

# Form-focused tasks in ELT coursebooks: A framework for analysis

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| 著者                           | Nitta Ryo, Gardner Sheena   |
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# Form-focused tasks in ELT coursebooks: A framework for analysis

Ryo Nitta and Sheena Gardner

## Abstract

Current grammar pedagogies tend to reflect the influence of recent SLA research in favour of input-processing rather than skill-building models. The detailed impact of these pedagogies and research on contemporary teaching materials, however, is less clear. This paper proposes a framework of criterial features of consciousness-raising (C-R) and practice tasks which is then used to explore the relationships between the features, and to investigate the nature and sequencing of form-focused tasks in ELT coursebooks. This research reveals an incremental shift from less interactional, input-based tasks to more interactional, production-based tasks through the teaching stages. More importantly, most materials use several types of form-focused tasks in rather fixed sequential patterns of interpretation tasks to grammar consciousness raising tasks to grammar exercises to grammar practice activities which follow a meaning → meaning>form → form/meaning → meaning progression. Theoretical explanations are offered in support of this data-driven model.

## 1. Introduction

Current grammar pedagogy in English Language Teaching (ELT) promotes awareness-raising rather than practice based activities (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Batstone, 1994; Thornbury, 2001); with a focus on 'process' rather than 'product' (Pennington, 1995); and a 'dynamic' and 'complex' rather than 'static' nature (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). Together they represent a paradigm shift influenced by second language acquisition (SLA) theory that strongly suggests that input-processing, rather than skill-building, models account for effective L2 development. The extent to which ELT materials have made this switch is a matter for empirical investigation. Indeed it has been suggested that a combination (Hopkins & Nettle, 1994) or compromise (Thornbury, 2001: 78–80) of approaches might be expected in classroom practice. It is the aim of this paper to propose a framework for investigating the nature of such combinations or compromises in ELT coursebooks, to explore which awareness-raising features appear in grammar activities, and how these are sequenced. This paper builds on previous work that suggests that while grammar practice materials tend to be dominated by explicit, deductive presentation of grammar rules and controlled practice (Ellis, 2002), general ELT coursebooks provide a balance of activities reflecting both input-processing and skill-building models (Nitta & Gardner, 2005).

Examination of grammar tasks in published materials is not only interesting in itself as a measure of the impact of SLA theory, and of ‘state-of-the-art’ grammar pedagogy, but can also inform theory with its unique perspective.

Following a review of recent research which outlines the relationship between input-processing and skill-building models of SLA (Ellis, 2001), we propose a typology of five form-focused tasks (FFT) — three consciousness-raising and two practice — and a framework which identifies their criterial features. This framework is then used to analyse a selection of contemporary course materials to provide insights on the nature and sequencing of published FFT.

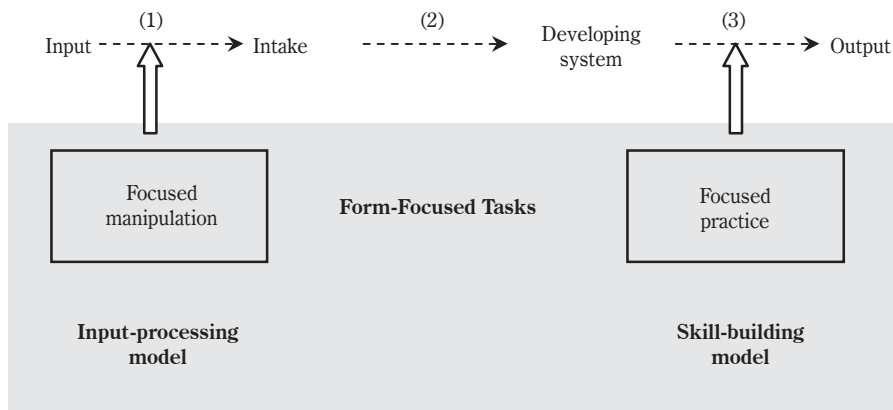
## 2. A rationale for form-focused tasks in SLA perspectives

In SLA research, there is general agreement on the explicit-implicit dichotomy (Schmidt, 1990), but questions remain about implications for language classrooms. One of the most debated issues was the controversy between Krashen’s “non-interface” and Bialystok’s “interface” position. The former claimed that explicit instruction has little influence on L2 development, and ‘comprehensible input’ in a supportive natural environment is sufficient for successful acquisition (e.g. Krashen, 1985), while the latter insisted on the importance of deliberate practice to transform explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge (e.g. Bialystok, 1978).

The explicit/implicit issue is raised in diverse forms; one is the psycholinguistic debate between *input-processing* theories, which are primarily concerned with ‘how learners derive intake from input’ (VanPatten, 2002: 757), and *skill-building* theories, which attempt to automatize acquired explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge through production practice (Ellis, 2001: 36). The discussion of both theories acknowledges formal instruction in language classrooms as playing a key role in developing L2 acquisition, at least contributing to accelerating the rate of development and attaining higher levels of L2 proficiency (Long, 1988). Thus the debate is between input-processing and skill-building perspectives, or methodologically, what types of instruction should accompany output practice (Larsen-Freeman 2003).

To focus on the links between SLA theory and practice, we adopt a model that glosses recent research that seeks more detailed classifications of L2 acquisition processes such as ‘attention’ and ‘consciousness’ (e.g. Robinson 1995; Schmidt 1990). (See Figure 1) To convert ‘input’ into ‘intake’ (1), learners need to pay conscious attention to particular forms (‘noticing’) and, as a result of attempts to understand the message content with a form-focus, form-meaning mappings are created; then (2) the linguistic features should be incorporated into learners’ interlanguage system through ‘noticing-the-gap’ between their prior knowledge and received new information (Schmidt & Frota, 1986), and subsequent revision of their hypotheses occurs in the ‘developing system’ (i.e. ‘restructuring’: McLaughlin, 1990); finally, (3) acquired knowledge should be trained through dint of practice to produce utterances quickly

## Form-focused tasks in ELT coursebooks



**Figure 1** Input-Processing and Skill-Building Instruction (Based on VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993: 46)

and easily under real communication pressure. This includes what cognitive psychologists describe as how ‘declarative knowledge’ is changed into ‘proceduralized knowledge’, and in the end ‘automatized’ (Anderson, 1985).

According to input-processing theorists, the value of skill-building-based grammar instruction is dubious because following the hypothesized flow of the computational model that ‘acquisition is intake-dependent’ (2) and ‘intake is in turn input-dependent’ (1) (VanPatten, 1996: 7), practice focused only on the automatizing process (3) is unable to effectively influence learner’s development (VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993: 46). Moreover, drawing on the Teachability Hypothesis, Pienemann (1984) argues that unless learners are developmentally ready to assimilate target items, practice does not work.

However, in spite of such negative views of practice, there are current theories which offer support. In a skill-building view, practising is a crucial attempt to develop internalized (often ‘declarative’) knowledge into an automated condition in order to effectively function in rapid online processing. Without this training, declarative knowledge requires a great capacity of Working Memory because learners always have to access declarative knowledge in Long Term Memory and generate appropriate utterances from scratch. As a natural consequence of the burden on cognitive processes, un-automatized knowledge takes too much time in communicating. This offers support for a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approach that progresses from explicit (and often deductive) explanation through various kinds of practice to “contextualized” or “communicative” production.

Our particular focus lies between form-focused instruction (see Ellis 2001 for a summary of FFI) and task-based teaching (e.g. Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Skehan 1998), in what we have called form-focused tasks (FFT). These are similar to “structure-based communication tasks” (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), “structure-based interactive tasks” (Fotos, 2002) and “focused-tasks” (Ellis, 2003), but whereas others are limited to communicative tasks with some grammar focus, our

category, as Figure 1 suggests, includes any type of FFT, from traditional grammar practice exercises to recently-introduced processing tasks inspired by SLA research. Thus in contrast to definitions of “task” as a meaning focused activity with communicative outcome (Ellis 2003; Skehan 1998), form-focused tasks in this paper deliberately include mechanical practice (Ur 1988) or what Fortune (1992) dubbed the ‘gang of three’ (focus on form, fill in the gap, isolated sentences) exercises, with a view to interpreting the balance in contemporary materials of older and newer types of grammar activity.

### **3. A typology of five form-focused tasks**

In this FFT context, our typology is initially two-fold to compare consciousness-raising and practising tasks; and thus investigate the uptake of an input-processing model versus the longstanding adherence to a skill-building model. With this, we concentrate on five types of FFT:

#### **Consciousness-raising tasks**

- Grammar consciousness-raising tasks (GCR)
- Interpretation tasks (IT)
- Focused communication tasks (FCT)

#### **Practising tasks**

- Grammar practice activities (GPA)
- Grammar exercises (GEx)

Examples of the five task type are given in section 6 below. Here I discuss their distinctive features. Consciousness-raising (C-R) pedagogy is defined as ‘the deliberate attempt to draw the learner’s attention to the formal properties of the target language’ (Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith, 1985: 274). It is noticeable that, as this definition suggests, the primary meaning of C-R is by no means something new — traditional grammar did this — however, the critical distinction is the underlying view of L2 grammar development, and this difference has significant influence on the degree of explicitness of grammar (Sharwood-Smith, 1981). The “old grammar” is explicit, and characterized by a ‘linear’ process or ‘the gradual accumulation of these entities’ (Nunan, 1991: 149) with explicit and direct explanation of a target form, followed by ‘restricted and controlled production of correct sentences’ (Pennington, 1995: vi). On the other hand, current popular views are marked in that ‘the process perspective on grammatical acquisition is a long-term focus in which the learner’s interim achievements, temporary behaviour, and progress over time are a central concern’ (Pennington, 1995: vii). To clarify the dissimilarities, these are more properly labelled as ‘direct consciousness-raising’ in the former, and ‘indirect consciousness-raising’ in the latter (Ellis, 2003). This ‘indirect’ or ‘less

explicit' consciousness-raising occurs through task-manipulation, rather than a direct procedure to give an explicit explanation of a language.

Taking such an *organic* process into consideration, one of the critical features of C-R approach is to downplay 'the role of production' and instead emphasize 'the role of cognitive understanding' (Fotos & Ellis, 1991: 609). Contrary to teacher-fronted rule explanation in traditional grammar teaching, *grammar consciousness-raising tasks* (GCR) are designed to guide learners to develop an explicit rule of the target structure as the result of engaging with the grammar task through meaning-focused interaction (*ibid.*).

Among C-R tasks, *interpretation tasks* (IT) (Ellis, 1995, 1997) particularly emphasize an aspect of interpretation (and avoid production of target forms). *Input-enhancement* procedures may increase the perceptual salience of target items by using negative/positive feedback, or giving colour-coding or bolding to particular target structures (Sharwood-Smith, 1993; White *et al.*, 1991), but more importantly the input strings should emphasize meaning in order to push learners to make meaning-form connections, and to turn input into intake, not just notice form (VanPatten, 1996).

*Focused communication tasks* (FCT) share a common C-R feature with the previous tasks in terms of eliciting learners' noticing process for problematic linguistic forms, but significantly differ from them in that this attention is drawn during ongoing communication (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). In contrast to the above comprehension-based tasks, FCT does not hesitate to encourage learners to produce the linguistic forms. According to Ellis (2001: 21), FCT has all the characteristics of communicative tasks, such as meaning-focused, outcome-evaluated and real world relationship. FCT is thus a simple technique to introduce targeted forms combined with communicative tasks, although it is open to examine whether this can be applicable to a wide-range of grammatical features, and whether it is truly effective to develop learners' L2 acquisition.

Under the second category, three types of grammar practice, mechanical, meaningful and communicative practice, are generally recognized (Ur, 1988). The first two types of practice involve interpretation and/or production of correct form, and with no obvious communicative goals. In our research, both these grammar-practising tasks are identified as *grammar exercises* (GEx), in accordance with conventional usage. As Ellis's (2002) analysis of grammar practice books suggests, such GEx are at the centre of popular grammar practice books.

*Grammar practice activities* (GPA) are conducted through 'information- or opinion-gap communication techniques' or through 'activities based on the production of entertaining ideas', following Ur (1988: 9). Contrary to GEx, in which production is not necessarily a task demand (e.g. matching or ordering), one essential characteristic of GPA is a communicative production-based step using the target grammar in speaking or writing. This is one of the approved forms among many skill-building researchers.

#### 4. A framework of criterial features for form-focused tasks

Prototypical tasks from the research literature (e.g. Fotos, 1994, Fotos & Ellis, 1991, 1997 for GCR; Ellis, 1995, 1997 for IT; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993 for FCT; Ur, 1988 for GPA) were examined to distinguish and better understand the criterial features of the five task types. These together form the framework used to analyse tasks in published materials (Table 1). Unfocused communication tasks are not form-focused, but they are included here to distinguish them from FCT.

The features identified here progress from those that relate more to staging and presentation, to those that concern the focus and nature of data manipulation in tasks. These are: (1) typical approach, (2) interaction, (3) form vs. meaning focus, (4) use of metalanguage, (5) controlled vs. free production, (6) required steps

##### 4.1 Typical approach

The first rather global consideration is whether the task is part of a deductive or inductive approach. The deductive approach is typical of traditional grammar instruction involving explanation and subsequent practice. This is critical to the overall distinction between C-R and practice approaches, because it depends on whether understanding the target grammar rule is expected before embarking on the task. The inductive approach is compatible with a “discovery” approach ‘enabling the students to build their own minigrammars by helping them investigate how specific points of grammar work’ (Ellis, 2002: 161). As far as only surface characteristics are concerned, it may be difficult to distinguish between FCT and GPA, but the difference of the intrinsic concept is prominent: C-R tasks are designed for learners to inductively (re-)discover particular linguistic points while being involved in the task, whereas practising tasks assume learners already understand the rule and will apply it.

##### 4.2 Interaction

Consistent with the popularity of communicative and task-based approaches for language learning, opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning through group or pair work are promoted even though it is not easy to combine such communicative-oriented tasks with form-focused instruction (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993). There is much research on detailed interactional task types (e.g. Pica *et al.*, 1993), but in this paper, I simply focus on whether interaction is required to complete a task, regardless of specific type.

##### 4.3 Form vs. meaning focus and use of metalanguage

Form-meaning focus highlights whether learners are required either to consciously deal with grammar (form) or to be engaged in a grammar-free topic designed for *implicitly* promoting understanding or practising the structure (meaning). This sort of distinction can be seen in many other studies, such

Table 1 Framework for Form-Focused Tasks

| SLA Perspective  | Pedagogical Perspective | Task Type                           | Typical Approach | Interaction          | Form vs Meaning Focus | Use of Metalinguage | Controlled vs Free Production | Required Steps               |
|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                  |                         | Grammar Consciousness Raising Tasks | Inductive        | Usually required     | Meaning → Form        | Frequent            | Free                          | Interpretation or Production |
| Input Processing | C-R Grammar             | Interpretation Tasks                | Inductive        | Usually not required | Meaning               | Minimal             | N/A                           | Interpretation               |
|                  |                         | Focused Communication Tasks         | Inductive        | Required             | Meaning               | Optional            | Free                          | Production                   |
|                  |                         | Grammar Exercises                   | Deductive        | Usually not required | Form or Meaning       | Frequent            | Controlled                    | Interpretation or Production |
| Skill Building   | Practice Grammar        | Grammar Practice Activities         | Deductive        | Usually required     | Meaning               | Optional            | Free                          | Production                   |
| N/A              | Non Grammar             | Unfocused Communication Tasks       | N/A              | Required             | Meaning               | Rare                | Free                          | Production                   |



as ‘explicit/implicit learning’ (Ellis, 2003), and ‘focus-on-form/formS’ (Long, 1991). This criterion is useful in recognizing the difference between GCR and IT, because the former frequently has a direct relation to grammatical form; learners are aware that the primary purpose of the task is to learn a particular grammatical item, but the latter tasks usually treat non-grammar topics, and implicitly encourage learners’ noticing of meaningful distinctions. Linked to an aspect of *form vs. meaning focus*, task types more directly connecting to grammar form tend to adopt more frequent use of metalanguage than meaning-focused tasks.

#### 4.4 Controlled vs. free production

Controlled production tasks require learners to produce the target form in a controlled way such as substitution or gap-filling, while free production tasks give learners opportunities to construct their own utterances using the target structure. (Ellis 2002: 159). This distinction is critical in particular to judging between GEx (controlled) and GPA (free).

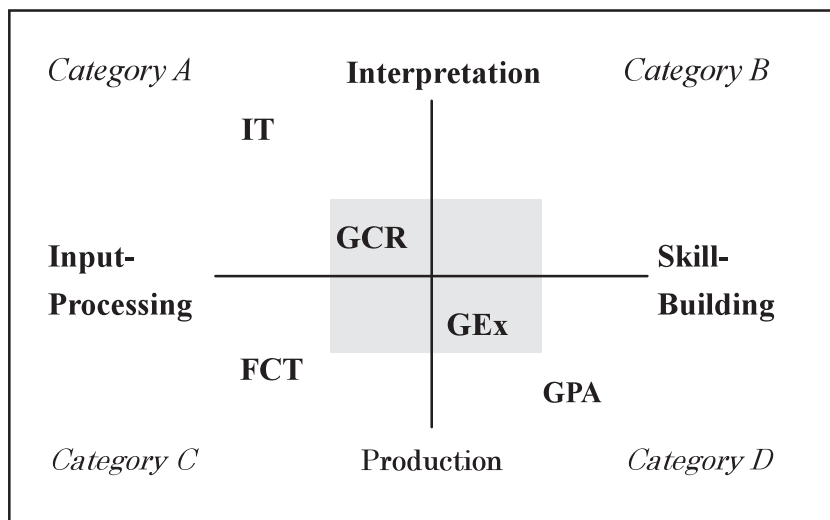
#### 4.5 Required steps and their relationship with SLA perspective

What I term ‘required steps’ here concerns whether ‘interpretation’ or ‘production’ steps are required to complete the task. Many recent studies, particularly by input-processing theorists, seem to focus more on the interpretation side, but this does not exclude production steps. For instance, some sample interpretation based GCR tasks (e.g. Fotos & Ellis, 1991) include production steps.

The important point drawn from this criterion is that an interpretation-based step is not necessarily synonymous with an input-processing perspective. An ‘interpretation-based’ task is dominated by the need to extract meaning, and may not lead to any focus on form, because ongoing interpretation is primary (VanPatten, 1996); that is, simple interpretation-based tasks do not necessarily guarantee learners’ subsequent shift of attention from meaning to form. On the other hand, in the input-processing-based tasks designed to control their attention during interpretation, the focus of learners’ attention would be on form as well as meaning. Hence it is very important to categorize these two dimensions under separated categories: *required steps* and *SLA perspective*. It is noteworthy that the practice-oriented tasks are, in either case of interpretation or production, assumed to accumulate grammatical knowledge and skill through a repetition of language use. It should be stressed that the example of GCR in the study of Fotos and Ellis (1991) frequently requires learners to produce language, but not specifically the target items. In other words, an intellectual effort stimulates learners’ cognitive power and motivates them to tackle the task. As a result of such an active involvement with a task, the targeted grammar can be *evocatively* and *organically* retained via the developing system.

In order to elucidate the difference between these criteria, it is informative to simply illustrate these aspects as split entity. The grey zone suggests more form-focus, implying that GCR and GEx

concern grammar rather overtly (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Required Steps and SLA Perspective

This figure shows that GCR is located in the input-processing and interpretation-based sphere (Category A), but, judging from the location near to the lower production sphere, a production-based step may be employed. However, the figure also suggests that, although they are in the same category, IT is not expected to involve production. In a similar vein, GEx can use both interpretation and production within the domain of skill-building perspective (Category D), but GPA is more largely linked with the production side (Category D).

## 5. Research questions and methodology

Based on the framework established above, we explore FFTs in recently published coursebooks with the purpose of better understanding their nature and the sequencing. In Nitta and Gardner (2005) we were chiefly concerned with the typical approach of five FFTs, and established that GCR and IT are frequently used to present grammar, and are followed by GEx and GPA for practice. Here we present a more detailed analysis of the other criteria, organized around the following questions:

1. How often are both form-focused instruction and interactional tasks realized together in the same task?
2. Which types of focus (form/meaning), step (interpretation/production) and theoretical basis (input-processing/skill-building) are more frequently applied?
3. Based on the results of the above questions, what task ordering can be identified?

The selection of textbooks comprises nine intermediate multi-course textbooks, all currently available in Britain (Appendix). As the purpose of this paper is not evaluative, we refer to these by letter. This examination concentrates on three grammar points, justified by the observation that each textbook has its own style and structure, and, more often than not, repeats the same pattern in every unit. Thus, the focus of this research has been on three problematic items: *present perfect*, *second conditional* and *reported speech*, all of which are more or less difficult for L2 learners because of the different concept from their L1 (e.g. present perfect) and complex structures of the items (e.g. second conditional, reported speech).

## 6. Analysis

Analysis of tasks in selected coursebooks enabled us to identify more clearly the criterial features of each task type. These features emerge from discussion of the analysis which includes an example of each type of form-focused task. An example of GCR is seen in Task 1.

### Task 1 (Material C, p. 75)

*Read these pairs of sentences. In each case, the first sentence is direct speech and the second sentence is reported speech.*

**a** *Underline the words that are different in the second sentence in each pair.*

**1** 'I don't have a mobile phone.'

She said she didn't have a mobile phone. . .

An interpretation-based step is explicitly realized in this task, which causes some difficulty in recognizing the difference from IT, but 'form vs. meaning focus' is critical to clarifying the task identification here. That is, the task topic of the example is importantly the target grammar itself ('reported speech'), implying that learners realize that they are discussing the grammar rule during the task through the metalanguage ('direct speech', 'reported speech') embedded in the rubric.

The conditions of GCR are rather loose because they do not necessarily adopt an interpretation-based step and non-interaction form etc.; on the other hand, the characteristics of IT are more strictly restricted. One clear example of IT is Task 2.

**Task 2** (Material B, p. 78)

*Which of these are true for you?*

When I was young, I didn't know that Father Christmas wasn't real.

I remember a time when I thought that the moon was the size of my hand.

I found out that you needed money in shops when I was six.

...

This example satisfies every significant condition demanded for IT. Focus of task topic in IT is preferably grammar-free (meaning-focus); in the example, learners are asked to consider whether the given sentences are true for them; but they are *implicitly* involved in the grammar learning process, through being exposed to reporting forms, as a significant preparation for the subsequent questions.

Unlike the other task types, FCT is not widely employed in the analysed materials. Among such few examples, the most overtly illustrated task is Task 3.

**Task 3** (Material G, p. 38)

*Work in groups of three. Each student should try to find three things that he / she has done, but the other two students have not. When you have finished, report back to the class.*

FCTs are truly communicative tasks that *implicitly* include the target grammar. In this task, learners are purely involved in communication without taking the target language ('present perfect') into account, but the task is devised so that learners use the target structure.

GEx is usually identified with a more controlled practice stage, and may be followed by GPA which tends towards freer practice. Hence, GPA is frequently established to create interactional opportunities. It is perhaps sufficient to give one example of GPA, which attempts to encourage the production of present perfect sentences by giving a list of topics (Task 4).

**Task 4** (Material H, p. 16)

*Ask questions to find out how many times the people in your group have done the following things. Take turns to ask the questions and note down the answers. How many times have you::*

travelled abroad? / moved house? / been in love? / won money in a lottery? ...

Compared with GPA, the manner of GEx is more controlled. It is characterized by rather emotionless

effort, such as gap-filling, matching, completion and rewriting style, as in Task 5.

**Task 5** (Material E, p. 27)

*Complete these sentences with already, yet or still.*

It's half past eight in the morning, and Jack should be at school by nine but he's \_\_\_ in bed.

He's \_\_\_ had breakfast because he brought it back to bed...

## 7. Results and discussion

Recent years have seen a greater awareness of the importance of interaction for L2 development, and, in an attempt to create this, many communicative-oriented tasks are implemented in published materials. Table 2 suggests that interaction is found in all FCTs (4/4) and many GPAs — all (4/4) in the presentation stage and 33/51 in the practice stage. Interaction occurs in 19% of GEx and only between 10 and 14% of GCR and IT. Thus despite evidence suggesting the benefits of combining interaction and grammar presentation (e.g. Fotos, 1994), there are not only few FCTs, but only a small percent of GCRs that require interaction. On the whole, there is a preference for GCR and IT that do not require interaction in the presentation stages while interactional tasks are more frequently employed in the practice stage (e.g. GPA).

**Table 2** Interactional Tasks

| Material           | Presentation |      |     |     |     |       |       | Practice |     |     |       |      |       |       |
|--------------------|--------------|------|-----|-----|-----|-------|-------|----------|-----|-----|-------|------|-------|-------|
|                    | GCR          | IT   | FCT | GPA | Gex | Other | Total | GCR      | IT  | FCT | GPA   | GEx  | Other | Total |
| A                  | 1/9          | 2/8  |     |     |     |       | 3/17  | 1/2      |     |     | 7/8   | 2/5  |       | 10/15 |
| B                  | 0/3          | 0/4  |     | 1/1 |     |       | 1/8   |          |     |     | 2/5   | 1/2  | 0/1   | 3/8   |
| C                  | 0/9          |      |     |     |     |       | 0/9   |          |     |     | 8/9   | 0/3  |       | 8/12  |
| D                  | 2/4          | 0/5  |     |     |     |       | 2/9   |          |     |     | 3/4   | 0/1  |       | 3/5   |
| E                  |              |      |     |     |     |       | 0/0   | 0/4      |     |     | 2/7   | 0/6  |       | 2/17  |
| F                  | 0/15         | 0/2  |     | 3/3 | 0/1 |       | 3/21  | 0/1      |     |     | 2/3   | 0/4  |       | 2/8   |
| G                  | 0/3          | 0/5  | 3/3 |     |     | 1/2   | 4/13  |          |     |     | 2/5   | 0/3  |       | 2/8   |
| H                  |              |      |     |     |     |       | 0/0   |          |     |     | 4/4   |      |       | 4/4   |
| I                  | 2/5          | 1/2  | 1/1 |     | 0/1 | 2/2   | 6/11  |          |     |     | 3/6   | 2/2  | 0/3   | 5/11  |
| Total<br>(n = 176) | 5/48         | 3/26 | 4/4 | 4/4 | 0/1 | 3/4   | 19/88 | 1/7      | 0/0 | 0/0 | 33/51 | 5/26 | 0/4   | 39/88 |
| % of tasks*        | 10           | 12   | 100 | 100 | 0   | 75    | 22    | 14       | -   | -   | 65    | 19   | 0     | 44    |

**Notes:** \* Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

With respect to the relationship between interaction and FFTs, one of the reasons for a paucity of interactional GCR in the analysed materials is that the simultaneous employment of grammar

interpretation and communicative production may give too much burden on learner's cognitive processing. A particularly noticeable hallmark is a clear movement from less interactional opportunities in presentation (22%) to more in practice (44%), suggesting that many coursebook writers might carefully design a gradual increase of interaction through the grammar learning processes in order to minimize the cognitive load on learners and increase difficulty by degrees.

It might be, however, that this conclusion is too simple a characterization of the potential of interaction. It is useful to take up the theoretical viewpoint, i.e. Long's Interaction Hypothesis, in which his repeated elaboration of the theory makes several interpretations possible. For instance, whereas the "weak" Interaction Hypothesis is regarded as only learning opportunities, creating natural-like environment, the "strong" standpoint assumes interaction as language development itself (Allwright, 1984: 8–10). It is particularly noticeable that the former position centres the opportunities for comprehensible input and the traditional "practice" view of fluency, whereas the latter includes a connection to accuracy, referring to qualitative development under discourse exchanges: 'Negotiation of meaning' in the strong view functions as a mediating impetus facilitating L2 acquisition because it connects *input*, internal learner capacities (i.e. *the developing system*), particularly selective attention, and *output* in productive ways (Long, 1996: 451–2). In a word, interaction, by synthesizing various processing facets, is theorized to more effectively contribute to L2 acquisition than simple input-only-dependent and repetitive practice instructions. As a consequence, 'the more opportunities for negotiation (meaning and form) there are, the more likely acquisition is' (Ellis, 2003: 80). Linked to our primary concern, it is conceivable that the weak form is more concerned with skill-building view, while the strong form includes not only this but also input-processing.

To discuss the relationship between interactional tasks and L2 acquisition processes more fully is beyond the scope of this paper. Also, in so doing, the examination of interactional types should be more detailed. Here it is important to suggest a gap between real materials, designed to gradually increase interactional opportunities, and the theoretical side advocating that interaction solves the conflict between meaning-focus and form-focus in learners' minds (Long, 1996).

Building on the understanding of interactional characteristics, it is useful to examine more precisely the nature of 'form-meaning focus', 'required steps' and 'SLA perspective'. Findings here will suggest implications for FFT sequencing.

The nine materials provide an even balance overall of form and meaning focus in the presentation and practice stages (Table 3).

It seems difficult to induce marked characteristics from this result, but Table 4, showing form-meaning distribution in terms of task types, gives very contrastive conditions; while GCR is disproportionately based on form, IT and GPA are based on meaning. A good balance of form-meaning in GEx signifies that both mechanical and meaningful practice types are widely used in the analysed materials.

**Table 3** Form-Meaning Focus in Presentation and Practice

| Material         | <u>Presentation</u> |         | <u>Practice</u> |         | <u>Total</u> |         |
|------------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|---------|--------------|---------|
|                  | Form                | Meaning | Form            | Meaning | Form         | Meaning |
| A                | 9                   | 10      | 7               | 9       | 16           | 19      |
| B                | 3                   | 5       | 1               | 7       | 4            | 12      |
| C                | 8                   | 1       | 4               | 9       | 12           | 10      |
| D                | 7                   | 8       | 0               | 1       | 7            | 9       |
| E                |                     |         | 11              | 6       | 11           | 6       |
| F                | 14                  | 7       | 3               | 5       | 17           | 12      |
| G                | 4                   | 9       | 4               | 5       | 8            | 14      |
| H                |                     |         | 0               | 4       | 0            | 4       |
| I                | 7                   | 6       | 3               | 6       | 10           | 12      |
| Total (n = 183)* | 52                  | 46      | 33              | 52      | 85           | 98      |
| % of all steps** | 28                  | 25      | 18              | 28      | 46           | 54      |

**Notes:** \* The number of steps (183) is larger than the number of task (176) as some tasks include more than one step. \*\* Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

**Table 4** Form-Meaning Focus in Task Distribution

|               | <b>Form</b> | <b>Meaning</b> |
|---------------|-------------|----------------|
| <b>GCR</b>    | 52          | 5              |
| <b>IT</b>     | 4           | 23             |
| <b>FCT</b>    | 0           | 4              |
| <b>GEx</b>    | 27          | 25             |
| <b>GPA</b>    | 2           | 34             |
| <b>Others</b> | 0           | 7              |
| <b>Total</b>  | 85          | 98             |

This abundant application of mechanical practice in GEx suggests a gap between practice and those skill-building theories that emphasize meaningful communication in communicative contexts.

In so far as required steps is concerned, the total number of presentation and practice steps is parallel, specifically 66 interpretation-based tasks in the presentation stage and 64 production-based tasks in the practice stage, although the proportions differ across coursebooks (Table 5). On the whole, there is an incremental shift from interpretation-based to production-based tasks as the teaching stages proceed from presentation to practice. Interestingly, this amplex of interpretation-based tasks is very contrastive to Ellis's (2002: 160–1) analysis of grammar practice books, which identified 'conspicuous paucity of receptive practice' leading to little opportunity to process the structures. (In this respect, an investigation of recent grammar practice books such as Nettle and Hopkins, 2003 or

**Table 5** Required Steps

| Material         | <u>Presentation</u> |            | <u>Practice</u> |            | <u>Total</u>   |            |
|------------------|---------------------|------------|-----------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|                  | Interpretation      | Production | Interpretation  | Production | Interpretation | Production |
| A                | 16                  | 4          | 5               | 13         | 21             | 17         |
| B                | 7                   | 1          | 3               | 5          | 10             | 6          |
| C                | 9                   |            | 3               | 10         | 12             | 10         |
| D                | 7                   | 3          |                 | 5          | 7              | 8          |
| E                |                     |            | 7               | 10         | 7              | 10         |
| F                | 14                  | 8          | 3               | 5          | 17             | 13         |
| G                | 8                   | 5          | 4               | 4          | 12             | 9          |
| H                |                     |            |                 | 4          |                | 4          |
| I                | 5                   | 8          | 3               | 8          | 8              | 16         |
| Total (n = 187)* | 66                  | 29         | 28              | 64         | 94             | 93         |
| % of all steps** | 35                  | 16         | 15              | 32         | 50             | 48         |

**Notes:** \* The number of steps (187) is larger than the number of task (176) as some tasks include more than one step.

\*\* Percentages are rounded to whole numbers.

**Table 6** SLA Perspective

| Material         | <u>Presentation</u> |                | <u>Practice</u>  |                | <u>Total</u>     |                |
|------------------|---------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|
|                  | Input Processing    | Skill Building | Input Processing | Skill Building | Input Processing | Skill Building |
| A                | 17                  |                | 2                | 13             | 19               | 13             |
| B                | 7                   | 1              |                  | 7              | 7                | 8              |
| C                | 9                   |                |                  | 12             | 9                | 12             |
| D                | 9                   |                |                  | 5              | 9                | 5              |
| E                |                     |                | 5                | 12             | 5                | 12             |
| F                | 17                  | 4              |                  | 8              | 17               | 12             |
| G                | 11                  |                |                  | 8              | 11               | 8              |
| H                |                     |                |                  | 4              |                  | 4              |
| I                | 8                   | 1              |                  | 8              | 8                | 9              |
| Total (n = 168)* | 78                  | 6              | 7                | 77             | 85               | 83             |
| % of all tasks** | 46                  | 4              | 4                | 46             | 50               | 50             |

**Notes:** \*The number of theoretical perspective (168) is smaller than the number of task (176) as some tasks not targeted at any grammar items (i.e. communicative tasks) are eliminated. \*\* Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Carter *et al.* 2000 might yield different findings.)

Likewise, there is a contrastive gap between use of input-processing and skill-building in each stage (Table 6); 78 input-processing tasks and only 6 skill-building tasks are in the presentation, but the relative amount between two types of task is reversed in the practice (Input-processing — 7; Skill-building - 77).



Because the total number tells us that both input-processing and skill-building are proportionally employed in every material except Material H, it is logical to assume that general coursebooks tend to keep a good balance of the two, in spite of the fact that input-processing perspective recently seems more supported by the findings of current SLA and pedagogical research. Again, it is identified that there is on the whole a move from input-processing to skill-building tasks according to the teaching stages.

Table 7 summarizes the number of required steps and SLA perspective identified in this analysis in terms of task distribution.

**Table 7** Summary of Required Steps and SLA Perspective in Task Distribution

|               | Interpretation | Production | Total | Input-processing | Skill-building | Total |
|---------------|----------------|------------|-------|------------------|----------------|-------|
| <b>GCR</b>    | 45             | 13         | 58    | 55               | —              | 55    |
| <b>IT</b>     | 22             | 6          | 28    | 26               | —              | 26    |
| <b>FCT</b>    | 1              | 4          | 5     | 4                | —              | 4     |
| <b>GEx</b>    | 21             | 29         | 50    | —                | 49             | 49    |
| <b>GPA</b>    | 2              | 34         | 36    | —                | 34             | 34    |
| <b>Others</b> | 3              | 7          | 10    | —                | —              | 0     |
|               | 94             | 93         | 187   | 85               | 83             | 168   |

The findings from materials analysis were applied to the framework of *required steps* and *SLA perspective* in Figure 2, with the arrows in Figure 3 showing movement from presentation to practice according to the additional criteria.

In integrating the directions of each arrow, the amalgamated (dotted) arrow can be assumed to flow roughly from the top-left side (Category A) to the bottom-right side (Category D). This typical sequence of FFTs explains that GCR should be within the scope of interpretation and presentation, while production-based presentation (FCT) goes against materials writers perceptions of the instructional sequence; i.e. the unpopularity of FCT may be explained by the fact that it is located in Category C, out of the usual presentation-practice sequence.

As a consequence of integrating these three-fold aspects, it is conceivable that the typical grammar learning sequence in current coursebooks is best summarized as a ‘meaning → form → meaning [M-F-M] progression, that seeks to manage shifts in attentional focus as the task unfolds’ (Samuda, 2001: 121). In applying my finding to this scheme, the following connections can be made: (1) meaning — IT; (2) meaning/form — GCR; (3) form or meaning — GEx; (4) meaning — GPA. IT aims at creating meaning-form connections, but the task content is primarily un-form-focused; and then, building on the created semantic space, GCR increases awareness of forms; GEx operates as a help to bridge between meaning and form by distributing both meaning (meaningful) and form (mechanical)

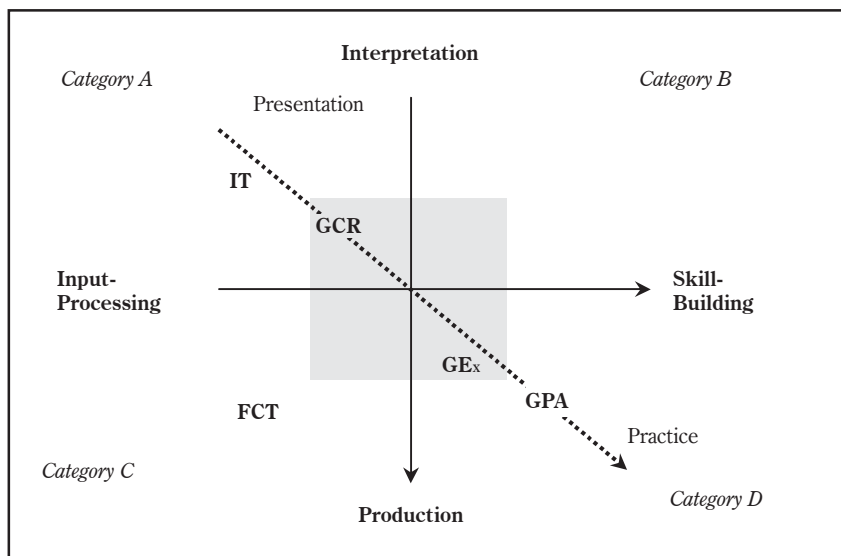


Figure 3 Sequence of FFTs in the Teaching Stages

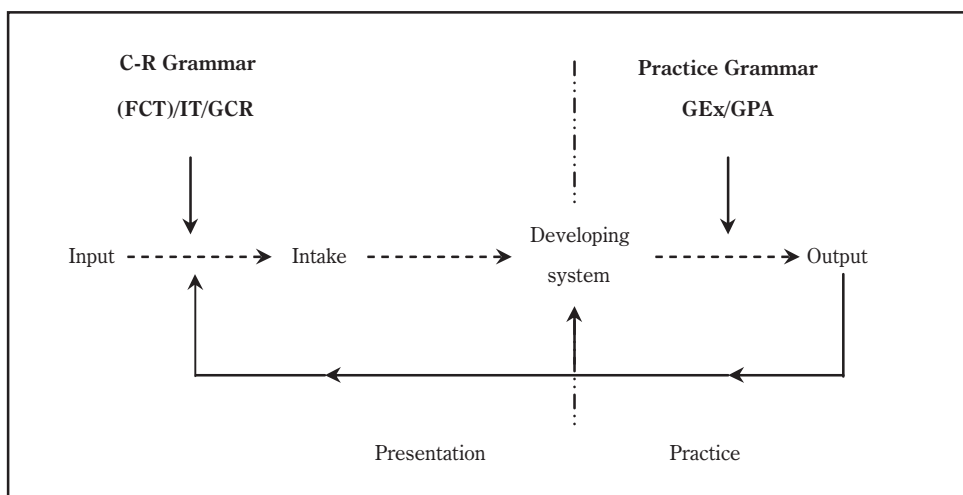
| Presentation  |              | Practice |   |         |
|---|--------------|----------|---|---------|
| Meaning   | Meaning/Form | Form     | Meaning   | Meaning |
| IT  | GCR          | GEx      | GPA   |         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Less interactional</li> <li>•Interpretation</li> <li>•Input-processing</li> </ul> |              |          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•More interactional</li> <li>•Production</li> <li>•Skill-building</li> </ul> |         |

Figure 4 M-F-M Progression in the Analysed Materials

focus in a good balance; finally, the focal attention returns completely to meaning again, with implicit focus on form, in a communicative manner (GPA). As this summary of the nine coursebooks suggests, it is assumed that the M-F-M progression is pedagogically justifiable, because the difficulty and cognitive burden of tasks gradually increases as the teaching stages proceed (Figure 4). It seems reasonable to suppose that this progression is accepted on the SLA research side, too. A flow from meaning to form, and returning to meaning, develops the processing that ‘somehow and at some point learner attention to meaning and form must be connected’ (Doughty & Williams, 1998: 244). This progression indicated by the summary of analysed materials is significantly consistent with current understanding of limited capacity of memory system in information-processing model: Initial solution of semantic aspect allows learners to use most of their focal attention on analysis of problematic forms

(e.g. VanPatten, 1996), which is mostly compatible with the intentions of the M-F-M progression presented by Samuda.

Having built on the Interaction Hypothesis and elicited particular attention to an aspect of production practice, a series of studies on output by Swain is significant in relation to my conjecture that it is unfeasible, at least for material writers, to separate L2 grammar acquisition processes activated by C-R tasks from those developed by practising tasks. SLA research appears to presuppose that learners completely understand the targeted grammar in the presentation phase. However, probably most ELT teachers, who observe real learners, cannot concur in this attitude. On the practical side, it is inferred that seemingly absorbed target structures repeatedly continue to be tested in the practising stage, these temporary hypotheses are revised and compiled in the developing system, and the wrongly hypothesized elements are carried to a further cycle of re-noticing and re-structuring. That is, it is assumed that learners would finally attain a certain level of understanding through an interlocking sequence of grammar stages including both C-R and practice (Figure 5). Thus, as pointed out by Larsen-Freeman (2003: 100-1), output practice should still occupy a central position in communicative approaches, despite criticism on this over the past two decades.



**Figure 5** L2 Grammar Acquisition Processes and Influence of FFTs

This finding corroborates studies by Swain (e.g. 1998), arguing that noticing and hypothesis formulation/testing have been observed in working with language production tasks including linguistic points. To be more precise, noticing a linguistic problem in producing the L2 ‘pushes’ a learner to modify his/her output; ‘the learner may sometimes be forced into a more syntactic processing mode than might occur in comprehension’ (Swain & Lapkin, 1995: 372-3). Interestingly, input-processing theorists do not completely ignore the role of output. For example, in his “updated” theory, VanPatten

(2002: 762) best summarizes these processes:

Input provides the data, IP [Input-processing] makes (certain) data available for acquisition, other internal mechanisms accommodate data into the system (often triggering some kind of restructuring or a change of internally generated hypotheses), and output helps learners become communicators and, again, may help them become better processors of input.

One instance of analysed material (Material G: module 4) gives authenticity to this consideration. In the presentation task (titled ‘Analysis’), learners are expected to master *present perfect simple*, but presumably a complete understanding of the target grammar item is very difficult only in such a limited and one-directed presentation. Rather, learners may be partially or even ambiguously aware of the system of present perfect simple in this stage, and then their hypothesis is either consolidated or, when initial understanding is wrong, modified through a lot of examples in the subsequent production practice. Ideally, the principle should be ‘a constant interplay between example, rule, and practice allowing for maximal flexibility’ (Berman 1979: 297). Because of its association with mechanical drills, current SLA research tends to criticize the employment of practising tasks, but the evidence of our research suggests that it still occupies an essential part in general ELT coursebooks. To put the point more concretely, rather than exclusively selecting one of them, material writers tactfully design grammar syllabus building on both approaches; in other words, there is a clear tendency of “eclectic approach (C-R+practice)” (see Nitta & Gardner, 2005).

As briefly revealed above, the findings in this research would also support implications about a task type of production practice. Current cognitive psychology claims that communicative practice which retains declarative knowledge develops the automatizing process. Looking closer at the mechanism of this development, communicative practices ‘provide the learners with the opportunity to practice these larger units of activity in the sheltered environment set up by the teacher’s questions, which are meant to elicit grammar structures and lexical items that the students have learned declaratively’ (DeKeyser, 1998: 52–3). To put it another way, ‘lower-level plans’ (grammar and lexis) are activated by ‘higher-level plans’ (communicative needs). What it implies is that the meaning of practice in many researchers’ minds should be ‘communicative’ practice (GPA), and mechanical and meaningful practice (GEx) therefore gives little contribution to automatization, although both are regularly used in the materials. Again, it is possible to suggest that the function of GEx is to focus the learner on the declarative knowledge that they are ready to activate in the GPA, in the Meaning — Form — Meaning progression. Further research here might usefully explore the nature and extent of features such as ‘contextualization’, ‘creative language use’, or ‘personalization’, in these tasks.

## 8. Conclusion

Having paid particular attention to two rival theories in SLA, this paper constructed a framework of criterial task features for five types of FFT. This served to identify prevailing pedagogical trends in ELT materials. Integrating various findings, this research revealed that most textbooks use several types of FFT in rather fixed sequential patterns (IT-GCR-GEx-GPA). This represents an extended M-F-M progression of  $M \rightarrow M > F \rightarrow F/M \rightarrow M$  which suggests a combination of FFTs might have a more positive influence on L2 development than individual task types alone. From an SLA perspective, this corresponds to a progression from input-processing to skill-building, combined with a gradual increase of interaction.

Although it is less clear how much the material writers are affected by the current SLA research, there is compelling evidence that both input-processing and skill-building based tasks are widely exploited in the materials. The results assume grammar teaching is a sequence of interlocking stages from presentation to practice. If, as is suggested, practising has an impact on noticing and restructuring, as well as automatizing, and if skill-building is happy with GCR and IT for presentation, then the two SLA models, generally regarded as opposing views, can be seen as compatible and complementary in different stages of grammar teaching.

While the selection and establishment of criteria are exploratory, and incorporation of a wider range of FFTs into the framework is possible, it is hoped that the present work contributes to research on task components and task design. It is not our intention to advocate C-R rather than practice, or communicative grammar practice rather than mechanical exercises; rather, our aim was to develop a framework for exploring how different criteria interact in FFTs in coursebook sequences. We began with an assumption of two opposing theoretical SLA positions. We explored how these are realized in FFTs in current ELT coursebooks, and these lead us to suggest arguments in favour of a data-driven model of practice where the two theories complement each other.

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## Appendix: Coursebook Materials Analysed

- A:** *New Headway English Course Intermediate*. 1996. L. Soars and J. Soars. Oxford University Press.
- B:** *Clockwise Intermediate*. 2000. W. Forsyth. 2000. Oxford University Press.
- C:** *Landmark Intermediate*. 2000. S. Haines and B. Stewart. 2000. Oxford University Press.
- D:** *Inside Out Intermediate*. 2000. S. Kay and V. Jones (Student’s book), H. Gomm and J. Hird (Teacher’s book). Macmillan Heinemann.
- E:** *Reward Intermediate*. 1995. S. Greenall. Macmillan Heinemann.

## Form-focused tasks in ELT coursebooks

**F:** *Intermediate Matters*. 1995. J. Bell and R. Gower. Longman.

**G:** *Cutting Edge: A practical approach to task- based learning Intermediate*. 1998. S. Cunningham, S. and P. Moor. Longman.

**H:** *Activate Your English Intermediate: A short course for adults*. 1996. B. Sinclair and P. Prowse. Cambridge University Press.

**I:** *True to Life Intermediate*. 1996. R. Gairns and S. Redman. Cambridge University Press.