Task-Based Grammar Lesson

Andy W. Fuller

Colorado State University
Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been shown to be effective in many different language learning settings (Van den Branden, 2006). Tasks can be focused on specific communicative situations like ordering food or renting a car. Tasks can also be useful in teaching specific grammar structures because students are actively engaged in communicating and negotiating about the target form. This paper will summarize an article by Ellis and Fotos (1991) and introduce a sample lesson plan based on their research findings.

*Keywords:* Task-Based Language Teaching, negotiation
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Article Summary

Ellis and Fotos (1991) reported on a task-based method of teaching a specific grammar rule in communicative EFL classrooms. Their research questions included (a) do tasks successfully promote learning of particular grammar rule (b) and do tasks produce the kind of negotiation that promotes L2 acquisition? The main purpose of the study was to demonstrate that it is possible to integrate the teaching of grammar within a communicative activity that requires negotiation, and that this grammar task will lead to explicit L2 linguistic knowledge.

According to Ellis and Fotos (1991), formal instruction has been shown to lead to increased explicit knowledge of grammar rules and implicit knowledge of less complicated grammatical structures e.g. plural and genitive s endings. Formal instruction may also lead to L2 acquisition when it provides students with opportunities to communicate naturally. Thus, formal instruction has been shown to increase explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge can lead to learners developing implicit knowledge, which is needed for spontaneous communication (p. 606).

The approach targeted in this study, involves a task that requires problem solving with a partner or group to understand a target grammatical structure. Task-based approaches combine theories of comprehensible input and pushed output; therefore tasks require negotiation and interaction to solve a problem or work towards a definitive goal (Ellis & Fotos, 1991). Also cited in this study was SLA research that showed language learners produce more in groups and pairs than in teacher controlled lessons. This research has led to a widely held view that tasks and group work are believed to be effective in L2 acquisition (p. 610).
According to Ellis and Fotos (1991), communication and formal instruction can be combined in grammar tasks. These tasks should contain two main goals: to develop explicit knowledge of an L2 grammatical feature and offer negotiation through an information gap between the students involved. Included in their study were three groups of Japanese EFL learners. All three groups were to learn grammar rules concerning dative alternation. One group of students learned through grammar tasks in groups or pairs. Another group of students was instructed through traditional formal teacher interaction and the control group of students was left to read, study, and learn the structure on their own. All three groups were give pre and post tests on dative alternation.

The study found that the students involved in the task treatment and the teacher instructed treatment both increased scores on post tests; however, the control group showed no change in score from pre to post test (Ellis & Fotos, 1991). As tasks did not involve any further explicit instruction of the grammar rule other than what was written on the tasks themselves, this suggests that grammar tasks promote interaction, involve proficiency gains, and help the learner understand the form as a result of engaging in the task. The task described in this study raises consciousness about a grammar rule rather than involving simple practice of a particular form. In other words, students are communicating and negotiating about grammar instead of blindly practicing a target form.

Ellis and Fotos (1991) concluded that grammar tasks do increase explicit L2 linguistic knowledge. Grammar tasks also included negotiation and communication centered on a particular grammatical form. Suggestions for further research included (a) developing different formats for grammar tasks (b) assessing these formats in terms of quality and explicit knowledge gains (c) and examining the effect of teacher feedback on tasks (p. 623).
Sample Lesson Plan

Building background for task – Ask Ss what grammar rules they already know. Ask them how they would explain those rules to someone else. Then I will tell Ss they will be completing a task today to help them understand a grammar rule. I will also explain that after the task I will be giving them a quiz on the structure learned in the task.

Comprehensible input- The class has already completed many similar tasks so direct modeling is not necessary. Also, verbs chosen in dative alternation task should be already known to the students. Explain how this task will be completed. Then I will form groups of four students with one student having part A and three students having part B. Part B will be handed out to the groups first. They will read the directions and will be given the opportunity to ask any clarification questions. Once all groups understand the task, one person in the group will be given part A and asked not to show this paper to their group members.

Production- During completion of the task, I will monitor the class, help students come up with their own answers to questions, and attempt to keep the students motivated and on task.

Feedback/Assessment/Reflection- After the grammar task, each group will write their three dative alternation rules on the board. As a whole class, we will discuss and decide which three rules are correct and why they are correct. I will then give the students the quiz on dative alternation. Once the quiz is finished I will ask for feedback from the students on the task and whether or not they felt it helped them understand the rules concerning dative alternation.

Reflective Discussion

I chose the treatment task proposed by Ellis and Fotos (1991) because I recently completed my critical anthology review of task-based language teaching (TBLT). I am extremely interested in how tasks can be used to teach the various components of a language
class. Their article showed that focused tasks can be nearly as effective as teacher explicit instruction. Because tasks are obviously useful methods of instruction, this particular grammar task presented me with some challenges. How does a teacher best motivate and engage students in a grammar task?

One of the main components of TBLT is motivation. More specifically, how does the teacher motivate students to engage in tasks? It seems is easier to motivate students to become involved in tasks that require communication about a topic relevant to their lives rather than a grammar task. However, if the students see grammar as an important piece of language learning, then these tasks might engage them and facilitate L2 acquisition. Perhaps a lesson on the value of using correct grammar to increase meaning during communication would provide students with insight into the importance of grammar. This lesson might include examples of how incorrect grammar can cause communication breakdowns. A teacher might also ask the students to think about the grammar of their L1 and how important correct use is in conveying meaning.

Another way teachers could motivate students to engage in grammar tasks is through feedback and reflections. After tasks, teachers could incorporate time for the students to discuss the usefulness of the tasks, to express what was confusing or unhelpful, and to ask further questions. Reflective discussions might engage students and help them attain an integrative role in their own language learning. Discussions might also create metacognitive opportunities for students to reflect on how they learn, what they think is important to learn, and if they feel tasks increase their L2 linguistic knowledge.

Above all, tasks are communicative in nature and require some degree of negotiation. Even in the case of a grammar task, students must use the L2 to communicate and talk about the target structure. During task production, students are often speaking, listening, reading and
writing. These four components are important to integrate into a language classroom. While grammar tasks may not be as engaging as a meaning focused task, they still provide students the opportunity to learn about an important feature of the language through meaningful communication.
References


APPENDIX A

Task Cards

Students in groups of 4— one different card to each member
Students in pairs— two different cards to each member

1. Incorrect: She asked a question to her mother.
2. Correct: Kimiko reviewed the lesson for John.
2. Incorrect: Kimiko reviewed John the lesson.
3. Correct: The teacher calculated the answers for the students.
3. Incorrect: The teacher calculated the students the answers.
4. Correct: The secretary reported the problem to her boss.
4. Incorrect: The student reported the teacher the matter.
5. Correct: I offered her a cup of tea.
5. Correct: I offered a cup of tea to the president.
6. Correct: The teacher pronounced the difficult word for the class.
6. Incorrect: The teacher pronounced the class the difficult word.
7. Correct: I bought many presents for my family.
7. Correct: I bought my family several presents.
8. Correct: She cooked a delicious dinner for us.
8. Correct: She cooked us a wonderful meal.
9. Correct: She suggested a plan to me.
9. Incorrect: She suggested me a good restaurant.
10. Correct: The teacher repeated the question for the student.
10. Incorrect: The teacher repeated the student the question.
APPENDIX B
Task Sheets

There are some verbs in English which can have two objects. One of the objects is called the direct object. The other is called the indirect object. An indirect object names the person for whom the action of the verb is performed:

indirect object  direct object
She wrote Susan a letter.

Different verbs may have the objects in different order, and this is often a problem for students of English. The following exercise will help you understand some confusing verbs.

Directions:
In groups, you are to study correct and incorrect sentences using different verbs. You all have different sentences. You must read your sentences to the rest of the group. Do not show your sentences to the other members! Only read the sentences as many times as necessary! Work together as a group and decide on the basis of the correct and incorrect sentences where the direct and indirect objects should be located. Fill out the rest of this page. Choose one student to report your results to the rest of the class. Please speak only in English during this exercise!!

Verbs:

Possible correct order of direct and indirect object

1. asked:

2. reviewed:

3. calculated:

4. reported:

5. offered:

6. pronounced:

7. bought:

8. cooked:

9. suggested:

10. repeated:

Conclusion: Write 3 rules concerning the possible order of objects

Rule 1:
verbs which follow this rule.

Rule 2:
verbs which follow this rule.

Rule 3:
verbs which follow this rule.
APPENDIX C
Grammaticality Judgement Test on Dative Alternation

Directions: Read the sentences. Decide if they are correct or incorrect. Write (0) if correct, or (X) if incorrect.

1. ______ She asked the class a question.
2. ______ She asked a question to the class.
3. ______ She reviewed the sentences for Mary.
4. ______ She reviewed Mary the sentences.
5. ______ She calculated John the math problem.
6. ______ She calculated the math problem for John.
7. ______ She reported the police the problem.
8. ______ She reported the problem to the police.
9. ______ She offered her friend a chocolate.
10. ______ She offered a chocolate to her friend.
11. ______ She pronounced the difficult word for me.
12. ______ She pronounced me the difficult word.
13. ______ She bought her friend a dress.
14. ______ She bought a dress for her friend.
15. ______ They cooked a meal for their friends.
16. ______ They cooked their friends a meal.
17. ______ They suggested the children an idea.
18. ______ They suggested an idea to the children.
19. ______ She repeated the word for me.
20. ______ She repeated me the word.