
Examining Task Based Instruction As a Viable Pedagogical Framework for Teaching Grammar

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Abstract

The field of language teaching has undergone substantial changes from the advent of grammar translation method and audiolingual to the contemporary communicative language teaching approach. While each method regarded language from a unique perspective, researchers and educators believe that there is not a single best method that can be effectively applied to the various educational contexts. Therefore, the advantages and disadvantages of each method need to be carefully examined and identified. Task based language instruction offers valuable insights on the second language pedagogy by emphasizing the negotiation of meaning and group work in a communicative context. The aim of this qualitative study is to investigate teacher's perspective on the incorporation of grammar into the task based instruction. To this end 25 English teachers from Zahedan and Saravan took part in a semi-structured interview. The data were collected by recording and transcribing the interviews. From the data the relevant themes and concepts were extracted. The results showed that grammar can be effectively incorporated in a communicative setting by simultaneously focusing on linguistic form, meaning, and usage.

Key words: Task based instruction, Grammar, Teachers

1. Introduction

English as an international language plays a prominent role in global communication and the proficiency in English is crucial for the international business and career opportunities. Task based language teaching has gained substantial attention from researchers and many teachers have sought to successfully implement tasks into their classrooms and various contexts.

1.1 Task based Instruction

TBLT owes its genealogy to the educational theories that highlight the interrelationships between experience and learning and is rooted in cognitive and interactionist SLA theory. (doughy & long, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

Nunan (1991, p. 279) defines the main characteristics of TBLT as follows:

- *An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- *The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- *The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.
- *An enhancement of learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- *An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

1.1.2 Phases of TBLT

Pre-task stage

The purpose of the pre-task stage is to prepare the students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition ” (Ellis, 2003, p. 33). In this stage teachers can help students recall useful words and collocations. “At the pre-task phase, the

teacher highlights useful words and phrases, helps students understand directions for the task, and prepares them for the task” (Huang, 2010, p. 33). helping students plan how to perform the task by a variety of communication strategies will greatly enhance their performance and the negotiation of meaning.

TASK Cycle

During this stage learners cooperate with each other to complete the task. the teacher receives student’s feedback and determines whether they have successfully completed the task. At this stage the complexity of the task will inhibit learners from performing the task.

Post task phase

Wills & Willis (2001, p. 178) call the post task phase as language focus. at this stage the students review the task and try to report what they have accomplished and this stage is divided into language focus and language practice. at the language focus stage, the students incidentally attend to linguistic form and try to understand the rules of the target language. at the language practice stage, students will further improve their understanding of language functions in a communicative context.

2. Grammar

Grammar, as one of the elements that supports fluency in speech, is very important to learn as it affects the meanings and messages a person wants to convey (Ampa & Akib, 2019). Grammatical elements such as tenses are quite complicated for the students to learn because each element has specific rules that must be followed when using it in the language (Spahiu & Kryeziu, 2021). there is substantial controversy among researchers and teachers whether grammar should be taught implicitly or explicitly. Researchers such as Ellis (2009) and Larsen Freeman (2012) contended that grammar should be taught in a communicative context and that focus on form activities need to be combined with communicative activities.

3. Research hypothesis

There is no relationship between grammar and task based instruction.

4. Research question

To what extent does task based instruction affect grammatical knowledge?

5. Methodology

In order to delve deeper into the research question and examine it in a variety of contexts, a qualitative research methodology has been chosen to examine the phenomenon in its own underlying setting.

5.1. participants

25 Iranian EFL teachers were recruited for this study which was chosen based on purposive sampling. The teachers were selected from among the EFL teachers with at least 10 years of teaching English at Universities and institutes. All EFL teachers' academic degree was master of arts.

5.2. Instruments

For the efficiency of interview sessions, the interviews were carried out in a semi-structured form. The interview was conducted on the basis of interview protocol refinement framework proposed by Castillo Montoya (2016). Therefore, the questions of the interview were compatible with the research question and they were designed on the basis of an inquiry based conversation. Finally the opinions of experts were utilized and the interview were piloted for ensuring the meticulousness of the data.

5.3. Data collection

The interview sessions were carried out with the teachers individually and each session lasted approximately between 20 to 25 minutes. The data collection took 4 months and finally the data were recorded and transcribed.

5.4. Data analysis

All the data were examined and analysed on the basis of constant comparative method of Glasser and Strauss (1967). This method is aimed at developing a grounded theory and it is a practical process in which the structural features of the phenomenon, concepts, and principles are identified and compared and finally the initial understanding and the phenomenon is established. Based on the initial

understanding of the phenomenon, open coding and axial coding were utilized. In the open coding process, the data were analysed, compared, and conceptualized. And in order to create a connection between the data axial coding was utilized. In this process, the conditions, context, and interactional strategies were established.

6. Results

Question 1: Do you believe that task based instruction impose many constraints on learners ? explain your answer

Teacher's perspectives: All of teachers argued that in designing tasks, learner's language proficiency need to be determined and then educators can design relevant tasks that address learner's needs. The salient factors that inhibit learners from performing tasks were identified: 1 the nature of the input 2 the task conditions 3 the information processing demands imposed by the task. One of the teachers designed a video-based task about cultural differences to use this task in a reading comprehension passage. Before watching the video the learner's discuss the topic in their first language with the help of the teacher. The students watched the video and after watching their comprehension of the topic enhanced. The teachers concluded that tasks need to be modified on the basis of the student's proficiency level and by focusing on group work and utilizing communicative strategies such as elicitation techniques, the complexity of the task will be effectively reduced.

Question 2: How the learner's task performance and task motivation is facilitated?

Teacher's perspectives: The task performance and motivation is enhanced by scaffolding that focuses on the interactional view of learning and socio-cultural perspective. In this approach learning is enhanced through a process in which a knower supports the learning of others and therefore, language development arises from attempts to negotiate meaning through interaction. In the process of scaffolding, to further improve task motivation and performance, teachers can assist learning substantially by providing different forms of feedback such as comprehension checks, clarification requests, and elicitation techniques. Eventually the teachers agreed that tasks need to be designed and sequenced in ways that will prepare learners to do the task. For example, during the pre-task phase, the teachers specified task instructions by introducing the topic and helping students remember useful words and phrases.

Question 3: Do you think that task based instruction provide a practical framework for the incorporation of grammar? explain your answer

Teacher's perspectives: The teachers argued that language structure emerges from language use and that the communicative nature of task based instruction provides a potential framework for teaching grammar effectively. To incorporate grammar into the task based instruction, the teachers suggested the framework that Jack Richards (2007) utilized. In this framework grammar can be addressed at three stages: 1 Addressing accuracy during the pre-task stage 2 Addressing accuracy during the task 3 Addressing accuracy during post-task phase. Before utilizing and embracing this framework, one of the teachers concluded that the framework need to be simplified by a combination of unfocused and focused tasks. At first simple unfocused tasks need to be determined on the basis of learner's needs and then these tasks will be subsequently complemented by designing focused tasks. In this way, the relationship between linguistic form and meaning is strengthened. For example, at first an unfocused task like snake and ladder is designed and in this game the students merely focus on complete cooperation and the completion of the task. Subsequently a focused task like picture sequencing is designed to focus on a specific linguistic form such as the present continuous. Therefore, tasks need to focus on the negotiation of meaning by group work and using communicative strategies and then gradually focused tasks stress the linguistics form. An experienced teacher in Zahedan concluded that the theory of three dimensional grammar can be addressed practically by the task based instruction. By a combination of focused and unfocused tasks, each dimension of grammar will be addressed. By designing unfocused tasks, the negotiation of meaning and group work will be addressed. In this way meaning is emphasized. After that focused tasks are designed implying a particular linguistic form. For example consciousness raising tasks focus how grammar is used and why it is used and interpretation tasks on the basis of the input processing theory focus on how linguistic form and meaning are connected. Eventually on the basis of the teacher's statements a viable pedagogical conclusion is made that corroborated what Rod Ellis (2009) concluded. Tasks that aimed at focusing learner's attention on the negotiation of meaning need to be complemented by tasks that aim at focusing on particular grammatical form. In this way three dimensions of grammar: form, meaning, and usage are addressed by designing appropriate tasks.

Question 4: Are consciousness raising tasks effective in improving grammatical knowledge? explain your answer

Teacher's perspectives: The teachers hold the view that consciousness raising tasks contribute to communication activities and that they are merely a supplement. C-R tasks function like a puzzle that enables students to discover for themselves how a linguistic feature works. Some teachers believe that C-R tasks are based on discovery learning in accordance with the consensus that what learners can find out for themselves and what they discover will lead to a greater knowledge. Five Teachers who were interviewed utilized a framework for designing C-R tasks. At first they designed a picture difference task to stimulate student's attention on the present continuous. The picture showed a man drinking water, talking, watching tv, and playing football. After that a similar task is designed to highlight the grammatical points. It functioned like an input flooding or input enhancing task. Gradually, these tasks will serve as a potential framework for designing C-R tasks. The C-R task that teachers developed contained these questions: Make up a sentence describing a continuous action 2 compare your sentences with your classmates. On the basis of what the teachers designed, a viable conclusion is made that corroborated what Rod Ellis (2012) has hypothesized

Rod Ellis (2012) utilized a weak non interface model where explicit knowledge facilitated implicit knowledge. In this way explicit knowledge facilitated implicit knowledge in two ways 1 by improving the process of noticing 2 by assisting noticing the gap. Therefore, explicit knowledge supplements the processes that are involved in implicit learning.

7. Discussion

On the basis of the result of the interview, task based language teaching provides a natural communicative context within which grammar can be practically incorporated and taught. This study agrees with what Skehan (1994) concluded. He proposed that learners need to be exposed to language at an appropriate level of difficulty and opportunities need to be provided for learners to attend to linguistic form while they focus on communication. This study also agrees with the views of Rod Ellis (2009) that consciousness raising tasks need to be developed in ways that the function as supplementary tasks to communicate tasks. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that interpretation tasks on the basis of input processing theory need to be developed to strengthen the relationship between linguistic form

and meaning. Although these tasks have certain limitations that will inhibit their application in a variety of contexts, they strengthen the relationship between linguistic form and meaning and their advantages certainly can not be ignored.

8. Conclusion: Task based instruction in comparison with the traditional approaches to grammar learning is more effective. It provides a practical communicative context which integrates grammar into a communicative setting and grammar can be addressed both deductively and inductively by designing appropriate tasks. Task based instruction has received significant criticism on the grounds that beginners can not learn grammar by task work. But the research has suggested that input-providing tasks are more appropriate for beginners and that gradually learners linguistic knowledge will advance and they can perform structure-based production tasks. As Prabhu (1984) demonstrated language acquisition develops from communicative activity and all that is necessary is the provision of opportunities to communicate naturally. And the creation of opportunities in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication is vital to language acquisition. The role of tasks is evident in that they provide the means by which learners engage in a communicative activities.

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