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Author(s)	Lee, Shzh-chen Nancy
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Form-focused Instruction in Task-Based Language Teaching

Lee Shzh-chen Nancy

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a new teaching approach for many second and foreign language classrooms. In Japan, especially at the university level, task-based language teaching has been widely implemented in the communicative language teaching context where students work as individuals or in groups to complete different tasks. However, while task-based language teaching has been highly valued by its advocates, it has also been criticized for its over emphasis on meaning and lack of attention to form. Lack of attention to linguistic forms can be problematic especially for language learners who have not reached advanced level proficiency. While earlier research of task-based language teaching has mostly only focused on meaning, recent studies have acknowledged the importance of integrating form into meaning. However, how form can be integrated into tasks needs to be reconsidered as this integration could vary depending on how focus on form is conceptualized. The present paper reviews literature related to the task-based language teaching approach by positioning it within the communicative language teaching paradigm. It conceptualizes focus-on-form by differentiating it from focus-on-forms. Finally, it conceptualizes form-focused instruction and introduces how different types of instructions are integrated into task-based language teaching. This paper concludes with some pedagogical implications for integrating form-focused instruction into task-based language teaching in Japan.

1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been widely implemented in many English language classrooms in the EFL context as it offers learners the opportunity to develop language proficiency through authentic communicative tasks (Nunan, 2003). Within the CLT framework, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has become a popular approach in the past several decades (Ellis, 2018; Long, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). It has gained wide recognition from research because it offers learners the opportunity to develop speaking proficiency by engaging in tasks that resemble real-life situations. However, research has also shown that while many learners become more fluent from completing these real-life tasks, they continue to have problems with their language output and continue to make the same grammatical errors. Therefore, a major criticism of the earlier task-based language teaching research is that it overemphasized the importance of meaning and lacked sufficient attention to form (Long, 1991).

The integration of form-focused instruction (FFI) has been a topic of significant interest within the realm of task-based language teaching. Task-based language teaching has since progressed from its original emphasis on incidental and meaning to recognizing the importance of form-focused instruction by integrating form into meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2009b; Long, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Skehan, 2018). Addressing linguistic forms explicitly within communicative contexts facilitate deeper processing and interlanguage development. However, form-focused instruction refers to both incidental and planned instructions that direct learner attention to target language linguistic forms. In addition, the definition of form-focused instruction widely varies so it has different classroom implications and practices (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Therefore, the integration of form-focused instruction within task-based language teaching requires redefinitions and conceptualizations to optimize its effectiveness for developing learners' language proficiency. This paper reviews literature related to task-based language teaching and form-focused instruction. First, it reviews literature related to the task-based language teaching approach by positioning it within communicative language teaching. Second, it conceptualizes form-focused instruction by differentiating the overlapping terms of focus-on-form and focus-on-forms. Finally, it reviews different types of form-focused instructions, how they are implemented, and their effects on language output.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Task-Based Language Teaching

From a non-pedagogical perspective, *task* can widely defined as “the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between” (Long, 1985, p. 89). From a language learning perspective, *task* is “a piece of classroom work which involves learners comprehending, manipulating producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than on form” (Nunan, 1989, p. 10). In the framework of task-based language teaching, *task* has also been diversely defined (Ellis, 2003). Skehan (1998) and Bygate et al. (2001) defined *task* as an activity with primary focus on meaning in order to attain some objectives. According to Skehan’s definition, *task* usually involves solving some communication problems related to real-world activities and it is assessed in terms of its outcome. The above definitions of *task* can be compared with that of *exercise*, which is a language using activity with primary focus on linguistic forms (Ellis, 2003). Ellis further defined *task* to be learner activities that have primary focus on meaning, involve real-life language usage, use skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, engage cognitive processing skills such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information to produce clear communicative outcomes.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has become a well-known pedagogical approach in the communicative language teaching framework (Ellis, 2003, 2009b; Long, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). It has been widely conceptualized and therefore have different classroom applications and implications (Ellis, 2003; 2018). Task-based learning was originally introduced to the field of language learning and teaching arguing that the teaching focus needs to be placed on tasks as they are holistic units of communication (Prabhu, 1987). Prabhu further discouraged the preselection of linguistic forms because language acquisition needs to be perceived as an implicit process that occurs when learners use language for communication. According to Prabhu, tasks which are motivating and engaging are sufficient for learners’ linguistic development. Unlike Prabhu, Long (1985) also focused on real-life meaning communication but advocated the need for learners to incidentally focus on form when communication breakdowns and misunderstandings occur. Therefore, according to Long (1985), task-based language teaching is an approach in which learners learn by engaging in meaningful tasks with an incidental focus on form.

While implementing task-based language teaching in the classroom is meaningful, relevant, engaging, and stimulating for learners, the approach has also received many criticisms (Skehan, 2003; Swan, 2005). One of the earliest criticisms of task-based language teaching is that teachers need to be ready to provide unpredictable types of support when required by learners (Skehan, 2003). Since linguistic regularities are only acquired through noticing during communicative activities, irregularities are only addressed incidentally. Because this focus on form occurs only incidentally, learners do not learn the target linguistic forms as they are taught in traditional grammar-focused classrooms.

However, the above criticism against task-based language teaching is not entirely accurate because it has progressed from its original emphasis on incidental learning to recognizing the need to focus on linguistic forms during meaningful tasks (Long, 2015). Learners need opportunities to consciously notice their own errors through focus on form in order to improve grammatical accuracy (DeKeyser, 2001; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 1998). This later conceptualization of task-based language teaching supports Swain’s Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (1985, 1995, 2005) that learners need to be pushed to produce precise and appropriate output so that they notice what they are missing when they produce outputs in the target language. During focus on form, learners are encouraged to pay attention to linguistic forms, especially to forms that they might otherwise ignore (Ellis et al., 2001; Schmidt, 2001). Without noticing linguistic forms, language learners, including those with high communicative ability, are often unable to develop a high level of grammatical accuracy (Yang & Lyster, 2010).

2.2 Conceptualizing Focus-on-form and Focus-on-forms

In the context of task-based language teaching, the term focus on form (FonF) was initially introduced to describe a brief instructional focus on linguistic features that are noticed during meaningful communication (Williams, 2005). Long’s (1991) earlier definition of focus on form indicated that it occurs extensively (i.e., multiple forms are attended within a single lesson) and incidentally (not planned) as well as interactionally in meaningful discourses. Ellis et al. (2001b) later defined focus on

form as the incidental attention that teachers and learners pay to form in the context of meaning-focused instruction. Focus on form approach places a primary focus on the communication of meaning and any focus on linguistic features occurs only incidentally when it is triggered by problems that occur during meaningful communication (Williams, 2005). According to this conceptualization of focus-on-form, targeted forms need to originate from problems experienced by learners during communicative tasks (Ellis et al., 2001a).

There are two general approaches to focus on form: intensive and extensive approach (Rahimpour et al., 2012). The intensive approach to focus on form refers to repetitive exposure to one single pre-selected linguistic feature whereas extensive approach refers to nonrepetitive exposure to numerous linguistic features within a single lesson. The extensive approach to focus on form involves instructors responding to all linguistic error that occur incidentally during communication or when communication breakdowns occur. Compared to the extensive approach to focus on form, the intensive approach is limited to one or a few target forms pre-selected by teachers based on their prior analysis of linguistic problems experienced by the learners. Therefore, the intensive approach to focus on form can also be considered as preemptive where teachers anticipate linguistic problems before they occur (Ellis et al., 2001b). However, because the intensive focus on form approach is based on the presumption that the pre-selected linguistic feature(s) is chosen by teachers beforehand, it actually refutes the original definition of focus on form which occurs only incidentally during meaningful communication.

Focus on forms (FonFs), on the other hand, is a term used to describe decontextualized, planned, pre-selected, and teacher-centered instruction to focus on linguistic features. However, overlap between FonF and FonFs is inevitable especially between the intensive approach to focus on form and focus on forms as they are both teacher-centered instructions based on pre-selected linguistic features. Therefore, in order to describe this overlapping, Ellis (2001) suggested the umbrella term, form-focused instruction to include both incidental and planned instruction that direct learner attention to linguistic forms in the target language.

2.3 Conceptualizing Form-Focused Instruction

While form-focused instruction can be both incidental and planned, both types of instructions to focus on form could potentially encourage deeper processing of target forms and assist interlanguage development (Ellis et al., 2001b). Form-focused instruction encourages learners to attend to forms in the input that they have yet acquired (Williams, 2005). Through input and output processing, it assists learners to compare their current interlanguage rules and the target language rules (Doughty, 2001). Form-focused instruction could lead learners to compare forms in the input to representations stored in their long-term memory or traces left behind in their short-term memory (Doughty, 2001). However, direct comparisons between input and output are unlikely because input must be processed before it can be stored and used for comparisons. Therefore, if target language input is not stored in learners' long-term memory, then noticing-the-gap and comparisons would have limited effectiveness (Williams, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to implement approaches that encourage target language input to be effectively stored and incorporated into the interlanguage system so that it can be used for comparisons later on.

2.4 Using Form-Focused Instruction for Task-Based Language Teaching

More recent task-based language teaching research has acknowledged the importance of integrating form-focused instruction into meaningful communicative contexts (Ellis, 2013, 2018; Long, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Skehan, 2018). Research has found that the explicit attention to form in communicative contexts is effective (Norris & Ortega, 2000) especially in foreign language settings where the target language input is limited outside of the language classroom (Fotos, 2002). Form-focused instruction reduces ambiguity and facilitates cognitive mapping between form, meaning, and the use of linguistic expressions (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010). It allows teachers to draw learners' attention to specific morphosyntactic forms and enhances their ability to speak accurately (Goh & Burns, 2012). In addition, instruction can help learners to notice inappropriate forms in their own output. As mentioned above, unless learners notice errors in their own utterances, it is unlikely that they will modify their spoken language to achieve greater grammatical accuracy (Swain, 1985). However, form-focused instruction is not always explicit, it can range from more implicit interventions such as planning and repetition, to more overt interventions such as grammar

instruction and corrective feedback (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

2.4.1 Planning

Planning has often been used as one type of focus-focused instruction in the task-based language teaching context as it can lead to improved working memory functioning and a better conceptualization of the task (Ellis, 2009a). Planning improves the formulation of ideas and the articulation of phonemes because learners are likely to have accessed linguistic knowledge while doing planning and are likely to find it easier to access the same information when performing the task. While planning seems like a straight forward intervention that leads learners to focus on form, it can also be divided into two types: pre-task planning and within-task planning (Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2011; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). The following section reviews only pre-task planning as within-task planning is considered to be online planning which involves different meta-cognitive processes.

Pre-task planning can be further divided into two types: strategic planning and rehearsal. Strategic planning encourage learners to consider what they are going to say in terms of content and language prior to task performance whereas rehearsal refers to partially or wholly repeating the task as preparation before performing the actual task. Research on the effects of pre-task planning in the task-based language teaching context has found that it always effectively improves oral fluency (e.g., Ellis, 2005), sometimes syntactic complexity (e.g., Skehan, 2009), but almost never improves syntactic accuracy. Rehearsal (also known as repetition) on the other hand benefits subsequent performances of the same task (e.g., Bygate, 2001; Baleghizadeh & Shahri, 2017). Similar to strategic planning, rehearsal also benefits oral fluency and syntactic complexity (Bygate, 2001), but almost no positive effects on syntactic accuracy development (Bygate, 2001). In addition, rehearsal is most effective when it is used in conjunction with other corrective interventions (Sheppard, 2006). While research has often found planning to be effective, its positive effects are not transferable to other tasks even when equivalent difficulty level tasks are performed (Bygate, 2001).

2.4.2 Repetition

Besides planning, task-based language teaching research has also looked at the effects of repetition on learners (e.g., Bygate, 2001; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Lambert et al., 2017). Many researchers have used the terms repetition and pre-task planning interchangeably as they both require learners to do the same task partially or wholly (Bygate & Samuda, 2005). However, these two instructions are slightly different because while planning improves learners' working memory and a better conceptualization of the task, repetition reduces their processing load for conceptualization which then frees up their working memory capacity (Levett, 1989). During repetitive tasks, learners are primarily concerned with content rather than linguistic form when performing the task for the first time. Concentrating on the content allows learners to familiarize themselves with the content of the task, which frees up their working memory capacity so they can focus their attention on linguistic form(s) when repeating the task for the second or more times (Fukuta, 2016).

Repetition improves speaking fluency because it leads to more automatized speech (Bygate, 2001; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Ellis, 2005). Repeating a task enhances language formulation and articulation as learners can draw upon the linguistic and procedural knowledge they already accessed and thereby simplify the subsequent performances (Bygate, 2001). Repetition also improves syntactic complexity because learners can recycle some of the cognitive work (in the area of morphosyntax) already completed for subsequent performances (Bygate, 2001; Skehan, 2009). This increased memory capacity makes it possible for learners to focus on other more complex syntactic structures. In contrast to its positive effects on oral fluency and syntactic complexity, repetition has almost no positive effects on grammatical accuracy development (for exceptions, see Fukuta, 2016; Sangarun, 2005). It can be considered that repetition fails to develop grammatical accuracy because learners primarily focus their attention on the content and overlook linguistic forms.

2.4.3 Grammar Instruction

Grammar instruction helps learners to acquire grammatical features more accurately and quickly as its explicitness directs learners' attention and raise their consciousness of the target form(s) (Ellis, 2005; Han, 2004). While grammar instruction does not alter the natural order of acquisition, it encourages learners to progress more rapidly along the natural route (Ellis, 2005).

According to Ellis (2005), there are different types of grammar instructions and some are more

explicit than others: explicit instruction, production practice, and negative feedback. Explicit instruction refers to teachers' explanation of linguistic knowledge, where metalinguistic knowledge is explicitly transferred from teachers to learners. Production practice requires learners to produce output containing the target form(s) through both controlled tasks (e.g., filling in blanks) and functional tasks (e.g., making original sentences containing the target forms). Negative feedback can both implicit (e.g., recast) and explicit (e.g. correction). Implicit feedback models the correct target forms by responding to students' language output without explicitly indicating the errors whereas explicit feedback clearly indicates and describe error(s).

2.4.4 Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback is considered to be the last type of form-focused instruction in this review because it can effectively direct learners' attention to their linguistic errors. According to Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (1985), learners need to be pushed to notice differences between their own language output and target language forms so the more they notice non-target linguistic forms in output, the higher the possibility they will improve on the target forms. However, in order for learners to notice non-target linguistic forms in their own output, they need to be explicitly corrected by teachers. Mackey (2006) found that feedback is effective at promoting noticing of target forms while a lack of negative feedback limits the development of syntactic accuracy (Goh & Burns, 2012). Research on the effects of corrective feedback has produced significant positive results on language output especially in syntactic accuracy development (Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010). It has been found that when combined with other types of form-focused instruction, corrective feedback creates multiplying effects (Lyster, 2004).

While corrective feedback has been found to have positive effects on the development of syntactic accuracy, its implementation is not without criticisms because feedback is not always perceived by learners as error correction, especially the more implicit types of feedback such as recast. As the result, learners are unlikely to notice the gap between their language production and the target language rules (Williams, 2005). Lyster (2004) further argued that only explicit forms of feedback can push learners to precisely notice and reformulate their output. In addition to the concerns over implicit feedback, excessive amount of feedback can also become ineffective if learners receive feedback on too many types of errors (Williams, 2005).

3. Conclusion

This paper reviewed literature related to form-focused instruction in task-based language teaching. It conceptualized *task* in task-based language teaching within the framework of communicative language teaching. While there are different definitions of task, they share the same concept that task is a language using activity with a primary focus on meaning. The paper also reviewed the overlapping dichotomy of focus-on-form and focus-on-forms approaches and their joined umbrella term as form-focused instruction. It reviewed four types of form-focused instruction used in task-based language teaching: planning, repetition, grammar instruction, and corrective feedback and how they effectively lead learners' attention to form.

In conclusion, the integration of form-focused instruction (FFI) within task-based language teaching (TBLT) represents a significant advancement in second and foreign language education, addressing the limitations of earlier approaches that prioritized communicative tasks over linguistic forms. By integrating form-focused instruction into task-based language teaching, teachers and researchers can strike a balance between promoting meaning and form, thereby enhancing learners' overall communicative competence. Through various instructions to focus on form such as planning, repetition, grammar instruction, and corrective feedback, learners are provided with opportunities to notice and internalize target language forms.

However, the integration of form-focused instruction in task-based language teaching needs careful consideration. The controversy is no longer over whether or not form-focused instruction need to be integrated, but rather on what type of instruction is to be integrated or what types of instructions to be combined to achieve maximal effectiveness. The integration of form-focused instruction in task-based language teaching is promising for learner language development, offering pedagogical implications for language educators seeking to maximize learning outcomes in real-life alike educational contexts. The integration of form-focused instruction in task-based language teaching can therefore be a new approach to course design, implementation, and evaluation to meet the diverse

communicative needs of learners.

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