

The effects of task-based language teaching on grammar consciousness-raising

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In the consciousness-raising (CR) approach, the learners' attention is drawn to specific structures, enhancing their comprehension and raising their consciousness to facilitate their noticing of the targeted structure in subsequent communicative input. In task-based language teaching (TBLT), attention is focused on meaning and on saying and doing something with language. In the context of learning English as a foreign language at university level in Algeria, combining the two in grammar consciousness-raising (GCR) appears as a suitable solution to allow learners to achieve accuracy and fluency.

In this paper, we will examine the place of grammar in language teaching, the rationale for CR, the fundamental principles of TBLT and will explain how integrating the two in grammar consciousness-raising tasks (GCRTs) can prove to be worthwhile in certain contexts, more particularly in our context of teaching first year students of English.

The Place of Grammar in Language Teaching

The issue of grammar has always fascinated both theorists and practitioners in the field of education. A historical view of the studies related to grammar shows that –for a long time–grammar has been a deeply established discipline for the teaching of all languages throughout the world. In the twentieth century, the role of grammar in developing grammatical proficiency was questioned. However, teachers and learners remain convinced that grammar is a useful subject; what needs to be agreed on is how it should be approached.

On the whole, the different approaches to language teaching / learning recognize the role that grammar plays in learning languages. They agree that the grammatical component should not be neglected. They emphasize language analysis, and the need for learning the code and practising it in a systematic manner in order to achieve linguistic proficiency. This view is not shared by the proponents of the Communicative Approach based on the belief that language use will lead to the command of the target language.

Second Language theories have broadened the understanding of the nature of the learning processes and the factors affecting positively or negatively learners' interlanguage development. The different Second Language Learning models have revealed that the persistence of grammatical errors can be regarded as a natural phenomenon indicating restructuring, replacing, readjusting and developing communicative strategies. Foreign language learning has been found to be determined by a range of variables derived from the natural route of development, exposure, comprehensible input, attitude, motivation, personality, memory, interaction, cognitive processes. Consequently, grammar pedagogy has to take into account the sound findings of Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Neurolinguistics and Cognitive Psychology.

The Consciousness-raising Approach

One of the developments of these related disciplines is consciousness-raising, a cognitive approach to grammatical instruction developed by Sharwood-Smith (1981). In this approach, aspects of grammar are focused on, without necessarily using explicit rules or technical jargon. It seeks to help learners discover the rules by themselves. It is compatible with research findings related to how learners acquire second / foreign language grammar – the Learnability Hypothesis involving the mechanism of progression from one state of knowledge to the next. CR has proved to be useful at an initial stage of acquisition, the stage of controlled processing, to trigger declarative knowledge, paving the way to gradual proceduralisation and automatization when learners focus attention on higher-order skills, attending to message content rather than form (Ellis 2003).

It has been repeatedly argued that comprehensible input alone is insufficient for the acquisition of grammatical accuracy because it does not always provide appropriate evidence (White 1988). Comprehensible input does not solve, for example, the problem of overuse of a particular grammatical

feature, like the present continuous (Yip 1994) – a common mistake made by Algerian learners of English. What is needed is negative evidence : the information that a structure is ungrammatical or inappropriate in the target language (Yip 1994). In this context, CR activities represent a wide range of activities where the focus is on noticing, a cognitive ability which leads to awareness about the use of a language structure. These activities can be useful if the learner is concerned about form accuracy and the nature of the structure in question. They have been found to be effective for second /foreign students, especially at an advanced level (Yip 1994).

Task-based Language Teaching

Nunan (1988) reports that Doyle (1979, 1983) was one of the first to suggest that curriculum could be viewed as a collection of academic tasks which specify the products students are to formulate, the operations that are required to generate the product and the resources available to the students to generate the product. Starting from this view, other researchers (for example, Richards, Platt and Weber 1985; Willis 1996) have specified the various aspects of a task and have stressed the primacy of meaning and the fact that a task offers the opportunity to solve a communicative problem comparable with real world activities with an outcome (Candlin 1987; Nunan 1989; Long 1989). A task has a goal (the general purpose of the task: for example, to practise the ability to describe objects in such a way as to provide an opportunity for the use of relative clauses), an input (verbal or non-verbal information supplied by the task: for example pictures, maps, a written text), conditions (the way in which information is presented: for example, split versus shared information), procedure (the method followed in performing the task: for example, group versus pair work), and predicted outcomes (the product, for example: a completed table, and the linguistic communicative processes the task is hypothesized to generate) (Ellis 2003). A task with the above characteristics can be an information-gap activity, involving the transfer of given information from one learner to another, one form to another or one place to another; a reasoning-gap activity involving the discovery of new information through inference, deduction, practical reasoning or perception of relationships or patterns; or an opinion-gap activity in response to a given structure (Prabhu 1987). In this sense, tasks are cognitive processes involving selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing information, transforming information in order to carry out a task (Ellis 2003). They should engender accuracy,

fluency and complexity (Skehan 1998). To achieve this, learners should participate in a variety of tasks which encourage them to negotiate meaning when communication problems arise to ensure that they get sufficient comprehensible input for the acquisition of linguistic competence (Long 1983) and to provide the conditions needed to develop the kind of strategic competence which is necessary for the development of fluency (Brumfit 1984).

The assumption of a TBLT is that meaning-primacy interaction creates the optimum conditions for communicative development which will lead to interlanguage development (Robinson 1995). This point of view raises a reaction as to the validity of this aspect, with the argument that processing language to extract meaning does not necessarily guarantee automatic sensitivity to form and the resulting interlanguage development. Long (1991) and Schmidt (1990) support this reservation; they argue that interlanguage development prerrequires noticing of form; otherwise, aspects of second language syntax, phonology, vocabulary that are not salient may go unnoticed.

The question of the focus of tasks has been the object of several debates. What is the place of form-structure in a task? On the whole, specialists in the field agree that an important feature of TBLT is that learners are free to choose whatever language forms they wish to convey what they mean in order to fulfil the tasks (Willis 1996). The relationship structure-task is characterized by three aspects: naturalness (the use of a structure during a task would not stand out; alternative structures would do equally well); utility (the use of a structure would help the efficiency of the completion of the task, but it could be avoided through the use of alternative structures or communication strategies); and essentialness (a particular structure has to be used in order to complete a task) (Loschly and Bley-Vroman 1993). The selection of structures has to be guided by the task difficulty and the objectives to be achieved. They should make the students aware of why they are asked to perform tasks, adopt an active role, negotiate meaning, take and risks, experiment with language. The primary focus is on meaning when performing a task, but opportunities for focusing on form are required (Ellis 2003).

TBLT creating a balance between form and meaning is recommended. In such an approach, the tasks are natural, but through task choice and methodology, attention is focused on form to increase the chances of interlanguage development (Long 1988). Focus on form can be a proactive focus (the choice of the form is made in advance; in the design of the task, we ensure that opportunities to use problematic forms while communicating a message will arise) or a

reactive focus (the learners notice and are prepared to handle various learning difficulties as they arise) (Doughty and Williams 1998). Willis (1996) has developed a framework for the implementation of the TB approach where focus on language is more or less prominent at different times. The framework is organized in three phases : pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The pre-task activities serve to activate the schematic knowledge, what is likely to make the task interesting and authentic; and to provide opportunity for a focus on form and for noticing. The task stage involves doing the task, engaging in planning post-task and reporting. It provides opportunity for language use and the development of accuracy, fluency and complexity, contributing to the interlanguage development and the proceduralisation (automatization) of language. The teacher's role at this level is to ensure that the learner's attention is drawn to form-meaning relationships. In the language focus stage, the activities are of a CR nature, requiring an element of analysis; learners are required to process input in a way which makes features more salient. The aim is to get learners to identify and think about particular features of language form and language use in their own time and at their own level. This will help them to recognize these features when they meet them again and will lead to a deeper understanding of their meanings and uses. So, the language focus comes after a task has been done with the intention that any language which is focused upon is relevant to the learners and required for a communicative purpose. A similar model was developed by Skehan (1998). In this model, an information-processing approach, the tasks should cover a wide range of structures; they should be selected on the basis of the utility criterion; they should be selected and sequenced in such a way as to achieve a balanced development of accuracy, fluency and complexity; they should offer maximum chances of focus on form through manipulation, reflection and awareness. The aspect of negotiation of meaning is stressed in this model as well, for –as it has been mentioned– it provides the appropriate conditions for interlanguage development to occur.

TBLT was tried in several parts of the world. I would like to refer to the case of China reported in the "ELT in China 2001" papers presented at "The Third International Symposium on ELT in China", edited by Hu Wenzhong. Li Shoujing, Zhou Li and Li Dougfang found that a group of Ph.D students were highly motivated to carry out the tasks; the students showed interest and enthusiasm in using English; they took part in the activities negotiating the meaning they required to communicate their message. Ma Dougmei observed that TB pair work is a favourable environment for self and peer

correction with grammatical errors being corrected most and discourse errors being the least corrected in self and peer corrections. This shows that the learners' noticing of the grammatical features which are felt to be important in the acquisition of a second / foreign language has to be focused on.

Grammar Consciousness-raising Tasks

It is possible to integrate the teaching of grammar with the provision of opportunities for communication involving an exchange of information. Learners are given grammar tasks which they solve interactively in order to formulate both implicit knowledge – the knowledge that is intuitive and procedural – and explicit knowledge – the knowledge we learn. Krashen (1981) maintains that the two are completely distinct; however Sharwood-Smith (1981) holds that one type changes into the other. Fotos and Ellis' (1991) position is in between. They refer to the studies undertaken by Ellis (1990) and Long (1988) investigating the effects of formal instruction on the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. These studies suggest that formal instruction helps to provide more rapid second language acquisition; that it may succeed if the learners have reached a stage of developmental sequence that enables them to process the target structure; that it is effective in developing explicit knowledge of grammatical features; and that it may work best in promoting acquisition when it is linked with opportunities for natural communication. So, formal instruction, it is argued, helps in developing explicit knowledge of grammatical features which contribute to second language acquisition in that knowing about a grammatical feature makes the learner more likely to notice that feature in input and therefore to acquire it in implicit knowledge. The role of tasks in this context – skill development begins with declarative knowledge (facts about language) and ends with procedural knowledge (target-like communication behaviour) – is to provide opportunities to practise forms that have been first presented declaratively and to receive feedback on the mistakes under real-operating conditions (Ellis 2003). They are in this case of a focused kind, as they serve to practise pre-determined linguistic features, for example, tasks on prepositions of time where the learners use the data supplied to complete a table by classifying the time phrases into those that use “in”, “on” or “at” and where they try to work out a rule to describe how these prepositions are used (Ellis 1991). This case illustrates a GCRT which is designed to cater primarily for explicit learning to develop awareness at the level of understanding rather than at the level of noticing and where the content is language itself.

These tasks designed to promote communication about grammar (grammar tasks), raising the learners' consciousness about the grammatical properties of the language require the exchange of information in order to reach an agreed solution to a problem; they are an information-gap activity. Fotos and Ellis (1991) have developed task cards with sentences illustrating the grammatical feature to be studied and task sheets with some basic grammatical information concerning the grammatical feature supplied with some useful metalinguistic terminology. The task sheet contains a table to be filled. It instructs the learners to formulate the rules about the different kinds of uses. In pairs or groups of four, the learners are to exchange the information on their task cards in order to complete the task sheet, to talk about the information in order to agree on the results and to report to the class the rules they have formulated. This study demonstrated that grammar tasks used to develop the learners' ability to judge the grammaticality of sentences involving the use of dative verbs helped the students (Japanese students of English as a foreign language at college level) to increase their knowledge of this difficult rule. There were significant gains in the understanding of the targeted structure. The learners had the opportunity to learn about grammar while taking part in communication centred on an exchange of information with negotiation of meaning. Fotos and Ellis concluded that grammar tasks which emphasize consciousness-raising rather than practice appear to be an effective means of achieving focus on form while at the same time affording opportunities to communicate. Fotos (1994) who worked on GCRTs dealing with word order also indicates that these tasks successfully promote both proficiency gains and second language interaction. She recommends the use of GCRTs as one way of combining the development of knowledge about a problematic second language grammatical feature with the provision of meaning-focused use of the target language.

In the context of English as a foreign language at university level, we undertook to find out whether GCRTs were effective for developing grammatical accuracy and promoting grammatical explicit knowledge of English tenses. Mistakes made in this part of the English grammar require, we believe, both formal instruction and CR activities which will make the learners achieve an accurate use of the tenses in an appropriate context of communication. In order to find out whether GCRTs in the context of the subject of "Grammar" (Grammar is a separate module in the curriculum) were more appropriate than the currently used traditional teacher-fronted grammar lessons (TTFGLS), we compared the results of two groups of First

Year students (Grammar is taught in the first and second year – out of a four year instruction) : one group went on having TTFGLS, and one group was taught and evaluated through GCRTs. The English tenses were selected because they are a problematic area for these learners who are usually confused by the various tense forms of the Present, the Past, the Future, the Conditional in their simple and continuous forms, and in their perfective aspects (which gives 16 tenses), in addition to the complexity of the uses of each tense. The other reason which motivated our choice is that the students often ask for rules to make them aware of the uses of the tenses and consequently use them correctly. The TTFGLS consisted of traditional grammar teaching and written practice. In the presentation stage, thorough explanations of the forms and uses of the English tense under study were provided. Then, the students were presented with a context and required to find the rules governing the tense use. Once the rule was given, a diagram showing the relation between the past, the present and the future was drawn. At the practice stage, students were presented with an exercise (a short text) where they had to put the verbs in brackets in the correct form and to provide oral answers. The texts opted for made use of a particular tense.

The GCRTs consisted of information-gap activities : the students had to complete a given input, reasoning-gap activities : the students had to use their cognitive abilities in order to induce the rules underlying the given sentences, and decision-making activities: the students had to reach a negotiated decision. They were designed in conformity with the task components proposed by Candlin (1987), Breen (1989), Nunan (1989) and Ellis (1998) : goals, input, procedures, learner roles, teacher roles and outcomes. In terms of goals, the tasks were expected to raise the students' consciousness about the English tenses; to help them gain grammatical explicit knowledge of this aspect; to promote their grammatical accuracy; to provide them with opportunities to interact, communicate and negotiate meaning in order to improve their fluency and consequently achieve an implicit knowledge; and to enhance their autonomy, self-confidence and motivation. In terms of input, task cards and task sheets were handed in to the students who were required to work in subgroups of four. Each student in the subgroup was provided with a task card containing one form and one use of the tense under study. The students were instructed to discuss the content and form of the input of the task cards until an agreement about all the forms and the use of the tense was reached. Then, they were to write them on the task sheet. The task sheet consisted of a heading with one form of the selected tense

(affirmative, negative, interrogative and interro-negative), short Yes / No answers and the pronouns (I, you, ...) followed by dots to be filled with the appropriate verb forms; four sentences showing one use of the tense; and four rules reflecting the various uses of the tense. The students were required to select the appropriate use governing the different uses in their respective task cards. The procedures followed involved the students in the analysis of their task card input in order to find the required tense form and the appropriate rule governing their set of sentences. The members of the subgroup had to interact and negotiate the answer provided by each one. Once the right answer was agreed on, it was submitted to the whole class for general agreement. These activities required the students to take an active role in the process of learning and the development of the lessons through the exchange of information. In this context, the teacher acted as a guide, controlling and monitoring the students' work. In terms of outcomes, the students had to exhibit understanding of the forms and the uses of every tense; the ability to choose the correct rule underlying the tenses; they also had to develop interaction, autonomy and motivation.

At the beginning of the experiment, both groups (the control group and the experimental group) were administered a proficiency pre-test made of a multiple-choice test where the students had to choose one tense out of four alternatives, and a justification test where they had to provide a grammatical justification of the selected tense. After the administration of the traditional grammar lessons (to one group) and the grammar tasks (to the other group), the two groups took a post-test identical to the pre-test. The post-test results indicate that GCRTs are more effective for developing grammatical accuracy and grammatical explicit knowledge than TTFGLs : the students in the experimental group had higher scores both in the multiple choice test and the justification test than the students in the control group. Classroom observation revealed that GCRTs were also more effective for fostering interaction and comprehensible output, and for enhancing students' autonomy, self-confidence and motivation. The amount of the students' negotiated interaction in the experimental group was significantly more important than in the control group. These elements allow us to claim that GCRTs enable the students to get an in-depth knowledge of the English tenses. They help them to be more independent, more dynamic and more collaborative. This gives us grounds to advocate the integration of CR and TBLT through GCRTs which we recommend as a motivating methodology for the teaching of grammar.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude this paper saying that as the general goal of language learning is fluent accuracy and pragmatically effective use of the target language, all practice to make the students more skilled at fluent production of the language should avoid being exclusively form-focused or exclusively meaning-focused. The primary concern of a teacher should be how to integrate attention to form and meaning, either simultaneously or in some interconnected sequence of tasks. The findings of form-focused instruction, interlanguage studies and cognitive theories contribute to the understanding of the nature of the learning process, and as such must be taken into account in the teaching of grammar. We will mention one focal example, comprehensible input which is important but which should be coupled with focus on form, explicit teaching and systematic practising of certain forms through specific tasks set to develop grammatical consciousness-raising about the targeted feature. GCRTs , requiring learners to discover learning through problem-solving, is in accordance with the general principle that what learners can find by and for themselves is better remembered than what they are simply told. GCRTs are a critical investigation of the linguistic features, involving learners in a study of both form and use.

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