

## FORM AND FUNCTION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT STATE POLYTECHNIC OF SRIBUJAYA

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**Abstract:** Learners of English are required to have competences in form and function in order to be able to communicate or read effectively in English. Teachers of English who conduct the process of language learning in English language teaching classroom need to aware about this situation. They need to know what method or approach to use to facilitate students gaining these competences. The combination of form and function-focused teaching is another alternative to meet the competence of English language learners both in form and function. Focusing on students' needs, the knowledge of form and function remains teacher to adapt or even combine the existed English Language Teaching method/approach.

**Keywords:** *Form of English, Function of English, Teaching Method/Approach*

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English is considered as a global language because of its widespread and high-frequency use in the world. People from numerous non-English speaking countries learn it for some purposes, such as to be able to communicate with people from other countries or to read printed or non-printed materials published in English. However, English structure consists of form and function. Learners of English are required to have competences in form and function in order to be able to communicate or read effectively in this language.

Teachers of English who conduct the process of language learning in English language teaching classroom need to aware about this situation. They also need to know what method or approach to use to facilitate students gaining these competences. In fact, some teachers of English only apply form-focused teaching and others apply function-focused teaching in English Language Teaching (ELT). It is due to their belief that English Language Learner (ELL) will have the competence in English if ELL masters one of English structures better than the other. Consequently, some of ELL only know the structure of English without knowing how to use it in real communication. Whereas, some of them are able to communicate by using poor grammar even ambiguous sentences.

Nevertheless, the combination of form and function-focused teaching is another alternative to meet the competence of ELL both in form and function. Students, as the English learners, need to have good grammar to be able to produce meaningful sentences. Especially for ELL in vocational schools like students of State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya (SPS) who need good knowledge of structure to produce meaningful English sentence to be used in real communication in their working-world. This article discusses what constitutes the form and function in English, their roles in teaching English, the appropriate method or approach to facilitate the learners and what extent carry out language learning focused on form and function teaching at SPS.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### *Form of English*

As a language, English has its form and it develops time to time. The continued development results English we know today as Modern English. According to Johnson (2001),

cited in School of Humanities, ESOL 3703 Study Guide (2010: 25-26) what constitutes Modern English form refers to parts of language, namely: sound, vocabulary, words, and grammar. Firstly, the knowledge of sound in English is divided into two, sound producing and sound system. Sound producing refers to how English words are produced by speech organs such as mouth, lips, teeth, tongue, windpipe, and lungs. On the other hand, sound system refers to how English sounds differentiate the meaning and the pattern of English words or possible combination of them. It also differentiates the spelling of words based on the appropriate context.

Secondly, vocabulary is about the use of typical English words in a particular subject. It is also about their origin and the formation. Vocabulary gives choices of words to be used in meaningful utterances. Then, structure of English words refers to how words can be formed through the smallest meaningful units of its language (Stockwell and Minkova, 2001: 57). It gives more understanding to the words functions; it considers time (e.g. from the verb *open* in present time becomes *opened* in past time), people (e.g. from the verb *teach* becomes *teacher* for the doer) and condition (e.g. from adjective *happy* becomes *happier* in comparative adjective). Moreover, the grammar of English refers to how its words are combined to produce meaningful utterances based on words agreement to deliver messages so that communication happens.

### Function of English

A language is a means of communication among its users in spoken or written. To communicate effectively, the users are required to have not only knowledge of its form but also function. What constitutes function in English is how its users use the language and what they do with it. Firstly, in using English, the users deal with the knowledge of how to use words' meaning in sentences, whether the real meaning or the associated one. This is done in order to transfer and gain meaningful information. The users need to know how to use meaningful language that may contain words of agents as doers, action of the agent, experience, theme, location or source in real communication (Yule, 2006:102-103). They also need to know the relationship words to other words such as similar or opposite in meaning and the use of words in real situations. Furthermore, in producing meaningful language, the English users need to know how to tie or link sentences to each other in order to flow well and connect based on good grammar features and vocabulary, which is known as cohesion. For coherence, the users need to know how to create knowledge or sense in sentences depending on the listeners or readers' knowledge in English meaningfully about the given words (Yule, 2006:123-126).

Secondly, English users can do many things with English function. As stated above, they can communicate effectively in English. They speak do not only to transfer meaningful messages but also to perform certain actions or functions. These speech acts for example asking, apologizing, saying thank you, making invitation, requesting, promising, informing, commanding, etc., can be done directly or indirectly. English can be used to show linguistic politeness, awareness of and consideration for other persons' public self-image, as well. Yule (2006:119) says that public self-image is people's emotional and social sense which is expected to be recognized by others. English users can threat or even save other people public self-image by using the language.

### The Role of the Form and Function in Teaching English

Teaching form and function in English Language Teaching provides some roles to students and the classroom.

#### The Role of the Form

Teaching language form to students in ELT provides the knowledge of language systems: sounds, vocabulary, words structure and grammar. The roles of form in teaching English are:

- It provides learners the knowledge of English form.

- It assists the learners in producing meaningful sentences and clarifying their meanings in the process of transferring and gaining information through sounds and spellings (Yule, 2006:34).
- It equips the students with the understanding of a meaning and purpose of sentences from other speakers obtained when communicating by using English.
- Teaching English form does not only give learners the knowledge how to distinguish time and circumstances of its sentences but also facilitate them to express their idea properly in accordance with English rules.

#### **The Roles of the Function**

Teaching language function provides students with the knowledge of language skills, speaking, writing, reading and listening. The knowledge of English language skills are media to practice language function of English effectively by interact with other learners. The roles of teaching function in ELT are:

- It gives an opportunity for learners to communicate in real situations in the process of learning English. Harner (2003:18) argues that learners of a language are able to use it appropriately in real situation if a teacher clearly defines the language function in the teaching and learning process. By having knowledge of language function, learners learn to communicate well.
- The knowledge of language function is required to carry out the knowledge of language form.
- Teaching language function in ELT facilitates English learners to use English in communicative interaction and encourage cooperative relationship among them.

#### **Focus on Teaching Method or Approach**

##### **The Grammar Translation Method**

In implementing teaching language form, the most suitable method used in classroom is The Grammar Translation Method (GTM). GTM considers language mastery is gained by mastering language form. It is a method of foreign language teaching in which the learners are required to translate word for word from a text and memorize numerous grammatical rules and vocabulary lists (Larsen-Freeman, 2003:15). The teacher is the authority and learners learn from the teacher only. The learners strictly follow the textbook, only correct their own work and lack an active role in the classroom. This method does not provide learners the opportunity to use the form in classroom activities. In contrast, teaching language function requires a method or approach to facilitate the learners communicating in real situation by interacting each other.

##### **The Communicative Language Teaching**

In fact, another teaching method: The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) caters this requirement. It refers to communicative approach to the teaching of a second or a foreign language and considers a language as a goal to communicate in real situation and a system to express meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2003: 121). CLT provides opportunities for the learners to use the language in real communication and negotiate the meaning in the communication through the communicative activities. However, it only focuses on language function and less on the form because form is assumed can be gained in the process of communication.

However, in teaching English as a foreign language, the form and function of the language cannot be isolated one another. Knowledge of form is needed to produce fluency and accuracy in using language as a means of communication. Meanwhile, knowledge of function facilitates the use of form in meaningful language. Pienemann (1984, cited in Fotos, 1998) says teaching form in isolation to function usually fails to develop the ability of the learners to use form communicatively. Long (1988) also says using purely communicative approach is equally

inadequate because it neglects the grammar instruction. This situation leads to the combination of teaching and learning language focus on form and function.

Moreover, belief that language should be taught in real communication using CLT over the past two decades through natural exposure not through formal instruction has resulted some in renewed calls for form-focused instruction. Numerous researchers and studies of teaching language methods and approaches set re-evaluation about the role of grammar instruction in language teaching. First, Schmidt (1990, 1993, 2001, cited in Nassaji and Fotos, 2004) says that language learning needs a degree of conscious attention to language form as a necessary condition to the process. Second, the long-term exposure to communicative competence did not achieve grammatical form accuracy (Harley & Swain, 1984; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1991; Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1989, cited in Nassaji and Fotos, 2004). Next, grammar instruction and corrective feedback on language learning affect significantly on the possessing of the form accuracy (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Nassaji & Swain, 2000, cited in Nassaji and Fotos, 2004). In short, language teaching classroom never left grammar teaching because it is a part of process learning a language.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The Extents of ELT on Form and Function Focus at SPS***

There are two main extents on the focus on form and function in ELT at SPS. They are the institutional curriculum and students' needs.

#### ***Institutional Curriculum***

English is considered as a compulsory subject at SPS. It is taught to students in all majors, namely: civil engineering, chemical engineering, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, computer engineering, informatics management, accounting, commerce, and English department. English is taught in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP provides the learners certain roles such as technicians, executives or secretaries in learning English as their target language (Richard, 2006). This specific English needs an appropriate curriculum as the foundation to establish the goals and objectives of the course. SPS has set an institutional curriculum for English subject to meet the students' needs. It is stated in the goals of English subject that students as learners of English as a foreign language are expected to: have good knowledge of vocabulary items, be able to use appropriate grammatical structures in language skills in social function, and be able to communicate effectively and efficiently in real situation in professional life as professional persons.

Moreover, SPS also set the periodic tests: middle semester test 1, middle semester test 2, and final test; they are grammar-based tests. In grammar-based test, obviously, ELL is required to know form of English in order to pass the tests. It is clear that this curriculum needs language teaching method that focuses on form and function.

#### ***Students' Needs***

Students of SPS need ESP for two purposes. Firstly, they need it for their professional purpose. They need the knowledge of English form and function in their real working-worlds. The function of English in the real working-world, for example, business students in commerce major need English in communication or correspondence to their customers; programmers in computer engineering major need it for reading the manual of their computer programs; or hotel practitioners or English department students in English department need English in serving foreign-customers. Moreover, having good knowledge of English form assists them to use it in writing letters or documents to foreign company, understanding the manual well and communicating with people from other countries, they are required to produce meaningful language and have communicative competence in meeting negotiation.

Secondly, they need the form for academic purposes. Due to the English proficiency exams, such as the TOEFL, the TOEIC or the IELTS which requires communicative competence, these English proficiency exams will be given in semester six students to all majors as the requirement for their graduation. Communicative activities in four macro skills provide them with macro skills competence. Teaching form will help them in gaining information whether in printed or non-printed material published in English.

### Personal Belief and Suggestion

ELT at SPS should be focused on both form and function based on several points of view as an English language teacher. The main reason is that English curriculum at SPS does not meet the needs of the students. Most students in all majors at SPS are unable to communicate effectively since English is considered as a foreign language. Teaching English as a foreign language shows typical atmosphere in most public schools, including SPS. General curriculum, contents of courses and textbooks are determined by a central agency which control the education system. The students as the learners are required to master grammar rules, translation skills and specific vocabulary items. The mastery of these points will be tested in examination system as an evaluation and a determination entry to higher education level. Teaching English is purely focused on language form. Consequently, it generates incompetent learners at SPS to communicate effectively using English although they have studied it for years. For teachers of English who only apply form-focused teaching has generated students with high scores in periodic exams but passive in communicating. In contrast, for those who only apply function-focused teaching have produced active students in communicating with ambiguous sentences in their conversation and even poor scores in periodic exams. Obviously, ELT with only one English structure-focused method brings no satisfaction to ELL at SPS in fulfilling their requirement in learning English.

To overcome this problem, the combination of form and function in ELT at SPS might be carried out in ELT classroom activities. These classroom activities can be broken down into three activities: pre-activity, main-activity and post-activity:

- Pre-activity: learners are asked to give responses about the topic going to learn.
- Main-activity:
  - learners are given a short grammar lesson, which is related to the topic, followed by communicative exercise containing examples of the instructed form;
  - then, communicative activities are provided to give them opportunity to use the target grammatical form in real situation.
- Post-activity: learners are asked to give grammar review and the teacher gives necessary feedback.

In fact, combining language form and function means adapting the method or approach as well. The argument for combining them is not new. Some researchers in this field show (Long 1991, Williams 1993, Robinson 1996, and Douglas and Williams 1996, as cited in Fotos, 1998) integrating GTM and CLT enable learners to recognize the form of target language in context and develop accuracy in their function. This combination in ELT at SPS facilitates students the knowledge how to distinguish time and circumstances of its sentences, the opportunity to express their idea properly in accordance with English rules and to use English in communicative interaction and encourage cooperative relationship among them.

### CONCLUSION

The form of language is taught based on certain function. In ELT at SPS, however, focus on form and function must have facilitated the students the knowledge about what a language is and what a language is for. Teachers of English at SPS should be aware of providing an appropriate method/approach to give students opportunities to use English in the right purpose and situation.

Focusing on students' needs, the knowledge of form and function remains teacher to adapt or even combine the existed ELT method/approach.

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