Conceptual Underpinnings of Focus-on-form in Task-based Language Teaching

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Commentary

ABSTRACT

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) which is often viewed as the strong version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is gaining burgeoning interest as an approach to second language (L2) learning. However, many L2 researchers are concerned that the heavy focus on meaning and communication is insufficient for learners to achieve native-like language competence. Thus, researchers have proposed the use of *focus-on-form* in TBLT, where linguistic problems are dealt with as and when the need arises. This paper provides a conceptual basis for the need to use *focus-on-form* in TBLT in the L2 classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) advocates the use of tasks for language learning with a heavy emphasis on meaning, interaction and communication. However, the importance of linguistic forms, especially grammar cannot be denied as an important factor in ensuring accuracy in conveying meaning. Thus, the place of grammar in TBLT needs to be addressed to help learners achieve native-like competency in a reasonable amount of time.

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[1] identified two types of form-focused instruction, and labelled them focus-on-form and focus-on-forms. He further explained that focus-on-forms consists of the teaching of discrete grammar points, while focus-on-form "overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (p.45).

Researchers have found that focus-on-form works best in a task-based context [1,2] as the focus of the lessons is meaning while forms are dealt with as and when the need arises. Task-based researchers [3,4,5,6,7] have repeatedly shown that interaction leads to L2 development.

This paper attempts to provide the rationale for incorporating focus-on-form in TBLT. The concepts that underpin the use focus-on-form instruction are explained and illustrated with examples from focus-on-form pedagogy. Key concepts that would be dealt with include the theories related to input, noticing and interaction to facilitate L2 learning, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as an approach that advocates the use of tasks to encourage interaction without downplaying the importance of grammatical competence, the practice of using focus-on-form in TBLT and examples of research that incorporate focus-on-form in TBLT.

2. INPUT, NOTICING, AND INTERACTION

A theoretical perspective which can show a relationship between input and modified output produced during learner-learner interaction in a focus-on-form context and interlanguage development is needed to rationalise the need for focus-on form instruction. This relationship can be considered from the information-processing and interactionist perspectives. Three of the most relevant hypotheses are Swain's Output Hypothesis [8,9], Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis [10] and Long's Interaction Hypothesis [11].

2.1 Swain's Output Hypothesis

[8,9] proposes three main functions of output. The first role of output is to facilitate "noticing". Swain argues that language learners need to consciously notice linguistic forms such as grammatical items in order for the forms to be acquired. It is important for noticing to occur when learners are attempting to produce the target language orally or in written form. It is during language production that learners might notice "gaps" in their language use, thus helping them recognise linguistic problems they might have. The act of noticing these gaps could lead to interlanguage development.

Secondly, output allows for "hypothesis formulation and testing". This is achieved when learners try out new forms and structures in the target language thus potentially stretching their interlanguage. In other words, they would use language production as a way to test if the structures they are using are correct. Feedback received from other interlocutors- which include the teacher and other learners- would help the learners gauge whether their language use is acceptable or otherwise.

Finally, output would facilitate interlanguage development through the use of "metatalk". This happens when learners use language to reflect on language use. [11] explains that talking about explicit rules of grammar and using metalinguistic terminology while making meaning could help deepen learners' understanding and awareness of the relationship between forms, rules and meanings of utterances learners are trying to produce.

Perhaps, most relevant to focus-on-form instruction is "noticing" the target language. [9] argues that learners should notice the gap in their language use, as this would help trigger cognitive processes which in turn would "generate linguistic knowledge that is new to the learners, or which could consolidate their existing knowledge" (p.126). This would imply the need for pedagogical intervention in second language acquisition (SLA). Swain proposed the use of "output enhancement". This would require the integration of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback in a meaning-focused lesson. [9] posits that this could "stimulate learners to move from the semantic, open-ended, non-deterministic, strategic processing in comprehension to the complete grammatical processing needed for accurate production" (p.128). Put differently, learners need to focus their attention on grammatical forms even while processing information to aid comprehension.

2.2 Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis

[10] also highlights the importance of "noticing" and paying attention to form as he suggests that

"attention" facilitates acquisition and learners need to be conscious of language forms and use. [10] proposes four dimensions to the concept of conscious learning of language: intention, consciousness, awareness and control. Intention refers to the deliberateness in which a learner attends to language input or stimulus. This would be the direct opposite of incidental learning which often occurs when children acquire their first language. Meanwhile, attention is the detection of a stimulus, and awareness refers to explicit learning of a structure which is linked to a learner's knowledge. Finally, consciousness is about control. This refers to the control of the learner's language output. The extent of control is determined by the amount of mental processing that occurs. For example, a spontaneous respond would require little mental processing.

[12] illustrates the role of input processing and the interaction of input features, via noticing [10], with the current interlanguage system, using Fig. 1.

[10] proposes that only input that is noticed becomes available for effective processing. Fig. 1 shows that two input factors that could influence noticing are the input properties (e.g., saliency and frequency) and instruction. [10] argues that the more frequent a form appears in the input, the more likely it is to be noticed and consequently, be integrated into the interlanguage system. The assumption is that repeated presentations of an item results in greater opportunities for the item to be noticed at one time or another. Perceptual salience, which concerns how prominent a form is in the input, also affects noticing. Simply put, a form that calls more attention to itself has a greater chance of being noticed than other forms. Perceptual salience can be achieved through the use of formatting such as highlighting or underlining the intended forms in a text, or putting them in italics. Meanwhile, the use of instruction (e.g., form-focused instruction) could channel and bring to attention forms that would otherwise be missed.

Other than input factors, [12] contends that task demand on processing resources and learner internal factors could influence noticing. Internal factors would also influence noticing and output. Internal factors include learner readiness and individual differences in processing capacity. Several accounts offer suggestions about what "readiness" might mean. For example, [13]

through his Multidimensional Model suggests that word order acquisition can be predicted based on cognitive processing principles. In short, there is a predicted order of acquisition. [10]'s claim that noticing depends upon readiness implies that a prediction can be made about the forms learners would notice depending on their current level of acquisition. Meanwhile, individual differences in processing capacity would include learner differences in terms of aptitude and analytic capacity [12]. Fig. 1 shows that noticing could affect working memory and long-term memory. Sometimes working memory will be influenced, but at other times, what is currently noticed would activate long-term memory. The arrows on the right of the diagram symbolise the output which were influenced by current input, learner factors, and noticing.

In sum, noticing is a result of input features, existing knowledge systems and processing capacities which would influence the activation of working memory or long-term memory. Task demand would also affect noticing, as it could determine the amount of attentional resource that could be directed towards noticing. A result of noticing would then be output which lends itself into interaction. Noticing then becomes the awareness that leads to output, modifications, and their incorporation into the working memory and long-term memory [12].

2.3 Long's Interaction Hypothesis

All methods that deal with grammar use fall under the umbrella term form -focused instruction. However, focus-on-form instruction differs from all other form-focused approaches as it takes advantage of comprehensible input and modified output. Long's Interaction Hypothesis would explain the role of comprehensible input. He posits that the interaction processes involved while making sense of input or making input comprehensible is crucial for second language acquisition [11]. [11] further explains that interaction results in input modification to avoid potential ambiguity. By participating actively in interactions with native speakers or more advanced learners, the non-native speaker uses various strategies to make input comprehensible. This would sometimes involve the use of metalanguage to learn the correct forms. Other ways in which non-native speakers make input comprehensible is by asking for clarification, and paraphrasing. All these strategies would help non-native speakers modify their speech, and subsequently develop their interlanguage.
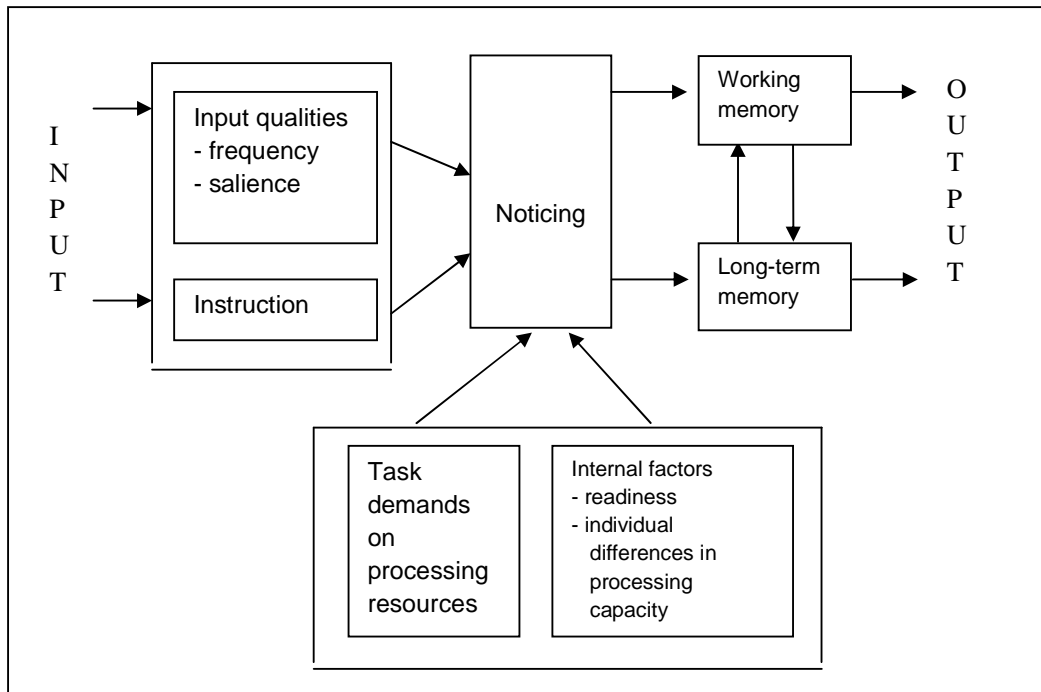
Fig. 1. Types of noticing within the information-processing model (Adapted from [3] p. 52)

Long's Interaction Hypothesis is compatible with focus-on-form instruction because the main focus is on meaning and communication, with only implicit references to form and heavy emphasis on noticing and embedding grammar with communicative activities [14]. Also, there is an acceptance of metatalk in the quest to optimise interaction through accurate language use. [11] also argues that to better reap benefits from metatalk and other types of modified interactions, L2 learners need to develop metalinguistic awareness. The importance of developing metalinguistic awareness is also in line with [10] argument that learners need to "notice the gap" in their language use. This awareness of the "gap" would sometimes necessitate the use of metalanguage to explain how certain forms are used.

In short, through his Interaction Hypothesis, Long contends that a range of interactional processes that occur during the course of completing tasks such as negotiating meaning, modifying output and getting feedback (from more adept speakers) could contribute towards L2 development.

3. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT)

In the mid-1960s British applied linguists deemed linguistic competence inadequate to prepare second and foreign language learners for language use in real-life situations [15]. [16] proposed that the goal of language teaching and learning should be communicative competence which means "the ability to use language in the most appropriate way in a specific context or situation" (p.12). Similarly, [17] suggested that the focus of language learning is language as social behaviour. He used the term meaning potential which is said to be the equivalent of Hymes' communicative competence. Views such as these have prompted the development of syllabuses for learners based on functional-notional concepts of language use. [18] contends that "functional linguistics view language as meaning potential and maintains the centrality of context of situations in understanding language systems and how they work." (p.263).

The term communicative was used to describe programmes that used a functional-notional syllabus based on needs assessment. Language teaching methodologists of the time developed classroom materials that encouraged learner choice and increasing autonomy [19]. As [18] pointed out, the focus is on classroom process and learner autonomy, with the use of role plays, games and communicative classroom activities. [20] proposed a functional or communicative definition of language that could serve as a basis for developing syllabuses for language teaching.

He described two types of meanings: notional categories (concepts such as time, sequence, quantity, location, frequency) and categories of communicative functions (requests, denials, offers, complaints). These views have become the basis of CLT with functions and notions as central concepts for learning a second or foreign language. [21] offered the following explanation for CLT;

> Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach to the teaching of a second or foreign language that emphasizes communication as the goal and means of learning a language. Within this approach, learners regularly work in pairs and groups, authentic materials and tasks are used, and skills are integrated from the beginning (p.7).

The sociolinguistic revolution led by Halliday and Hymes has also had an impact on CLT. [18] pointed out that "this revolution highlights the need to use language appropriate to a given communicative context, taking into account the roles of the participants, the setting and the purpose of the interaction" (p.278). This theory accounts for sociolinguistic competence being a component of communicative competence.

[11] Interaction Hypothesis is also relevant to CLT. The hypothesis [22] claims that "it is in the interaction process that acquisition occurs; learners acquire through talking to others" (p.95). This hypothesis would appear to support the use of communicative tasks and negotiation of meaning among participants in a discourse, as this would accelerate language acquisition. This is in line with CLT which advocates the use of communicative tasks and interaction among peers and with the teacher.

Since its conception in the 1970s, the scope of CLT has expanded. According to [15], "CLT advocators see it as an approach that aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching, and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication" (p.66). [15] further elaborate that there are varying interpretations of CLT, as there is no single text or authority on it. However, general principles governing this approach as explained by its proponents require the incorporation of communicative activities that would equip learners with the necessary language and communication skills to use language effectively, appropriately and in a purposeful way. Thus, according to the communicative approach, focus in language teaching would shift from the learning of structures as propagated by structural linguists and learning through habit formation (a view held by behaviourists such as Skinner and Pavlov), to using language as a tool of communication, to convey meaning. Also, the language used must be socially appropriate to specific situations and discourse participants.

To achieve communicative competence advocated by CLT, communicative tasks are used to develop macroskills, vocabulary and grammar. [23] stressed the need for active learner participation in pair-work or group-work around information-gap or problem-solving activities. The role of the learners has changed from a passive recipient of knowledge to an active participant in the learning process.

The roles of the teacher have also changed. One of the most distinct roles is as co-communicator [23]. Teachers no longer dominate the classroom. Instead they initiate and stimulate discussions among students. This also has psychological benefits, as students would be more confident of their own knowledge and abilities. This in turn would reduce inhibitions and insecurity, thus enabling students to produce language without constant monitoring.

Though proponents of TBLT make a strong case for using tasks to achieve communicative competence, the need for grammar teaching and the means in achieving grammatical competence remain fuzzy. Thus, the following section deals with the various definitions of tasks in L2 teaching and learning, and the place of grammar teaching in TBLT.

4. DEFINITIONS OF TASK

Tasks can be examined in various respects. [24], for example, describe task essentialness, task visual support and task-inherent feedback as features of task materials. Tasks can also be described in terms of the interaction required, such as one-way or two-way, and task outcomes requiring agreement or allowing disagreement [1,25].

In his earlier work, [26] defined a task as "a piece of meaning-focused work involving learners in comprehending, producing and/or interacting in the target language, and that tasks are analysed or categorised according to their goals, input data, activities, settings and roles" (p. 11). In later years, [27] defines and exemplifies the different

elements of tasks in several categories. Two of the main ones are real-world or target tasks, and pedagogical tasks. Real-world tasks involve the use of the target language to accomplish real-life tasks outside of the classroom, while pedagogical tasks would require students to complete classroom work that require them to understand and manipulate the target language, and interact in the language with a principal focus on meaning rather than language forms.

[28] takes a much broader view of what can be considered classroom tasks. [28] uses the term "task" to include any set of materials to bring about learning of the target language. [29] is also quite general in her definition. She considers tasks to be "activities where the target language is used by a learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome" (p.23). [30] identifies 3 critical features of a task:

a) It involves an activity of some kind.
b) It has a specified outcome that determines when it has been completed.
c) It may require language comprehension or language production or both.

In relation to focus-on-form, [31] provide a framework for analysing language learning tasks. The framework includes learner attention, learner involvement, learning condition, metalinguistic information, modes, and providers. Researchers such as [32,33,26,34] have offered frameworks for selection of tasks that include the cognitive analysis of task complexity.

5. FOCUS-ON-FORM IN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT)

With the inception of CLT in various L2 programmes throughout the globe, one issue remains controversial; what is the place of grammar in CLT? One extreme view is that we should do away with grammar instruction altogether. [35] through his comprehensible input theory argued that instruction that more closely resembles the characteristics of "natural" environment can eventually lead to mastery of the target language in much the same way that a child acquires his first language (L1) provided that the learner receives enough exposure to the language. However, his view has come under heavy criticism for its neglect of the role of formal grammar instruction in second language acquisition beyond the critical period.

Though theoretical and empirical evidence [36, 37,38] indicates that CLT results in greater

fluency and communicative confidence compared to purely form-focused instruction, there is also evidence to show that CLT does not necessarily result in high levels of language accuracy, as exposure to "natural contexts" is deemed insufficient for L2 learners beyond the critical period to produce accurate, native-like use of the language [39].

Research providing evidence that CLT does not necessarily result in grammatical accuracy comes mainly from Canadian French immersion programmes which [35] referred to as "communicative programmes par excellence" since they are exclusively communication oriented, with a primary focus on subject-matter. In an evaluation of a group of learners' acquisition of French as a second language, [40] found that though learners are able to speak French fluently and confidently, their accuracy in French syntax and morphology is still far below what one might expect of learners who are immersed in the second language. Some observers have even concluded that French immersion is the best demonstration of the inadequacy of CLT [41].

[38] also highlighted the importance of integrating grammar instruction in CLT to achieve communicative competence. They identify four interacting areas of knowledge and skill which would encompass communicative competence; grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. According to [18], research findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experiences. Therefore, though grammar is taught in CLT, it is not viewed as a separate entity from communication. Neither is it the goal of language teaching. Instead, the need to focus on grammatical competence is intimately linked to the need to combine grammatical forms and meanings not only at word, but also at sentence and text level to enable learners to construct and generate structurally cohesive and coherent longer sentences and texts [42]. In other words, grammatical competence is intertwined with discourse competence which deals with cohesion and coherence in different genres, while sociolinguistic and strategic competence would require learners to consider not only speech acts, but speech events, domains and participants, when choosing language varieties and codes.

The available data appear to indicate that there is a need to incorporate grammar in meaning-

focused lessons. A much debated and investigated option is the use of focus-on-form instruction. Focus-on-form instruction advocates the use of negative feedback or error correction as and when the need arises. Often feedback could come from the teacher or other learners. Researchers have shown that both sources of feedback could have positive effects of L2 learning [43,44,45,46]. Self or peer initiated focus on linguistic forms allow students to seek information about problematic linguistic items as the need arises during meaning-focused activities.

How does learner initiated focus on linguistic forms figure in CLT which is often viewed as being meaning-focused? [47] argues that CLT can actually be viewed as a continuum. In the CLT continuum, the "weak" form is at one end, while the "strong" form is at the other end [47]. CLT at the weak end does not reject grammar teaching [48]. As a result, grammar teaching appeared in syllabuses and course books with "traditional" exercises such as filling in the blanks and rewriting short paragraphs after making corrections to targeted grammar items. On the other hand, the "strong" version of CLT completely rejects grammar focus. Instead, it advocates that grammar acquisition would be an outcome of involving students in tasks. The rationale behind this argument is that students would utilise all the language at their disposal and acquire new language through interaction with other learners and the instructor, while they are involved in activities such as role-plays, problem-solving and simulations. An oft-quoted leader in deep-end CLT is [34] through his Bangalore Project. The Bangalore project was the predecessor of what is now known as task-based learning [48]. The Bangalore project was exclusively communication oriented. A strong advocator of purely communicative lessons, [34] argued that learners would acquire language through exposure to the target language as well as through negotiations of meaning during the course of completing tasks.

However, research [49,50] has shown that purely communicative lessons, devoid of focus on grammar, would result in inaccurate language use. [37] and [51] claim that learners might not have the competence to cope with language required to accomplish the task. Also, the learners would end up speaking inaccurate language which would be deeply embedded in the learners' long-term memory, as the absence of grammar focus would not give teachers the opportunities to make appropriate corrections.

The role of the teacher in CLT has been criticised as being detrimental to learners' interlanguage development and could potentially lead to fossilization. [52] claims that in the pursuit of CLT, teachers have altered their conceptualisation of teaching and learning. Consequently, form-focused instruction is deemed detrimental to L2 acquisition and is accorded low status. However, this view has been challenged especially from the early 1990s. It has been claimed that the great tolerance shown towards errors could result in stunted interlanguage development.

In addition, heavy reliance on communicative and comprehension strategies could also lead to fossilization. Oft-used strategies to avoid using language forms learners are not familiar with include avoidance and simplification. Avoidance is said to occur when specific language features are under-represented in learner production in comparison to native-speaker production [53]. One possible cause is L1 transfer [53]. For instance, Malay learners of English might avoid the use of different passive forms (e.g. past passive, present perfect passive, past perfect passive) because Bahasa Malaysia does not contain equivalent structures. Meanwhile, the simplification strategy includes overgenerali-sation, omission, reduction, substitution and restructuring [54]. When learners overgeneralise, they reduce the target language to a simpler system. For instance, they use the plural form of nouns with both countable and uncountable nouns. Learners who use the omission strategy would leave out certain grammatical items. For example, they use the root form of verbs even when past tense forms are required. Using the reduction strategy, learners reduce more complex systems to simpler ones. For example, breaking up complex sentences into simple sentences, while in substitution, learners use simpler systems to replace complex ones [54]. For example, learners might use verbs instead of phrasal verbs. Finally, learners use the restructuring strategy when using easier substitutes, like the active form instead of the passive form, even though the latter would have been the more appropriate choice. An overuse of strategies could cause them to become proceduralised thus hindering further development of interlanguage towards native-like accuracy [55]. This means that learners reach a plateau and do not further develop their interlanguage, hence reaching premature fossilization.

Some linguists argue that formal instruction can prevent early fossilization particularly among adult learners. [30], for example, has put forth two arguments in favour of formal instruction; (a) Grammar instruction is necessary for learners to acquire the more difficult grammar rules such as verb-end and inversion, (b) grammar instruction may help speed up the learning process and naturalistic acquisition of the target language is a time-consuming and slow process.

As a result of the criticisms levelled against purely communicative syllabuses, task-based learning has more recently relaxed its approach to grammar, largely through the recognition of the value of a focus-on-form [48]. This is achieved through the use of covert grammar teaching. This means teaching to a communicative syllabus (i.e., syllabus organised around language functions or tasks) but dealing with grammar questions that arise in the course of doing communicative activities. [48] claims that there is a sense of grammar revival resulting from the emergence of focus-on-form instruction and consciousness–raising activities. "Consciousness" is often linked to awareness, control, fluency and attention [10]. Awareness enables learners to notice the gap between their current interlanguage system and the target language [56]. [33] uses the term "strong and weak forms of the task-based approach". He further explains that a strong form has tasks as the unit of language teaching. Interlanguage development is perceived to occur while dealing with tasks. It is as though second language acquisition goes through the same process of interaction as first language acquisition. A weak form of task-based instruction would have tasks embedded in more complex pedagogical contexts. This type of task-based instruction is compatible with practices in weak CLT. For instance, there could be grammar presentation, practice and production in the lesson sequence, with tasks used only in the production stage. [4] uses the term task-supported language teaching, to indicate lessons that use tasks in supporting roles, as opposed to tasks as the organising principle.

6. FOCUS-ON-FORM PEDAGOGY

The focus-on-form approach to L2 learning conforms to certain criteria as outlined by advocators of this approach. Most importantly, focus-on-form must occur within a communicative context. The noticing of the language problem might be self-initiated or other-initiated (initiated by other interlocutors). It could be pre-emptive or reactive. In pre-emptive focus-on-form, a teacher would have already identified a grammar item she would like her learners to deal with. Through a needs analysis, a teacher might identify a grammar item that a majority of her learners have problems using. Therefore, she might use input floods that would naturally elicit the use of certain grammatical forms in learners' interaction. For example, the use of dictogloss tasks with texts loaded with specific grammatical items such as the past perfect and the past simple. In a dictogloss task, the learners engage in some discussion about the topic in the upcoming text and do some preparatory vocabulary work. Then, during the dictation stage, they listen to a short text, usually between four to six sentences, read at a normal speed by the teacher, or played from an audio recording. Learners will typically hear the text twice; the first time with pens down listening for meaning, and the second time taking notes of mostly key or content words. They should not try to write everything down. Then during the reconstruction stage, students work together in small groups to reconstruct the text, in complete sentences, from their shared resources. Students discuss and negotiate to cohesively reproduce the text. It should be as semantically and grammatically accurate as possible to the original text but need not be identical. Finally, during the analysis and correction stage, students read their final product to compare and evaluate their answers. They should finally sort out any errors, especially focusing on form, or the targeted grammatical structure and meaning. It is during the last 2 stages of the task that students would engage in interaction to reconstruct the text, analyse the reconstructed text, and make corrections to the text. During the course of interaction, learners are likely to encounter problems in language which they might deal with. This is when focus-on-form occurs. Learners work through their language problems in the course of completing a task given. Meanwhile, in reactive focus-on-form, there is no pre-determined language item. A teacher might get students to engage in a discussion based on a topic given, and the learners and the teacher might deal with problems in language use as and when the need arises throughout the discussion. Another important feature of focus-on-form is that it is brief and does not override the primary focus on conveying meaning and engaging in communication. Usually, it is implicit and does involve giving metalinguistic explanation. However, using metalinguisctic language to

explain grammar rules sometimes occur during focus-on-form episodes.

Focus-on-form might seem to be learner-eccentric as it focuses on the benefits of learner-learner interaction in a task-based context. However, it actually does not ignore the teacher's role. It is recognised that one pitfall of learner focus-on-form is that it might lead to incorrect conclusions with regards to language use which learners might internalise. Hence, some form of teacher feedback is necessary to ensure accurate language use. For example when engaging in a dictogloss task, the feedback could be provided during the post-task stage when learners present their reconstructed texts in class, or the teacher could take the initiative to check the learners' work as they are working through the tasks. Of course, the teacher should not be intrusive or disrupt learner-learner sustained interaction unnecessarily. The issue of teacher feedback has received great attention in the focus-on-form context, and some of the recommendations made are to use explicit techniques such as metalinguistic feedback, or implicit techniques such as recasts. Teacher feedback could be especially important in assisting learners to work out errors that they resolved incorrectly. In short, even though learner focus-on-form is encouraged in the task-based lesson, teacher review of learners' work is still crucial to ensure that errors are not internalised.

Research on the use of focus-on-form in task-based language teaching has shown positive effects on L2 learning. [57] used a "fire chief task" where the learners had to decide on the order in which they would rescue a number of people in a burning building. They then had to justify their actions and their choices. He found that the group of students that received focus-on-form instruction had a higher mean of accuracy score compared to the group of student that did not receive focus-on-form instruction. [58] investigated the effects of using preemptive and reactive focus-on-form on grammar learning. For the preemptive group, the researchers used an input enhancement task where learners received a reading text with the target items (tenses) highlighted, underlined and color-coded. Also, a set of questions was given. The questions would require learners to use the targeted language item. Then the teacher used a production task that required learners to explain two pictures given. This time the teacher wrote their responses on the board and underlined the tenses. Finally for the picture description task, the learners had to describe the pictures given. For the reactive group, the learners did the picture description tasks and when learners had problems with grammar use, the teacher intervened and engaged learners using focus-on-form techniques to correct the erroneous utterance. The post test results showed that the reactive group outperformed the preemptive group. The researchers concluded that teacher intervention (including the use of metalinguistic explanations) when learners made mistakes with their language use is more effective than dealing with grammatical forms that teachers have pre-determined and incorporated in the tasks using input enhancements.

7. CONCLUSION

Tasks as the organising principle with focus-on-form instruction would seem to be a logical move in light of the arguments levelled against CLT. In particular, as more and more L2 pedagogical research has shifted towards task-based teaching and learning, with its emphasis on promoting language development in a learner-centred context, a growing number of L2 interaction studies have started to examine the benefits of learner-learner interaction during collaborative meaning-oriented tasks [45].

SLA researchers generally concur that instruction does facilitate acquisition. A viable option would be to use focus-on-form instruction which shifts students' attention to linguistic problems temporarily as they rise incidentally in communicative or meaning-focused lessons. With the use of focus-on-form instruction in TBLT, the language instructor or other learners could bring attention to erroneous forms and these could be dealt with there and then. Thus, learners who use incorrect language forms, learners who avoid certain forms or learners who extensively employ simplification strategies could potentially gain from the linguistic focus and corrective feedback, and ultimately avoid premature fossilisation.

This paper served to provide conceptual underpinnings for the use of focus-on-form in TBLT. To grasp the concept of focus-on-form in TBLT, it is important for practitioners to have substantial understanding of what tasks are, how the use of tasks is implemented in L2 learning and how attention to language forms as and when the need arises in the course of communicating meaning facilitates learning. The

theories that underpin the use of focus-on-form in TBLT provide the rationale and foundation for practising this approach to L2 learning, while the examples of lessons and findings from research help illustrate the effectiveness of this approach.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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