

The place for explicit instruction in task-based language teaching

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Introduction

Within the field of second language education, task-based language teaching (TBLT) emerged as a distinct branch of communicative language teaching in the 1980s. TBLT involves language learners performing communicative tasks, in which the main focus is on meaning, and not language forms, unlike earlier approaches to language teaching such as grammar translation and audio-lingualism. TBLT proponents have argued that these traditional approaches are not compatible with second language acquisition (SLA) research findings. It has also been claimed that they result in boring lessons, and they have failed to produce successful language learners.

The purpose of this paper is to review one area that continues to stimulate debate; that is, the place of explicit form-focused instruction within TBLT. While some researchers contend that language classes should have an exclusive focus on meaning (Krashen, 1982), most probably accept that some kind of form-focused instruction is necessary. This instruction may be implicit and arise in response to learner needs, as in Long's version of focus-on-form (Long, 1991). However, it may also be explicit and planned. The question under discussion here is, where in a sequence of classroom activities should an explicit focus on language be placed? Should it come before, during, or after the main task? This paper will discuss these divergent views towards explicit form-focused instruction in TBLT.

Before the main task

The explicit teaching of target forms before learners perform a communicative task is the approach most commonly associated with the presentation-practice-production (P-P-P) method, and is largely rejected by many advocates of TBLT. However, there are some (Nunan, 2004) that do see a place for language focus before the main task, and it has remained popular with teachers (Carless, 2009) and in teacher training courses. Further, proponents have proposed a connection between P-P-P and skill acquisition theory (Johnson, 1996).

In P-P-P, a target form is introduced by the teacher. This gives learners declarative knowledge of its form-meaning connection. Learners then do carefully controlled practice of the form which proceduralises this knowledge. This practice lead to automatization of the declarative knowledge, allowing learners to use the target forms more fluently. Finally, the target language can be used freely in a communicative task that necessitates its use.

However, the pre-teaching of target forms has received a great deal of criticism over the years. This kind of language teaching course usually follows a grammar syllabus where forms are chosen and sequenced based on textbook writers' intuition and experience. Unfortunately, SLA research has shown repeatedly that learners follow their own internal syllabuses and cannot learn forms they are not developmentally ready for. Further, Willis & Willis (2007) have argued that if forms are pre-taught, learners will follow one of two undesirable paths. The first sees them not attending to meaning during the main task. Instead, they will only focus on regurgitating the prescribed target forms, resulting in interaction littered with disfluencies. The second possibility is that learners will simply ignore the target forms and do the task using whatever language resources they have available, rendering the pre-teaching stage pointless.

During the main task

While the idea of a largely implicit strategy to giving corrective feedback (through recasts and other means) as problems arise is widely advocated and researched, an approach that incorporates a pre-planned form-focused stage that falls during the main task has received less attention. However, Samuda (2001) has proposed exactly this procedure. She made the argument that a pre-task approach separates language forms from actual usage, while a post-task approach runs the risk that some forms will not be focused on sufficiently. Samuda contends that learners' attention should be drawn to form during the task when they have realised that their interlanguage

resources are insufficient to satisfactorily convey the meanings they wish. There is a meaning → form → meaning progression that makes the links between meaning and form clear.

After the main task

The strategy most familiar to TBLT is that of a language focus stage after the main task. It is the approach that is central to the TBLT framework proposed by Willis and Willis (2007), which has become something of a standard model in teaching training courses (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Willis and Willis argued that in the main task, by avoiding pre-teaching of forms, learners will employ their own resources (including the use of dictionaries and other sources) and experiment with language they are currently developing. They will focus on meaning, and how to best get their message across to their interlocutors.

However, Willis and Willis also claim that a post-task explicit focus on isolated forms is necessary. They argue that learners enjoy it, therefore it may hold motivational benefits. Also, it may make certain forms more salient when learners encounter them in future input. This may assist in noticing, which is thought to be a necessary condition for second language learning (Schmidt, 1990).

While popular among practitioners of TBLT, this position is not without its critics. For example, Swan (2005) makes the salient point that the post-task focus on pre-planned isolated forms is open to precisely the same criticism that has been levelled at P-P-P. He questions why this should be different just because attention is drawn to the forms after the task rather than before.

Conclusion

Much of the research into TBLT has investigated how to best incorporate form-focused instruction. Many would argue against any preplanned language focus for reasons discussed above. However, for those who accept that there is a place for some kind of preplanned language focus, there still seems to be differing views on how it can be best achieved, and one aspect is with regards to the positioning of an explicit language focus stage. Some authors of widely read books on TBLT have outlined frameworks without providing empirical evidence to

support their claims. It is clear that more empirical research is needed to look at what actually happens during task performances under the different conditions. For example, if learners are pre-taught specific forms, do they simply regurgitate these forms? Further, is there any evidence that one approach aids acquisition? It is likely that there is a place for all three approaches depending on the teaching and learning style of individual learners and groups of learners. In my own research, I am attempting to answer such questions to further our understanding of this important area of contemporary second language pedagogy.

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