

Effects of Focused and Unfocused Tasks on L2 Learners' Grammatical Development: A Select Review of Literature

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Abstract: The best procedure to improve learners' grammatical development has been debated vociferously by second language researchers and teachers. This paper analyzes the effects of focused and unfocused tasks on learners' development of grammatical knowledge by reviewing four empirical studies in task-based language teaching (TBLT) with the homogeneity of participants, settings, and designs. Each study is a quantitative analysis conducted at an Iran university or institution – an EFL context. Target grammatical structures in the four studies include have done, in spite of vs. although, because vs. because of, be done, prepositions, and English collocations. Findings support the arguments that learners exposed to focused tasks outperformed those instructed by unfocused tasks or traditional teaching methods. This synthesis of current research will be helpful to researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), language teachers, and syllabus and task designers.

Key words: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); Focused task; Unfocused task; Grammatical development; Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Introduction

One of the current trends in second language acquisition (SLA) and language teaching is task-based language teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes the use of tasks to engage learners in comprehending and producing the target language (TL) with their attention primarily to meaning rather than form. The ability to comprehend and produce communicative discourses can reveal learners' grammatical knowledge. To be specific, grammatical

knowledge involves not only the morphosyntactic forms but also the functions in sociocultural contexts (Farahani, 2017). Learning grammar through TBLT can lead learners to a promising communicative competence (Richards, 1986; Montasseri, 2016).

According to Ellis (1991), the main purpose of teaching grammar is to engage learners in the process of internalization of grammatical structures to help them develop implicit knowledge of grammar so that they can use the structures effortlessly in real-world communication (Farahani, 2017). From a TBLT perspective, through performing tasks, learners engage in developing implicit knowledge of grammar and use it productively and spontaneously. Ellis (2003) distinguishes between two types of tasks – focused tasks and unfocused tasks, which can be used to facilitate learners' development of grammatical knowledge. However, the effects of the two task types are not entirely clear. Therefore, this paper will explore the extent to which focused and unfocused tasks can affect L2 learners' development of grammatical knowledge. To begin with, the relevant theoretical underpinnings of TBLT are introduced, followed by a review of four homogeneous studies related to the effects of focused and unfocused tasks. Next, the impacts of focused and unfocused tasks on L2 learners' development of grammatical knowledge are discussed.

A Review of Literature

According to Ellis (2003), the criterial features of tasks are: tasks (1) are work plans; (2) involve a primary focus on meaning; (3) have a real-world connection; (4) involve any of the four language skills; (5) engage cognitive processes; and (6) have a clearly defined outcome (Block, 2004). Both focused and unfocused tasks meet the criterial features, but they also have their own characteristics.

According to Ellis (2003), unfocused tasks are predisposed for learners to choose from a variety of forms, but they are not required to use a specific form in mind. In other words, nothing in unfocused tasks requires learners to use specific linguistic features. Focused tasks, in contrast, are to induce learners to productively process particular linguistic features with two aims: (1) stimulating communicative language use and (2) engaging learners in the use of the predetermined target structure. There are two ways of designing a focused task: designing the task which can only be completed by using a particular

linguistic feature and making the language itself the content of the task (Ellis, 2003).

Ahour and Ghorbani (2015) examined the impacts of the two task types on learners' overall grammatical development. Participants were 60 freshman students majoring in English translation at an Iran university. They were averagely and randomly assigned to three groups, receiving the treatment of focused tasks, unfocused tasks, and traditional grammar translation instruction, respectively. The focused-task group was given instructions that induce students' attention to specific grammatical structures (e.g. using modal verbs to provide suggestions), the unfocused-task group was given instructions on pedagogical tasks proposed by Prabhu (1987), and the control group was given traditional kind of instruction (e.g. grammar translation and explanation). After 10 sessions of treatments, a teacher-made production post-test was used to see learners' performance on grammatical development. No target grammatical structure was emphasized, but the overall performance in learners' grammatical knowledge was assessed. The results indicated that learners instructed by either focused or unfocused tasks outweighed their counterparts receiving traditional grammar translation instruction, and learners who experienced focused tasks were the most outstanding.

Effectiveness of Focused Tasks on Grammar Acquisition: Evidence from Research Studies

The researchers claimed that both task types were effective, and focused tasks had the most dramatic effects on learners' development of overall grammatical knowledge.

In addition to assessing learners' overall development, a number of studies have been carried out with the focus on specific grammatical structures. Farahani and Taki (2017) investigated the effects of focused tasks on learners' grammar acquisition of specific target structures (have done, in spite of vs. although, because vs. because of). Participants were 60 intermediate female students in an Iran institution, who were randomly assigned into four groups: three focused-task groups (three different types of focused tasks: task utility, input enrichment, and consciousness-raising task) and one unfocused-task group. After two-month treatment, a post-test extracted from Nelson English Language Tests book was used to test the result. The findings revealed that focused task instruction was more effective in

augmenting the specific grammatical structures chosen in this study.

Likewise, Alavinia et al. (2018) examined the effects of focused and unfocused audio-appended reading tasks on the acquisition of two morphosyntactic structures: be done and prepositions. Participants were 90 intermediate female students at the Iran National Language Institute. They were randomly divided into two groups: a focused-task group and an unfocused-task group. The teacher in the focused-task group highlighted the target forms (passive voice and prepositions) to draw students' attention, whereas the forms were not highlighted in the unfocused-task group. After 10 sessions of treatment, the participants were provided with the post-test - a guided rendering task that asked students to translate a text from Persian into English - to check their development in the target structures. The findings showed that learners receiving focused tasks outperformed the learners instructed by unfocused tasks, meaning that focused tasks were more effective for learners' grammar development of the two linguistic forms.

The Impact of Focused and Unfocused Tasks on L2 Learners' Development of English Collocations

Last but not least, Montasseri and Kheradmand (2016) examined the effects of focused and unfocused tasks on the development of English collocations which are defined as a set of words found together in a prefabricated speech pattern. Participants were 32 upper-intermediate female teenagers in an Iran institution. They were randomly divided into two groups: a focused-task group and an unfocused-task group. The former group received instructions of structure-based production tasks designed to elicit the productive use of target structures, whereas the latter group received instructions of real-life tasks which did not emphasize any structures. After treatments of 15 sessions, the posttest of collocations designed by Pishghadam et al. (2011) was administered to test students' performances. The results revealed that both task types had a statistically significant impact on learners' collocations development, but focused tasks were more effective than unfocused tasks.

In sum, considering the homogeneity of participants, settings and designs, the findings are comparable and valuable among the four empirical studies. The studies have found that

both types of tasks are effective for learners' development of grammatical knowledge, but that focused tasks are more effective than unfocused tasks on not only the improvement of the overall grammatical knowledge but also that of specific grammatical structures, including have/has done, in spite of vs. although, because vs. because of, be done, prepositions, and English collocations. In the next section, the effects of TBLT and traditional grammar teaching and the effects of focused and unfocused tasks on L2 learners' grammatical development are analyzed.

Discussion

Learning grammar is essential for L2 learners' language development for two reasons: comprehensibility and acceptability (Farahani, 2017). Comprehensibility means that knowing how to build and use linguistic structures can help learners comprehend and communicate regarding their meaning successfully. Acceptability refers to the fact that learners may need a higher level of grammatical correctness than is required for mere comprehensibility in order to avoid using inappropriate expressions.

Because of the significance of grammar learning, implicit and explicit grammar instruction have received much attention. According to Ellis et al. (2009), implicit grammar instruction, such as learning grammar in a TBLT class, can provide learners with opportunities to infer the grammatical rules without awareness, which will result in the process of internalizing the structure without explicitly learning it. In contrast, explicit grammar instruction, like the Grammar-Translation (GT) method, refers to teaching the grammatical rules during the learning process and encouraging learners to develop their metalinguistic awareness. The difference can also be distinguished through comparing tasks and exercises. Ellis (2003) distinguishes tasks from exercises that the former is meaning-based, whereas the latter is form-based. Learners receiving form-based instructions (explicit instruction) experience the process of presentation, practice, and production (PPP). From a skill acquisition perspective, they convert declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge, and finally the knowledge becomes automatized (Anderson, 1983). However, learners completing meaning-based tasks (implicit instruction) develop their grammatical knowledge without conscious awareness of the rule but by paying attention to the meaning. In brief, the main

difference between implicit and explicit instruction lies in the role that explicit knowledge plays in language learning. According to Ahour and Ghorbani's (2015) study and Montasseri and Kheradmand's (2016) study, learners who were instructed by focused and unfocused tasks outperformed their counterparts who were taught by the traditional teaching method, meaning that implicit instruction (e.g. TBLT) is more effective than explicit instruction (e.g. GT) on learners' grammar learning. Based on this finding, the effects of focused and unfocused tasks are scrutinized in terms of learners' development of grammatical knowledge.

With respect to the results of the four empirical studies that focused tasks were more influential on learners' grammatical development, the reason could be attributed to the characteristics of the two task types. In terms of focused tasks which predispose learners to process particular grammatical features, they are provided with opportunities to pay attention to such features while doing the tasks. Two characteristics can contribute to such a learning process. First, focused tasks can naturally induce the use of linguistic features. Compared to explicit grammar instruction that metalinguistic knowledge will be introduced in the class, focused tasks can encourage learners to complete tasks without being aware of the grammatical rule. For example, by asking learners to give a brief account of something happening in the past, the task naturally induces the use of simple past tense. Second, focused tasks embrace the characteristic of task-essentialness, which indicates the essentialness of particular linguistic forms in completing tasks. As the example stated above, only by using the simple past tense can learners adequately complete such a task. With the two crucial characteristics, when learners get involved in the grammatical structures, focused tasks can engage them in a more effective grammar learning process, and at the same time, avoid being entangled by metalinguistic knowledge, which PPP and GT advocate.

In addition, the characteristics of focused tasks are compatible with Schmidt's (2001) Noticing Hypothesis that noticing is an essential and necessary condition for learning, the process during which input can be converted into intake (Corder, 1967). The more attention learners pay to the linguistic structures, the more likely they will be to acquire the intended

forms, which can promote the process of SLA (Schmidt, 2001). Likewise, as Ellis (2003) argued, attracting learners' attention to second language structures can facilitate learners' development of L2. Thanks to the characteristic of task essentialness, performing focused tasks, therefore, can provide learners with adequate and appropriate contexts for their L2 development. In contrast, unfocused tasks, as Montasseri and Kheradmand (2016) claimed, are designed to develop learners' communicative competence instead of paying direct attention to a particular linguistic feature. Learners who choose different grammatical structures or even remain grammatically incompetent can still complete tasks, as long as they are communicatively competent.

Learners' linguistic competence can be reflected in three dimensions of language proficiency – complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) (Skehan 1998; Robinson 2001). The study of Iswahyudi et al. (2019) on junior high school students' spoken performance indicates that focused tasks produced a positive effect on accuracy and lexical complexity, whereas unfocused tasks had a positive effect on fluency. In looking closely at accuracy, performing focused tasks can induce learners to use specific linguistic features adequately and accurately. With this task design, learners' grammatical accuracy of specific grammatical structures is higher than learners who complete unfocused tasks. In terms of lexical complexity, predisposed linguistic forms in focused tasks can contribute to learners' competence and performance because they are intended to practice specific words or phrases, in accordance with the result of Montasseri and Kheradmand's (2016) study on English collocation. In comparison, the argument that unfocused tasks have a positive impact on fluency can be explained by learners' competence in communication. They can always complete tasks so long as they are able to communicate fluently, even though their expressions are grammatically incorrect. In sum, focused and unfocused tasks with their respective characteristics have impacts on different aspects of L2 learners' grammatical development.

Based on the analysis of effects of the two task types, a couple of problems need to be considered. First, it is less clear whether the effects of the two task types can be generalized to all grammatical features. The structures that the four studies investigated (i.e. have done,

in spite of vs. although, because vs. because of, be done, prepositions, and English collocations) are semantically meaningful, but for structures which contribute little to the meaning of a message, such as articles and morph syntactic features of verbs, research needs to be conducted to obtain the finding. As White (1987) argues, certain types of grammatical features may not be easily acquired through interaction (Nobuyoshi, 1993). It is unreasonable to overgeneralize the conclusion based on limited evidence without the support of relevant research. Second, the impact of focused and unfocused tasks on learners' grammatical development should not be considered in isolation. Grammar is a construct that can be influenced by many factors, including affective factors and sociocultural factors (Farahani, 2017), and task type is not the only variable. Future studies and analyses focusing on this topic should avoid such confounding variables. Third, even though focused tasks can be more effective on learners' development of grammatical knowledge, teachers would also want to use unfocused tasks to strike a balance on learners' different dimensions of language proficiency, namely CAF, which is necessary for promoting the process of SLA. Forth, focused tasks should be contrived naturally but not artificially. Artificially contrived focused tasks are structure-trapped tasks, which are more like exercises than tasks, because meaning is not at the center. For example, if learners are aware of the focus of a task, they may stop regarding the task as an opportunity to communicate but switch to a learning mode (Alavinia et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Using focused and unfocused tasks in a TBLT class is an effective approach to teaching a second language (Ahour, 2015), which engages learners in authentic language use to facilitate language development. In terms of grammar learning, as Celce-Murcia (2001) suggests, under no circumstance should teachers teach grammar as meaningless, decontextualized, and static structures or think of grammar solely as prescriptive rules. The class should be designed to motivate learners to engage in authentic grammar-learning tasks. The use of meaningful tasks, especially focused tasks, based on this short report, should be used as one method to achieve the goal of grammar learning.

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