

A Grammar Task Micro-Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This task micro-evaluation seeks to explore issues in implementing tasked supported language teaching in a middle school context. It hopes to shed light on this method as a whole by analyzing one particular task supported language lesson. Data was collected in two forms. The response-based portion was collected by an audio recording created during the performance of the task. Student-based data was collected by means of a small questionnaire. The transcription revealed that learners although learners produced the target structure accurately only 56% of the time, they engaged in much negation of meaning. The results show that learners greatly enjoyed the task, although they demonstrated somewhat limited evidence of acquisition.

Keywords: Micro-Evaluation, Grammar Task, Task Supported Language Teaching

I. Introduction

The following evaluation is meant to analyze the effectiveness on one particular task supported language lesson in the hopes that some knowledge can be gained about the nature of task supported and task based language teaching more generally. This micro-evaluation will explore the effectiveness of the task portion of the task supported language lesson from two perspectives, whether it helped learners acquire the target grammar structure and whether those learners found the lesson enjoyable and helpful.

Despite the immense body of literature on task based instruction and the increasing popularity of classroom tasks around there world, there remain relatively few task micro-evaluations in language teaching literature (Ellis, 1998).

Ellis (1998) wrote that tasks can only be studied in the situation where they are used. This study, then, seeks to add to the literature available a report of a real sample task's impact on real learners in a real situation.

The primary goal, however, of the evaluation is to provide some points to consider for teachers to improve the implementation of their classroom tasks. This study would be what Allwright (2005) called Exploratory Practice, in that it is a small scale piece of research that aims ultimately to improve the teaching and learning experience without disruption of the learning process.

II. Literature Review

A. Tasks

There exists a huge amount of previous work on task based language teaching generally, far too much to

effectively review in the space available here. Rather than attempting to cover all the pertinent information we will discuss only a few core issues that must be clarified before moving on.

Let us first briefly discuss what we mean by a task. Ellis (2003) quotes Skehan (1996) who defines a task as, “an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome” (p. 10).

Nunan (2001), echoing a similar sentiment, writes, “A task is a communicative act that does not usually have a restrictive focus on a single grammatical structure. It also had a non-linguistic outcome” (p. 4). Nunan’s definition of task it is the one applied in this report, but the most important factor in a task is that it gives learners a need to create meaning in L2 (Skehan, 2002).

Skehan (2002) claimed that we do not have definitive evidence on the effectiveness of tasks, but most research seems to support the idea that they are effective.

There are several reasons why tasks might facilitate acquisition. Long and Robinson (1998) claimed a well designed task that involves transferring information and negotiating meaning can allow students to collaborate and communicate beyond their individual competencies, which is thought to contribute to L2 acquisition.

The use of tasks may also provide teachers an opportunity to provide immediate, individualized feedback to learners while keeping the primary focus on meaning (Skehan, 2002, & Long and Robinson, 1998). This is particularly useful in a multi-level class where learners may be at different levels of language development, like the participants in this study.

Engaging tasks can foster motivation for learners to practice L2, which can sometimes be lacking in an EFL environment. As Nunan and Lamb (1996) write, “In situations in which there is no immediate need to use the language outside of the classroom, classroom tasks and activities need to be made interesting for their own sake” (211).

There are those who are less convinced of the effectiveness of task based or task supported language teaching, however. Burton (2002) cites Sheen’s (1994) concern that in doing a task learners may not learn important structures, or if they do they may impart errors to each other.

Samuda (2001) also had reservations that take issue with task supported language teaching specifically. She claimed that it can be difficult for teachers to adequately prepare learners for tasks that call for oral production, claiming that the freer the oral production of a task the great variety of language that will be used and the less able a teacher would be to present useful structures in pre-task instruction.

In addition, Samuda (2001) points out that most task types called for the teacher to ‘lead from behind’, allowing learners to find their own solutions. This style of instruction could well be at odds with the educational-cultural values of some societies that place great value on teacher fronted instruction.

Though the final verdict is still out on the effectiveness of using tasks in the language classroom (Shehan, 2002), the fact remains that national educational policies and government sanctioned syllabi have, in

various nations in East Asia, moved slowly, yet increasingly toward tasked based language teaching (Littlewood, 2007).

B. Task Micro-Evaluation

As Ellis (1997) aptly writes, “Micro-evaluation serves as one way of conducting action research and, thereby, of encouraging the kind of reflection that is believed to contribute to teacher development” (p. 41). In addition to providing an opportunity for teacher development, it is the aim of this report to use micro-evaluation as a window into a task’s affect on learners and their responses to said task, in the hopes that this task can serve as an exemplar of other similar tasks used in the language classroom.

In a work partially about task micro-evaluation, Ellis (1998) looked at several examples. The tasks were successful in promoting negotiation of meaning and fostering meaningful discussion among learners.

Simons (1997), cited in Ellis (1998), for example, conducted an evaluation of an information gap task somewhat similar to the task examined in this report. He found that the task not only resulted in a lot of meaning-focused communication between learners, but learners also reported on a follow up questionnaire finding the task amusing and challenging.

III. Research Questions

1. How effective was this task-supported lesson in allowing learners to accurately produce the target grammar structure?
2. Did learners feel the task portion of the task supported language lesson was enjoyable and/or helpful?

IV. Methods

The evaluation took place on an intact class of 31 L1 Korean learners. Intact classes were used as a matter of convenience. The students studied were all 12-13 years old and in their first year of middle school. They hailed, by and large, from the lower middle class neighborhood where the school was located. In the school’s EFL program, all English classes were sorted broadly into two levels, based on the students previous years English test scores. The research presented here involved students located in the upper 50% of English scores and, therefore, represented a higher proficiency level class in terms of the context. It should be noted, however, that within each class a wide range of English abilities were still represented.

The categories below, used to describe the task evaluation, were derived from Ellis (1997) in his article about evaluating language teaching materials.

A. Choice of Task

This particular task was generally a good exemplar of information gap tasks often used in task supported language teaching. The task was meant to allow learners an opportunity to truly communicate in L2. Although the situation was contrived, the necessity of learners to communicate in order to facilitate group success was quite real.

The task was designed as a compliment to a block of explicit grammar instruction that preceded the task itself. If we focus only on naturalistic language use, without anything else (like formal instruction) learners are likely to focus only on meaning and ignore accuracy in form (Skehan, 2002).

The task evaluated also had the added bonus requiring learners to engage both productive and receptive skills, making the task not only engaging for learners but valuable for research. As Ellis (2003) wrote, “Focused communicative tasks involving both reception and production are of considerable value to both researchers and teachers.”

B. Task Evaluated

The task was designed to work as the second 45 minute period of a two-part, task supported language lesson covering describing people’s physical appearance in L2. The main grammar points addressed were the general use of ‘have/has’ (i.e. “He has black hair and brown eyes.”) and use of present continuous tense as applied to the verb ‘wear’ (i.e. “She’s wearing a green sweater.”). The task aimed to give learners a chance to use those structures in communication.

It was a focused task, as focused tasks are designed to provide an opportunity to communicate meaning by using a specific linguistic feature (Ellis, 1998). In addition, it was also an activation task. Nunan (2001) defined an activation task as, “A piece of classroom work involving communicative interaction, but NOT one in which learners will be rehearsing for some out-of-class communication. Rather they are designed to activate the acquisition process” (5).

The task called for learners to be divided into groups of four. Six pictures were displayed to the whole class. One learner from each team was secretly told which picture they were to describe. They then returned to their groups to describe that picture to the other members. The pictures in each set of six were selected to be somewhat similar to each other, differing in minor ways that could be addressed by a description that included the target structure. For example, in one picture set six pictures of middle-aged white mails were displayed. Some had long hair, some short. Some had black hair, some blond or brown. They also wore different colored articles of clothing.

The other members discussed and attempted to guess the number of the picture described. If the team was able to choose the correct picture, they received one point. When all groups had guessed, the role of the describers was switched and the process began again. Successful completions of each round required learner accurately use both their productive and receptive skills.

The game aspect was meant to create a situation of facilitating anxiety, to help students achieve their best performance. Nunan and Lamb (1996) found that there is a relationship between competition and anxiety.

Learners were instructed to speak only in L2 and the rule was generally followed. Later transcriptions revealed only five instances of L1 use, and none by the describers.

Though the learners were never told overtly what structures to use when completing the task, the first half of the lesson, conducted one week before, included structured input activities and explicit

instruction about these two grammar points. The task, then, was designed to reinforce the grammar and lexis covered previously, in accordance with task-supported language teaching (Ellis, 2003). The task challenged learners to develop implicit knowledge needed for real time language use.

Fotos (2002) writes, “Researchers have found that learners benefit from formal instruction prior to meaning-focused activities because such instruction helps them activate their previous knowledge of the target structure and promotes their attention to the forms they will encounter” (p. 137).

Nassaji and Fotos (2004) agreed, claiming that explicit instruction followed by communicative grammar practice appears to be an effective way to approach grammar instruction. It was with this research in mind that I developed the task to support the structured input and explicit instruction that learners received the previous week.

The task aimed to create a communicative condition that would make the target structures useful to utilize in the task, while keeping meaning front and center in the learners’ minds. Target structures demonstrated what Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) called ‘task naturalness’ (in Ellis, 2003). That is that target structures may not be strictly required to do the task, but they can still be expected to occur frequently and naturally during performance of the task.

Feedback was provided to the describer quite quickly by group members, by way of their ability or inability to guess correctly..

C. Planning the Evaluation

The evaluation itself is both response-based and student-based, as defined by Ellis (1997).

The L1 Korean portions of the tape were translated by a bilingual coworker and the necessary portions of the recording were transcribed and analyzed within a week of the class.

D. Collecting Information

Data was collected in two forms. The response-based portion was collected by an audio recording created during the performance of the task. Since insufficient equipment was available to record all groups simultaneously, an effort was made to record each group for approximately equal time, although only one group could be recorded at a time..

Student-based data was collected by means of a small questionnaire (Appendix A). After the lesson, a half sheet of paper that contained two Yes/No questions was distributed to each learner. Respondants answered anonymously in the hopes of eliciting more honest feedback. All learners were asked, “Did you find this class enjoyable?” and “Do you think this class was helpful?” To avoid possible miscommunication, each item on the questionnaire was also written in learners’ L1.

V. Results

The recording was partially transcribed and analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

In listening to the tapes, the very errors that were most targeted by the direct explicit instructional treatment the week before seemed to be prevalent, most notably a lack of conjugating ‘have’ for the third person and a lack of contracted –s at the end of pronouns that preceded present continuous verbs. When

the instances of these two grammatical features were tallied together, only 56% of those recorded were produced grammatically.

However, the tape also revealed quite a large number of clarification requests and confirmation checks. The following exchanges illustrate the kind of language heard throughout the recording.

Example 1 –

Student A: He have brown hair.
 Student B: What the hair?
 Student A: Brown hair. The hairs is short.

Example 2 –

Student C: She's wearing a blue skirt.
 Student D: Skirt? Blue and white skirt?
 Student C: Yes, blue and white skirt.

Example 3 –

Student E: He's black hair. He's wear shirts.
 Student F: 5!
 Student G: No, black. It's 2, okay?
 Student E: Yes, 2.

The results of the student-based questionnaires were quite positive. Of the 31 learners who took the survey 26 (84%) reported finding the activity enjoyable and 28 (90%) claimed it was helpful.

VI. Discussion

What the tape revealed was that the learners seemed to be focusing primarily on meaning while undertaking the task. Very few digressions were present and describers appeared to be eagerly trying to lead their group to the correct choice. Even group members who were listening, by and large, seemed quite engaged and enthusiastic about correctly interpreting the message.

This is evidence that learners were attempting to communicate their messages as accurately and quickly as possible. Fotos (2002) cites Swain and Lapkin when she claims that clarification requests were a particularly potent form of negotiated interaction for facilitating language acquisition. That would lead us to believe that the task could have succeeded in facilitating language acquisition.

The results were somewhat discouraging, however, when the relatively low percentage of accurately produced target structures was considered.

It may have been that the learners were simply not developmentally ready to produce the target structure. Ellis (2003) claims that learners cannot produce a structure that they are not ready to absorb.

Another possible explanation is that there may have been insufficient explicit instruction in the previous class for learners to fully grasp the target. Correct use of target structures is unlikely during the task if there has not been enough pre-task instruction, because learners may not have had enough time to absorb

the structure (Burton, 2002).

Whether the lack of grammatically correct production of these features was the result of the inefficacy of previous treatments, a failing of the task, or attributable to some other reason is still a matter of question.

Overall, the instruction that came before conducting the task may have helped students to understand the structures being taught, but their ability to produce those same structures accurately a week later was somewhat limited. The learners did, however, report enjoying the task and felt that it was valuable for their language learning.

VII. Conclusion

The initial aim of this assessment was to judge ways in which the task and explicit instruction succeeded and failed so that those teachers who choose to use task supported language teaching may better understand its benefits and limitations.

The results of the survey clearly showed that learners found the task both enjoyable and helpful. In the language teaching profession affective matters are widely considered to be of consequence in pedagogical considerations. Generally speaking, no one hates to learn, but no one learns what they hate.

The recording seemed to tell the story of learners who were greatly enthusiastic about the task and about communicating in the L2, but who also had not fully internalized the target grammar points into their interlanguage.

Though the results of this examination overall bode well for the use of tasks in the classroom, it would also suggest that teachers seeking to use focused tasks should first ensure that ample instruction and exercises directed at the target structure precede the task in order to maximize learners' opportunity to internalize the target structure.

This study was clearly limited in scope. It examined only one lesson presented to one class, so the results of other similar investigations might vary. This study was also quite narrow in scope, in that it examined only a small choice of target structures.

The inability to record all interactions on all teams during the task was also a limiting factor. It may have been that recorded learners were more focused or enthusiastic at that moment because the teacher was physically near them or because they were being recorded.

The area of task micro-evaluations is one ripe for future research opportunities. A clearer understanding of the pedagogical functions and implications of tasks could be built on a foundation of a wide variety of such evaluations. Future such evaluations should include a pretest and post-test component to gauge learner improvement.

Ellis (1998) cites Freedman (2007) who claimed that task micro-evaluation usually do not find their way into journals because they are considered too localized in nature, but we can learn a lot about the nature of task-based and task-supported teaching from them. Much could be learned from further investigation in different settings with different tasks.

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About the Presenter

Raymond Bryer received an MA in TESOL from Anaheim University, California. He has taught English in ESL to students ranging from advanced speakers to true beginners in Jeonbuk Prince for the past 6 years. His professional interests include the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, task-based language teaching, and journal studies. Currently, he is a professor at the Department of English Education, Jeonbuk National University. Email: raymondbryer@gmail.com

Appendix A

Please circle 'Yes' or 'No' to answer the following questions.

다음문제의 맞는 답에 Yes 나 No 에 동그라미 치세요.

- | | | |
|---|------------|-----------|
| 1. Did you find this class enjoyable? | Yes | No |
| 이 수업이 즐거웠나요? | | |
| 2. Do you think this class was helpful? | Yes | No |
| 이 수업이 도움이 되었나요? | | |