First Meaning Then Form

A Longitudinal Study on the Effects of Delaying and Reducing Form-focused Instruction for Young Adolescent EFL Learners

When teaching a foreign language in an instructional setting it is common practice to provide explicit form-focused instruction. This type of instruction often includes the presentation and practice of isolated linguistic structures (grammar rules) without a communicative need. Providing this instruction in a foreign language classroom has shown significant short-term gains in language tests that focus on the accurate production or recognition of specific grammatical features. But when language production is viewed from a different perspective, including measures such as communicative effectiveness, fluency and lexical diversity, and over a longer period of time, it is uncertain to what extent explicit form-focused instruction facilitates language learning. Is it of added value? Or would a mainstream foreign language classroom be better off without? In other words, how can the limited time in the language classroom best be spent?

In this dissertation language proficiency development was compared between two cohorts of students in secondary education learning English as a foreign language. One cohort did not receive any explicit form-focused instruction whereas the other did. Both receptive and productive language skills were taken into account as well as the effects of cognitive and affective individual differences. Additionally, the participating teachers were interviewed to evaluate their teaching practice and practical issues that occurred after leaving out the explicit form-focused instruction. This work is of interest for linguists and teaching practitioners who would like to know more about different language learning processes in different instructional settings.