

Task-based Learning Applied: Satisfactory Grammar Coverage

Mehran Esfandiari¹

¹ Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, Monterey, California, The United States of America

Correspondence: Mehran Esfandiari, Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, Monterey, CA, 93944, The United States of America.

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Abstract

Not only did the emergence of the idea of communicative competence result in grammar instruction being moved from its central position in traditional approaches, but it also helped to pave the way for the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). As a tenet of language teaching methodology, the belief that languages are acquired through communication has appeared to be central to the development of task-based approaches to language teaching. Built upon the idea of learner-centeredness and CLT models of language learning, task-based learning (TBL) comes into play and encourages language learning through authentic acts of communication, interaction, and negotiation of meaning. With its main focus on fluency rather than accuracy, TBL has been criticized for inadequate grammar coverage. By drawing a distinction between a task and a grammar exercise and between focus on form and focus on forms, this paper argues that there are enough opportunities for satisfactory grammar coverage throughout a TBL lesson.

Keywords: task-based learning, grammar, focus on form, communicative competence

1. Introduction

The belief that languages are acquired through authentic acts of communication shifted attention to language use rather than knowledge (Richards, 2006). Following its emergence in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been continuing to earn itself a reputation for being efficient. As a logical development of CLT, by putting emphasis on interaction and practical purposes for which language must be used, Task-based Learning (TBL) entails using the language for acquisition to take place (Brown, 2001). That is to say, it is the use of language that helps learners learn the language (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). Having defined a task as a goal-oriented activity where an outcome has to be achieved, Willis (1996) established a framework for TBL, which is made up of three phases: 'the pre-task phase', 'the task cycle phase', and 'the language focus phase'.

Contrary to traditional approaches, in which grammar is treated as a kind of discipline (Crystal, 2004), grammar may not appear to be central to TBL. That has led to concerns about inadequate grammar coverage in TBL classes, though attention to form is considered a requisite for language acquisition (Schmidt, 1994). The main aim of this paper is to address this concern by arguing that there is enough room for satisfactory grammar coverage throughout a TBL lesson. In doing so, a distinction is made not only between a task and a grammar exercise, but also between focus on form and focus on forms.

2. Task-based Learning (TBL)

Over the past five decades, a series of modifications has been made to ideas within syllabus design and methodology. Based on grammatical competence as the foundation of language proficiency, traditional approaches lay great emphasis on accuracy at the expense of fluency (Scrivener, 2005). Simply stated, with no such notion as communicative competence - that is, "the underlying systems of knowledge and skill required for communication" (Canale, 1983, p. 5) - the focus is on the language itself rather than the way it is used. However, developing the idea of communicative competence coined by Hymes (1971), language learning is considered to be the ability to use language for communication. Indeed, linguistic competence and communicative competence need to be taught in unison, as the former focuses on usage and the latter on use (Widdowson, 1978). Therefore, the main focus of CLT is to build up fluency in language use.

Having proposed the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983), it is argued that in light of negotiation of meaning, learners learn new forms in a language when they are engaged in communication. Long (1996) points out that "especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (p. 451-2); and it leaves learners with no

alternative but to modify their speech so that understanding can take place. Thus, there is the need to move beyond structural rules of the language and practice communication skills in a meaningful way.

As a manifestation of CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Skehan, 2003; Nunan, 2004), TBL came into prevalent use as a focal point of language teaching practice to help learners develop actual language use. With its main emphasis on the central role of meaning in language use (Skehan, 1998), TBL has evolved in response to restrictions of the traditional Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) approach (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1991). In order for the acquisition of the target language to take place effectively, learners need to be involved in processing the meaning and achieving a desired end (Willis, 1998); accordingly, practical purposes for language use are considered the major concern in TBL classes, as opposed to small pieces of the language.

In sum, unlike traditional approaches, which emphasize that learners are required to be taught some language prior to being capable of communicating, TBL works on the assumption that languages are learned best through authentic acts of interaction, communication, and negotiation of meaning, and it focuses mainly on fluency rather than accuracy.

3. Position of Grammar

Language authorities have paid tremendous attention to the role of grammar in second language acquisition (SLA), so much so that its status as either knowledge or skill has always been the subject of heated debate. Within the traditional approach, grammar is referred to as a kind of discipline (Crystal, 2004), which is mainly taught to ensure the accuracy of sentences and utterances (Yarrow, 2007). Such an approach works on the assumption that productive language makes sense when a structure is learned (Esfandiari & Rath, 2014). However, it is argued that teaching grammar as an end in itself cannot be helpful, as it is not a clear-cut, mathematical system (Celce-Murcia, 1991). In addition, exposure to one grammatical structure at a time cannot guarantee the mastery of its use (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). Therefore, where the spontaneous production of utterances is concerned, grammatical accuracy cannot be sufficient by itself.

It is worthwhile noting that from a psychological angle, grammar is associated with not only the system, but also with use of language, as it can be attributed to both declarative and procedural knowledge. In the eyes of Larsen-Freeman (2003), value is attached to skill development as a question of practice, so emphasis needs to be placed on grammar as a language skill; and according to the Language Socialization Hypothesis, “grammar skill is acquired through repeated and meaningful experience with contextualized discourse” (Esfandiari & Rath, 2014, p. 12). Indeed, without the need for explicit analysis, such a process can pave the way for grammar to act as a structural resource via interaction and communication (Celce-Murcia, 2002). Thus, as a communicative end, grammar has to serve communicative purposes, and it has to be comprised of the three interrelated dimensions of form, meaning, and use (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

4. Tasks vs. Grammar Exercises

To avoid confusion, drawing a clear distinction between a task and a grammar exercise is of paramount importance. Contrary to grammar exercises, which put a strong focus on the structure, tasks supply learners with not only forms and words to use, but also with a good reason and purpose for doing them. Indeed, the main aim is to provide learners with a natural context for language use that calls for interaction (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). It is important to note that while the starting point of a task is a holistic experience of language in use, the end point is a closer look at some features that naturally occur in the language (Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996).

Although Prabhu (1987) first defined a task as “an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought” (p. 24), the definition has been revisited a lot in the literature over the past few decades; accordingly, defining a task is not a straightforward job, as it has been interpreted variously by syllabus designers and language authorities.

Having come to a broad agreement on some of the characteristics of a task, TBL proponents (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Littlewood, 2004; Swan, 2005) summarize the main principles of a task as follows:

1. The primary focus is mainly natural or naturalistic language use with activities focused on meaning rather than language and linguistic forms.
2. It is compatible with a learner-centered rather than a teacher-directed, educational philosophy.
3. It is composed of some systematic components, particularly a goal (the general aim of the task), input data (verbal or non-verbal materials for learners to manipulate), setting (the environment in which the task is performed), a procedure (things that participants do in a given setting), and a specific outcome (the task evaluation).
4. Tasks have to be communicative, and there is a need for involvement to help develop the acquisition of formal linguistic elements.

Based on the above-mentioned criteria, a clear distinction can be drawn between a task and a grammar exercise. It can be argued that although a grammar exercise provides an opportunity to convey meaning and express opinions, it fails to meet the first criterion of a task (focus on meaning). This is largely because the learners are aware that the main aim of the activity is to have them practice correct language (Ellis, 2009). Furthermore, whereas a grammar exercise can make learners rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to do the activity, it also fails to fulfill the third criterion of a task (a specific outcome). This is mainly because the outcome of a grammar exercise is correct language use, not a final product (Ellis, 2009).

5. Focus on Form/Forms

A clear distinction needs to be made between the terms ‘focus on form’ and ‘focus on forms’, as the two shall be interpreted differently. The latter refers to the traditional, structure-based approach to teaching grammar where certain linguistic forms are taught through explicit explanations and drills. It was Long (1991), on the other hand, who coined the term ‘focus on form’ to address the restrictions of communicative methodology. It is defined as “the pedagogic strategies for attracting attention to form while learners are primarily focused on meaning as they perform the task” (Ellis, 2014, p. 105). In other words, it is an approach where the attention of learners is drawn to linguistic forms while they are engaged in the context of communicative activities. Therefore, where handling grammar is concerned, focus on form is a focal point in task-based language teaching, particularly when there is a breakdown in communication (Ellis, 2009).

Form-focused instruction is defined as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form” (Ellis, 2001, p. 1) – that is, “any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners’ attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly” (Spade, 1997, p. 73). Indeed, form-focused instruction may range from explicit, traditional grammar instruction with the focus intended on a selection of grammatical features, to implicit, where form is referred to incidentally (Huang, 2010). However, Willis (1996) asserts that learners’ attention might result in being distracted from fluency if an attempt is made to shift their focus more towards form while the task is being performed. Thus, it can be argued that focus on form might be best achieved via corrective feedback.

6. Discussion: Opportunities for Grammar Coverage

There has been the argument that coverage of grammar has been a matter of concern in task-based language teaching. Grammar has been claimed to be deprived of its position in task-based instruction (Sheen, 2003; Swan, 2005). To put it another way, grammar is seen to have no place in a task-based lesson. However, it can be argued that task-based instruction can afford satisfactory grammar coverage, provided that undivided attention is called given to both syllabus design and the process of teaching, as the two could impact grammar coverage in parallel.

Where syllabus design is concerned, it is important to note that from a linguistic point of view, “tasks can be unfocused or focused” (Ellis, 2014, p. 104). Although it might be argued that any task type may have the potential to create opportunities for at least limited use of some linguistic features (Skehan, 1998), unfocused tasks are normally designed with no specific linguistic focus; therefore, no place can be allocated to grammar if the syllabus consists of unfocused tasks only. Conversely, focused tasks are “designed to create a context for a pre-determined linguistic feature – for example, a specific grammatical structure” (Ellis, 2014, p. 104); thus, if such tasks are incorporated into the syllabus, grammar finds its own place as the syllabus appears to be grammar-oriented. However, since the major concern has to be the task, a syllabus made up of a combination of both focused and unfocused tasks might suit better as learners are involved in more natural language use, as well.

On the other hand, it is worthwhile noting that a syllabus by itself cannot pave the way for adequate grammar coverage. Indeed, the way it is implemented – namely, the methodology, can play a crucial role in covering grammar in a satisfactory fashion (Ellis, 2009); this is where teaching comes into play, as it can make a difference. A closer look at the methodology of task-based teaching can draw attention to three opportunities that could be taken for satisfactory grammar coverage in TBL lessons. As a reliable, practical guide to task-based instruction, the TBL framework proposed by Jane Willis can be put into practice to ensure a smooth flow of the task in TBL classes (Willis, 1996). It is comprised of three sections: ‘the pre-task phase’, ‘the task cycle’, and ‘the post-task phase, which is also known as ‘the language focus phase’ (Huang, 2010).

In brief, the pre-task phase acts as a stepping-stone to the task cycle; indeed, it is aimed at preparing learners to perform the task in a way that develops acquisition (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2006). Since the pre-task phase should contain some activities to help learners learn or even recall useful words and phrases (Dornyei, 2001), it can have the potential to include some important linguistic features, as well (Huang, 2010). In other words, it can be argued that it is possible to incorporate some grammar teaching into the pre-task phase (Estaire & Zanon, 1994). Therefore, there can be some room for covering grammar at the outset of a TBL lesson.

The task cycle, on the other hand, is the stage during which learners can build up confidence and fluency. They are

provided with opportunities to benefit from a holistic experience of language in use by not only using whatever language they have already acquired, but also by improving their language while being monitored by the teacher (Willis, 1996). It consists of three components: “(a) task: students work in pairs or small groups and the teacher monitors from a distance; (b) planning: students prepare to report to the whole class orally or in writing how they did the task and what they decided or discovered; and (c) report: some groups present their reports to the class or exchange written reports, and then they compare results” (Huang, 2010, p. 33). In the eyes of Long (2006), the task cycle is the stage into which attention to form can be incorporated in the form of recasts. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for reactive teacher engagement with extensive focus on form in many different ways (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). Thus, it can be argued that there is the chance to provide familiar contexts for grammar teaching in the task cycle phase of a TBL lesson.

Finally, leading out of the task cycle, there comes the language focus phase. With ‘analysis’ – that is, bringing surface forms to learners’ attention, and ‘practice’ as its components, the language focus phase gives students the opportunity to reflect on the language used in the task cycle (Frost, 2004). Indeed, “learners examine the language forms in the text and look in detail at the use and the meaning of lexical items they have noticed” (Willis, 1986, p. 75), so attention should be drawn to form at this stage (Willis, 1996). Accordingly, it can be argued that the language focus phase gives students the opportunity to not only study grammar rules more closely, but also to put the target forms into practice.

7. Conclusion

The shift from traditional, teacher-fronted towards more learner-centered approaches to teaching has resulted in a growing tendency towards CLT, where languages are claimed to be acquired through authentic acts of interaction, communication, and negotiation of meaning. Aimed at fluency rather than accuracy, TBL has come into effect as a strong version of CLT. It facilitates the process of language learning, as learners discover the system of a language by learning how to communicate in that language. A grammar exercise fails to fulfill the criteria of a task, not just because of a lack of focus on meaning, but also because of the absence of a specific outcome. Contrary to focus on forms, whereby the teaching of certain linguistic forms is through explicit explanations and drills, focus on form - as a requisite for acquisition in TBL - draws learners’ attention to linguistic forms while engaged in the context of communicative activities. In order for task-based instruction to afford satisfactory grammar coverage, undivided attention has to be drawn to both syllabus design and the process of teaching. While a syllabus made up of both focused and unfocused tasks can pave the way for learner involvement with more natural language use, there can be enough opportunities to cover grammar adequately in the three-phase TBL framework. Some grammar teaching can be incorporated into the pre-task phase, as it can contain some activities to help learners learn some important linguistic features. Furthermore, familiar contexts for grammar teaching can be provided in the task cycle phase, as attention to form can be incorporated into this stage of a TBL lesson in the form of recasts. Moreover, not only does the language focus phase give students the opportunity to study grammar rules, but it also gives them the chance to put the target forms into practice while reflecting on the language already used. Therefore, it can be argued that grammar is not deprived of its position in TBL and that there are enough opportunities to consider for satisfactory grammar coverage throughout a TBL lesson.

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