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THIS paper presents preliminary research on a form-focused task using semantically enhanced input data to target prepositions of location. It is based on a small classroom-based study that grew out of a need to develop tasks that targeted specific functions and/or structures in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. The researchers began with three tasks targeting prepositions, passives, and articles, using semantically enhanced input. Tasks were then experimented with to see if they could be adapted to different proficiency levels and courses.

Keywords

task-based, TBLT, TBL, TBI, form focused, FonF, meaning focused, semantically enhanced, ESP, prepositions of location, realia

Kumaravadivelu (2007) suggested a need for more research into tasks that raise learners' awareness of gaps in their interlanguage (IL) and for the design of tasks that are communicative yet have sufficient focus on form. This paper describes a small research project using realia (a miniature apartment) and Samuda's (2001) design components of input on data, operations on data, and outcomes, to target prepositions. The task design objective was to "create a semantic space," leading learners to use the targeted form (Samuda, 2001, p. 122). The authors believe that semantically enhanced tasks can indeed induce learners to notice a gap in their IL, seek language input on a highlighted form, and then apply that form with a greater degree of accuracy/control as a result of their increased appreciation of that particular meaning-form relationship. The task described, although proactive, follows a meaning → form → meaning task cycle, where meaning is primary.

これまでに、学習者の中間言語に存在する欠落の認識を高めるタスク及び、コミュニケーションながらも十分な言語形式の焦点化 (focus on form) を持つタスクデザインに関する研究の必要性が説かれて来ている (Kumaravadivelu, 2007)。本研究は、前置詞をターゲットとして、実物教材 (ミニチュアアパート) と、Samuda のフレームワークのデザイン構成要素であるデータのインプット、データの操作、及び結果を使用した小規模研究である。タスクデザインの目標は「意味空間 (semantic space) をつくる」ことにより学習者をターゲットとされる言語形式に導くことである (Samuda, 2001, p. 122)。著者らは、意味が強化されたタスクは、学習者が、彼らの中間言語に存在する欠落に気づき、特定の言語形式を持つ言語のインプットを探究し、意味と言語形式の関係を一層理解した結果、その言語形式を高い正確性・制御性をもって応用することを促すと考える。本論で取り上げたタスクは、前もって指示するものではあるが、意味を重視した意味→言語形式→意味タスクサイクルに準ずるものである。

Background

Within task-based language teaching (TBLT) there is little or no consensus on focus on form. Focus on form (FonF) "consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features—by the teacher and/or one or more students—triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (Long & Robinson, 1998, p. 23). At its most basic, the debate ranges from *whether* to include a FonF to *how* to include one.

In designing tasks, the researchers' goal was to create communicative tasks capable of targeting specific language forms without being overtly structure trapping; that is, without specifying a particular language form in advance (Skehan, 1998).

Willis and Willis (2001) have criticized meta-communicative tasks, tasks focusing explicitly on a particular form, as not being tasks in their own right as meaning is secondary. Yet, from using tasks in the EFL classroom, the researchers feel that a reactive approach to FonF, where teachers notice language difficulties and address them as they arise rather than targeting them proactively in advance, is not always practical or efficient (Dough-



ty & Williams, 1998). First, it is rare for two learners to demonstrate the same gap or linguistic need during a single task. Second, at other times, a teacher may notice the same mistake recurring over a sequence of several tasks but not frequently enough within any single task to warrant becoming a FonF for that task. Third, some syllabuses, especially for ESP courses, constrain teachers to cover certain linguistic forms in a limited amount of time. Finally, for many learners the FonF comes too late in the task cycle, after the need has passed. Therefore, in creating these tasks, the researchers attempted to use a proactive task design model which nonetheless could allow learners to move from meaning to form and back to meaning in a helpful way.

Kumaravadivelu (2007) observes that two of the most intractable issues in TBLT are the relationship between form and meaning and managing attentional resources. Skehan (1998) notes that within the context of TBLT, task orientations range from an explicit focus on structure to an exclusive focus on meaning, where both extremes “concentrate on one aspect of language performance at the expense of others” (p. 121). Critics of a form-based approach accuse such tasks of being structure-trapping (Skehan, 1998) or of artificiality, producing language for display purposes only (Willis, 1996), whereas critics of a meaning-focused approach contend the lack of structure and control can lead to fossilization as it ignores the need for systematic language development and promotes over-reliance on communication strategies and lexically-based language (Skehan, 1998). A further criticism can be made that a purely meaning-focused approach limits opportunities for teachers to direct systematic language learning through task design.

Skehan (1998), in line with Long (1991; Long & Robinson, 1998), argues that an intermediate approach that achieves a productive form-meaning balance is possible by manipulating the learners’ attentional resources effectively. In such an approach, the chances for interlanguage (IL) development are increased by maximizing opportunities for noticing in the initial stages of the task and then creating “effective attentional conditions” later in the task to draw learners’ attention to a FonF (Skehan, 1998, p. 131). This is possible by alternating between a focus on meaning and a focus on form as learners, through negotiation of meaning, become aware of a need to mean (Swain, 1998). Skehan identifies Samuda’s (2001) approach to task design as being representative of this intermediate approach. He further comments that her design has “a means of creating a need for language while at the same time providing methods of supplying that need without too-heavy-handed a focus on form for its own sake”

(Skehan, 1998, p. 147). In a classroom-based study examining the role of the teacher in a knowledge-constructing task to teach epistemic modality, Samuda (2001) demonstrated that it is possible to design communicative tasks using semantically enhanced input, where the form-meaning connections are both salient and obvious to the learners. This design framework and concept of semantically enhanced input seemed particularly relevant for what the researchers wanted to construct; that is, communicative tasks which do not explicitly trap structure.

The design framework

In Samuda’s task framework, three design components (input data, operations on data, and outcomes) operate sequentially as interlocking stages. Output from one component provides input for the following stage in a meaning → form → meaning progression that “manage[s] shifts in attentional focus as the tasks unfold” and provides “opportunities for focusing attention on novel form/meaning connections” (Samuda, 2001, p. 121). The input data highlight an area of meaning to create a semantic space. The learners’ current IL resources may not fill this space adequately, but the operations on data, or task demands, are designed to create a need to mean, pushing learners to fill the space as precisely as they can. According to Swain, “[I]t is *while attempting to produce* the target language (vocally or subvocally) that learners may notice that they do not know how to say (or write) precisely the meaning they wish to convey” (1998, p. 67; italics in original). In Samuda’s model, the FonF is introduced to coincide with the learners’ awareness of their need for the target structure. Samuda contends that this framework is not structure trapping because the progression is from specific areas of meaning to form and then back to meaning.

In tasks designed with a meaning → form → meaning progression, Samuda (2001) stresses that the targeted semantic area must be highlighted before learner attention can be directed to meaning-form relationships. For semantically complex items, where the form-meaning relationship may not be transparent, the task input data can be designed to be semantically enhanced. In Samuda’s study targeting modals, an opaque structure, task input data were semantically enhanced to attract learner attention to probability and possibility. The task input data included instructions to the learners to speculate on a person’s identity, a bag of items representing contents from the person’s pockets, and a chart for registering the degree of probability.

The input data thus focused learner attention on the targeted semantic area.

The study

The researchers used Samuda's framework and idea of semantic enhancement to design similar communicative tasks to highlight form-meaning relationships. Tasks targeting prepositions, passives, and articles were created, and realia were used to semantically enhance input. This section describes preliminary research using a task designed to target prepositions in a class of low proficiency learners.

Research questions

In creating this task, the following research questions were asked:

1. Does the input data highlight an area of meaning to create a semantic space that learners attempt to fill?
2. Does this type of task, with a meaning → form → meaning progression, aid in acquisition of the target form?
3. Is it useful to adapt Samuda's design to create semantically enhanced tasks for other structures?

Setting and participants

The study was conducted with a small class of three adult learners, teachers in Japanese elementary schools, motivated, but with low levels of English proficiency.

The task

The input data were semantically enhanced to attract participant attention to the location of items (the area of meaning). The input data were (a) a miniature apartment (approximately 40x40x15cm) complete with furniture, crockery and cutlery, cooking utensils and foodstuffs, and electrical appliances, such as a vacuum cleaner and a stove; (b) task instructions; and (c) an empty rectangle drawn on a whiteboard to represent a plan of the apartment. At the start, the apartment was placed in the centre of a table with a cloth covering it. The task rubric instructed one participant to remove the cloth and look at the apartment for one minute. While doing this, the other participants were asked to draw a large rectangle in their notebooks to represent a bird's-eye plan of the apartment (this plan had been drawn on the whiteboard to facilitate accuracy).

Operations on the input data required one participant to describe the apartment in enough detail for

the other participants to draw a diagram showing the location of items in the apartment. As the participant described the apartment, the others were allowed to ask questions to clarify the positions of items. The interaction was recorded for analysis. At no point were the participants instructed to use prepositions.

Analysis of task process

Two aspects of task performance are analyzed as the task unfolds: pre-language focus and post-language focus.

Pre-language focus

From the start, the learners were fascinated by the realia: the 3D nature of the apartment seemed to result in a curiosity and a level of engagement beyond that usually noted when using the textbook. The Extract 1 is from the start of the interaction.

Extract 1. K describing apartment; H, M drawing diagrams

1. K: Centre table is circle.
2. H: Centre? Big or small?
3. K: Middle.
4. M: Square, circle?
5. K: Circle?
6. M: Circle?
7. K: Circle. It's a bit right side.
8. M: Right side. Circle table?

Extract 1 seems to show an initial curiosity to understand the sizes and shapes of things in the apartment. The first attempt to explain and understand the location of something (the language target) appears towards the end of the interaction.

Extract 2. K continues describing apartment while H, M draw

9. K: Yes. And er there is a dish on the table.
10. H: mm mm
11. M: How many? [H: How many?]
12. K: One dish.
13. H: Where?
14. K: Big dish.
15. H: Centre of table?
16. K: No.
17. H: Right side?

18. K: No.
 19. M: Up?
 20. K: uh? (laughing)

In Extract 2 the location of a large dish becomes the object of attention. With the exception of the first question (line 11), asking about quantity, there are four questions focusing on location. This seems to show that the learners are orienting themselves within the semantic space created by the input data. They have perceived a need for prepositions of location and are using language from their current IL repertoire.

Extract 3. K continues describing apartment while H, M draw

27. K: And er left side there is a bed.
 28. M: Where?
 29. K: um...wa...wall.
 30. M: Wall side?
 31. K: um left side...(5 second pause)
 32. M: In front of wall?
 33. K: In front of wall? Left side.
 34. M: Left side.
 35. K: There is a bed er on the left.
 36. M: Left?
 37. H: Only left?
 38. K: Left side.
 39. M: Left side?
 40. H: Opposite wall not er...corner? [M: Corner left side?]
 41. K: Yeah corner.

In Extract 3 the interaction moves through a more difficult phase as K tries to explain the location of the bed. The learners appear to experience greater difficulty in negotiating meaning and become aware of a gap in their current IL resources and the need for language to help them. From the increase in locational phrases and questions, it appears that task demands are pushing the learners to fill the gap with precision.

Extract 4. K continues describing apartment while H, M draw

42. K: And left side...[H: um]...left side window.
 43. M: Window?
 44. K: Two window. Left side.
 45. M: Two!?

46. H: uh?
 47. K: No no no. Left side wall.
 48. M: Two window ?
 49. H: Opposite wall you said.
 50. K: Opposite door (all comment very briefly) and left side. Yes.
 51. H: Yes? [K: uh]

With the general location of the bed determined by *a corner* in Extract 3, the learners clearly experience even greater difficulty—and frustration (line 47 *no, no, no*)—as K now tries to explain more precisely the location of the bed in relation to a window in the apartment. The learners now appear to have reached the limits of their IL resources—they “notice that they do not know how to say precisely the meaning they wish to convey” (Swain, 1998, p. 68) and are, at this point, ready for explicit input on the target form.

Focus on form

After the pre-language stage, the teacher shifted the focus of the task from meaning to form. He introduced the FonF as it became clear that the participants had perceived a gap in their IL resources, which they were unable to fill, and were aware of their need for the target structure. Prior to this point, the task had been purely communicative with no teacher intervention. The teacher introduced a list of prepositions (on, next to, opposite, between, near, under, to the left/right of, etc.) and pictures to assist visual understanding of relative meanings. These prepositions were briefly practiced, T ↔ S, S ↔ T and S ↔ S, using classroom items.

Post-language focus

After spending five minutes on the FonF, a second participant (H) looked at the apartment for one minute and described the location of other objects. This time, the instruction to describe the location of things was explicit.

Extract 5. H describing apartment; M, K drawing diagrams

1. H: Tofu is on the sink er...right side.
 2. M: Right side.
 3. K: Is there the tofu on the sink? And right side of the sink?
 4. H: Yes.
 5. H: Teapot. On the stand. Teapot is on the stand er left side.

5. M: Where is stand?
6. H: um on the left side. Stand. The stand.
7. H: Soy sauce. Centre of the table.
8. M: The soy sauce is in the centre of the table.
9. K: Where is the soy sauce on the table?
10. H: Centre of the table.
11. K: Centre? Ah!
12. H: Rubbish box is in front of the door.
13. K: Rubbish box?
14. H: Front of the door er and left side.

As might be expected, in Extract 5 the learners immediately begin to use prepositions and locational phrases. Although there are still errors, a greater degree of control in the overall interaction and more precision in the use of prepositions is evident. This indicates that the explicit FonF has raised learner awareness of the saliency of the targeted form in communicating meaning accurately. Although they still need to negotiate meaning, they do it more efficiently than in the pre-language focus phase when they were dependent on inadequate IL resources.

Evaluation

The study presented here is modest and the data are too limited to make any quantitative evaluation; however, qualitatively they do appear to suggest that the learners have benefited from the task and were able to move from meaning to form and, importantly, back again to meaning without being trapped by structure. Returning to the research questions:

In regards to whether the input highlighted an area of meaning that learners attempted to fill, the learners attempted to either describe or ask about the placement of objects in the apartment, appearing to highlight a semantic space that they attempted to fill.

Second, regarding whether the task facilitated acquisition, output in the extracts show potential evidence of form-meaning mapping. This could be taken as evidence that some sort of internal processing occurred, but without more research it is impossible to say whether the learners' IL developed. The pre-focus extracts also seemed to indicate learners noticed a gap between their IL resources and what they wanted to say, which is a necessary step in second language acquisition (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998).

Finally, regarding adapting Samuda's design, the

use of this task in the classroom seems to indicate it was an effective pedagogical tool for focusing learner attention on a particular language feature. However, given that prepositions of place are essentially lexical in nature, further research needs to be conducted to determine whether Samuda's design can be adapted to a wide enough range of language, both grammatical and lexical, to be truly useful. Nevertheless, the high level of learner engagement while performing the task indicates it was appealing.

Conclusion

The nature of this study was preliminary and exploratory, as only a single case was presented and a limited amount of data collected and analyzed. The participants were three adult learners whose high motivation may have had an influence on the results. To determine whether the findings are representative or idiosyncratic, it is now necessary to use the task with a broader range of test groups and to take a more empirical approach, using pre-and post-tests as well as a control group. In addition, to see if the design is truly effective in highlighting a "semantic space" and managing learner attentional focus, it would be useful to examine learner perceptions of their performance. This would provide valuable insight into how learners perceive gaps and how effective this type of task is in developing their IL.

The researchers hope that this classroom-based study might encourage other teachers to experiment with designing form-focused tasks for their own classes. Kumaravivelu (2007) observes that more research is needed into the types of tasks that cause learners to notice gaps in their IL development and also into how to design tasks that are communicative yet have a sufficient focus on form. With its meaning → form → meaning progression, Samuda's (2001) framework appears not only to offer a viable alternative to a typical reactive task cycle, but also to provide a model that can be adapted for research in the areas identified by Kumaravivelu. Samuda and Bygate (2008) warn, "Until classroom-based studies become a mainstream for research in this field [TBLT], the use of pedagogical tasks will never be properly researched" (p. 191).

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