focus of the present study was to investigate students' preferences for form vs. meaning in a SAC. The study was exploratory in nature and sought to examine what type of material was preferred by university students of English as a foreign language in a SAC. It was hoped that gaining data on their preferences would help to determine which type of material may be most appropriate in the SAC environment. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data. Students' choices of form or meaning-focused exercises in a SAC were recorded. Qualitative data, in the form of subjects' SAC journal entries, and responses to a post interview on the type of activities preferred, were gathered and analyzed to help explain trends in the quantitative data.

Review of Literature

It was necessary to consider research from several distinct, yet relevant areas. These will be discussed in the following order: 1) focus on form and focus on meaning; 2) students' preferences; 3) related contexts; 4) research in the SAC context.

Defining Focus on Form, Focus on Forms and Focus on Meaning

Firstly, it is necessary to define as clearly as possible exactly what these terms mean. Long and Robinson (1999) define focus on form as "an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features by the teacher and/or one or more students triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (p.23). Long (1991) asserts that focus on form is when the instructor intentionally draws attention to linguistic elements of the L2 but maintains an overriding focus on meaning and communication. Long and Crookes (1992) emphasize that focus on form "draws students' attention to aspects of the target language code" (p.43) while Doughty and Varela (1999) provide three specific criteria for a focus on form approach:

1. The target of the focus on form should arise incidentally in the otherwise content-based lesson.
2. The primary focus should remain on meaning or communication.
3. The teacher should draw students' attention to form rather than leaving it to chance that students will notice linguistic features without any pedagogical assistance. Focus on form has a dual requirement to focus on a linguistic feature without interrupting significantly a primarily communicative task.

It is evident that a focus on form has two main features. Firstly, focus on rules is less important than meaning. That is, the emphasis on the meaning of the language is primary and a shift towards a focus on formal aspects occurs only when meaning is not accurately conveyed or when the instructor suspects the shift is necessary for comprehension. Secondly, this shift entails attention being directed towards the

grammatical features of the language. Nevertheless, it appears that what constitutes a focus on form approach is relative. Harley's (1999) study for example, had her learners focus on code based aspects of the language which included metalinguistic terms. Although Harley asserts she was using focus on form, Doughty & Williams (1999) claim that the activities used by Harley in her study could be considered not focus on form but what is known as focus on forms. Focus on forms involves more traditional approaches to grammar that consist of isolating individual linguistic constructs out of context (Doughty and Williams, 1999). Long and Crookes (1992) define focus on forms as "the use of some kind of synthetic syllabus and/or a linguistically isolating teaching "method", such as audiolingualism, the Silent Way, or Total Physical Response" (p.43). Long and Crookes (1993) go on to point out that a focus on forms involves "treatment of language as object, as the content of the syllabus and primary focus of instruction" whereas focus on form involves "treatment of language as object in context as an incidental feature of task accomplishment" (p.731). Long (1991) provides a more practical explanation of the difference between the two approaches:

Whereas the content of lessons with a focus on forms is the forms themselves, a syllabus with a focus on form teaches something else-biology, mathematics, workshop practice, automobile repair, the geography of a country where the foreign language is spoken, the cultures of its speakers, and so on-and overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. (pp. 45-46).

Although Doughty and Williams (1999) comment that an approach like Harley's could be considered focus on forms and not focus on form, they do concede that focus on form can be defined on a sliding scale. They point out that "Long is at the most implicit end of the focus on form continuum, with the narrowest interpretation of the term, whereas both Dekeyser and Lightbrown, for instance, see at least some role for what

Long would probably call focus on forms" (p.5). So, it would be possible to label a study such as Harley (1999) as focus on form research and point out that defining it is not entirely fixed.

What then is a focus on meaning? Doughty and Williams (1999) succinctly summarize the basic difference between focus on form, focus on forms, and focus on meaning. They say that "Focus on form entails a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on forms is limited to such a focus, and focus on meaning excludes it" (p.4). Thus, it would appear that focus on meaning does not allow for any attention whatsoever to the linguistic code of the L2. The focus on meaning approach stems from what is known as the 'noninterventionist' position. This position claims that an L2 is learned best by allowing students to experience the L2 through communication and not through rigorous study. This would include methods such as Krashen's Natural Approach (1983) as well as content based ESL and immersion programs (Long & Robinson, 1999).

In the present study what constituted a focus on form fell more towards a focus on forms. Thus, the type of focus on form that subjects were required to participate in involved them paying attention to an individual linguistic structure that stemmed from a predetermined syllabus, rather than briefly focusing on a troublesome structure that arose out of a meaningful activity. The relative nature of the idea of focus on form motivated the researcher to formulate the following operational definitions for the study:

Focus on form = requires the student to focus on the grammatical correctness or incorrectness of the L2.

Focus on meaning = requires the student to focus on the message being conveyed by the L2.

In the following section research that contrasted focus on forms with focus on meaning will be discussed. Focus on forms not focus on form is reviewed because the present study was more closely related to a focus on forms approach (i.e. the grammar

points were dictated by a predetermined syllabus). It should also be pointed out that the use of the term “focus” in this study does not refer to the subjects’ cognitive processes. The fact that it is difficult to know what subjects actually focus on is acknowledged by Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) who cautions that one cannot assume that manipulation of input will actually increase the learner's attention to form. Sharwood Smith prefers the term “input enhancement” rather than “consciousness raising” since it is difficult to actually know what subjects focus on (Leeman; Arteagoitia; Fridman; Doughty, 1995, p.219). For the purposes of this study the term focus is used only to refer to the design of the SAC exercises which attempted to “enhance” the input towards an emphasis on form or meaning. It is not used to refer to what subjects were actually focusing on while doing the exercises.

Focus on Forms vs. Focus on Meaning Research

This line of investigation exists because researchers discovered that many language programs such as immersion, which focused primarily on meaning, left learners with some L2 structures underdeveloped (Harley, 1992; Harley & Swain, 1984). This fact lead researchers to believe that focusing on the linguistic principles of the L2 could be beneficial for learners (Doughty & Williams, 1999). For example, a study by Alanen (1995) made use of a semi artificial language based on Finnish. ESL learners were randomly assigned to four different groups. The experiment took place in a classroom setting. All four groups were asked to read a text for meaning and answer comprehension questions. The rules of the grammar point were explained to the two forms-focused groups. The difference between these two groups was that one received an explanation of the rules and had the linguistic structure in question highlighted in the text while the other only received the explanation but no highlighting. The meaning-focused group received a highlighted text and the control group an unmodified text. Subjects in the

forms-focused groups outperformed the subjects in the meaning-focused groups on a post experiment sentence completion task which disfavored a meaning only focus and lended support to the effectiveness of a focus on forms. A study performed by Doughty (1991), however, found different results. Doughty used a pretest-posttest design with adult ESL learners in three randomly assigned conditions of exposure. The grammatical structure that was being tested was relative clauses (" I found the book that John was talking about" or "The girl who I gave the present to was absent"). As in Alanen's (1995) study, the groups were asked to read a text in order to answer comprehension questions. These texts contained relative clauses. The control group simply read the texts. The meaning oriented group had the relative clauses highlighted in the text. The focus on forms group read the texts and received rules to explain relative clauses. The results favored the focus on meaning group because this group not only comprehended better the message of the text but also was as good as the focus on forms group in relative clause knowledge.

Another experiment performed by Hulstijn (1989) in a laboratory setting directly compared the effectiveness of a focus on forms condition with a focus on meaning condition. Hulstijn wanted to know if the focus on meaning group would learn formal aspects of subordinate clauses incidentally and if this group would perform better than the focus on forms group in both rule based knowledge and content knowledge. The study had a pretest-posttest design. The pretest aimed at testing subjects' previous knowledge to the target structure and consisted of having subjects rapidly copy sentences with subordinate clauses after having been exposed to them briefly. Hulstijn's subjects were adults learning Dutch. The focus on forms group was asked to do an exercise that required them to match eight sentence fragments with an order given on a computer screen. The meaning group only read the sentences on the computer screen and commented if they agreed or disagreed with the sentence's message. Hulstijn also had a forms plus meaning group. Groups were then asked to recall all the sentences that they had been exposed to and Hulstijn evaluated accuracy in terms of grammar and

comprehension. The results showed that the focus on forms groups performed better than the meaning only group with the forms plus meaning group performing best of all.

This conflicts with VanPatten (1990) who claims there is an inevitable trade off that must occur when focus on meaning and form are concentrated on at the same time. That is, that when one is focused on, the learner's capacity in the other suffers. This claim was based on the fact that recall was most negatively affected when he had subjects listen to identify the occurrence of a form and comprehend meaning at the same time.

Evidence gathered from a classroom based study sheds light on other aspects of the focus on forms vs. focus on meaning question. Harley (1989) carried out a study with English speaking children aged 7-8 in a French immersion program with the aim of determining if instructional activities that focused on forms would help her students to recognize gender cues to determine gender assignment. Harley found some different yet equally as interesting results. She found that the students who received focus on forms activities in class were better at gender assignment only for the words that they had been exposed to and practiced in class. It also seemed that the relevance of the activities to the entire curriculum was important since teachers consciously or unconsciously rejected them if they did not fit in with what they were doing in class.

It seems that a focus on forms approach is worthwhile, yet there are some conflicting results from these comparative type studies that leave the question open to debate and motivates further research. In place of a comparative type approach perhaps one possible way to help resolve the issue is to examine what type of focus students prefer. Some researchers believe preference is a significant factor in promoting L2 acquisition. They assert that if students learn in an environment that takes their preferences into account it is possible students will benefit. Perhaps knowing the type of focus students prefer could help to determine which type of focus is most appropriate. The following section discusses briefly why students' preferences might be important and outlines some of the research.

Language Learners' Preferences

Some researchers assert that students' preferences are a significant factor for L2 learners. For example, Nunan (1996) advocates a learner-centered approach to activities and curriculum design. He claims learners should express their opinions of their needs for learning the language, their preferred learning styles, their beliefs about language learning or their preferred activity types. Their expressed preferences can then be taken into consideration by the teachers and administrators to make learning more effective. Thus, it is important for teachers and students to be aware of what their preferences are in order to help decide how and what they will learn. This certainly would apply in the SAC environment as well since students have a responsibility to decide what and how they will study, and teachers have a responsibility to help guide them in their use of the SAC. Perhaps knowing which type of focus students prefer could help to determine how or if a focus on meaning or form should be integrated into the SAC. Research has not been done in an SAC to determine if students prefer a focus on meaning or focus on form specifically. Nevertheless, there are relevant studies in other contexts that have looked at traditional vs. non-traditional, communicative vs. non communicative, and inductive vs. deductive activities which could be considered as either form or meaning-focused type activities. Studies of preferred activities have focused on: 1) learner opinions on their activity preferences; 2) teachers' preferred activities and; 3) comparisons of learners' and teachers' activity preferences. Since this study was concerned primarily with students' preferences, research from number one is most relevant and will be summarized in the following section.

A study by Alcorso and Kalantzis (1985) showed that adult immigrant learners of English in Australia at the intermediate level favored traditional activities over communicative activities. Yorio (1986) reported that learners preferred four traditional teaching methods. These were grammatical explanations, using the language library, memorizing vocabulary lists and translation exercises. This study did not consider

communicative activities, however. Barkhuisen (1998) used a survey to obtain learners' perceptions of 15 classroom activities. He found that learners did not like communicative type activities and preferred more traditional classroom work. However, a study by Green (1993) investigated how much learners' enjoyment of communicative and non communicative activities determined if they thought the activities were useful or not. It found effectiveness and enjoyment to be highly correlated. The results showed that learners tended to enjoy communicative activities more than non communicative ones (as cited in Spratt, 1999, p.142).

Studies that compared teachers' preferences to students' preferences also have provided some data on type of activity preferred. Brindley (1984) interviewed teachers and 115 adult migrant learners of ESL at an advanced level about language learning and discovered that teachers preferred use focused activities, while learners preferred usage focused activities more highly. Nunan (1988) also reports a discrepancy between teachers' and learners' preferences. In his study one out of ten activities were given the same rating by the two groups. Peacock (1997) also found disagreement between teachers and students preferred type of activities (as cited in Spratts, 1999, p. 142).

Studies comparing learners' preferences with teachers' preferences generally indicate that teachers prefer communicative activities more than learners do. Spratts' (1999) study, for example, surveyed 997 tertiary level learners and 50 teachers in a university context in Hong Kong about 48 classroom activities. His study showed a considerable disagreement between learners' preferences and teachers' perceptions of them. It seems that students tend to prefer more "traditional" type of activities and that there is a discrepancy between the students' preferences and what teachers believe students' preferences to be. It is not difficult to infer that narrowing this gap between student and teacher could help students learn more effectively. All these studies mentioned were performed in the classroom. None of them were realized in a SAC context. Thus, teachers' lack of understanding of what students' preferences are is even

greater in this context. It would seem that a study such as the present one is valuable, therefore, to help narrow this gap between teacher and student when making use of the SAC context. If teachers are more fully aware of students' preferences in the SAC they can use that knowledge to help them make more effective use of the SAC environment. Although research has not been done in the SAC context, there has been some investigation in related autonomous contexts. This research will be the subject of the following section.

Related Contexts

Nagata (1997) compared inductive and deductive feedback in a computer assisted learning task (CAL) of relatively complex grammatical structures. Nagata used thirty first semester students of Japanese at the University of San Francisco. He paired subjects on the basis of mid term exams into deductive and inductive groups. The target structures were the Japanese particles *ga, o, wa, ni, and de*. Nagata entered 68 sentence production exercises into a computer program called Banzai. When subjects answered the exercises the Banzai gave them either inductive or deductive feedback. The following is an example of the deductive and inductive feedback that subjects received:

Deductive

A particle is missing for NIHONGO. It should be marked with the particle DE to indicate the role INSTRUMENT (the one by means of which the action occurs).

Inductive

A particle is missing for NIHONGO. It should be marked with the particle DE.

The following examples show how the particle DE is used:

- 1) Waapuro de kakimashita. "(I) wrote (it) with a word processor." (p.525).

Subjects were exposed to inductive or deductive input for six sessions of 45 minutes over 15 days. At the end of the treatment Nagata had subjects fill out a questionnaire to investigate students' preference for the two different computer programs. The results of the questionnaire showed no significant difference between the two groups in preference. The deductive group, however, did prefer the feedback messages more than the inductive group.

A study by Fortune (1992) also examined learners' preferences towards inductive or deductive. His study used self study grammar exercises. Fortune had fifty adult learners of English for General Purposes studying in college part-time. Subjects were given three weeks to do a battery of 14 grammar exercises. Seven exercises were deductive grammar practice and seven were inductive. To avoid boredom, each exercise dealt with a different grammar construct. When subjects had finished the 14 exercises, Fortune applied a questionnaire and performed informal interviews to determine which grammar materials students preferred. Results from the questionnaire indicated that 58% preferred the deductive exercises.

Although these studies were not performed in a SAC, the autonomous nature of their context provides some insight into what students may or may not prefer in the SAC environment. Studies like these should be performed to gather data on students' learning preferences in the SAC context as well. This data would help to determine what constitutes "appropriate" instructional material for the student in a SAC. This and many other issues have not been studied in the SAC environment. Nevertheless, the following section outlines relevant topics which have been examined in the SAC context.

The Self Access Center Context

Holec (1985) identifies three of the most important requirements for a self access center as: 1) an infrastructure of appropriate materials and resources; 2) teachers trained in providing support; 3) effective means of informing potential users about the system. In

Holec's opinion, as can be seen by his first requirement, appropriate material is one of the most important aspects to consider in a SAC. Nevertheless, research has not been conducted to determine the specific linguistic nature (such as emphasis on form or meaning for example) of the instructional material and teacher support that is most beneficial. Appropriate materials in the SAC would include those that take students' preferences into account. Given the possibility that individual student preferences may be important in L2 acquisition and that teachers should be aware of what they are, it is worthwhile to investigate these preferences and how they relate to the language learning process in this context.

It should first be pointed out that there exist many different types of SACs. Miller and Rogerson-Revell (1993) define four different types that vary in terms of organization and function: 1) menu driven: a dedicated self-access system specifically for language learning. All materials are classified, and the information is stored either electronically or on hard copy; 2) supermarket: offers the learner the opportunity to look around and choose what to study; 3) open access: is usually part of a library. The self-access material is open for use by students studying the L2 and to other library users; 4) controlled access: learners are directed to a specific set of materials. This study took place in the context of a controlled access SAC. Miller & Rogerson-Revell describe in detail the characteristics of this type of SAC:

A system where learners are directed to a specific set of materials in a self access centre by their tutors can be called a 'controlled access' system. Usually, the materials held in the centre are closely related to work covered in class and classified in a similar way. Learners using this type of system would have little or no control over what they choose to study and the classification of materials is usually very simple, e.g. 'Worksheet 1', 'Worksheet 2', etc. (p. 229).

Discussion and investigation into materials in SACs has been mostly limited to the general nature of the material and how it is organized and accessed in a SAC. Aston

(1993), for example, performed an experiment in which upper intermediate level second language learners of English investigated and produced new materials for a SAC in their university as a project to get them involved in the integration of materials into the center. The study had students evaluate and produce materials focusing only on preferences for video, computers, or magazines. Littlejohn (1985) performed a questionnaire on users of a SAC at the University College of Bahrain and concluded that further research needs to devise tasks and materials that develop the ability of learners to choose. Yoke & Brown (1994) discuss the need to produce "in house" materials due to the cultural bias of materials from western countries and the sometimes limited resources of Asian or African countries. The construction of these materials took into consideration skill (grammar, speaking, writing), level (advanced, intermediate, elementary), and type of activity (multiple choice, matching, etc.).

Other researchers discuss "pathways" to materials which involves the organization of material in the SAC in such a way that users are directed to a specific sequence of materials. The set of materials that learners are guided towards are connected by topic and focus on grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, video, or computer work (Kell & Newton, 1997).

The present study focused on instructional material that dealt with grammar because of the crucial role grammar plays in the SLA field. Ellis (1994) points out the importance of grammar for teaching and research in the second language field:

This reflects both the importance which has been traditionally attached to grammar teaching in language pedagogy, and also the centrality of grammar in SLA research. The focus on grammar has had both a practical and a theoretical motivation. It has helped teachers to understand the factors that determine whether instruction is successful, and it has helped researchers to explore a number of issues of importance for theory building (p.611).

Although work has been published on how the SAC should be organized and operated, it appears the trend is ahead of the research. The specific linguistic nature of

materials that should be present in a SAC has not been sufficiently investigated. Little empirical research has been done to investigate what actually goes on in a SAC. If SACs are to promote the acquisition of languages research must also consider issues such as how L2 input should be presented to students in this context.

Methodological Precedents

Data for the present study were gathered using journals, questionnaires, and interviews. Journals and diaries have been used in previous work to gather data on students' language learning preferences. Brown (1985) used diaries to investigate the kind of input preferred by L2 learners of English. She analyzed the entries of subjects that made any reference to amount of input given, type of input, and complexity or meaningfulness of input. Schmidt & Frota (1986) used diary entries to investigate what a L2 learner noticed most in the input received (cited in Ellis, 1994, p.245). Questionnaires have also been used extensively to discover what type of input students prefer (Burkhuisen, 1998; Littlejohn, 1985; Nagata, 1997; Fortune, 1992; Spratt 1999). Brindley (1984) used interviews to determine learners' and teachers' preferences for use or usage activities. The present study asked subjects to complete a battery of exercises that were either form or meaning focused. Further data were then gathered to using journal questions and an informal post interview. Fortune (1992) used this same procedure to investigate students' preferences for inductive and deductive grammar activities.

Research Strategy

Research Question

The lack of investigation on the linguistic design and learner preferences of materials in the SAC context motivated the following research question:

In terms of form-focused or meaning-focused materials in a SAC, what are the preferences of advanced adult second language learners of English?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were forwarded for the study:

Adult second language learners of English will prefer meaning-focused materials over form-focused materials in a SAC.

Adult second language learners of English will prefer form-focused materials over meaning-focused materials in a SAC (alternate).

Adult second language learners will show no preference for meaning-focused or form-focused materials in a SAC (null).

Assumptions

Since subjects will have freedom to choose in the SAC, it will be assumed that their choices are their actual preferences.

The responses in journals, questionnaires, and interviews that subjects give will be assumed to be honest and truthful.