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Implementing the task-based approach in the grammar classroom through consciousness-raising tasks

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1. Introduction

Promoting high levels of accuracy in students of English in the English Department of the University of Algiers 2 is one of the cherished goals of the new LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorat) curriculum. But there is a growing concern that an emphasis on formal instruction should not lead to a revival of the 'old ways' of grammar teaching.

The introduction of the new LMD system involves, among other things, a move from structure-based lessons with teacher-led classrooms and formal instruction based on a series of isolated forms to cognitive and humanistic approaches to language teaching and learning. These approaches are based on the premises that language learning is a cognitive process where the learner is viewed as an active participant in the learning process and the teacher as a facilitator and monitor. In keeping with these principles when teaching the module of English Grammar, we have tried to adopt a task-based framework to grammar learning using consciousness-raising tasks (CRTs). This paper is an attempt to appraise the implementation of CRTs and suggest some ways to make them fit the Algerian context.

2. Consciousness- Raising Tasks: Theory

CRTs are focused tasks that were developed to create a balance between fluency and accuracy in the task-based classroom. They draw from task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is 'a strong version' of communicative language teaching mainly because tasks constitute the main elements upon which any task-based curriculum is built (Ellis: 2003). As Skehan (1996: 20) puts it: "Task-based instruction takes a fairly strong view of communicative language teaching. It is the task which drives learner's system forward by engaging the acquisitional process".

Task-based proponents acknowledge the importance of drawing learners' attention to how learner language operates as a significant component in language development. It is in facing the challenge of seeking effective ways to reach the perceived imbalance between fluency and accuracy that interest in consciousness raising (CR) stemmed. In the task-based approach, accounts of CR focus primarily on the construction of CRTs in a way that guarantees second language (L2) grammar development communicatively, thereby reacting to the traditional teacher-centered teaching of grammar based on the presentation, practice, production (PPP) approach. The PPP involves the introduction of a single grammatical item explicitly or implicitly with the objective of making the underlying rule understood. The presentation stage

would be followed by activities whose aim is to provide learners with opportunities to practise a given grammatical point in a controlled manner. After sufficient practice, the degree of control is reduced in the production stage during which learners use the grammatical item in free language production. The PPP approach to grammar learning is grounded in behaviouristic principles that merely encourage learners to respond to the teacher's stimuli by accurately producing 'the structure of the day' in order to fulfill the teacher's expectations (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003).

CRTs differ from the PPP approach in its recognition of the learners' active involvement in the learning of grammar. They are activities in which the content is language itself. They are meant to raise learners' awareness of how language works. Yet, the explicit focus on form and the saliency of the language structure in the input do not redeem a CR task to a simple "situational exercise" (Ellis: 2003); this is because the task must meet the same criteria that apply to any other task. Ellis (2003) identifies six features that characterize a task:

- It is a 'work-plan' or an activity that involves planning.
- It is meant to enhance the students' communicative language use through their engagement in 'meaningful interaction'. It involves a primary focus on meaning and seeks to develop language proficiency through communication.
- It requires the use of learning strategies similar to those used in real world such as negotiation of meaning and discussion of ideas. The work plan may engage the students in a real world activity such as completing a form or preparing an interview.
- It can be directed at any of the four language skills. The TB approach focuses on the spoken language, but it can be used to teach any skill.
- It involves cognitive processes such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating.

It follows that CRTs are meaning-focused activities that involve the use of communication strategies and the exchange of information to achieve an outcome.

3. Application of Consciousness-Raising Tasks

For teaching grammar to first year LMD students, I have used text-based tasks following Willis (1996)'s approach. The selected texts are written extracts that form the basis upon which the whole task is built. These tasks are believed to facilitate the integration of various language skills in the grammar lesson as they involve note taking, active reading, and listening. They have also the potential to increase exposure to language. The use of this type of tasks encourages discussion of meaning before form and provides adequate context to discuss the linguistic item. The selected texts are short paragraphs that are both exploitable and easily accessible.

Besides, the tasks are form-focused activities that:

- Are meant to raise students' awareness of how language works.
- Involve the students into inductive and active discovery of language system.
- Require the students to formulate and solve linguistic problems using both their linguistic and cognitive resources.

I have also adapted the task framework proposed by Willis (1996: 38). It comprises three phases: pre-task, task-cycle and post-task (see appendix). Although this framework was meant to teach integrated-skills lessons, it is flexible enough and can be adapted to teach a

task-based grammar lesson. So, based on this framework, the grammar lessons comprise the three phases described in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Description of the Consciousness-Raising Tasks as Implemented in the

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|---|---|--|
| Pre-Task Phase | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present the outcomes that the students are required to attain by the end of the unit. • Explain the nature of the activities they are required to do. • Provide each student with the handouts containing the text, instructions and the activities implied by the task. • Explain the instructions and make sure they are clear for them. • Divide the students into small groups. • Engage in short activities to prepare the students for task completion and familiarize them with some of the terms that might be ‘new’ for them. | | |
| Task-Cycle Phase | | |
| Task | Planning | Report |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the students to do the task. • Assist the students through monitoring from a distance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind them that they should report the task to the whole group. • Ask them to pay more attention to the accuracy of their reports. • Draw attention to their weaknesses. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the group leaders to report the accomplished task to class. • Encourage interaction and peer feedback. • Appraise the reports and suggest other ways to report the task. |
| Post-Task Phase | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more opportunities to reflect on the accuracy of the language the students have been using. • Provide more opportunities to further analyze the language. • Help them to check their hypothesis. • Encourage them to formulate their own rules. | | |

Grammar Classroom

4. Consciousness-Raising Tasks in Actuality

My experience of incorporating CRTs in first year English Grammar classes has been revealing in a number of ways. The students' reactions to the task-based methodology helped me to better understand where and how the tasks could fit into the grammar lesson in our university context. Thus, the CRTs appear to be effective in generating discussions about form and promoting peer feedback. They are built around texts and have the potential for integrating the language skills while explicitly focusing on form. Some positive reactions by my students learning in small groups have also been collected. The rich dialogues between the students appear to be beneficial in the sense that the students seem more involved and responsible in the classroom.

However, this by no means suggests that learning is guaranteed. Despite the above positive observations, the students' expectations often appear to not always match the teacher's expectations. This is mainly due to the students' previous learning experiences. After years of reform in the primary and secondary school, students are expected to have acquired some learning strategies that enable them to perform demanding tasks in the classroom. But the students were observed not to be ready for autonomous or self-directed learning. This implies that the teacher must train the students in basic learning skills, such as note-taking, skimming a text or understanding an instruction.

Besides, the CRTs used in the grammar classroom are tasks and texts where language features occur in a fairly large number, and that should involve much student interaction and participation to induce the rules and consolidate grammar. But the students were observed to worry more about getting the structure right than the meaning right. They also expected to be taught the grammar rules: many of them believed that spending time on memorizing the grammar rules was worthwhile and that they would get the structure right by the end of the class. Other behaviours were also observed:

- Some students used minimal language in performing the tasks. They often simplified the task by using the easy way out or carrying it out quickly.
- They overused their first language/s (L1). CRTs are designed to enable the learners to attend to form in a meaning-based context. So, CRTs cycles foster interaction and provide maximum chances for the students to use English (L2) while planning and performing the tasks. Nevertheless, the students tended to communicate through their L1s, which was counter-productive.
- In addition to their previous learning experiences, the whole philosophy of the CRTs may have affected their behaviours in the TB grammar lessons. Both teachers and students must have clear and tangible lesson goals that can be achieved and evaluated by the end of the lesson. This is possible with the traditional PPP approach, which lends itself to accountability, but less so with CRTs which focus on the process of learning but not on the product. Therefore the students' sense of progress was undoubtedly threatened.

5. Some Practical Suggestions

The observations I collected while implementing CRTs in the first year LMD grammar classroom have drawn my attention to a number of techniques that may be incorporated into grammar lessons. These are discussed below, relating them to the problems encountered and

to how to face them while using the TB methodology. Some of these suggestions were inspired by the task-based work done by Willis & Willis (2007) essentially:

- TB Language teaching entails a change in the attitudes of the students who are not used to grammar instruction through CRTs. Students are worried about not being able to improve their accuracy. We propose to:
 - Start the lesson with a clear statement about its aims and outcomes that the teacher is expecting the students to attain.
 - Choose tasks with concrete outcomes such as to discover and recognize the difference between the use of the present perfect and the past simple tenses, to be able to use time expressions in narrating a story, etc.
 - End a CRT with the students' own summary of the meaning as well as the use(s) of the structure under focus.
- Teachers need to encourage the use of English during pair-work and group work. They could :
 - Draw a set of rules where L1 is not allowed to be used (Willis & Willis: 2007).
 - Before starting an activity, ask some students to explain what they think they have to do using English.
 - Remind the students that they will be asked about how they have completed the task in English.
- The implementation of CRTs by the teacher is demanding. In order to make the design and preparation of CR lessons less time-consuming, the teachers are advised to use these tips:
 - Teachers' collaboration to gather materials and work out activities, prompts, and projects for their students makes the preparation of the tasks less time consuming.
 - The use of text-based tasks can be a source of a variety of activities. They are flexible enough to be adapted easily to different levels of proficiency and different contexts.

6. Conclusion

This first attempt to use CRTs with first year LMD students has helped me to reflect on my teaching and highlights some important points in relation to teacher development. I have realized that understanding a given method of teaching and implementing it is far more complex than designing a syllabus or planning a lesson. It is the on-going teacher-learner interaction which creates the experience inside the classroom. This reality seems to confirm O'Brien and Guirney's (2001:23) observation that "...teaching and learning is an unpredictable risky affair".

In addition, observation can be more powerful than theory in affecting our teaching. It is the actual interaction between what we prepare as teachers and what students take as learners which is the real experience in the long-term teacher development. Observation can be more powerful and effective if planned as part of collaborative teaching. This leads us to talk about sharing teaching experiences especially that the university is undergoing changes. Moving away from traditional methodologies and a more secure framework towards new ones can be safer if teachers constantly work together. Collaboration reduces the sense of uncertainty.

Finally, as we believe that every classroom is a different "social situation" (Allwright & Bailey: 1991), the teachers are invited to experience the benefits and challenges of TB

collaborative learning. We hope to hear from other teachers of grammar about how they integrate CRTs in their classrooms. The observations that other teachers may collect under different circumstances would undoubtedly add to our understanding of teaching and learning in different contexts and circumstances.

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