

THE IMPACT OF TASK BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING ON GRAMMAR INSTRUCTIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PLANNED VS. INCIDENTAL FOCUS ON FORM

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Introduction

Grammar is an important component in English medium content courses at university level which needs attention of academia. Since majority of learners have already learnt basic grammar at school, a choice has to be made between teaching grammar deductively using traditional ‘Presentation, Practice & Production’ (PPP) model or creating opportunities through communicative activities for the learners to use and acquire it. “The aim of grammar instructions at the higher level is to reinforce previously studied grammatical areas and to achieve them through communicative activities” [1]. This research aims at finding out whether Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can effectively be used to help learners acquire the grammar of the language. It also attempts to identify whether a ‘grammar gap’ is existent in TBLT as claimed by Swain [2] and Sheen [3]. Further, studying the effectiveness of Grammar Consciousness Raising Activities (GCR: grammar discussion tasks that help learners focus on certain language structures) at the post task stage instead at the main task stage as done in most previous research is significant.

Materials and Methods

This research is of a quasi-experimental design and involves a comparative analysis. It investigates the possible cause and effect relationship between teaching instructions (independent variable) and student performance (dependent variable). The two types of instructions investigated are; Planned Focus on Form (PFF: attention to language forms that occurs under planned circumstances) and Incidental Focus on Form (IFF: attention to language forms that occurs under unplanned circumstances), which are accommodated within TBLT. There are two classes of equal proficiency levels and each class receives one type of instructions. An opinion exchange task is used as the type of task based on the research findings that the tasks that are cognitively demanding lead to accuracy [4].

The students work in groups of four and give their opinion on a given topic, record their views and write down a report based on it. The same task is carried out two times with only the topic changing. Although the same opinion exchange tasks are given to both classes, the two approaches of PFF and IFF are achieved through it. PFF is achieved through GCR activities while IFF is achieved by assigning only a task reporting time (when the reports are read, the students may focus on grammar as a whole) at the post task stage. A questionnaire on student perspectives on the potential of TBLT for acquiring grammar is administered and used for the analysis.

The target group of this research is a convenient sample-two group of second year students, mature enough to handle opinion exchange tasks, in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka. The groups consist of 36 students each of an average age of 22. The curriculum includes both English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as well as English for General Purposes (EGP) which cover the four skills (reading, writing, listening & speaking) and grammar. The grammar lessons are always done separately and are of the Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) style.

A common questionnaire has been designed for both PFF and IFF structures and it comprises of two sections. Section 1 is common for both groups and carries seven statements designed using the Likert five-point scale. They focus on obtaining the students' views on whether the tasks that focus on form actually helped learners acquire grammar. Section II-A has been designed for those who received PFF instructions and section II-B for those who received IFF instructions based on the fact of whether or not the participants received GCR activities. Section II of the questionnaire initially presents a sample GCR activity for the IFF group to read and understand since they do not receive such activity compared to the PFF group. Their responses on GCR activities are based on that sample activity. Section II-A and II-B carry both open ended and closed ended questions.

Two GCR activities have been designed based on the principles given in Ellis [5], and they focus on past simple vs. present perfect, active voice vs. passive voice, time clauses, conditional clauses, and relative clauses. The choices have been made on the assumption that the knowledge of those areas is important for learners in providing opinions and writing a report based on the opinions. The GCR activities also require the learners to work collaboratively and independently of the teacher.

Results and Discussion

The responses for section I of the questionnaire reveal positive attitudes towards a change in an approach to teaching/learning grammar. Interestingly, 'PFF' group shows a far more positive attitude towards this methodological change by 33.33% strongly agreeing and 53.17% agreeing compared to their counterparts who also show satisfactory figures by 45.24% agreeing and 23.41% strongly agreeing.

Similarly, calculating the total number of figures given under PFF instruction, only 0.79% state that they 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' for the move while under IFF instructions 18.25% either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with it. Thus, the impact of GCR activities in building up learner confidence towards focus on form instructions is significant. Yet, the percentage of participants who have selected 'not sure' seems to be near similar in both groups-they being 12.7% and 13% in 'planned' and 'incidental' focus on form groups respectively. Hence, a considerable number of the population needs further exposure to GCR activities to come to a conclusion.

Table 1: Number of responses of learners of PFF and IFF Groups on GCR activities

Question No:	PFF Group	IFF Group
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Section II-A/B, Que. i	Yes-36 (100%)	No-0 (0%)	Yes-34 (94%)	No-2 (6%)
Section II-A/B, Que. ii	Yes-32 (89%)	No-4 (11%)	Yes-13 (36%)	No-23 (64%)
Section II-A/B, Que. iii	Yes-35 (97%)	No-1 (3%)	Yes-33 (92%)	No-3 (8%)

The statistics on Table 1 for Q.i “Do you think these activities helped you do the tasks more accurately when you attempted similar tasks the next time?” reveal highly positive responses towards GCR activities with 100% agreement by the PFF group and 94% agreement by the IFF. In this case, the students handled the grammar tasks quite independently of the teacher, and it was quite a different experience from traditional grammar exercises as they focus on identifying the rule rather than the right answer.

The feedback given on ‘question ii’- ‘Were you able to understand the grammar rules focused in the activity without teacher explanation’ measures the participant’s capacity to discuss and acquire grammar on their own as well as the suitability of the GCR tasks designed by the researcher for the learners’ language level. 32 out of 36 (89%) have stated that they were able to understand the rules without teacher explanation under the PFF structure. In contrast, only 23 out of 36 (64%) under IFF structure state that they will be able to understand the rules without teacher explanation. The responses of the latter show to a certain level the difficulty of accepting independent learning after being teacher dependent for nearly 10 years. Further, it indicates that the students value an expert’s role in handling grammar rather than students doing it on their own.

The responses on the first part of question ‘iii’- ‘Do you like to have similar activities during tasks in future lessons’ reveal that majority of the participants (97% of PFF & 92% of IFF) irrespective of the type of instruction received want GCR tasks to be done in future. The second part of question ‘iii’ is the only open ended question in the questionnaire which aims at identifying the reasons for accepting or rejecting GCR activities.

The participants’ views on GCR activities of the PFF group could be summarized under nine key ideas. Eight out of it were positive and commented that “Discussions improve and refresh knowledge of grammar, successful method to be continued, teamwork is effective and enjoyable, interesting new experience, improve speaking and writing, promote learner autonomy, PPP approach is boring and ineffective, and GCR should be combined with PPP approach”. The only negative comment was that “GCR provides only a limited focus on grammar”.

The comments given by the IFF group can be coded into eight sections. They had also given similar comments like “tasks improve grammar, interesting activities, improve speaking and writing etc. But, comparatively there are more negative

comments such as “GCR alone is insufficient, PPP is the best method to learn grammar, provide only a limited focus on grammar, teacher explanations should be available during tasks etc.

Question ‘iv.’ required the participants to rank four methodologies based on the participants’ preference considering the potential of each methodology in learning grammar. The rankings given by the IFF group proves that a combined approach of TBLT and PPP which allows both inductive and deductive learning is the most popular view. The second choice of the majority is to learn grammar through tasks and GCR activities.

As given in Table 2 of the PFF and IFF group, a similar trend can be observed. The most popular view marked by 52.8% as the first choice and 33.3% as the second choice is to implement a methodology which allows both independent learning through tasks as well as dependent learning of direct grammar rules. The group which received PFF instruction also rejects learning grammar only through tasks. 44.4% and 33.3% of participants have marked this as the last and third option respectively. Another important observation made is that irrespective of the type of instruction received, the second largest percentage of participants in both groups have selected the third statement, namely “I like to learn grammar through tasks and grammar reflection activities.” by a second majority, and the figures are comparatively more favourable for those who have engaged in GCR activities than for their counterparts.

The fourth statement which is based on traditional PPP methodology reveals that both groups have ranked TBLT and PFF as superior to their present practice of PPP. Although they do not completely reject the PPP structure, a brief exposure into a novel practice, have been welcomed by the participants.

Table 2. Rankings given by the 36 participants of the PFF & IFF Group

<i>Statement</i>	<i>first Choice</i>	<i>second choice</i>	<i>third choice</i>	<i>forth choice</i>
1 I like to learn grammar only through tasks done in groups	1 (2.77%) 3 (8.3%)	7 (19.4%) 6 (16.7%)	12 (33.3%) 7 (19.4%)	16(44.4%) 20(55.6%)
2 I like to learn grammar by both teacher explanations and tasks	19(52.8%) 20(55.6%)	12(33.3%) 10(27.8%)	4 (11.1%) 6 (16.7%)	1 (2.7%) 0 (0%)
3 I like to learn grammar through tasks and grammar reflection activities.	10(27.8%) 9 (25%)	13(36.1%) 15(41.7%)	12 (33.3%) 9 (25%)	1 (2.8%) 3 (8.3%)

4	I like to learn grammar only through teacher explanations and other individual direct grammar exercises.	7 (19.4%)	5 (13.9%)	8 (22.2%)	16(44.4%)
		5 (13.9%)	5 (13.9%)	13(36.1%)	13(36.1%)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Both PFF and IFF groups have given positive comments on the potential of TBLT into learning grammar. Yet, the planned focus on form achieved through GCR activities has been preferred. Commenting on the best approach to learning grammar, majority have favoured a combined approach of TBLT planned focus on form and traditional PPP over a purely TBLT approach, and this needs to be experimented on further. A curriculum that takes these insights into account in developing the methodological approaches to teach grammar would bring positive results in helping learners to acquire grammar knowledge.

References

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