Task-based Language Teaching and Focus on Form

Mohammad Golshan

Department of English, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Yazd, Iran

Abstract

This paper examines the role of focus on form in Task- based language teaching (TBLT). It discusses the importance of TBLT with regard to second language acquisition and language pedagogy. A brief review of the relevant literature with regard to communicative tasks and necessity of focus on form in TBLT will be provided and two important ways through which focus on form can be integrated into second language teaching will be introduced and discussed.

Keywords: Task, Task-based language teaching, Focus on form

Introduction

The origin of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) goes back to the development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in 1970's when it was introduced as a reaction to the behaviorist audio-lingual methods of language teaching in 1960s, because these methods could not lead to the development of learner's communicative language ability in the foreign language (Leaver & Willis, 2004). It emerged in the 1980's in Parbhu's Communicational Teaching Project and was further developed by the findings of SLA research. Interest in this approach to instruction gained momentum during 1990's when a large number of studies on task design, task selection, task implementation and other features related to tasks were published (for an overall review see Ellis, 2003). Gradually and following these studies, a considerable number of books on TBLT were printed (e.g., Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Van den Branden, 2006).

TBLT is a teaching approach which is an alternative to traditional method of teaching (i.e., Present, Practice, Production), and is based on the use of communicative and interactive tasks as the unit of organization (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to the proponents of TBLT, the most effective way to teach a foreign language is engaging learners in real language use (Willis & Willis, 2007). Van den Branden, Bygate and Norris (2009) enumerate the main aspects of TBLT. According to Van den Branden et al. (2009), TBLT is concerned with holistic learning, is learner-centered and stresses communication-basing instruction. Nowadays, a growing number of theoreticians prefer to replace CLT with TBLT because it offers researchers a more researchable paradigm than CLT approach (Durnyei, 2009). Tasks also lend themselves to a more rigorous and precise definitions in comparison with CLT which, due to its broad domain, has been interpreted and implemented in various ways since its inception (Spada, 2007).

SLA research has witnessed an increasing interest in TBLT in the past three decades because TBLT is important to both second language acquisition and second language teaching. This interest in TBLT can be attributed to the fact that "task" is considered a construct of equal importance to both SLA researchers and language teachers (Pica, 1997). However, according to Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2000), "task" is viewed differently in research and pedagogy.

Tasks and Second Language Acquisition

Significance of tasks with regard to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) can be discussed in terms of a) their utility as tools in research design, b) ped-

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Corresponding author: Mohammad Golshan, Department of English, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Yazd, Iran. E-mail: mohammadgolshann@gmail.com

agogical units used as object of inquiry, and c) inherent value based on research findings.

During the last 40 years, communicative tasks have played a significant role in descriptive and theoretically-based SLA studies because they have been used as research instruments and have also become focus of research in their own right. In descriptive studies which were mainly conducted in 1970's and early 1980's (see Chaudron, 1988), tasks were used to elicit communicative samples of learner language. These samples of language use are important from an SLA perspective because they help researchers document how learners structure and restructure their interlanguage (Ellis, 2003). Therefore, tasks have always been invaluable tools in many SLA studies.

Tasks have also been used as objects of inquiry in theoretically-based research to test the hypotheses derived from theories such as input hypothesis (Krashen, 1981,1985), interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), theories of language competence and of speech production (Skehan, 1996), and Levelt's (1989) model of speech production. The goal of this strand of research has been to determine those psycholinguistic characteristics associated with tasks which can affect the nature of language that learners comprehend and produce. The studies which were conducted within these lines of research in both classroom and laboratory settings aimed at investigating whether task design variables such as unfocused vs. focused, input-providing vs. output-pushing, type of gap (i.e., reasoning, information, opinion), and task complexity etc., and implementation features such as lockstep vs. pair work, inclusion of pre-task stage, online planning vs. offline planning and so on impacted on interaction and production. It should be noted that a number of studies were also motivated by sociocultural theory.

Tasks and Language Pedagogy

The importance of adopting a CLT approach and using tasks in support of this approach has also been recognized by language teachers, materials writers and course designers. In order to make language teaching more communicative, tasks have been incorporated into traditional language teaching methods or have been used as the main instructional units in the entire course. TBLT is a realization of CLT at the levels of syllabus design and methodology (Nunan, 2004). Howatt (1984, 2004) makes a

distinction between a strong and weak form of CLT. According to Howatt, the strong version, unlike the weak version, is a holistic approach based on which language is learned through communication and the linguistic system will be automatically acquired during the process of learning how to communicate. TBLT, as a strong version of CLT, is used in language pedagogy because it affords learners the chance to learn a language by experiencing it. Ellis (2003) refers to these two approaches to using tasks as "task-supported language teaching" and "task-based language teaching" respectively (p.27). Task-supported language teaching employs tasks for the purpose of providing communicative practice for the traditionally taught items while TBLT is based on the premise that tasks are both necessary and sufficient for learning, and therefore constitute the main elements in a syllabus.

Since traditional methods of language teaching did not prepare language learners for communicative language ability in real life encounters, task-based and task-supported approaches have been introduced into language teaching in support of an approach that reflects real life language use and entails primary focus on meaning. Using tasks in language classes offers learners ample opportunity to process meaningful input and produce meaningful output that are said to be essential for language acquisition. This positive orientation towards using tasks in language teaching can be attributed to the research that has shown that people do not learn in an additive, linear fashion and learners rarely move to immediate target like mastery of new forms and items in one step (Ellis, 2003). TBLT as a type of analytic approach to selection and gradation of items for an educational program paves the way for naturalistic learning processes because it promotes rich exposure to comprehensible input and many opportunities for interaction and output which are all believed to contribute to acquisition (Rĭvĭsz, 2007). In fact, learners are expected to learn a second language incidentally and implicitly from exposure to comprehensible input and engagement in communicative tasks. Language use through tasks is transferable to real world because the kinds of communicative behaviors that normally arise from doing tasks are similar to real life language use (Van den Branden, 2006).

Nunan (2004) puts forward six pedagogical principles and practices which are strengthened by TBLT. They include:

1- A needs-based approach to content selection.

2- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the

target language.

3- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.

4- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.

5- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.

6- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom. (p. 1)

As it can be interpreted from the above list, TBLT is a step forward toward addressing the concerns that have always been prevalent in discussions of language pedagogy. TBLT is no more a teacher-dominated methodology. It is an approach in which learner takes the central role with regard to selecting, sequencing and presenting course content and other aspects of educational activity. The teacher's main role is motivating and supporting learners to engage in communicative behavior (Van den Branden, 2006). Learners' needs for future are recognized and learning processes and activities are as authentic as possible, and therefore, the cognitive operations and language behavior that tasks evoke resemble those that people need to perform in real life. It is in line with humanistic principles of education which acknowledge the importance of both affective and cognitive dimensions inlearning (Ellis, 2003).

Communicative tasks

Communicative tasks have been defined as tasks that engage learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while the primary focus is on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989). According to Richards & Rodgers, 2001, in communicative tasks, a) primary focus is on meaning, b) there is some kind of gap between the speaker and the listener, c) learners have to rely on their linguistic and nonlinguistic resources to complete the task, and d) there is a clear outcome other than the use of language. Communicative tasks are different from traditional language tasks in that the completion of traditional language tasks entails paying attention to linguistic properties such as lexical and grammatical features for the purpose of learning and practic-

ing them (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). The main value of communicative tasks can be attributed to the fact that they help learners develop communicative skills and fluency in a foreign language.

Communicative tasks can be categorized into two general categories of focused and unfocused tasks. In unfocused tasks, the teacher or researcher does not attempt to manipulate the design and execution of the task to elicit a particular linguistic feature while a focused communicative task is designed and implemented in such a way that it elicits the use of specific linguistic features. Focused tasks are of value to both teachers and researchers. Researchers can measure whether learners can use a linguistic feature spontaneously for communication while teachers can use them to teach specific linguistic features communicatively. TBLT can benefit from both of these communicative tasks. In the next section, we will consider the necessity of focus on form in communicative tasks.

Importance of Focus on Form in Communicative Tasks

As mentioned above, using communicative tasks contributes to the development of communicative skills and fluency in a foreign language. Nonetheless, the problem that arises when we shift from a traditional way of presenting language to adoption of a purely communicative approach, which draws on implicit and incidental ways of learning, is that overall language performance improves to a great extent in terms of fluency and communicative needs, but learners' accuracy of language use suffers. Although children learn their first language implicitly and reach native-speaking proficiency in their first language, implicit learning does not appear to be effective when we learn a second language at a later stage in our lives. In fact, uninstructed learners do not achieve sufficient progress in their L2 learning (Dцrnyei, 2009). The evidence in this regard comes from two kinds of studies: (1) descriptive and experimental studies in educational contexts like immersion programs which were purely communicative and were dependent on implicit learning, (2) experimental studies conducted in laboratory settings that investigated implicit and explicit learning.

Communicative Classrooms: Immersion programs evidence

Immersion programs refers to an approach in sec-

ond language pedagogy where academic subjects are taught in the target language. Therefore, immersion classrooms seem to be a highly communicative context and a good setting for implicit language education because a tremendous amount of meaning-focused input is available in such classes and the learners have ample opportunity for functioning in the second language (Doughty, 2003). Research focusing on the immersion classrooms has indicated that immersion students develop functional abilities in second language, but their production shows that they have not reached a native-like proficiency in terms of grammatical and pragmatic competence (Harley & swain, 1984; Lightbown & Spada, 1990). The shortcomings of immersion programs (non-native grammatical and pragmatic proficiency) can also be observed in other communicative programs where teaching linguistic forms has no place (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Lightbown and Spada (2006) refer to a number of studies which focused on teaching form in immersion programs (e.g., Day & Shapson, 1991; Doughty & Valera, 1998; Harley, 1998; Lyster, 1994; Samuda, 2001) and conclude that there is support for the hypothesis that form-focused instruction and CF within communicative second language programs is needed. Therefore, the overall findings of research on immersion programs indicate that students need form-focused instruction in the context of primary focus on meaning.

Implicit and Explicit Learning in Laboratory and Classroom Studies

A large number of studies which have investigated the beneficial effects of explicit and implicit learning reveal that explicit types of second language instruction are superior to implicit types. As Norris and Ortega (2000) reported, "on average instruction that incorporates explicit (including deductive and inductive) techniques leads to more substantial effects than implicit instruction" (pp. 500-1). A number of other researchers also pointed out that explicit instruction is more advantageous than implicit instruction (see De Keyser & Juffs, 2005).

From all these accounts, we face a big challenge when we decide to integrate grammar into a communicative course such as TBLT because we need to be careful not to compromise the value of tasks which require primary focus on meaning by introducing grammar teaching because we are very likely to draw the students' attention to form and change the nature of tasks. Ellis (2012) aptly warns

about this when he notes:

> The danger here (in pre-teaching the target structure) is that the 'taskness' will be subverted (emphasis added) as learners respond by treating the task as a situational grammar exercise that require the display of correct language rather than a communicative exercise. (p. 225)

Among the proposals that have been made concerning the incorporation of grammar into task-based instruction has been focus on form approach.

Emergence of the Notion of Focus on Form

The problems associated with traditional approaches and dissatisfaction with purely communicative approaches and the research findings which were mentioned above led researchers to propose an approach to the integration of grammar into analytic syllabuses which is called focus on form (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). This approach was first proposed by Long (1991) and since early nineties different definitions have been proposed. Two of the most important ones which include Long's (1991) and Doughty and William's (1998) definitions are introduced below.

Long's Definition

According to Long, (1991), focus on form " draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (pp. 45-46). Long holds that focus on form is more effective than focus on forms, arguing that this way of integrating grammar into analytic syllabuses can retain the strength of this type of syllabus which has primary focus on meaning and at the same time can deal with its limitations (Long & Robinson, 1998). This definition of focus on form can be operationalized as a teacher's and/or another interlocutor's occasional shift of attention to linguistic features of the target language in response to the comprehension and production problems which arise due to those features. In other words, focus on form is both incidental and reactive and occurs in a primarily meaning-focused context. As it was mentioned in the introduction, studies on meaning-based programs such as task-based instruction and immersing programs have shown that the desired level of grammatical development cannot be achieved

through programs whose pure focus is on meaning. (e.g., Harley & Swain, 1984; Swain, 1985), and thus, Long's focus on form can be considered a solution to this problem because learners' primary attention is on meaning when a linguistic feature is addressed or introduced. Long (2000) contends that the methodological principle of focus on form is largely motivated by Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1990, 2001) which holds that noticing is a cognitive process that involves attending to the input that learners receive. According to this hypothesis, attention is a necessary condition for converting input into intake.

Doughty and Williams' Definition

Following Long's (1991) definition, Doughty and Williams (1998) made a distinction between focus on form, focus on forms and focus on meaning. They point out that:

> Focus on forms and focus on form are not polar opposites in the way form and meaning have often been considered to be. Rather focus on form entails a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on forms is limited to such a focus, and focus on meaning excludes it. (p.4, italics in original)

Doughty and William's definition of focus on form entails three critical characteristics: 1) the need to engage in meaning prior to attention to form, 2) the importance of identifying learner's language problems that require intervention, 3) the necessity of brief and unobtrusive treatment. In comparison with Long's definition, Doughty and Williams' definition is broader in scope and includes planned focus on form along with incidental focus. It should be noted that later Long adopted Doughty and Williams' definition for TBLT (cf. Long, 2000).

There is now quite a large amount of research conducted with learners of different ages and levels that suggests a focus on form at some point within a TBLT can help learners achieve greater levels of accuracy because it draws learners' attention to points of language that may go unnoticed in meaning loaded classes (see Ellis, 2003; Lightbown, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Long, 1991 for summaries).

Focus on Form VS Focus on Forms

Now that the concept of focus on form has been introduced and defined, it is better to make a distinc-

tion between a focus on forms and a focus on form. First, let's define form-focused instruction. Ellis (2001) defines form-focused instruction as follows:

> Form-focused instruction is used to refer to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form.... FFI includes both traditional approaches to teaching form based on structural syllabi and more communicative approaches where attention to form arises out of activities that are primarily meaning-focused. (pp.1-2)

Focus on forms refers to the type of form-focused instruction that isolates linguistic forms in order to teach and test them one at a time and is normally based on a structural syllabus, but focus on form, as was mentioned above, is a principled way of alternating between a focus on meaning and a focus on form (Long, 1991). Focus on form takes place in task-based syllabus when learner's attention is focused on specific linguistic properties in the course of doing a communicative task (Ellis, 2008). Ellis (2012) points out that the main difference between these two approaches lies in whether language is viewed as a tool for communication or it is an object to be studied. Focus on form occurs when the learners view language as a tool for communication and the language learner learns a form in the context of primary focus on meaning. Both sociocultural theory and interactionist-cognitive theories lend support to focus on form instruction. Sociocultural theory views focus on form as a kind of mediation between intra and interpsycological processes in learning while interactionist-cognitive theories discuss the value of focus on form in terms of cognitive acquisition processes which result from this approach such as noticing, noticing the gap and modified output.

A number of other SLA theories such as skill-learning theories, which consider rule learning as a perquisite for declarative knowledge that is needed for subsequent proceduralization and automatization, support focus on forms. However, according to Long (1991), instruction which is based on focus on forms cannot have the desirable outcomes. This kind of focus leads to lessons which are dry and consist of linguistic forms with little communicative use (Long, 2000). Long holds that instruction built on focus on form on the other hand results in faster learning and higher level of acquisition. It is learner-centered, and happens when learner is attending to meaning and has a communication

problem.

These two types of focus on form entail different ways of syllabus design. Focus on form requires a task-based syllabus in which focused and unfocused communicative tasks are used for selection and gradation. In this type of syllabus, focus on form is determined reactively. Focus on forms, on the other hand, needs a linguistic syllabus and the forms to be taught are all selected and graded in advance.

It should be noted, however, that the distinction between focus on form and focus on forms is not without controversy. Batstone (2002) argues that focus on form might change into focus on forms from context to context and from activity to activity when students divert their attention from paying attention to meaning to form and this is what focus on form does not support at all. Besides, focus on form activities can also be different in terms of obtrusiveness (Doughty & Williams, 1998) and degree of explicitness (Sharwood-Smith, 1981). However, the researcher believes that the distinction is a useful one because focus on meaning is what counts and these distinctions can just be considered important when specific research questions are concerned.

Conclusion

TBLT plays a significant role in second language theory and practice. On the surface of it, it seems that adopting a task-based syllabus is a solution to the problems of language acquisition posed by synthetic syllabuses and implementing tasks as units of syllabus design and instruction will contribute to second language acquisition effectively. Nonetheless, closer exploration of tasks revels that the story is far from over. SLA research has indicated that a purely meaning-focused approach in general and a task-based syllabus in particular without being augmented by some kind of grammar instruction will not suffice. Since the meaningful use of language will necessarily imply that the relevant form-meaning mappings should occur, the learner will need to manipulate and pay some attention either consciously or unconsciously to form. So, there is a consensus among many researchers that there should be a place for focus on grammar in TBLT and the claims of those who claim they can teach a second language without grammar are far from being realistic.

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