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Investigating the Effectiveness of a Focus-on-form Based Approach for Japanese Learners

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Abstract

As the need to improve students' practical communication abilities increases, task-based language teaching (TBLT) is gaining attention. TBLT is based on the principle of focus-on-form in which the primary focus is on meaning, and learners attend to form when comprehending or producing communicative messages. In addition, learners are often required to process simultaneously meaning, function and form. Admittedly, TBLT based on a focus-on-form approach seems to be effective in developing students' communicative abilities. However, in the Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) learning environment in which learners do not have much exposure to English and have little need for communication in English in their daily lives, there is still considerable skepticism regarding the effectiveness of TBLT or focus on form. In the present study, two experiments were conducted to examine: (1) whether students actually use a target structure or not and how they feel about a task; (2) whether students can simultaneously process form and meaning. The results implied that in the Japanese EFL learning environment, teaching based on a focus-on-form approach may not be as effective as we would expect.

Key Words：TBLT, Focus on form, Japanese EFL learners

1．Introduction

In the Japanese secondary school English education, developing students' practical communication abilities has been becoming more and more important. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has declared that one of the overall objectives of English education in junior high school is to develop basic communication abilities (MEXT, 2008), and furthermore to develop communication abilities to convey information and express ideas and opinions in senior high school (MEXT, 2009). It is clearly stated that "students should be engaged in activities that will lead them to exchange their thoughts and feelings by actually using the English language" (MEXT, 2009, p.6). Teaching grammar in an isolated way－focusing on pre-specified structures without context－seems to be rejected more and more these days. Thus, the utilization of task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is a logical development of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Willis,1996), has been recently gaining attention for English teaching in Japan (e.g., Matsumura, 2009; Takashima, 2005). However, taking account of the Japanese EFL situation in which students do not have much exposure to English and have little need for communication in English in their daily lives, we can be skeptical the effects of CLT and TBLT (Sato, 2010).

Focus on forms (FonFS) is one of traditional, synthetic approaches to language teaching in which specific target grammar is taught and practiced focused on form without context (Long, 1991). This is most exemplified by the traditional presentation-practice-production (PPP) model (e.g., Le & Roger, 2009). Focus on meaning (FonM) is referred to as learning second language (L2) incidentally or implicitly just as first language (L1) acquisition. This is exemplified by CLT. Long (1991) defines focus on form (FonF) as: primary focus is on meaning; learners attend to form when comprehending or producing communicative massages. He mentions that FonF is a viable third option between FonFS and FonM. Doughty (2001) states FonF requires learners simultaneous processing of meaning, function

and form. Ellis (2001) classifies FonF into two types: planned and incidental. Planned FonF refers to the treatment of pre-determined target structures, but it is different from FonFs in that learners' attention is primarily on processing meaning (Ellis, 2002). Incidental FonF is defined as the treatment given to students to let them pay attention to form when a communication breakdown occurs due to the rise of grammatical difficulties (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Le & Roger, 2009.) Although there is no single way of doing TBLT (Ellis, 2009), it has been suggested that TBLT embodies the concept of FonF as communicative approach (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Izumi, 2009; Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998). Ellis (2009) clearly states that in TBLT FonF is one of the main ways for handling grammar. Ellis (2003) defines a task as follows:

1. A task is a work plan.
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
3. A task involves real-world processes of language use.
4. A task can involve any of the four language skills.
5. A task engages the cognitive process.
6. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome. (pp. 9-10)

Ellis (2003) claims that TBLT insures cognitive processes, such as noticing, negotiation of meaning and form, scaffolded production and private speech, enabling acquisition to occur. It seems that a task, which presupposes attentions to linguistic form, embodies the concept of FonF. However, as Doughty (2001) suggests as an issue of FonF, we can be skeptical whether Japanese learners have the cognitive resources to notice the gap between their interlanguage utterances and target utterances around them while they are doing a task focusing mainly on meaning. We also have to think whether learners can learn and use target structures through FonF in a task.

2. Experiment 1

2. 1. Purpose

This brief experiment was conducted to examine whether students actually use a target structure or not and how they feel about a given task.

2. 2. Participants

Twenty-one university students majoring in English education at a national university in Japan participated in the experiment. They were regarded as intermediate level learners as they had obtained high scores in the entrance exams for the national university and were majoring in English.

2. 3. Procedure

In the task, extracted from Takashima (2005), students were put in a situation where they were implicitly encouraged to use the present perfect. As there was a pre-determined target structure, this activity was categorized as a planned FonF activity. The following was the procedure:

1. Students made pairs (one student was paired with me).
2. Each of the students was given a sheet which included different information from their partner's sheet.
3. Referring to the sheets which had (1) information on what they had eaten before the Golden Week (GW) holidays, (2) a restaurant recommended by their mother, and (3) plans after GW, they were required to talk with their partner to decide which restaurant to go to during the holidays.
4. One student from each pair reported their final decision and the reasons why they chose a particular restaurant.
5. Students then completed a brief questionnaire which asked whether they had used the target present perfect grammar during the task, and they were asked to write comments about the task.

2. 4. Results and Discussion

Among 21students, 5 students produced the present perfect, 15 students did not at all, and one student mentioned she couldn't remember. In my particular pairing with a student, I found that my partner had no immediate need to use the target grammar to complete the goal of the task. A chi-square statistic was calculated to examine whether there was a statistical difference between the number of students who produced the target structure (5) and of students who did not (15), finding a significant difference between them.

($\chi^2 = 5.00$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

Some of the comments written by the students

further highlighted some of the issues with the task (comments were originally written in Japanese and translated into English by the author):

- Student A: *I really enjoyed doing the task. It was like playing a game.*
- Student B: *I used the past and future tense but I did not have to use the present perfect to complete the task.*
- Student C: *When I couldn't say in English what I really wanted to mean, I spoke in Japanese.*
- Student D: *I don't know if I learned something in the activity, but anyway it was fun.*
- Student E: *I often used just words, not sentences, to convey massages to complete the task.*

In a task, as learners are given the freedom to decide which grammatical items to use, it is unlikely that they will produce the target items in a task. There is no controversy over the importance for Japanese learners, most of whom have exposure to English only in an English class, to learn new items during the class. However, the task may not meet this need. Ellis (2003) has admitted that students often regard communicative tasks as opportunities for communication rather than learning. In a task of the experiment, it was observed that students often used L1, made errors and mistakes without being given feedback from the partners. Their utterances were, in many cases, lexical oriented simple ones as the purpose of the activity was to convey their messages to complete the task goal. It was revealed that the planned FonF task was not effective even for those intermediate level learners in that (1) target item was not often used purposefully through the task;(2) some of the students used their L1; (3) lexical oriented expressions, not full sentences, were often used. The results imply that it might be even less effective for junior and senior high school students and that it would be difficult for them to experience FonF. If we draw on Bruton's (2005) conclusion that a task has limited applicability for EFL students, we can be skeptical of the appropriateness of the concept of FonF approaches for Japanese students.

3. Experiment 2

3. 1. Purpose

As is mentioned earlier, in a focus-on-form activity, learners are occasionally required to attend to both form and meaning (Doughty, 2001). Experiment 2 was conducted to examine students' micro-process of input: Whether they can simultaneously process form and meaning, or to answer my simple question, "Can Japanese learners attend to both form and meaning at the same time?"

3. 2. Participants

National university students from two classes participated in the experiment: Class A consisted of 9 students majoring in English education, regarded as intermediate students; Class B consisted of 24 students majoring in mathematics or science, regarded as lower level learners.

3. 3. Procedure

Students were asked to write their own opinions for or against the sentences which would be seen on the screen. The first sentence was, "A good teacher love all of her students." The sentence disappeared from the screen after three seconds. The second sentence was, "If I were five years old now, I'm happier." This sentence was also on the screen only for three seconds. Immediately after the second sentence disappeared, a different question was given to the students, which was "Was there any grammatical error in each sentence? If you think so, point it out. If you think there wasn't, just write "no". If you think there was but cannot tell what it was, just write "unsure"(1). This direction was given to examine learners' cognitive process by which they attend to form while comprehending communicative messages of the sentences. Students wrote their answers and after all of them finished writing, the papers were collected. They did not have to write about their opinion of the sentences because this direction was given to let student focused on meaning of the sentences. When students correctly pointed out the error, it was counted as "correct". When students answered that there was no grammatical error in a sentence and when they pointed out different words or expression from the exact error (in sentence 1, "love" should be "loves"; in sentence 2, "I'm" should be "I would be"), it was counted as "wrong."

3. 4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 and 2 show the results.

Table 1 Number of correct and wrong answers in sentence 1

	Correct	Wrong	Unsure
Class A (intermediate)	3	5	1
Class B (lower level)	7	17	0
Total	10	22	1

Table 2 Number of correct and wrong answers in sentence 2

	Correct	Wrong
Class A (intermediate)	4	4
Class B (lower level)	3	18
Total	7	22

If sentence 1 and 2 are combined, total number of correct answer is 17, with 26% of success rate. To examine whether there was a statistical difference between the successful moves (correct) and failed moves (wrong and unsure) a chi-square statistic was calculated in sentences 1, 2 and 1and 2 combined, and found that there was a significant difference between them in each case. (sentence 1, $\chi^2 = 5.12$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; sentence 2, $\chi^2 = 10.93$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; combined, $\chi^2 = 15.51$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). Table 3 shows total number of correct and wrong answers according to students' proficiency.

Table 3 Total number of correct and wrong answers according to students1 proficiency

	Correct	Wrong
Class A (intermediate)	7	9
Class B (lower level)	10	35
Total	17	44

To examine whether there was a statistical difference in the success rates between intermediate students and lower level students, a *t*-test was conducted. For the statistical analysis, correct answer was given 2 points, "unsure" was given 1 point and wrong answer was not given a point. The result of the *t*-test showed that there was not a significant difference between them. The results show that students, both intermediate and lower-level, were less likely to attend to forms while attending to meaning in the activity, which is compatible with VanPatten (1989), who has claimed that learners cannot attend to forms and meaning simultaneously.

During the activity, they could have been given grammatical instruction. However, as Doughty (2001) points out, a pedagogical intervention aimed at directing or attracting learner attention to formal features of language could be an intrusion on their cognitive processing.

The results would not dismiss the effects of FonF completely: It can be assumed that as they did not have to experience communication breakdown while processing input, students did not have to attend to forms; the experiment has measured just simultaneous process of forms and meaning. However, the experiment revealed that it is difficult for Japanese learners to attend both to form and meaning at the same time, dismissing a part of important concept of FonF.

4. Conclusion

These two small scale experiments did not support the effectiveness of approach based on the concept of FonF. Experiment 1 revealed that most of the students, who can be regarded as intermediate level learners as they passed the test of the national university, did not use the target grammatical structure in the planned FonF task. If we refer to Bruton's (2005) conclusion that a task has limited applicability and Swain's claim (2005) that TBLT is suitable for advanced learners, a task might be even less effective for junior and senior high school students. Experiment 2 indicated that both of the intermediate and lower-level learners would not benefit from FonF-based approach. As Foster (2009) states, "Whether task-based instruction is the ideal L2 teaching method might be a mystery, or just a fanciful mental illusion" (p. 251). Considering the improbability of a natural occurrence employing focus-on-form, we have to examine the effects of a traditional FonFS-based approach. In this Japanese EFL learning environment, approaches based on FonFS, such as PPP can be more effective than a FonF-based task. Further study should compare the longitudinal effect of approaches based on FonFS and FonF with more participants with different English proficiencies.

Note

（1）This direction was given in Japanese.

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