

Chapter 4

Discussion of Results

The choices the group made in the SAC indicated they preferred the meaning-focused activities to the form-focused overall. When these choices were examined on a weekly basis a gradual movement away from preference for meaning and towards preference for form appeared. Only in the final week did the group prefer form over meaning. Individual subjects did show a marked preference for one type or the other, but there was an even distribution of preference categories within the group. Also, there was variance in preference between the three different classroom sections. Data from the student journals, teacher journal and post interview implied that there were reasons other than a preference for form or meaning that motivated their choices. This chapter presents some possible explanations for why these particular results were generated.

Probably the most significant factor that determined the group's preference was perceived level of difficulty. A high percentage of subjects indicated that this was the motive behind their choices. The researcher had attempted to eliminate intervening variables such as appearance and ease by piloting and constructing the exercises in such a manner as to neutralize variables. Nevertheless, there was overwhelming response by subjects in their journals that they had chosen one or the other on the basis of ease. Was it the case that the meaning-focused exercises actually were easier?

An illustrative example is presented to help address this question. In the meaning- focused activities students were asked to decide if a sentence contained an identifying or non-identifying adjective clause. For example, in the sentence "The executive *who wants to climb the corporate ladder* will have to go the extra mile and work long hours" subjects had to determine if the adjective clause (italicized) was simply extra information being provided (non-identifying) or information that distinguished the person or thing from another (identifying). In the form-focused activities the exact same sentence appeared but students were asked to determine if the adjective clause was

grammatically correct or not. It would seem that what subjects were asked to do in the meaning-focused activities was not easier but in fact more difficult than in the form-focused. This is because determining identifying or non-identifying required the students to understand the meaning of the entire sentence and judge whether or not the information provided in the adjective clause was extra or essential. The form-focused exercise, however, only required the students to be able to apply a simple rule for relative pronouns ("who" is used for people) to the corresponding head noun (The executive). As a result, it was not necessary for subjects to analyze the entire sentence when doing the form-focused activity but only find the head noun and apply the simple rule.

There are other reasons to believe the form-focused exercises may have been easier. Evidence for this comes from the gradual week-to-week movement by subjects away from the meaning-focused activities towards the form-focused. Perhaps students were slowly coming to the conclusion that the form-focused exercises and not the meaning-focused were easier. The longer the students were exposed to the two types of exercises the closer they came to the realization that the form-focused were easier. If the study had been performed over a longer period of time it is possible that we would have seen a complete preference for the form-focused exercises. The trend may have continued to grow and move towards the extreme.

An alternative explanation for this trend is boredom. Perhaps students were getting bored of doing the meaning-focused activities. There is some evidence to support this from the teacher's journal. The instructor indicated that students were not having much difficulty with adjective clauses, "This group did not have any specific doubts about the four grammar points that will come on the exam. They all seemed quite comfortable at the end." She also mentioned that "they seem to be getting tired of doing the same type of exercise".

If the form-focused activities were in fact easier and subjects were concerned with doing the easiest exercise, why is it that they preferred the meaning-focused exercises

overall? A possible answer is that even though the meaning-focused activities were not easier, students had the perception that they were. Perhaps they were acting upon a belief that they were easier. Why did they believe this to be the case? A likely cause was their interaction with the instructor and material in class.

This was apparent in data from the students' journal entries. One subject, for example, wrote that he had chosen the meaning-focused activity "because I wanted to review the I and NI adjective clauses". There is an assumption in this statement that the form-focused did not have anything to do with the identifying and non-identifying clauses they were seeing in class. This is just one example of many already documented in the results section that make this assumption. During the course of the study subjects had been working with the terms "identifying" and "non-identifying" clauses in class. It may be that the meaning-focused activities were chosen partly because of the simple fact that the exercises had the words "identifying" and "non-identifying" on them and the form-focused did not. This could be considered a small but significant flaw in the design of the SAC activities on the researcher's part. This difference could have led subjects to believe that the meaning-focused activities were more closely related to what they were studying in the course. The fact that some subjects claimed the meaning-focused activities were easier because they had the course text to help them complete the exercise also supports the conclusion that relation to what was going on in class had a lot to do with preference in the SAC.

These factors would imply that what students did in the classroom had a role to play in determining preference. This is not surprising if we take into consideration data from item 17 on the language history questionnaire that asked subjects how they preferred to study grammar. Many indicated that they preferred to do so in class 83.4% $N= (22/26)$ because they have the support of the teacher. Perhaps students were not independent enough or terribly confident about doing grammar exercises alone. As a result, it would be less likely for them to choose exercises such as the form-focused ones

which seemed less related to class material that they had already gone over with the course instructor.

What the teacher said and did in class likely influenced student choice of materials. This is most clearly evident if we look at the group's preference during the last week of the study. Just previous to the final week the instructor had mentioned to the students in class that it was probably true that the form-focused activities were easier. Only during the final week did the group choose the form-focused exercises more than the meaning-focused. All three previous weeks the meaning-focused activities were preferred.

It would seem that subjects were motivated primarily by a preference to do the easiest activity and the instructor and course material influenced which they felt was easier. Nevertheless, there were subjects that indicated a reason other than ease for their choices. Some wrote that they had chosen one or the other exercise for variety or because they wanted to do the difficult exercise to challenge themselves. There were a number of subjects that indicated in their journal that they had made a completely random choice. An entry such as "I don't know, I just chose one and that's all" suggests a complete lack of thought or decision making process. The fact that subjects made completely random choices and did the easiest exercise has something to say about their level of motivation and autonomy. It is possible the students were neither motivated nor autonomous enough to choose the exercise that would help them the most. As a result, they just ended up choosing the easiest exercise. Item 22 in the language history questionnaire showed that subjects felt the SAC was not very useful. Further evidence that motivation was a factor comes from comments in the post interview. One subject stated that she really did not feel the SAC was necessary, "No me hace necesario el CAL porque podemos hacerlo en cualquier lado." The fact that subjects stated they preferred to do exercises with the support of the teacher and chose exercises most closely related to class work also indicates they were not terribly independent students. It would seem that it is possible the

students were not motivated or prepared to take serious advantage of their SAC experience and as a result just made easy, random choices.

Each classroom section appeared to demonstrate a different trend over the four week period. Section one, for example was the least consistent. One of the most obvious exceptions in the results comes from section one in week two where meaning was chosen 100%. Section three, on the other hand, maintained a preference for meaning all four weeks. Finally, section two demonstrated a gradual movement away from meaning towards form with a marked preference for form the final week. The question that arises is what was it that caused the sections to vary in such a manner? It is unlikely that it had anything to do with language background or attitudes since the classroom sections came out relatively similar in background on the language history questionnaire. One of the only significant results from the language history questionnaire was that there was a difference in exposure to a third language between groups. However, considering the small number of subjects in total (26) and each group (7, 10 and 9) this result has not much validity. The other possibility is that what went on in class for each section varied and this was reflected by each section in the SAC. However, the journal that the teacher kept illustrated that what went on during class was fairly consistent between classroom sections. Nevertheless, since the classes were not observed and it is possible the teacher may have failed to note in her journal important events that occurred during class, it is still a possibility that class interaction had a role to play. Furthermore, what subjects did while in the SAC was not observed. Without this data it is impossible to know if students were interacting amongst themselves while in the SAC to complete the activities. If so, this also could have tainted the results and caused the variance between the groups.

It should be pointed out that there were so few subjects in each classroom section that the trends demonstrated by each section perhaps are not valid and reliable. As a result only tentative speculation is warranted. However, it does not appear to be the case that subjects made choices in the SAC on the basis of a preference for meaning or form.

Evidence from the post interview suggested subjects were able to identify the fundamental difference intended between the two. Even though it seems some subjects were able to identify the intended variable between the two exercises, none of them indicated that they had chosen an exercise because of what it attempted to get them to focus on. This conclusion coupled with the fact that subjects clearly chose one exercise or the other for several different reasons makes it difficult to answer the study's original research question. The data the study generated were not sufficient to determine if students preferred a focus on form or meaning in the SAC environment. There were too many different reasons why subjects made the choices they did and none of the subjects indicated that they had chosen an activity because it appeared to focus on meaning or form. However, there were data useful enough to address some alternative issues. For example, one of the tentative conclusions that can be drawn from the study is that a linguistic factor such as focus on form or meaning is not at all important, or is one of students' lesser concerns, when making choices in the SAC environment. Another possibility is that motivation and autonomous ability could have been significant factors in determining choice. It seemed that a certain level of motivation and autonomy would have helped students to make choices on the basis of what would benefit them the most as opposed to choosing what would inconvenience them the least.

Theoretical Implications

Originally the purpose of the study was to help determine which type of focus is most likely to benefit students learning an L2. Previous comparative research has attempted to investigate which type of focus works best but the conflicting results of these studies had left the question unanswered. Some researchers assert that preferences are an important factor to consider in the L2 learning process (Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Nunan, 1996). As a result, the present study sought to discover students' preferences in the recently emerging context of an SAC environment. It was hoped that obtaining this kind of data could contribute to answering the question of which type of focus is most beneficial in the SAC environment since students may learn better when their language learning preferences are accommodated. However, in the present study subjects did not chose on the basis of a preference for form or meaning but for other reasons. As a result, the study could not answer the question of which type of focus students prefer and in turn cannot infer which type of focus might be most beneficial. Consequently, the results of the study have minimal relevance to research and theory on the form vs. meaning issue. Nevertheless, there are some potentially relevant findings.

Several researchers found that students tend to prefer "traditional" type of activities that focus more on usage and less on communication or use (Alcorso & Kalantzis, 1985; Barkhuisen, 1998; Spratt, 1998; Yorio, 1986). Also, subjects in studies by Fortune (1992) and Nagata (1997) preferred deductive to inductive type work. Fortune points out that second language learners have historically been exposed to primarily a deductive approach. (p.160). It would seem that students like to do what they are most familiar with. The present study perhaps relates to these studies and supports

this idea since subjects tended to choose the activities that were most closely related to class and therefore more familiar to them. Also, the tendency in the present study for subjects to prefer the "easiest" exercise perhaps relates to Fortune's and Nagata's findings in another way. Both found that subjects preferred the deductive exercises. However, neither Nagata nor Fortune addresses the variable of level of difficulty. Perhaps a deductive type of exercise is much easier for subjects to do than an inductive one. If this is the case, it is possible that both Fortune's and Nagata's subjects also just chose the activity they thought was the easiest for them. Spratt (1998) concluded that there exists a gap between what teachers prefer and what students prefer. In the present study it appeared that the instructor had an influence on the decisions subjects made in the SAC. This possibility that the instructor has an affect on what students will subsequently do in the SAC makes it even more important that this gap found by Spratt between what the teacher thinks students prefer and what students actually prefer be bridged.

One of the unexpected results in the present study was that subjects made choices based on what was closely related to class and comments made by the instructor. Little (1995) defines autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (as cited in Rubin, 1998, p.5). By choosing the easiest, most familiar exercises and being swayed by comments made by the course instructor subjects did not display any of these abilities. The implication is that they were not at a high level of autonomy. Many researchers emphasize the need to train teachers and students how to be autonomous and use the SAC correctly (Gremmo & Riley 1995, p.157). Nunan (1996) asserts that learners should be "systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they

want to learn and how they want to learn it" (p.15). Thus, an SAC is not just a room full of materials but system of skills and abilities to make informed decisions about their language learning. The fact that students just ended up choosing the easiest exercise or the one that they thought was most closely related to class supports this idea that it does no good to have an SAC if students and teachers are not trained on how to use it. If this is the case, the SAC just becomes a room for students to work in rather than a system that fosters autonomous language learning.

Contributions of the Study

Even though the study failed to provide an answer to the research question posed, there were some practical contributions to the field. For example, it helped gain a better understanding of the close relationship between the SAC and what the teacher and students do and say in class. This realization could cause teachers to consider more carefully the relationship between what they do in class and how it will determine their effective use of the SAC. This in turn could result in better planning for and use of the SAC. Secondly, the study illustrated the importance of autonomous training for students that use an SAC. This will help administrators to take more seriously the need to train their teachers about how to teach their students to be autonomous. The study supports the idea that an SAC is a system of skills and strategies and not just a room filled with materials. If it is, the SAC may be much less effective. This could help schools to avoid jumping on the SAC bandwagon and consider their decision to invest in setting up an SAC more carefully and avoid ending up with an expensive "homework room".

The study also confirmed that motivation is a factor in the SAC environment. The SAC in this particular study was a fairly controlled, obligatory situation and students did not have much freedom to choose. This seemed to affect the students' level of motivation and in turn their effective use of the SAC. Knowing this is an important relationship could help teachers to give their students more freedom in the SAC and seek out ways to help motivate them more. Finally, although the original research question was not answered, the exploratory nature of study successfully brought to light issues that could be addressed individually in future studies. Some of these will be mentioned in a subsequent section.

Limitations of the Study

Although this research did result in some worthwhile data the conclusions are at best tentative. The fact that there were many possibilities for why subjects made the choices they did and many intervening variables affecting their choices means it can only make inferences and point out possible explanations for the results. The study could not draw concrete conclusions on the form vs. meaning question. Furthermore, the limited duration of the study and the small number of subjects that provided complete data meant that comparison between classroom sections and within subjects was not possible due to validity concerns.

As mentioned previously, the SAC situation that was setup for this study was a controlled type of SAC. Thus, perhaps it would be difficult to generalize the results of the study to other types of SAC environments where students have more freedom to choose. Furthermore, the study was designed within a focus on forms situation (i.e. the grammar points of adjective clauses were taught as part of a set syllabus). A focus on

form approach, however, teaches certain grammar points only as it becomes apparent there is a need to clear up uncertainty for students. This would make it difficult to relate the present study to the broader focus on form issue.

Suggestions for Further Research

Several steps could be taken to make the present study better if it were to be continued in the future. The first and most obvious improvement would be to refine the SAC exercises so that they had an equal degree of difficulty. Doing this would help to stop students from choosing on the basis of ease and in turn it would be more feasible to answer the question of which type of focus is preferred in the SAC. Secondly, a more in-depth record of what was going on in the classroom during the study would help to accurately determine how profound an effect class material and the instructor has on SAC preferences. This could be done by recording the class, or the researcher could sit in during the class as an observer. Nevertheless, such procedures would have to take into account the possibility that the presence of the researcher, a camera or tape recorder in class could cause the instructor or students to behave differently than they normally would.

Another benefit would be to conduct the study over a longer period of time with more subjects. This would create a more accurate picture of actual preferences and lend validity to the results. As mentioned earlier in the discussion, there was a possibility that subjects were getting bored with the study's activities. If the study were conducted over a longer period of time this factor would be even more of a concern and the researcher would have to take measures such as varying the content and type of the exercises placed in the SAC.

This study demonstrated subjects' lack of autonomy may have had a role to play in how they made choices in the SAC. Nevertheless, it did not offer a specific measure of their autonomous ability. In the future the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

(SILL) (Oxford, 1990) could be applied and used to provide an accurate rating of subjects' autonomous ability. The SILL is a questionnaire that asks a battery of questions aimed at determining what, or if, students use certain language learning strategies. This data would make it easier to conclude if low or high autonomous ability directly determined type of choice made in the SAC.

Another possibility would be to allow for more freedom in the SAC. In this study subjects' freedom was limited in order to control for intervening variables. This, however, made it less of an autonomous situation. Perhaps giving up some control and letting subjects choose more freely in the SAC would make for a more natural autonomous SAC environment. The researcher could observe and record students' interaction with the SAC. He/she could then utilize a coding system that categorizes the choices as focus on meaning or focus on form. The difficulty with this approach, however, would be logistical since it would be difficult to record everything subjects did in the SAC and even more difficult if there were a larger population. Thus, perhaps it is the case that single researcher studies can't effectively study the SAC environment and it may be necessary to utilize research teams.

The study also shed light on potentially worthwhile topics for future research that are not related to the form vs. meaning question. In the present study it was evident that the instructor had an influence on students' SAC choices. How much influence do the instructor and the course material have on what students do in the SAC? This relationship could be investigated in more detail. Perhaps a discourse analysis of the class could be compared with subsequent behavior in the SAC. Another worthwhile project would be to examine the relationship between freedom in the SAC and motivation. Subjects in the present study indicated that the restrictive and compulsory nature the SAC did not make sense to them. This in turn affected their level of enjoyment in the SAC. A study could be performed that exposes subjects to different degrees of freedom in the SAC and their subsequent attitudes towards the SAC could be

gathered. The benefits of autonomy training should also be researched more. How much of a difference would autonomous training of students help to promote their effective use of the SAC?

Finally, it seemed that the linguistic element of focus on form vs. focus on meaning was not a priority in the SAC for the students. A question that arises out of this is what are students' priorities in a SAC? If given complete freedom in the SAC what is most important to them? This is an important question to address if we accept the idea that students should have a say in what and how they use the SAC. Nunan (1996) asserts that it is important students help to design the curriculum and teachers should strive to bridge the gap between what they think is beneficial and what students think is beneficial. A study that investigated students' preferences more generally would serve well to help bridge this gap and in turn create a more useful and enjoyable SAC experience.