

Grammar teaching using form-focused tasks

Naoko Osuka
Akikusa Gakuen Junior
College
Atsuko Yamamoto
Azabu University

Reference Data:

Osuka, N., & Yamamoto, A. (2005). Grammar teaching using form-focused tasks. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Many college students complain that learning grammar is useless for acquiring English speaking abilities. But the presenters believe that grammatical knowledge is still important in developing learners' communicative abilities, especially in EFL settings. The point is how we should teach grammar so that it can assist students in obtaining abilities to use English in real communication. The presenters assume teaching grammar using form-focused tasks can be effective. It is an instruction where focus on form is incorporated in communicative tasks. This instruction is expected to develop both learners' fluency and accuracy, and help them develop their implicit knowledge by having them notice the rules for themselves. In this paper, the theoretical background of form-focused tasks is explained and how the presenters have implemented form-focused task instruction in class is illustrated. Examples of form-focused tasks prepared by the presenters based on some problematic grammar features are explained in the Appendix.

多くの大学生が、文法の勉強をしても英語を話せるようにはならないと訴えるが、筆者らは、EFL環境において英語のコミュニケーション能力を育成するためには、文法の知識はやはり必要だと考える。重要なのは、実際のコミュニケーションで英語が使えるような文法の教え方をするのである。筆者らはform-focused instruction、とくに文法指導を組み込んだタスク (form-focused tasks)を使用する教授法が効果的であると考える。この教授法を使えば、学習者は流暢さと正確さの両方を伸ばすことができ、自分で文法ルールに気付くことで、暗示的知識を身につけることが期待できる。本稿では、この教授法の理論的背景を紹介し、実際にクラスでどのように実践したかを紹介する。また、学生が間違えやすい文法事項に基づいて作成したform-focused tasksの例を添付資料に付記した。

The role of grammar

Results of our past survey done these four years have revealed that many students think English grammar is useless for real communication, especially for speaking English. Is grammar really useless to acquire communicative abilities in a foreign language?

In this case, grammar means 'explicit knowledge' of grammar rules. According to Ellis (2004b), explicit knowledge is held consciously, and is learnable and verbalizable. By contrast, 'implicit knowledge' is held unconsciously and available for use in rapid, fluent communication. In the view of second language acquisition, in general, competence of implicit knowledge is the primary matter. There are three positions about the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge. The first is the non-interface position, proposed by Krashen (1981), which claims that explicit and implicit knowledge are totally distinct and that explicit knowledge never becomes implicit knowledge, and there is no use in teaching grammar. The second is the strong interface position which claims explicit knowledge can become internalized

through practice. The third is the weak interface position which claims explicit knowledge can assist and facilitate the development of implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2004b).

The presenters support the weak-interface position and believe that grammar plays a certain role in acquiring communicative abilities, especially in EFL settings. We think the way ESL learners learn English is quite different from the way EFL learners learn it. It is rather difficult for EFL learners to obtain implicit knowledge because they are not where English is spoken in their daily life. They have limited amount of exposure to English and limited chances to use English in real life. We think they need help of explicit knowledge to acquire implicit knowledge.

The traditional grammar teaching and PPP

In traditional junior/senior high school grammar lessons, teachers teach grammatical rules in isolation, and students have few opportunities to use them in real communication. Considering the fact it is well known that communicative abilities in English of most Japanese people is rather low, this traditional grammar teaching does not seem successful in helping learners use the language communicatively.

There is another approach called PPP (present-practice-produce), which is often used in English speaking classes. Many English textbooks are made based on this approach. However, it is doubtful whether PPP really helps students develop their communicative abilities, in other words, assist them in acquiring their implicit knowledge. From our teaching experiences, we have found that students easily forget the target structure they have learned through this

approach. This is maybe because the target structure is first presented by a teacher in this approach and there is little noticing by students themselves, so practice and production tend to be mechanical without internalization of the rules.

Form-focused task instruction

Theoretical Background of Form-focused instruction

Then how should we teach grammar so that it can help students develop their communicative abilities? One of the answers we are expecting is form-focused instruction. In this instruction, focus on form is incorporated into communicative context, so students are expected to develop their fluency and accuracy, both of which are important in second language learning.

In recent years, many researchers argue that focus on form need to be integrated with communicative approaches (Long, 1996; Long & Robinson, 1998), and a number of empirical studies have revealed that form-focused instruction is successful in promoting learners' second language development (Doughty, 1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998; N. Ellis, 1993). They argue the exposure to the target language or focus just on meaning is not enough to develop accuracy.

Form-focused instruction is different from traditional teacher-centered grammar teaching. As Long (1991) states, the primary purpose of form-focused instruction is to draw students' attention to form as they arise in lessons whose main focus is on meaning, while the main purpose of traditional grammar teaching is to teach explicit knowledge of grammar in isolation.

Form-focused task instruction

The form-focused instruction we have tried in class is based on ‘focused tasks’ proposed by Ellis as one of the task-based approaches he advocates.

Ellis (2003) defines “form-focused task” as

“a task that can be employed to elicit use of specific linguistic features, either by design or by the use of methodological procedures that focus attention on form in the implementation of a task.”

As it is a kind of a ‘task’, it should have general features of a task, such as “It focuses on meaning”, “Learners decide what language to use”, and so on (Ellis, 2004a).

Three kinds of form-focused tasks mentioned by Ellis are comprehension tasks, structure-based production tasks, and consciousness-raising tasks.

In comprehension tasks, students are given text in which target forms are frequently used. The task is usually designed so that the target forms should be essential for comprehending the whole text. In this type of tasks, students comprehend, interpret and process the input, and are not necessarily required to produce the target structure.

Structure-based production tasks are designed so that students can use the target structure for completing the task. In some tasks, the target structure is used ‘naturally’ and there are possibilities that students complete the task without using the structure. In other tasks, the target structure is used to make the task ‘easier’. Furthermore, there are tasks in which the use of the target structure is ‘essential’.

Consciousness-raising tasks are designed so that students can induce and formulate some grammatical rules from the presented sentences, through interacting and negotiating in small groups. Fotos (1993, 1994) found that this type of tasks provided opportunities for communication and promoted noticing.

We assume teaching grammar through form-focused tasks can be effective. It will help students internalize the rules by having them notice while they are focusing on meaning. Thus students are expected to develop their implicit knowledge, which is crucial for acquiring communicative abilities.

How to implement form-focused task instruction

Now, we explain how the presenters implement the form-focused task instruction in class. We combine various kinds of form-focused tasks according to the difficulty level of the target structure or the development level of the students.

Unlike PPP, we generally do not teach students the target structure directly before the task. This is because if students are taught the structure first, they are likely to do practice and production mechanically without noticing, and the rules are unlikely to be internalized.

What kind of form-focused task we give first depends on the difficulty level of the target structure and the development level of the students. If the target structure seems to be easy for students, we can have students do structure-based production tasks first without any input of the structure. If the target structure is a little difficult for them, we may have students do a comprehension task first,

and then have them do a structure-based production task. If the target structure is more difficult, we may have students do a consciousness-raising task first to have them notice the rules by themselves. If they notice the rules by themselves, the knowledge is more likely to be internalized. Then we may have them do a comprehension task and/or a structure-based production task. Thus we change the combination and the order of the tasks flexibly depending on the level of the target structure and that of students.

There is a point we should bear in mind when we conduct form-focused tasks; we give corrective feedback to students while conducting tasks. Many researchers indicate the effectiveness of corrective feedback. According to Ellis (2004a), there are two ways of giving feedback. One is implicit feedback such as recast and a request for clarification, and the other is explicit feedback such as direct correction and metalingual explanation. It is still controversial which type of feedback is more effective, but we try to give students some kind of feedback when they make grammatical errors.

Sample lesson plans using form-focused tasks

Target structure: Comparative and superlative

Students' English level: low to low-intermediate

Comprehension task

“Comparative and superlative” are a little difficult for low to low-intermediate students. So it would be a good idea to start with a comprehension task. They are exposed to a lot of target structure.

[World quiz]

Preparation

Prepare 10 quiz questions related to the world using superlative or comparative, and answer choices. Examples are in the Appendix.

Procedure

Step 1: Divide the class into groups of four or five. (Option: Students can do this task individually.)

Step 2: Ask them quiz questions.

Step 3: After the teacher gives the answer for each question, he/she should say it in a complete sentence again.

Step 4: Groups (or individuals) compete how many correct answers they can get.

Structure-based production task

Now students are supposed to be ready to do a structure-based task. The task is carefully designed to make it essential for students to use the target structure, so the teacher does not have to tell them to use superlative or comparative.

[Name the girls]

Preparation

Prepare a drawing of six girls. They are similar in their faces, hair styles, and clothing. The major difference is only their height. Their names are listed in alphabetical order: Betsy, Emily, Kate, Mary, Rachel and Sara. Only one girl, who is the third from left, has her name: Emily. (See the Appendix.)

Procedure

Step 1: Divide students into pairs: Student A and Student B.

Step 2: Give each student a drawing.

Step 3: Student A writes a name from the list below each girl randomly.

Step 4: Student B asks questions and identifies who is who. Student B cannot ask questions using who or which. Student B can answer just yes or no.

Step 5: Teacher gives corrective feedback when students make mistakes.

Consciousness- raising task

Many students of this level are confused about when they should use -er or -est form, and when they should use more XX or the most XX form. A consciousness-raising task can be used to give them correct knowledge.

[New York guide]

Preparation

1. Prepare a story using a lot of superlative and comparative. An example is in the Appendix.
2. Also prepare a table to categorize the words of -er and -est form, and the words of more XX and the most XX form. (See the Appendix.)

Procedure

Step 1: First read the story to the class and ask some comprehension questions, such as “What is the highest building in Manhattan now?”, “What is the longest running musical?” and so on. (This step is a kind of comprehension task.)

Step 2: Give the written story to each student and tell them to underline every word in the superlative or comparative degree.

Step 3: Tell them to categorize all the underlined words into two groups. One group is the words of -er or -est form. The other group is the words of more XX or the most XX form. Tell them to write its original form next to each word.

Step 4: Ask students what rules they can induce from the table. (Many students answer “A short word takes -er or -est form and a long word takes more XX or the most XX form.”)

Step 5: Give them the rules of the target structure precisely. For example, “One syllable word takes a -er or -est form, and a word which consist of two or more syllables takes more XX or the most XX form, except a two syllable word which ends with *y*, like *happy*.”

Other examples of form-focused tasks prepared by the presenters based on some problematic grammar features are explained in the Appendix.

Discussion

Now, as stated above, many empirical researches have revealed form-focused instruction is successful in promoting learners' second language development. However, we presenters have not yet obtained definite evidence for the effectiveness of our form-focused task instruction.

We used form-focused tasks, including structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, and consciousness-raising tasks, as described in the Appendix 5, to teach grammar during a semester. The results of pre- and post-tests (TOEIC Mini Test was used) given to 31 subjects showed that students' average score went up from 31.55 to 33.05 (full score is 70), but the result of *t*-test showed no significant differences. Furthermore, the problem is TOEIC Mini Test was not very suitable for measuring students' development of implicit knowledge.

The questionnaire was addressed to the subjects and the main question was "Do you think learning grammar in communicative ways is useful for you?" The result was the average score was 4.29 on a scale of 5. We can see the students felt the usefulness of form-focused task instruction, but we need to do more empirical researches.

Conclusion

In Japanese FFL settings, where learners' exposure to English is limited, learning English just through communication tasks without explicit knowledge of grammar is really difficult. The presenters believe that learners need grammar to develop their oral fluency and accuracy. However, the traditional grammar teaching

methods, including PPP, have not been very successful in leading students to development of communicative abilities. We assume that teaching grammar using form-focused tasks can be effective. It will help learners develop implicit knowledge, by giving comprehensible structured input and chances to use the target structure in real communication. Noticing the rules by themselves will help them internalize the rules. We think we can make an effective lesson by changing the combination of the different types of tasks, according to the level of the target structure and the development level of the students. We need more empirical researches to prove the effectiveness of this instruction.

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Appendix

1. Example questions used in [World quiz]

1. What is the smallest country in the world?
 - a. Haiti, in Central America
 - b. the Vatican City, in Europe
 - c. Guinea, in Africa
2. Who is the richest person in the world?
 - a. The king of Brunei
 - b. Steven Spielberg
 - c. Bill Gates
3. What vegetable is produced most in the world?
 - a. tomatoes
 - b. potatoes
 - c. onions
4. Which is taller, Eiffel Tower or Tokyo Tower?
 - a. Eiffel Tower
 - b. Tokyo Tower
5. Which country has larger land, Canada or China?
 - a. Canada
 - b. China

2. An example picture used in [Name the Girls]

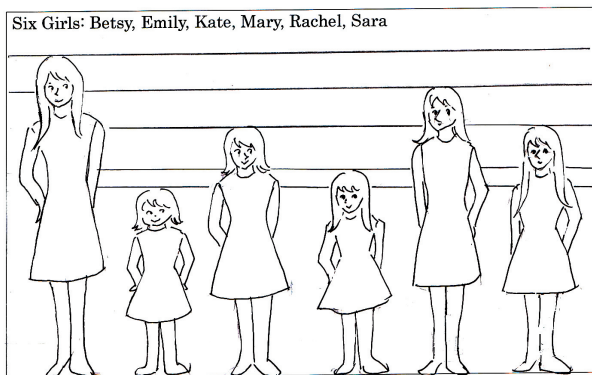


Figure 1. Name the girls

3. An example story used in [New York guide]

New York is the biggest city in the world and also one of the most attractive tourist spots. The skyscrapers of Manhattan seen from a distance are one of the most impressive images. The Empire State building was the tallest building in the world for 40 years, from 1931 to 1972, now is the highest building in Manhattan after the destruction of the World Trade Center.

You can see numerous wonderful works of art in New York. It has one of the largest art museums in the world – the Metropolitan Museum and other many smaller museums or galleries. Moreover, New York has the more established arts – dance, theater, music. Musical is one of the most popular entertainments here. Popular musicals usually run very long. The longest running musical so far is “Cats”, which started in 1982 and closed in 2000.

You can eat and drink anything in New York. There are a wide variety of restaurants here: from very cheap hamburger shop to very expensive French restaurant. The most expensive restaurant in Manhattan is “Masa”, which is run by Japanese chef Masa Takayama. You have to pay at least \$300 to eat sushi there. Drinks are, of course, extra.

4. An example table used in [New York guide]

-er/-est	original	more XX/ the most XX	original
the biggest	big	the most attractive	attractive
the tallest	tall	the most impressive	impressive
the highest	high	the most popular	popular
the largest	large	the most expensive	expensive
smaller	small		
the longest	long		

5. Other examples of form-focused tasks

The following is a brief description of form-focused tasks prepared by the presenters.

- A. Comprehension task
- B. Structure-based production task
- C. Consciousness-raising task

Grammatical Feature	Procedures	Type of task
Nouns Countable or Uncountable	The teacher prepares many things and students are asked to divide them into two groups. There may be many ways to divide things. After students divide things in their own ways, the teacher divides them into two groups, countable nouns and uncountable nouns. Students have to guess what the two categories are. After that, students are required to divide the nouns in their textbook into countable nouns and uncountable nouns.	C
Adjectives -ed or -ing	1. Students sit in a circle and listen to the tape. There is a 5-second pause between each dialogue and each student is required to respond to a question as quickly as possible. The teacher stops the tape when giving 'recast'. The tape is about 10 minutes long with about 30 dialogues recorded. 2. Students listen to a short story and answer questions. The teacher gives 'recast'. 3. Students listen to a short story and retell the story. Teacher gives 'recast'.	A, B
Articles the, a/an or no article	Students listen to the passage the teacher reads to them. Students are asked to rewrite the passage in their own words. The teacher checks whether articles are used correctly or not.	A, B

Adverbs	Students sit in a circle and listen to the tape. A statement followed by a question is recorded. Students listen to the question and answer it as quickly as possible. The teacher gives metalingual explanation.	A
Verbs Transitive verb or Intransitive verb	The teacher prepares many sentences in which sentences with either transitive verbs or intransitive verbs incorrectly used are written. The teacher divides each sentence into two and gives the first half to student A and the latter half student B. Both students read the half of the sentence and decide whether the complete sentence is grammatically correct or not.	C
Relative Clauses who, which or where?	1. Students are asked to make a crossword puzzle. They may use relative clauses, to-infinitive, or gerunds to describe things. The teacher can ask students to use phrases such as 'This is a thing which~. This is a person who~. This is a place where~.' If students have access to computers, they can use internet site to make their own crossword puzzle. 2. Students work in pairs and each student has his/her crossword puzzle half of which are not complete. The student A asks the student B 'What's 1 down?' and the student B explains that word in his/her own words.	A, B
Subordinate Conjunctions	The teacher gives the passages full of gaps in which subordinate conjunctions are to be put. Students are required to complete the gaps.	C

Prepositions (place & time)	1. Students are asked to draw their rooms and to write about them in detail. After students finish writing, they are required to describe their rooms (students have to use various prepositions and prepositional phrases) and their partners are required to draw their rooms. 2. Students ask many personal questions to their partners and are required to talk about them. They have to make sentences including time prepositions: for example, 'My partner was born in Tokyo on Dec. 24. He entered elementary school near his house in 1995. Students are asked when to use 'at', 'on' or 'in'.	B, C
Comparative & Superlative	Students are asked to do the class survey. Questions are prepared by the teacher; for example, 'How many hours a day do you study?' 'How often do you eat out?', etc. After that students are asked to find the one who does a certain thing the most often; for example, 'X eats out the most often in our class.'	B
Coordinate Conjunctions	The teacher gives the passages full of gaps in which coordinate conjunctions are to be put. Students are required to complete the gaps.	C
Present Tense	Give students a day schedule form. Each student thinks of his/her typical Wednesday and fills in the form without writing his/her name. The teacher collects the forms, shuffle them, and give one schedule sheet to each student. Students move around the classroom asking questions, such as "What time do you get up?" to find whose schedule sheet it is.	B
Past Tense	Students choose a famous person in the past and do research on the person (Homework). Divide students into pairs. They ask questions each other and guess who the person is.	B

Future Tense	Have students listen to a conversation between Person A and Person B, who are talking about plans for after class, tomorrow, weekend, and vacation. Sometimes they use <i>be going to</i> and sometimes <i>will</i> . Show students the transcript of the conversation. Have them notice the difference between <i>be going to</i> and <i>will</i> .	A, C
Progressive	Prepare two kinds of pictures. Both pictures have 15 people who are doing something. In two pictures, 10 people are doing the same things but 5 are doing different things. (For example, in Student A's picture, Emily is cooking, but in Student B's picture, Emily is watching TV.) Divide the students into pairs, and have them find 5 people who are doing different things.	B
Present Perfect Past Perfect	Have them listen to job interviews of 5 applicants. (For example, "Have you ever studied abroad?" "Yes,...Students decide which applicant is the best and explain why.	A, B
Modal	Divide them into groups of 4. Give the group a set of trouble cards. Each card shows one problem or trouble, such as "I have a stomachache." "I lost my purse." etc. They shuffle the cards and put them face down. One student draws a card and the other members give him/her advice, such as "You should go to bed and sleep." "You should go to the police." etc.	B
Passive Voice	Have students listen to a story which contains many passive voice forms. Have students retell the story. Give them corrective feedback.	A, B
Subjunctives	Divide them into groups of 4. Give them a board game. The game has 25 squares. Each square has an incomplete imaginary sentence, such as "If I were a millionaire,..." Students roll a dice and move their piece. They have to complete the sentence of the square where their piece stops.	B