

# Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



## Input flooding and learner performance of focused tasks

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Many teachers teach courses which are not task-based and that contain a syllabus of pre-selected grammar items. Teachers who wish to use communicative tasks in such situations will have to select tasks that match the grammar syllabus, that is, select tasks where the pre-selected language features could plausibly be useful for completing the task. While choice of task topic alone may be sufficient to induce use of targeted forms, teachers may also try to harness learner mining of input. This study looks at the effects that flooding pre-task input with repeated examples of a targeted structure has on the grammar choices students make when performing a communication task.

文法に基づいて言語コースを教える教員が多いと考えられる。もしこのような授業でコミュニケーションタスクを行おうとすれば、文法シラバスによく合うアクティビティをデザインしなければならない。本論は書面にしたpre-taskインプットが学習者が目標語のコミュニケーションタスクをする時、文法の選択にどのような影響を与えるかを検証している。

### Using non-task-based coursebook materials as tasks

**D**efinitions of a “task,” while varied, usually stress that tasks are activities that focus learner attention on the communication of meanings and not on a particular language form. For example, Nunan (1989, p. 10) defines a task as “A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.”

Few textbooks, especially those for low-level learners, present material in a task-based framework (Muller, 2005). For example, the course book I teach from sequences an explicit examination and practice of target language structures prior to a lesson’s main speaking activity, and so the speaking activity cannot be

considered a task. “Textbook lessons that start with a focus on form mean that even when learners come on to a speaking activity they are still in a mind-set that is concerned with producing specified forms” (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 209).

However, Willis and Willis suggest that such a textbook’s speaking activity could become a task by having learners first perform the speaking activity (which may need to be slightly modified to ensure it has a clear communicative goal) and follow the task with subsequent activities that focus on form.

### Focused tasks

It has been suggested tasks can be used not only to prepare the ground for subsequent form-focused activities, but that tasks themselves can be used to focus learner attention on specific language forms. Ellis (2003) uses the term *focused tasks* for tasks that engage learners in using language for communication which in addition have a specific predetermined linguistic focus in mind. While focused tasks intend that learners use targeted language forms, what distinguishes focused tasks from situational grammar exercises is that “learners are not informed of the specific language focus and therefore treat the task in the same way they would an unfocused task, i.e. pay primary attention to message content” (Ellis, 2003, p. 10).

A factor to consider is the degree to which a task encourages or even requires the use of a certain language form. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) suggest that there are varying degrees to which the use of a certain structure is needed for task completion. *Task-naturalness* refers to the

extent to which a grammatical structure may arise naturally during task completion. *Task-utility* refers to the situation where use of a particular structure greatly facilitates task completion, but where it is not essential. *Task essentialness* refers to the situation where use of a particular structure is needed to complete the task.

When a course book targets a particular form prior to a speaking activity, the course book is making an implicit assertion that the speaking activity is representative of a situation where use of the target form would be natural, useful, or necessary. If this assertion is valid, then perhaps the course book speaking activity could be used successfully as a focused task to induce use of the targeted form.

However, unless the targeted language form is essential for task completion, in the sense that there are no alternative forms to the one being targeted, the task may well not induce use of the targeted form. While tasks do create a particular restricted semantic space, which in turn places restrictions on what learners need to express, learners ultimately have the final choice in the language forms they employ (Ellis, 2003). Furthermore, many notions can be expressed by more than one exponent (language form). For example, Samuda and Bygate (2008) challenge task designers to create a task that will elicit the use of relative clauses; that is, a task where the use of simple adjectives or prepositional or participle phrases would not be available or sufficient.

### Inserting target forms into pre-task and task input

To increase the likelihood of learners employing a targeted form during task performance, teachers could try deliberately

inserting the preselected form into pre-task or task input. This could lead to the inserted target form being *mined* by learners. Mining occurs when “in the course of preparing for or performing a task, learners supplement their linguistic repertoire by adopting language features from task input and incorporating these features into their task performance output” (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 22).

For example, Boston (2008) found that giving learners task instructions deliberately phrased in such a way as to include a targeted language form induced learners into employing the same language form when performing spoken tasks. Studies by McDonough (2006) and McDonough and Mackey (2008) found that having teachers deliberately insert target forms into their speech while acting as a task participant “syntactically primed” the learners into using the same targeted structure. In other words, learners who could have used alternative structures to complete the task produced the structure that had been inserted into the input.

### Aims

This study presents an attempt to modify a course book speaking activity into a focused-task. One aim is to see if the task induced learners to use the course book’s targeted grammar structure. The other aim of this study is to see what effects exposure to *flooded input* had on the language forms learners produced during task performance. Flooded input is input containing large numbers of the target structure in the context of meaning-focused activities (Trahey, 1996), and as Gass and Selinker (2001) note, “something that is very *frequent* in the input is likely to be noticed” (p. 402, emphasis in original). Inserting repeated uses of a target

structure into a teacher’s speech has been shown to prime students into using a target structure; however, it may be impractical for teachers of large classes to act as a task participant with most learners. This study aims to see if flooded written pre-task input also induces learners into employing the targeted grammar structure during subsequent spoken task performance.

### Participants

Fifty-five 1st-year Japanese university students performed the same task. Students were enrolled in the same required English course. Students were false beginners with average TOEIC scores of 370. Thirty-six students took the class once a week on Mondays and 19 students took the class on Thursdays.

### Method

The lesson was a task-based adaption of Lesson 35 from *Language to go Elementary* (Lewis & LeMaistre, 2002). Without adaptation, the course book lesson follows this sequence of activities:

- (1) Students are presented with the situation of a fictional reality TV program that is looking for cast members to try surviving on an isolated island for 1 year, and are shown the conditions under which cast members would live.
- (2) Students are presented with a completed application form from a prospective cast member. All the questions on the application form are

written in the present perfect (e.g., “Have you ever lived abroad?”) and answered in the present perfect (e.g., “Yes, I’ve lived in Greece.”).

- (3) An explanation of the present perfect and grammar exercises follow.
- (4) A speaking activity where students are provided with a list of activities cast members would need to be able to perform to survive on the island. Students are asked to use the present perfect to interview partners to see which activities their partner has done.

In this study, three groups of students were given the task of designing a questionnaire to use to interview other students to determine who would be the best candidate to become a cast member on the reality TV program. In Group 1, the task was preceded by a pre-task activity where the input was flooded with repeated uses of the present perfect (the course book’s grammar target). In Group 2, the pre-task input was flooded with the use of *can* being used to talk about abilities and skills. Group 3 did not have any pre-task activities. Group 3 acted as a control to see how successful the task was inducing use of the course book target structure (i.e., the present perfect), as well as what effect flooded pre-task input had on the other groups’ task performance.

### Initial task instructions

All 55 participants were given the same initial task instructions. The students were asked to imagine that they were TV producers who had to design a questionnaire to

interview fellow students to see who is the best candidates to appear on the TV program *Survivor Island* (see Appendix 1 for task instructions).

### Pre-task activities

#### Group 1

Group 1 was comprised of 18 learners (half the 36 students from the Monday class). After reading the initial task instructions, these students were given applications from two (fictional) potential cast members. The applications were flooded with repeated uses of the present perfect to talk about prior experiences (see Appendix 2). The students were asked to individually read the two applications and write a brief report explaining which candidate they felt was better suited to join the TV program.

#### Group 2

Group 2 was comprised of the remaining 18 students from the class of 36. These students were also given applications from two (fictional) candidates and asked to write a brief report explaining which candidate they felt was better suited to be a cast member. The applications given to these students were flooded with repeated examples of *can* being used to express an applicant’s ability (see Appendix 3).

### Results of pre-task procedure

The pre-task activity required students to choose the best candidate based on what the candidates wrote. Most students justified their choice of candidate by using the structure that

had been flooded into their candidates' applications.

### Group 1

In Group 1, most (15/18) students replicated the candidates' use of the present perfect when justifying their choice of best candidate, for example:

I choice candidate 1 as best for program. He (?) has lived abroad so he is friendly with strangers. He has lots of experience working, so he can do many things. He has pets before and has cooked for many. Program needs to take care animals and cooking. These are important I think.

Only 3/18 students did not employ the present perfect when explaining their choice of candidate. Instead, these students wrote their reports exclusively in terms of what the candidate *can* do. For example:

Candidate number 2. Candidate can fix machines and can sing, he is good singer. He can grow rice and can farming. Food is important. Candidate 1 can not do farming. If candidate 1 everybody maybe die because no food!

### Group 2

In Group 2, most (16/18) students explained their choice of best candidate by replicating the candidate's use of *can* to explain the candidate's ability. For example:

Candidate 1 is best. He can cook. He can repair clothes with sewing. He can camp. So, if no

restaurant we can eat. With no stores we can have clothes. With no houses we can sleep with tent. So I choose it.

However, 2/18 students did not use the targeted form that had been flooded into the input. Both of these students explained their choice using the simple past tense. For example:

For me, I pick Candidate 1. He lived abroad so he is communicator. He cooked before many times. He taught before. Adults only but he said children are no difference. He repaired clothes. Candidate 2 only strong point is grow up on farm. So Candidate 1 is more skills.

### Task activity

Students were asked in pairs to write a 10 question questionnaire to use to interview classmates to find the best candidate to join the cast of *Survivor Island*. Students in Group 1 and Group 2 formed 9 pairs each. Group 3 was comprised of the 19 students taking the course on Thursdays and formed 8 pairs and one group of three. Group 3 had not performed the pre-task activity.

### Task results

#### Group 1

Group 1, which had their pre-task input flooded with the present perfect, wrote the greatest number of present perfect questions. 20% (18/90) of all questions generated by the entire group were formed using the present perfect (Table

1). However, the extent to which each pair employed the present perfect varied considerably, ranging from two pairs failing to employ the present perfect entirely to another two pairs employing the present perfect in 40% (4/10) of their questions. As a group, the single most produced question structure was *Can you* which made up 54% (49/90) of all questions produced. Six pairs used this structure to form 60-80% of their questions; two pairs used this structure in 40% of their questions; and one pair employed it once. The remaining questions produced by this group consisted of other miscellaneous constructions. Examples of other question forms generated included:

Do you have any confidence to survive in the Island?

Do you keep a diary?

Are you healthy?

Why do you want to join *Survivor Island*?

Are you a vegetarian?

Is your eyesight good?

How is your family feeling about this program?

Are insects ok? Or do you hate?

When was your last health check?

**Table 1. Question forms produced by Group 1 (pre-task input flooded with the present perfect)**

Question forms (out of 10 questions)	Have you [ever]...?	Can you...?	Other
Pair 1	0	7	3
Pair 2	2	7	1
Pair 3	2	8	0
Pair 4	2	6	2
Pair 5	3	6	1
Pair 6	4	4	2
Pair 7	1	6	3
Pair 8	4	4	2
Pair 9	0	1	9
Group totals	18/90	49/90	23/90
Percentage of group question forms	20%	54.5%	25.5%

### Group 2

Group 2, which had their pre-task input flooded with *can*, wrote 33% (30/90) of their questions as *Can you* questions (Table 2). On a pair-by-pair basis however, the use of *Can you* varied. Five out of nine pairs used this structure in less than half of their questions, and two of these pairs employed it only once. Only one pair used *Can you* in more than half of their questions (6/10 questions). This group did not generate a single question employing the present perfect. The remaining 66% of questions produced used other miscellaneous question structures.

**Table 2. Question forms produced by Group 2 (pre-task input flooded with can)**

Question forms (out of 10 questions)	Have you [ever]...?	Can you...?	Other
Pair 1	0	2	8
Pair 2	0	1	9
Pair 3	0	3	7
Pair 4	0	5	5
Pair 5	0	1	9
Pair 6	0	4	6
Pair 7	0	6	4
Pair 8	0	5	5
Pair 9	0	3	7
Group totals	0/90	30/90	60/90
Percentage of group question forms	0%	33%	66%

### Group 3:

Group 3, which received no pre-task input, produced the greatest number of *other* question structures, comprising 60% (54/90) of all questions produced (Table 3.). In eight out of nine pairs, *other* questions comprised 50-90% of questions produced. In five out of these eight pairs, such question structures comprised 60-90% of questions produced, and three pairs wrote 50% of their questions using *other* structures. *Can you* questions made up 35.5% (32/90) of the questions produced. The present perfect was used in

**Table 3. Question forms produced by Group 3 (no pre-task flooded input)**

Question forms (out of 10 questions)	Have you [ever]...?	Can you...?	Other
Pair 1	2	7	1
Pair 2	0	5	5
Pair 3	1	2	7
Pair 4	0	1	9
Pair 5	0	1	9
Pair 6	0	3	7
Pair 7	0	5	5
Pair 8	0	5	5
Pair 9 (3 students)	1	3	6
Group totals	4/90	32/90	54/90
Percentage of group question forms	4.5%	35.5%	60%

only 4.5% (4/90) of the group's questions. Only three out of nine pairs produced this structure (two pairs once and one pair twice).

### Discussion

#### *Influence of pre-task input on learner choice of question forms*

In Group 1, the flooded pre-task input did appear to have an influence on learners' choice of question forms produced. Group 1, whose input was flooded with the present perfect,

produced the largest percentage of present perfect questions (20%); whereas, Group 2 did not generate a single present perfect question (0%), and Group 3 produced very few (4.5%).

Group 2, whose input had been flooded with *can*, wrote 33% of their questions using *can*, making *Can you* questions the most frequently produced single question form. However, this was true of all groups. In Group 1, despite this form being absent from their pre-task input, *Can you* questions made up 54% of all questions produced; Group 3, who had no pre-task input, also produced a greater percentage of *Can you* questions (35.5 %) than Group 2. These results make it difficult to see what influence, if any, the flooded input had on Group 2.

### **Evaluation of the focused task**

What the results did show was that the design-a-questionnaire task functioned very poorly as a focused-task intended to induce use of the present perfect. Rather, the task was most successful in inducing production of *Can you* questions. If I had not adapted the course book materials, students would have been asked to interview each other using present perfect questions. However, when left to their own devices, students simply did not see the present perfect as a very useful pattern to employ when designing the questionnaire. The only students who used the present perfect to any extent (albeit relatively infrequently) were those from Group 1 who had been exposed to repeated examples of it during the pre-task stage.

One possible reason for this may be that, while asking

whether a potential cast member has done something (i.e., *Have you [ever]...?*) could be used as a means of ascertaining whether a candidate may also have the skills to do something, it appears students felt a more immediate and direct way of determining this was to ask *Can you* questions. Students may also have found the *Can you* structure more appealing due to its simplicity relative to the present perfect. Furthermore, because a candidate's experiences and abilities are not the only criteria that could be used to determine their suitability to become a cast member, all groups wrote a large number of *other* questions. For example, questions that inquired about such things as an applicant's health (e.g., *Are you healthy?*); whether the candidate has the right personality (e.g., *Do you have any confidence to survive in the Island?*); or if they would enjoy being a cast member (e.g., *Do you like camping?*).

### **Evaluation as a focused speaking task**

After students completed their questionnaires, they interviewed each other in six sets (groups) of three students each (in Group 3, five sets plus one set of four students). In Groups 1, 2, and 3, the design-a-questionnaire pairs were "broken up" when making interview groups (i.e., students were asked to make interview sets that did not include their design-a-questionnaire partners). Each student had been required to make (write) a copy of their pair's questionnaire to ensure every student had a questionnaire.

In Group 1, flooding the pre-task input with the present perfect caused most (14/18) students to include it in their questionnaires, and when students made their interview groups, all six interview groups had at least two members



with a questionnaire containing a present perfect item (this happened by chance and not design). Any students who were asked a present perfect question at some time during the interview replied using the present perfect. This resulted in the present perfect being used in every interview group by every student, as in the excerpt below:

**S2:** Have you ever kept any animals? (Questionnaire item)

**S1:** Yes, I have. Many.

**S3:** Me too. I have pets before and now.

**S2:** What pets have you kept?

**S3:** I have kept fish.

All 18 students produced the present perfect at least twice, and Group 1 produced the present perfect most frequently during the interview task; 50 times in total including questionnaire items (Table 4.).

However, even Group 2, whose questionnaires did not contain any present perfect questions, often produced the present perfect during the interview. These students employed the present perfect in either their responses or to formulate follow-up questions (i.e., questions not contained in their written questionnaires), as in the following excerpt:

**S1:** Can you kill animals to live? (Questionnaire item)

**S3:** I don't know, because I have never killed animals before, but I have kill insects.

**S2:** Is insect an animal?

**S3:** Maybe animal.

**S1:** I can kill animals.

**S3:** What animal?

**S1:** Do you know *inoshishi* [wild boar]?

**S3:** Yes, I know.

**S1:** Only kill *inoshishi*, *inoshishi* only.

**S2:** You have? You have killed before?

In Group 2, 15 out of 18 students produced the present perfect at least once (up to six times in one case) during the interview. In total, the present perfect was produced 30 times by this class during the interviews (see Table 4.).

In Group 3, who had not had any pre-task input, 7 out of 19 students had written at least one present perfect questionnaire item, and five out of six interview groups had at least one member with a questionnaire that contained a present perfect question (happened by chance and not design). During the interviews, 14 out of 19 students produced the present perfect twice (up to 5 uses); the remaining 5 out of 19 students did not produce it at all (Table 4.).

## Conclusion

Even without recourse to input flooding, the task lesson was largely successful inducing learner use of the course book grammar target. Of the students who did not have pre-task input flooded with the present perfect, 78% (29/37) eventually produced the target form at some point during their interviews. However, flooding the present perfect into pre-task input led most of the Group 1 students to include

**Table 4. Number of times students in each group used present perfect in focused task (in order of number of occurrences)**

Student	in Group 1	in Group 2	in Group 3
Student A	5	6	5
Student B	4	4	3
Student C	4	3	3
Student D	3	3	3
Student E	3	2	2
Student F	3	2	2
Student G	3	2	2
Student H	3	1	2
Student I	3	1	2
Student J	3	1	2
Student K	2	1	2
Student L	2	1	2
Student M	2	1	2
Student N	2	1	2
Student O	2	1	0
Student P	2	0	0
Student Q	2	0	0
Student R	2	0	0
Student S	n/a	n/a	0
Totals	50	30	34

it (albeit infrequently) in their questionnaires. This limited inclusion contributed to, on average, a more frequent use of the target form during the interviews.

Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) note that while learner uptake of input does not mean that the learner has acquired the form; it does indicate that the form has been noticed and that pushing learners to produce language has been hypothesized to aid acquisition. Therefore, even if the deliberate insertion of a targeted form into input is only successful in inducing its use by very few learners, this uptake may be beneficial for those few. However, this is not to suggest that a focused task that does successfully induce use of a targeted form necessarily would remove the need for further post-task activities that focus solely on form, for example, when students may have produced the target form while performing the task but frequently formed it incorrectly.

Even if unsuccessful at inducing use of a target form, a “failed” focused task would still function successfully as an unfocused communication task. For example, in this study, learner use of *other* (i.e., non-targeted) question forms generated interesting exchanges. As in the following example where the learner was not sure of what the purpose of the questionnaire item was:

**S1:** Do you have good eyesight? (Questionnaire item)

**S2:** Why? Important?

**S1:** Because island is no doctor or eyeglasses store.

**S2:** I bring extra glass.

When teaching courses that specify an inventory of pre-selected language items, teachers need to find a way to create lessons where learners focus on the communication of meaning and on the pre-selected language features. Whether focused tasks and pre-task input flooding are effective means of doing so deserves further study.

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## Appendix 1

### Initial task instructions

#### SURVIVOR ISLAND (TV SHOW)

“Survivor Island” is a TV program. In the program, 30 normal people (like the students in this class) will try to survive on an island for a year. Nobody lives on the island. So, the TV program producers need to interview people to find good candidates to live on the island for the TV program.

These are the problems you will have on the island:

#### There are...

1. no food shops or supermarkets
2. no houses
3. no schools (some candidates have children)
4. no clothes shops
5. no entertainment (no theatres, TV, karaoke boxes, radios and so on)

#### So, the TV program producers need people to...

- a. grow vegetables
- b. build houses and shelter
- c. teach children
- d. make clothes and repair clothes
- e. entertain each other so everybody does not get bored

#### The TV program producers give you...

1. vegetable seeds
2. eight chickens and two cows
3. building materials (wood, nails, etc.) and tools (hammers, saws, etc.)
4. a diary for each member (you need to write a diary every day).
5. a guitar or other music instrument of your choice you can carry (no pianos)
6. a video camera

#### So, the TV program producers need people to...

- a. play an instrument
- b. use a video camera
- c. keep a record in their diary
- d. look after animals

## Appendix 2

### Group 1 pre-task input

#### *Candidate 1.*

I have lived abroad, in Greece for one year and worked at a hotel. I cooked for large groups of tourists. I have also been camping many times, so I am experienced at living outdoors. I have never taught children, but I have taught adults. I don't think it is very different. I have never worked on a farm. But, my family has lots of pets, so I think I am good at taking care of animals. I have studied home economics in high school and learned how to sew. I have never made my own clothes, but I have repaired my clothes before. I have played the violin since I was eight years old, but I am not a professional.

#### *Candidate 2.*

I have never lived abroad, and my mother does all the cooking at home. However, I have lived on a farm and have worked in the rice fields. My family has a few chickens and a dog. On the farm, we have a lot of farm machines, so I have fixed many things. Also, I have taught my younger brother how to fix things. I have never practiced playing a musical instrument, but I am a very good singer. I think others would enjoy my singing.

## Appendix 3

### Group 2 pre-task input

#### *Candidate 1.*

I lived abroad in Greece for one year and worked at a hotel. I cooked for the tourists and can cook for large groups. I enjoy camping and can live outdoors comfortably. I also taught English in Greece and can teach adults, I don't think teaching children is very different. I don't know much about gardening, but my family has lots of pets, so I can take care of dogs, cats, fish, and birds. In high school, I studied home economics, and can sew and can repair my clothes. I can play the violin, but I am not a professional.

#### *Candidate 2.*

My mother does all the cooking at home, but I can make simple dishes like cup noodle or omelets. I grew up on a farm and I can grow rice. My family has a few chickens and a dog. On the farm, we have a lot of farm machines, and I can fix them when they are broken. I can't play a musical instrument, but I can sing very well. I think others can enjoy my singing.