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Negotiating grammatical choices:

Academic language learning by secondary ESL students[1]

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Abstract

This paper reports on a part of a year-long investigation into high school ESL

students' academic language development. Eight participants were pulled out of their

intermediate ESL class for weekly 50-minute sessions with the author for a year. While

the main focus of the sessions was reading news magazine articles for meaning, the

author purposely drew students' attention to potentially difficult grammatical forms. Four

sessions were on sentence-combining strategies in which the participants practiced

rewriting sentences and discussed their justifications for their grammatical and rhetorical

choices. Multiple solutions were encouraged and the participants negotiated meaning

derived from the various ways of rewriting the sentences. These sessions were audio-

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recorded and transcribed, and each participant's written responses were analyzed for grammatical accuracy, clarity, and completeness in meaning, and compared with his/her oral justification. The stronger students in the group exhibited greater willingness to experiment with different ways of rewriting sentences and had an "ear" for what academic English sounded like. In contrast, the weaker students stumbled on individual words and had considerable difficulty when presented with multiple sentences. This paper discusses the critical role of the teacher in drawing students' attention to form within a meaning-driven, interactive discussion of academic English.

Key Words: academic language development; English for Academic Purposes (EAP); focus-on-form; secondary English language learners; sentence combining; teaching grammar

1. Introduction

Throughout the United States, middle and high schools are seeing increasing enrollments of students whose first language is not English. Many of these immigrant students struggle with reading, writing, and oral language in English, which interferes with their academic work. Nationally, secondary English language learners (ELLs) are performing poorly on assessments of English literacy. Only 4% of eighth-grade ELLs and 20% of students who are classified as "formerly ELL" scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the reading portion of the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005) - the nation's only ongoing assessment of what students know in various subject areas. This means that 96% of the eighth-grade limited English proficient (LEP) students scored below the basic level.

One of the biggest challenges facing secondary English language learners is going beyond the intermediate level of English to develop advanced English skills. While many immigrant students make fairly rapid progress from beginning to intermediate levels of proficiency in English (at which point they are mainstreamed), few progress beyond the intermediate level to achieve high levels of English literacy that are required to meet grade-level standards in content areas (August & Shanahan, 2006; Bielenberg & Wong Fillmore, 2004/2005). Many of these students are fluent in spoken English needed for everyday interaction but have considerable difficulty in navigating dense, de-contextualized language of academic English (Scarcella, 2002; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

In this paper, I report on a part of a year-long investigation into the development of academic English by a group of ESL students in a U.S. high school. Eight participants,

from various first language backgrounds, were pulled out of their intermediate ESL class for weekly 50-minute sessions with me. While the main focus of the weekly sessions was reading articles in news magazines (e.g., *Time, The Economist*) for meaning, I purposely drew students' attention to difficult grammatical forms so as to help them better understand the texts. For example, I noticed that some of the students repeatedly stumbled on sentences with subordinate/co-ordinate structures (e.g., relative clauses, complex noun phrases, adverbial constructions). Consider the following three sentences from an article we read, about disputes over trademarking Ethiopian coffee beans (from *The Economist,* 2006):

> (1) … No wonder Starbucks, [a global coffee chain that prides itself on being socially responsible], has reacted like a scalded *barista* to criticism from Oxfam, [a development charity]… (2) [Although it denies being behind coffee-industry lobbying against the Ethiopian government], Starbucks argues that trademarking coffee beans might introduce legal complexities that will deter firms from buying trademarked beans, [thereby hurting farmers instead of helping them]… (3) Indeed, Mr. Holt's suggestion [that the Ethiopian government is being frustrated in its attempts to help coffee growers become more entrepreneurial] is laughable.

Each of the bracketed clauses in (1) is a type of nonrestrictive relative clause also known as an appositive, a group of words following an expression that further defines that expression (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.596). Notice that (1) could be rewritten using the relative pronoun "which" + *be* as, "No wonder Starbucks, which is a

global coffee chain that prides itself on being socially responsible, has reacted like a scalded *barista* to criticism from Oxfam, which is a development charity," although stylistically, (1) is preferred. Notice also that the first bracket in (1) contains a relative clause, "that prides itself on being socially responsible." The bracketed clauses in (2) are adverbial phrases. Notice also that the main sentence in (2) contains a relative clause, "that will deter firms from buying trademarked beans." In (3), the long embedded clause, "that the Ethiopian government is being frustrated in its attempts to help coffee growers become more entrepreneurial" is a complement to the complex noun phrase, "Mr. Holt's suggestion". Notice that this complement clause has a passive construction in which the implied agent (i.e., Starbucks®, coffee-industry lobbyists) is not explicitly mentioned because it was stated in the preceding passage.

The students' lack of knowledge of these and other grammatical features was getting in their way of adequately understanding the texts. Therefore, we spent four subsequent sessions on sentence-combining practice which necessitated the use of some of these forms. I first modeled how I would combine a set of original sentences into subordinate/co-ordinate structures and presented alternative ways of doing this so that students could see that there was more than one way of rewriting the same sentences. For example, I combined the following set of original sentences in four different ways:

Original Sentences: Aluminum is a metal and it is abundant. It has many uses and it comes from bauxite. Bauxite is an ore and looks like clay.

➤ Sample 1: Aluminum is an abundant metal that has many uses. It comes from bauxite which is an ore that looks like clay.

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➢ Sample 2: Aluminum is an abundant metal with many uses. It comes from bauxite, an ore that looks like clay.

➢ Sample 3: Aluminum is an abundant metal with many uses. It comes from bauxite, a clay-like ore.

➢ Sample 4: Aluminum, an abundant metal with many uses, comes from bauxite, a clay-like ore.

In my sample combinations, I tried to stress that although grammatical accuracy is important, meaningfulness and appropriateness of use are equally significant. Multiple solutions were encouraged and the participants negotiated meanings derived from the various ways of rewriting the sentences. These sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed, and each participant's written responses were analyzed for grammatical accuracy, clarity, and completeness in meaning, and compared with his/her oral justification. In this paper, I present the different ways in which the students negotiated their grammatical and rhetorical choices, and how I, as the instructor, helped them to focus on grammar form within a meaning-driven, interactive discussion of academic English.

2. Grammar teaching in second language classrooms

One of the major issues raised by second language acquisition researchers has been the question of whether and how to include grammar in L2 instruction. Research on what has come to be known as *focus-on-form* has been motivated, in part, by the findings that suggest that when classroom second language learning relies too heavily on

communicative approaches, some linguistic features do not ultimately develop to target-like levels (see, e.g., Harley, 1992; Harley & Swain, 1984). For example, students in French immersion programs in Canada fail to acquire such features as verb tense markings even after many years of study. This has led some researchers (e.g., Swain, 1995) to argue that learners not only need to engage in communicative language use but also need to attend to form. Considerable research followed on methods for integrating grammar instruction with communicative language learning in such a way that students can learn and use grammar forms in context (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Hinkel & Fotos, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998).

Ellis (1996) argues that advanced proficiency and accuracy in spoken and written production are essential for effective functioning in an academic setting, and that attaining high levels of proficiency may require specific instruction. Discussions of how to teach grammar have included accounts of the various pedagogical options and the relative advantages of each option (Ellis, 1997). But as Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen (2002) point out, little attention has been paid to the actual methodological procedures that teachers use to focus on form in the course of their teaching. Given the increasing perceived importance of teaching form in the context of communicative language learning (see, e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Hinkel & Fotos, 2002), examining the ways in which focus on form is accomplished warrants careful consideration. The current study is an attempt to contribute to filling this gap.

3. Sentence combining as a writing tool

The process of constructing formal sentences is quite complex, as the writer must deal with a number of demands, including word choice, syntax, textual connections, and clarity. Writing differs from speech in important ways, such as the absence of gesture, pitch, and other paralinguistic meaning-making devices and contextualization cues that are available in face-to-face interaction. The process of translating ideas into written text requires considerable effort, even for English-speaking college-age students (Kellogg, 1987). Presumably, the mental load imposed by sentence construction is even higher for English learners, as they have less control than English speakers over their lexical and syntactic choices, and the process of translation of their ideas into text is also less fluent. At the same time, however, one could argue that for L2 learners of English, written English offers them certain advantages over speaking such as the time afforded in which to select a correct form and thus less need for rapid on-the-spot processing.

Whatever the conveniences and/or difficulties of writing might be, previous research has shown that explicit instruction in sentence combining strategies results in improved writing (e.g., Daiker, Kerek, & Morenberg, 1985; Saddler, 2005; Saddler & Graham, 2005; Strong, 1986). Sentence combining not only teaches students how to craft syntactically more complex sentences but also helps them produce sentences that more closely convey their intended meaning (Saddler & Preschern, 2007). Furthermore, sentence combining instruction has been shown to lead to improved scores of reading comprehension on standardized tests (Evans et al., 1988), and to produce sustained judgments of "quality" writing (Combs, 1977). Although sentence-combining instruction has been used widely in general language arts education and many studies have reported its effectiveness with mainstream English-speaking students, its use with second

language learners has not been examined adequately. In this paper, I look at ways in which focused sentence combining practice within a meaning-driven, communicative setting can facilitate secondary ELLs' development of academic English skills.

4. The research site and the participants

The current study took place at a public high school in Maryland which I will call Hillcrest High.[2] As an "ESOL center school", Hillcrest has over 100 ESOL students who are bussed in from surrounding areas and 5 full-time and 1 half-time ESOL teachers. I have been involved with the Hillcrest High ESOL program for several years as a teacher educator and university supervisor of M.A. TESOL interns. The idea for a pull-out class originated from my conversations with Mr. Brown, the head of the ESOL department at Hillcrest, who felt that some of his intermediate level students could benefit from focused instruction in academic English. My decision to work with a small group was also based on Williams' (1999) study which found that communicative group work did not necessarily produce attention to grammar form except when the teacher joined the group. Therefore, in order to maximize attention to form while encouraging interaction, I limited the study to a small number of students.

Eight participants (six male and two female), from various first language backgrounds, were pulled out of their intermediate ESL class to meet with me in a separate classroom for weekly 50-minute sessions throughout the academic year. Known as the "Academic Language Group," all eight students aspired to go to college and were highly motivated to improve their English (see Table 1). Most of the students in the group have recently arrived in the U.S. as immigrants - except for Bernardo and Anthony, all

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[2] All names are pseudonyms.

other students had been living in the U.S. for less than 2 years at the beginning of the study. After securing the principal's approval, I was invited to Mr. Brown's intermediate ESL class at the beginning of the school year to describe the project to the students. I explained the purpose of the project and the kinds of activities I planned to do with the "Academic Language Group". I also explained that joining the group was completely voluntary and that Mr. Brown will make arrangements for them to make up missed work in his class. All the participants and their parents signed permission forms. Once every two or three weeks throughout the year, Mr. Brown and I conferred on the participants' progress.

(Insert Table 1 about here.)

5. Methods

During the weekly sessions, the participants and I read short articles from news magazines such as *Time* and *The Economist*. As we were reading, I explicitly drew students' attention to various structural aspects of formal English found in the articles that I thought might present difficulties for them. I also noted specific grammatical difficulties the students encountered in comprehending the texts and taught specifically to those grammatical features in mini-lessons. The overall goal of the sessions, however, was meaning-driven comprehension of the texts and interactive discussion of the students' own opinions about the topic at hand. After several weeks, I realized that some students repeatedly stumbled on the same few grammar forms (e.g., relative clauses, complex nominals, passives, adverbial participles). I then decided to spend four sessions on sentence-combining exercise which required the use of some of these forms.

I began with a whole-group discussion by showing students a few kernel sentences and modeling how to combine them, and shared what my thinking was in performing the combination. I performed several more combinations based on the same kernel sentences while increasing the amount of discussion. Following this, the students were paired for brief partner practice and worked together to write out combinations for additional sentence clusters. Where necessary, I provided background information to contextualize the sentences. For example, before having students combine sentences about Gary Kasparov, a former world chess champion, I first asked the students if anyone played chess and whether they knew computers can play chess with human players (see section 6.2 for the kernel sentences). I showed a photo of Gary Kasparov playing chess with an IBM supercomputer and explained that although human chess players were superior to computer programs for a while, spectacular increases in computing power have made it possible for computers to eventually beat humans at the game.

I asked for several possible solutions to each problem and encouraged the students to discuss them while circulating around the room and joining the groups when necessary. The students wrote their responses on a transparency and presented them on an overhead projector, providing justifications for their grammatical and rhetorical choices. A total of 13 sets of sentences were worked on over 4 sessions. The sentence-combining sessions were audio-recorded, and each student's written work was collected for analysis. In cases of clearly ungrammatical sentences, I first allowed the student to explain his/her combined sentences, then pointed out the student's error and explained why it was wrong. This was done based on the claims of some researchers that positive input may not be

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sufficient and that certain grammatical structures also require negative input to be learned (Ellis, 2002; White, 1987).

The audio-recordings were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively in conjunction with the students' written responses as well as their oral justifications for how they combined the sentences. In addition, each student's combined sentences were scored for grammatical correctness, completeness in details, and clarity. The following is an example of how each student's sentences were scored:

Original sentences: Pollution is a form of environmental contamination. It results from human activity.

➢ Robert: Pollution is a form of environmental contamination which results from human activity. (correct; complete; clear)

➢ Bernardo: An environmental contamination called pollution which is a results of human activity. (incorrect; complete; clear)

➢ Anthony: The result of human activity is pollution, a form of environmental contamination. (correct; complete; clear)

Robert's sentence is grammatically correct, contains all the details of the original sentences (complete), and clear. In contrast, Bernardo's combination is incorrect because 'results,' which he seems to have construed as a noun, needs to be put in the singular. His sentence is complete because it includes all the details of the original sentences, although his use of the verb 'called' instead of 'is called' creates an alternative meaning. In comparison, Anthony's sentence is grammatically correct, complete in meaning, and clear, although, by changing the word order, he changed the original meaning (see excerpt 2 in section 6 for Anthony's reasons for doing this).

<u>**6. Results**</u>

As can be seen in Table 2, the number of grammatically correct responses each student produced as a proportion of the total number of sentences he/she generated varied widely. Minh, Hanna, Robert, and Winston produced grammatically correct sentences most of the time while Bernardo, Dawit, and Abdul struggled considerably. Anthony's performance fell somewhere in between the high- and low-performing groups. Below, I present some excerpts which show students' negotiation of their grammatical and rhetorical choices.

(Insert Table 2 about here.)

6.1 Strategies used by the stronger students

In Excerpt 1, I ask Hanna how she arrived at her sentence and how it was different from the other students' output (line 5). After Hanna states that she added the word 'which' (line 8), I ask her again to explain how it was different from the other students' sentences (line 9). Hanna then explains that she changed the order of facts in the original sentences (line 12). When I ask her why (line 13), Hanna explains that 'it sounds more better' (line 14). Then in line 18, I reread Hanna's sentence while pointing out the changed order of facts, and ask the whole group whether this changed the meaning of the original sentences. After Anthony responds 'no' (line 19), I confirm that the original meaning is intact in Hanna's combined version (line 20). Then in line 22, I explain that changing order of constituents can sometimes change the meaning of the original sentences but in this case, it did not.

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Excerpt 1

<u>Original sentences</u>: An acrylic plastic is a polymer. It can take a high polish. It is
clear and transparent. It can be shaped while hot.

> <u>Hanna</u>: An acrylic plastic is a polymer, which is clear and transparent,
> shaped while hot and takes a high polish.

1 Res: Could you read to us what you have?

2 Hanna: (clears throat) (unintelligible)

3 Res: uh huh.

4 Hanna: An acrylic plastic is a polymer, comma, which is clear and transparent,
            shaped while hot and takes a high polish.

5 Res: Okay. What did you do there? Yours is a little bit different from what the
            other two groups have, right? What's the difference?

6 Hanna: (unintelligible)

7 Res: huh?

8 Hanna: What I (unintelligible) I added 'which'.

9 Res: Uh huh. You added 'which' which is something that others, other groups
            did. Okay. But yours, yours looks a little bit different.

10 Hanna: This every part (unintelligible) acrylic plastic is a polymer

11 Res: Uh huh.

12 Hanna: High polish polymer. It's different 'cause I like inversed (unintelligible)

13 Res: Uh huh. Uh huh. Why did you why did you um change the order?

14 Hanna: It sounds more better.

15 Res: You think it sounds better? Okay. Let's see. An acrylic plastic.. huh?

16 Robert: (unintelligible) an acrylic (unintelligible)

17 Winston: Acryllique.

18 Res: Uh huh. Oh, A An. Rather than a. Okay good. An acrylic plastic, okay, is a polymer 'kay which is clear. So she jumped from here to here, right? Which is clear and transparent, shaped while hot, 'kay, and takes a high polish. Um, does she change the meaning of the sentences at all?

19 Anthony: No.

20 Res: No, I don't think she did. She didn't change the meaning, which is good. You, um, you know, held on to the original meaning.

21 Abdul: Yeah.

22 Res: But changed the order. 'kay? In this case, it was okay, but in some other cases that might not be okay and we'll actually see some examples, okay? But this is this is a very good try. Yeah, okay? 'Cause she stuck to the original meaning.

In general, Hanna seemed quite comfortable about experimenting with different ways of combining sentences. She seemed to have an "ear" for what good English sounded like, which was probably influenced by her prior use of English in English-medium education in Cameroon. I often noticed her rearranging words and rereading her sentences to see whether they sounded acceptable. The following is an example of Hanna's two different attempts to rewrite the same set of sentences:

Original sentences: The four-wheel Antilock Braking System (ABS) helps provide straight stops. It also helps you make controlled stops during braking. It helps the driver maintain steering control. ABS works under most road and weather conditions.

➢ Hanna 1: The four-wheel Antilock Braking System (ABS) helps the driver maintain steering control, make controlled stops during braking and helps provide straight stops, which works under most road and weather conditions.

➢ Hanna 2: The four wheel Antilock Braking System (ABS) works under most road and weather conditions, which helps the driver maintain steering control, control during braking and provide straight stops.

As can be seen in these attempts, Hanna's inclination to switch order of sentence constituents often resulted in combinations with slightly different meanings. What is noteworthy, however, is that she treated the sentence combining activity as a fluid process with multiple possible solutions, and not as having single right answers.

Anthony also tended to switch the order of constituents in his combinations and experimented with different ways of rewriting sentences. In Excerpt 2, Bernardo first shares his sentence with the whole group (lines 1 and 3). Anthony finds Bernardo's sentence problematic and interjects in line 2, saying 'No, no, no.' In line 4, I provide explicit negative feedback to Bernardo by pointing out that what he wrote is not a sentence because it lacks a verb. In line 6, I start rereading Bernardo's sentence and suggest that he start with 'Pollution is…' rather than 'Environmental contamination…'. Then I read Anthony's sentence and acknowledge that his attempt is good and that it is

one way of combining the sentences. In line 7, Bernardo takes my suggestion to begin the sentence with 'Pollution is…' and revises it orally.

In the meantime, however, I realize that Anthony's sentence had changed the original meaning and state that not all human activity results in pollution (line 8). Going along with what I had suggested earlier, Bernardo proposes placing 'pollution' at the beginning of the sentence (line 9), with which I agree (line 10). When I restate that not all human activity results in pollution (line 16), Anthony disagrees with me and names examples of human activity that could potentially cause pollution, such as riding a car and cooking (lines 17 – 28). Notice that Robert also becomes involved in this discussion and points out the advantages of recycling (line 32). But Anthony insists that even recycling has elements of pollution albeit at a reduced level (line 33). It is not clear whether Anthony actually meant to argue that all human activity leads to pollution. Nonetheless, this form-focused discussion provided him (and other students in the group) with an opportunity to observe how a seemingly small structural change can result in a very different meaning.

Excerpt 2

Original sentences: Pollution is a form of environmental contamination. It results from human activity.

- ➢ Bernardo: An environmental contamination called pollution which is a results of human activity.

- ➢ Anthony: The result of human activity is pollution, a form of environmental contamination.

1   Bernardo: I say, um environmental contamination called pollution which is

2   Anthony: No, no, no.

3   Bernardo: The results of human activity.

4   Res: This is not a sentence because it's lacking a verb.

5   Bernardo: Oh.

6   Res: Okay? Environmental contamination... you might want to start out with

               'Pollution is' ok? So, (reading Anthony's sentence) The result of human

               activity is pollution, a form of environmental contamination. This is a

               good way to do it. Do you guys... very good very good. That's one way to

               do it, too, yeah.

7   Bernardo: Pollution is a form of environmental contamination.

8   Res: Okay. But think about it. The result of human activity is not always

               pollution. See, human activity doesn't have to result in pollution.

9   Bernardo: Just put that in front?

10   Res: Yeah, maybe you should put pollution in the front. Pollution is a form of

               environmental contamination...

11   Bernardo: That is result...

12   Res: That

13   Bernardo: Result

14   Res: Results from

15   Bernardo: From human activity

16   Res: Yeah. You see, you see you just flip it, okay? This makes sense, too. Okay?

               But this makes it look like all human activity is pollution.

17 Anthony: Yeah, it is.

18 Res: No, it isn't.

19 Anthony: Yeah, it is.

20 Res: No, it isn't.

21 Anthony: Riding the car.

22 Res: Huh?

23 Anthony: Riding the car.

24 Bernardo: Is eating pollution?

25 Res: Yeah, human activity, it could be..

26 Anthony: Then you pollute after that. (Everyone laughs.)

27 Bernardo: (Laughing) Shut up.

28 Anthony: (Unintelligible) when you cook.

29 Res: True.

30 Anthony: Yeah.

31 Res: And you throw out a lot of garbage, too.

32 Robert: It's (unintelligible) when you're talking about recycling.

33 Anthony: I recycle. Still it's pollution.

34 Bernardo: Okay, guys. Do it like that.

As can be seen in this excerpt, I, as the instructor, was actively involved in negotiating grammatical choices and meanings with the students. By raising specific questions about the students' own grammatical and rhetorical choices, I tried to help them see that grammar is not simply a set of rules to be memorized, but a result of deliberate

attempts to convey the intended meanings of the writers. I treated writing and discussing

the ideas presented in the writing as ultimately a meaning-making activity for which

grammar was a necessary tool. At the same time, however, I intervened frequently and

provided both positive and negative feedback (as I did with Bernardo) to help them learn

the correct form (Celce-Murcia, 1991). I shall discuss this point further in 6.3.

6.2 What stumped the weaker students

While the weaker students did participate actively in the oral discussions, they

were not as effective in negotiating their meaning as the stronger students because they

often stumbled at individual words or phrases. Bernardo, Abdul, and Dawit, in particular,

struggled considerably when they were presented with multiple sentences. For example,

in the following, both Dawit and Abdul seem to have known that they could use relative

clauses headed by 'which' to tie the second and third sentences to the first, but ended up

attaching them to the wrong nouns:

Original sentences: Ever since the stunning victory of Deep Blue over Gary

Kasparov, it has been clear that computers would dominate chess. Deep Blue is a

program running on an IBM supercomputer. Gary Kasparov was the world chess

champion in 1997.

> Dawit: Ever since the stunning victory of Deep Blue over Gary Kasparov,
> it has been clear that computers would dominate chess **which** is a program
> running on an IBM super computer, **which** was the world chess champion
> in 1997.

> ➢ Abdul: Ever since the stunning victory of Deep Blue, over gary kasparov **which** has been clear that computers would dominate chess by deep blue is a program running on an IBM supercomputer, and gary Kasparov was the world chess champion in 1997.

Notice that "Ever since the stunning victory of Deep Blue over Gary Kasparov" is an adverbial clause which modifies the main sentence, "it has been clear that computers would dominate chess". The main sentence is a complex passive in which "computers", and not the pronoun "it", is the main topic. Both of these grammar forms are commonly found in academic writing and are a significant source of difficulty for English learners who have not been taught to focus on form (Scarcella, 2002). In order to combine the sentences then, the students had to insert additional bits of information about Deep Blue and Gary Kasparov in an already structurally complex sentence.

When Robert presented his grammatically correct sentence as follows and I explained how "a program running on an IBM supercomputer" modifies Deep Blue, and "a chess champion in 1997" modifies Gary Kasparov, Abdul said this was all "very confusing":

> ➢ Robert: Ever since the stunning victory of Deep Blue, a program running on an IBM supercomputer, over Gary Kasparov, a chess champion in 1997, it has been clear that computers would dominate chess.

6.3 Student-initiated focus-on-form

Despite the fact that the weaker students found the sentence combining activity challenging, it was useful in that it provided them with specific opportunities to clarify

grammar points that I may have overlooked otherwise. In excerpt 3, Robert describes how he used a comma to combine the original sentences (line 1). I then explain alternative ways of modifying a noun phrase, either by an appositive (with commas) or, by a relative clause headed by 'which' (lines 4 and 6). Then in lines 7 and 9, Abdul questions whether the word 'and' can replace the comma.

Abdul's question here is a 'student-initiated preemptive focus-on-form' (Ellis et al., 2002) and something I did not foresee as potentially problematic for the students. Abdul probably had learned that 'and' and a comma can be used interchangeably (e.g., 'apples, oranges, bananas and grapes' as opposed to 'apples and oranges and bananas and grapes'). Ellis et al. (2002) explain that the advantage of 'student-initiated preemptive focus-on-form' is that it addresses gaps in the students' linguistic knowledge which can be presumed to be significant to them and which they are therefore strongly motivated to try to fill. They note that learners are more likely to recall new items if these had been used in learning situations which they themselves had initiated. Notice that in lines 12 and 14, I provide immediate negative feedback to Abdul's question, in line with the previous claims that negative feedback may be necessary for some structural features to be learned.

Excerpt 3

Original sentences: Today, surveyors, pilots, and mapmakers around the world rely on the Global Positioning System, or GPS. The Global Positioning System is a method of finding latitude, longitude, and elevation of points on Earth's surface. It uses a network of satellites.

➢ Robert: Today, surveyors, pilots, and map makers around the world rely on the GPS, a method of finding latitude, longitude and elevation of points on Earth's surface and uses a network of satellites.

➢ Anthony: Today, surveyors, pilots, and mapmakers around the world rely on the Global Position System, or GPS, is a method of finding latitude, longitude and elevation of points on Earth's surface and it uses a network of satellites.

1 Robert: What we used was like um we used commas.

2 Res: You used commas? Okay. Where?

3 Robert: Here, like…

4 Res: Uh huh. Uh huh. After GPS, you used a comma. Okay. A method of finding. So Anthony and Dawit, look at that. They didn't use the word 'which'.

5 Dawit: They just used comma.

6 Res: They used a comma and that does the job too. You can use the, you can use 'which', okay, or sometimes you can just use a comma and that takes care of it, too.

7 Abdul: Can you use 'and'?

8 Robert: (unintelligible)

9 Abdul: Can you use 'and'?

10 Res: 'And' where?

11 Abdul: (unintelligible) instead of um using comma.

12 Res: Oh. 'And' a method? No, that wouldn't be right. Because GPS… You're

you're trying to define what GPS is. And GPS is a method.

13 Abdul: is a method

14 Res: Uh huh. So that's why a comma is okay or you can say 'which is' a method.

That's okay but you can't use 'and'. That wouldn't make sense.

15 Dawit: Okay.

7. Conclusions and implications

In this paper, I reported on a part of a year-long investigation into the development of academic English by a small group of high school ESL students. Specifically, I examined sentence combining as a focus-on-form activity embedded within a communicative meaning-centered discussion of academic texts. Although this is not a large-scale quantitative study, and the findings cannot be generalized to all secondary ESL populations, this study has relevance to language classrooms in that it shows examples of actual pedagogical procedures used by the author, an experienced ESL teacher and teacher educator, to help students to focus on linguistic form. In addition, it showed how students justified their grammatical choices and negotiated their intended meanings.

The findings show that the number of grammatically correct sentences each student produced as a proportion of the total number of sentences he/she generated varied widely. While four participants produced grammatically correct sentences most of the time and actively negotiated meaning derived from the various ways of combining sentences, three students had substantial difficulties, often at the level of the single word.

In general, the stronger students were more comfortable experimenting with different ways of combining sentences and treated the exercise as a fluid process with numerous possible solutions and meanings. The weaker students, however, were less flexible in their approach and became confused, especially when the sentences became lengthy with multiple subordinate/co-ordinate constructions. It is possible to argue that the combined sentences can be difficult to process, even for native speakers of English, and therefore are not a good stylistic objective in written English. Nonetheless, as we have seen, formal English writing is replete with complex syntactic constructions, and failure to grasp the structural complexities at the sentence level prevented some of the students from adequately comprehending the texts. Without explicit instruction in the structural aspects of academic language, ESL students cannot access grade-level content, which leads to academic underperformance (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Teachers should teach these structures explicitly to students (Harley & Swain, 1984; Swain, 1995), and ESL students need to concentrate on form, in addition to engaging in communicative language use (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

On the whole, all of the participants seem to have benefited from this deliberate attempt to focus on form in a meaning-based communicative language learning environment. In particular, it provided occasions for 'student-initiated preemptive focus-on-form' (Ellis et al., 2002) and immediate instructor feedback, which clarified meaning and use of certain structures and directly addressed gaps in the students' grammar knowledge (Ellis, 2002). It helped the stronger students to solidify their knowledge of certain grammatical structures by justifying their choices and negotiating meanings. There was plenty of oral interaction throughout, and the students, even the weaker ones,

found the explicit focus on form useful, as Dawit once told me, "This is helping me in my AP [Advanced Placement] classes."

The conclusions have several implications. In order to help students develop an "ear" for academic English, teachers may wish to increase the amount of students' exposure to academic texts by reading to them out loud, focusing their attention on specific features of English, and getting them to use these features in their own writing and speech (Scarcella, 2002). In addition, initial teacher training courses need to ensure that teachers are equipped with the skills necessary for focusing students' attention to form and that they have an understanding of the potential advantages and disadvantages of the different procedures involved (Ellis et al., 2002, p. 420). Teachers need to be trained to analyze and reflect on their own as well as others' techniques for addressing form. Ultimately, however, teachers need to understand that it is not the adherence to a particular teaching method but teachers' involvement with the grammar-focused activities and their ability to personalize teaching that often promotes successful learning (Richards, 1994; 1998).

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Tables

Name	Male/Female	Country of Origin	Length of Residence in the U.S. year(s):month(s)	Grade in School
Anthony	M	Mexico	3:8	10
Bernardo	M	El Salvador	7:0	10
Dawit	M	Ethiopia	1:5	12
Abdul	M	Iran	1:4	12
Minh	F	Vietnam	1:8	12
Hanna	F	Cameroon	1:5	11
Robert	M	Cameroon	1:1	10
Winston	M	Cameroon	1:1	12

Table 1: List of participants

Student	Correct	Complete	Clear
Anthony	6/10	6/10	6/10
Bernardo	1/6	2/6	3/6
Dawit	2/8	3/8	2/8
Abdul	0/5	2/5	1/5
Minh	4/4	3/4	3/4
Hanna	6/8	4/8	6/8
Robert	9/11	6/11	8/11
Winston	5/7	6/7	4/7

Table 2: Sentence combining results [3]

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[3] Not all students participated in all four sessions due to testing and absence.