TASK BASED GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION FOR SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT: *Learning English for Academic and Specific Purposes helps the English as Second Language learners to be communicative in academic social contexts. Focus on form is an important part of learning English for academic purposes. The ability to use appropriate vocabulary and structure in a meaningful context is what an English for Specific Purpose learner dreams about for academic excellence. Such an ability would undoubtedly motivate learners to learn and produce English for social and academic purposes. This could happen only when the learner develops his repertoire of grammar which is no less an outcome of the teaching and learning process. The present paper deliberates on how a language class focused on form could unassumingly involve the ESP learners think creatively in a task based role play activity as a main activity to negotiate meaning with their peers using the language syntaxes and lexis appropriate to the context.*

KEY WORDS: fluency, competence, proficiency, academic excellence, English for Specific Purpose learner.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar classes are unwelcome in any classroom irrespective of the students' age and need. But none can deny the implicit influence of grammar in fluent discourses. Grammar teaching as an integral part of communicative language teaching is an orthodoxy fervently practised by certain teachers who are Janus in the ELT pedagogy. The cognitive approach of the seventies and eighties is still vogue in language classes as learning grammar involves a series of activities such as the teacher presenting the rules *(presentation)* students studying the rules underlying grammar instruction as explained by the teacher, practicing the rules by doing grammar exercises (practice) and applying what is learnt cognitively in negotiating meaning during interactions and discourses in the target language (production). The present paper deliberates on how a language class focused on form could unassumingly involve the ESP learners think creatively in a task based activity that had role play as a main activity to negotiate meaning with their peers using the language syntaxes and lexis appropriate to the context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

M.L.Tickoo (2003) finds two important factors which govern learning the grammar of a target language; they are age factor and the learners' aim. According to him younger learners learn grammar best through activity based methods while older learners with more focused attention to language and its form. Knowledge about Language (KAL) and the rational explanation of linguistic facts help the adult learners in building their communicative

competence. As Faerch, Haastrup and Philipson point out it is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without being linguistically competent. (1984:168)

Grammar teaching can be effective with a careful contextualisation of linguistic forms in situations of natural use (Trecia Hedge 2003). She adds that the contexts in which grammar is embedded need to be generally useful and appropriate to the needs of learner group. By being so, grammar becomes 'generative' that the students can make grammatically correct sentences appropriate to relevant situations. "Contexts can be created through visuals, through the teacher miming or demonstrating in the classroom, through a dialogue, a text, a song or video or through a situation set up by the teacher" (Trecia Hedge 2003: p.159). The particular context chosen must relate to the learners in terms of their age, levels of proficiency, back grounds and learning styles. A study by Fotos (1994), assures that grammar consciousness raising tasks can promote significant gains in acquiring the target grammatical structure, at least with the intermediate level and adult learners. Fotos further continues that consciousness-raising provides teachers with a procedure which helps learners to develop their grammatical competence with in the cultural frame of the communicative classroom: 'Cultural frame' refers to the approach that the teacher uses for the purpose of making her students communicative.

Tricia Hedge feels grammar learning on the part of learners depends on their willingness to learn, 'readiness to learn' and when they learn it provides input for noticing language forms. It helps students to see the difference between their own output and accurate forms of English. It can present high frequency grammatical items explicitly to speed up learning. It can provide information about the communicative use of language structures contextualising them in spoken and written texts. It can give information implicitly through exposure to examples or explicitly through instruction on the stylistic variation of language form.

Freeman in her discussion on the values of teaching grammar in accelerating or complementing natural process refers to Krashen's (1994) aversion to explicit grammar instruction and his belief in comprehensible input which could help learners to acquire grammar automatically. She further cites Norris and Ortega (2000) who conclude that focused L2 instruction which is more of explicit nature could make grammar instruction more sustainable. She further brings in Spada and Lightbown (1993); Lightbown (1998) for they found that teachers who integrate grammar lessons in communicative teaching are more effective than those who teach decontextualized grammar instructions. White (1987) finds, as opposed to Krashen's view, only incomprehensible input triggers the urge to learn grammar, not comprehensible input.

In her anxiety to let know that communicative language teaching sans grammar is disastrous in L2 learning, Freeman further cites Higgs and Clifford (1982) who with long years of experience warn that unmonitored practice of inaccurate language forms can cause fossilization as the learners find it hard to shed off the ungrammatical forms they have acquired because of their first language interference. Michael Long (1991) feels the comprehensible input is the result of modified interaction which identifies what is grammatical in the target language and such learning is focusing on form within a meaning based or communicative approach.

While helping the learners to tap their resources some grammar structure might prime their subsequent noticing (Strevick 1996). When learners notice a structure, they are said to store a trace, which would help them to process the structure more fully at a subsequent time (R.

Ellis 1993). Their exposure to communication oriented consciousness raising tasks helps learners to know about the rules that govern the use of language. According to Borg (1998) such perceived patterns help them to be aware of language rules, and internalise them for future production.

Van Pattern's (1996) theory of input processing considers processing instructions is important to develop learner's inter-language system since a learner is selective in processing a particular feature of the target language and holds it in his working memory to comprehend the information. Swain (1985, 1995) introduces his consciousness raising theory that learners need to notice the gap between what they want to say and what they are able to say. Thus their production of the language forces them to focus attention to the form of intended messages. Instructional conversations or prolepsis is essential for scaffolding teaching process (Tharp and Gallimore 1988).

Freeman posits explicit teaching of grammar with examples can be done either alone or in combination of other methods; however in all these methodologies the only requirement she is particular about is that the learners must be informed of the reasons behind the usage of the grammatical rules. Freeman's concept of grammaring is the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully and appropriately. To achieve this change in the learners ability she suggests a shift from the traditional pedagogic practices. She wishes grammar to be viewed as fifth skill on par with any other productive skills and that it should be interconnected with the other skills; in her words 'mindful practicing of grammatical structures and using them for one's own purposes will hone the 'grammaring' skill. The students will become creative and innovative, "if they are aware, aware not only of rules of grammar but also importantly of reasons" (Freeman L. 2003: p.143)

Tricia, H. suggests that adults can be encouraged to think about strategies that they use for learning grammar. They may be initiated to reflect on their strategies of grammar learning and usage in their first language; they can also be asked to use self-help strategies and can be introduced to appropriate grammar materials. Further she adds "in ideal circumstances this might involve taking a set of various grammars into the classroom and setting a task which invites learners to explore the different contents and layouts to see which grammar suits them best". The use of language strategy and identifying it to the learner's benefit is what Chamot and O'Malley (1987) suggest to develop the academic English language skills of Limited English Proficient Students (LEPS) while deliberating on their Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA)

Though the cited expert opinions are noteworthy, the present day orthodoxy being communicative language teaching, the ESL pedagogues depend mostly on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to facilitate the learners to learn to use the language to negotiate meaning. The meaning focused methodology is quite often criticised for its neglecting form. However Willis and Willis (2009) find this focus on meaning ignites the learners' grammatical system to get updated with the implicit information gathered while practicing the task. Albeit, there are Burrows (2008) and Sato (2010) who express their doubts regarding the efficacy of TBLT compared to the traditional methods which unequivocally practice the method of presentation, practice and production (PPP) to instruct the learners the predetermined forms. Of late the TBLT has started recognising the importance of form over meaning. Skehan (1998: 125) opines that 'engaging in worthwhile meaningful communication may emphasise fluency at the expense of the focus on form that accuracy and complexity would require'. Willis further carries the idea that he asserts using tasks only

could help the learners to realise TBLT as a strategy to get to know the use of target language in a limited way. The communiqués of Doughty and Williams (1998:2) are in the direction of giving the desirable support for inter-language communication through sequencing a focus on form within the frame work of TBLT.

Skehan, considering the gravity of the issue at hand, suggests the teachers could aim at the three important components of speaking- accuracy, complexity, and fluency which are also the output factors the teacher and the taught need to focus upon during the processing stage of communication. Bygate (1996) could prove with evidence the improved performance of a repeat task in terms of grammatical complexity and lexis. However, the Iranian researchers Birjandi and Ahangari (2008) could show improvements in complexity and fluency but not much in accuracy. Here, it is worth to recollect what Bygate (ibid.; 44) "previous experience of a specific task aids speakers to shift their attention from processing the message content to working on formulations of the message". Using task repetition as an immediate post task activity to focus attention on form has been identified as an effective learning strategy that could be engaged within the frame of task based approach.

However, the author would like to inform that Ellis (2006) noted research and theories do not give definite answers on what types of instruction can best facilitate language learning, and considerable controversy exists regarding whether instruction should focus on a form approach with incidental attention paid to grammatical features in communicative contexts.

METHOD

The present inquiry adopted the use of formulaic language and listening to model target dialogue as pre-task activity to infuse confidence into the attitude of the low proficient ESP learners. The students were motivated to practice fluency in the main task of role playing and form focus as a post task activity. Repeat performance of the role play led the learners to achieve accuracy in terms of lexis and structure.

Context

This study was carried out at Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute University, a deemed university at Chennai in India. Students were from first year Engineering stream of different branches. The syllabus of the first year- first semester English (Technical English-I) syllabus aims at instructing students to learn functional grammar using a prescribed text book with a focus on communication. Since the students were pursuing an engineering programme, and they were going to be professionals in another four years, the activity that they had to carry out must aim at learning the target language for basic interpersonal communication (BIPC) and communication for academic purpose (CAP); the task must give them ample scope to practise listening and speaking of English.

Participants

The first year engineering students were sixty in number. They were young male adults in the age group of 18 – 20 years. They were of mixed ability. They were from different cultural background speaking different languages; the situation was such that the students needed to speak in English to communicate and academic communication was everybody's wish. They volunteered to participate in the study. The class was given a diagnostic test to assess their

proficiency level. The pattern of errors was notified for remedial correction. However the assessment was not used for stream lining.

Their proficiency level in English was not same though all of them had passed plus 2 (twelfth standard in Indian School Education Board) with English as second language before they got admitted in B. Tech course. The initial inquiry through a questionnaire revealed that the students had undergone English learning for a period of minimum six years and maximum fourteen years (Pre-KG, UKG and twelve years in schools). They agreed that they were not given enough opportunity to speak in English in school. All of them were uniform in saying that they learned English through teacher centred traditional pedagogy.

Procedure

The students had already learnt English as second language for a period of six years at the minimum; however they unanimously confessed that they could not speak English fluently because they felt shy, afraid of speaking, lacked vocabulary and that they were weak in grammar. Different task types were thought about so as to familiarise them with the syllabus and facilitate their learning, to learn the use of the language. The main task was the role play in which the students participated in pairs; the repeat performance was again done in role play maintaining the same participants. They recorded their Role play performance for reflection and remediation.

The task chosen for the purpose of relieving the students of their shyness, fear and anxiety and infuse confidence to speak by introducing vocabulary and grammar components as formulaic sentences and audio- listening followed by script writing for scaffolding their grammatical accuracy. Then they were asked to present the role plays in pairs.

The sixty member class was divided into twelve groups. There were twelve pamphlets of quality hotels (3 Star) in the city. The menu cards presented delicious food varieties and their rates. The pamphlets and menu cards were circulated among the groups to help the groups to arrive at a consensus to decide upon the eatery they prefer for dining.

Task

Advertisement pamphlets were used for the purpose of gathering information and discussing with friends. Interpretation and inference formed the core of this activity. They were asked to compare the different eateries in terms of accessibility: close by/ far off; need to take/ share the bike/ can go by walk; the ambience to be discussed by looking at the photos in the brochures/ the rates of the dishes to be discussed as cheap, costly, unaffordable to arrive at a conclusion to choose a fine dining outlet to enjoy their evening outings.

This task involved:

Finding the actual information

Inferring the inner details

The language components learnt:

I) Giving opinions - group work (grammar point : simple present /present perfect)

II) Instructing the waiter at a hotel as they ordered dishes of their choice – group work

III) Narrating the experience – pair work/ individual presentation (grammar point: simple past /past perfect)

I) Giving opinion: In a group they shared their preference for certain hotels/food items

The names of the dishes were available on the pamphlets.

The formulaic lexical phrases were given on the board.

Rose restaurant is **better than** Ruchi

That is near ………….∕ far away

I like …………………

I **would like to have/ taste** ………………………

It tastes good. I *have eaten once/ many times*/ I haven't tasted/ ***How is it?/ How does it taste***?

II) Instructions and questions: (Role play at a hotel – Role play cue card was given - while one student took the role of a waiter the other four were friends enjoying their outing. They have gone to the hotel and order for their favourite food)

III) formulaic lexical phrases: In the form of questions to the waiter and answer from him

How does it taste?/ How long will it take for you to prepare/ bring?

Please bring fast / ***bring a bottle*** of cold mineral water/ ***Can you ask*** someone to clean the table?

IV) Narrating the event /experience at the hotel (Role play)

Pair work : your friend asks you about your previous day experience.

You narrate the hotel experience (simple past)

Task sequence:

❖ **Pre-task**

1. Collecting pamphlets and menu cards either from the hotels or from newspaper advertisements

2. Perusing the pamphlets and menu cards

3. Listening to the audio tape of 'at a restaurant'

4. Scripting the dialogue.

❖ **Main task**

Delivering role play

❖ **Post task: assessment/ feedback- form focus consciousness raising**

Repeat performance /assessment/ feedback

Repeat performance, after the first and second showed sheer improvement to the delight of the teacher.

The first performance was lacking in form and accuracy. The students' oral delivery was recorded and in person each pair was called in to analyse their performance. They themselves assessed where they were lacking and assured to do the repeat performance well /the delivery was recorded and subjected to self-assessment/ feedback showed better performance.

Use of target forms

Since the researcher believed in the use of formulaic expressions to relieve the participants of their anxiety and shyness formulaic language was given as pre-task- input; the vocabulary and the name of the food items as they found in the pamphlets and menu cards again gave enough support to the students to indulge in script writing and then to deliver the role play without inhibition. The recorded main performance and controlled repeat performance after the feedback were assessed for overall performance and with focus on target form.

Evaluation

The students were given a pre-test before making the elaborate arrangements for collecting the menu cards and advertisement pamphlets from different hotels. The test was suddenly announced and the students were given the situational role play of 'a dinner at a restaurant'. It was a group performance without any model, scripting and rehearsal. The teacher had tough time to coax the students to take part in the role play. All the twelve groups were assessed on the criterion developed by O'Malley and Pierce. The same role play was performed after collecting the menu cards and advertisement pamphlets from different hotels. More importantly with repeat performance as consciousness raising act. Then the same kind of assessment was carried on and the quantitative assessment was recorded.

Statistical technique

Statistical techniques serve the purpose of the description and inferential analysis. The response of the learners in pret-test and post-test were transcribed. A deviance response in the attitude and presentation of the role play was clearly evident in the post-performance which clearly manifested itself in the post-test. The pre-test and post-test score were compared with each other on mean score, standard deviation and standard error mean to find the probability value contrasted with the level of significance.

Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Role plays

Description	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean	P value	LS
Pre-test	49.38462	60	5.122537	0.635373	**0.000**	**<0.01**
Post-test	53.646153	60	4.525727	0.561347		

The 'p' value is considered as extremely statistically significant at 1% level. It is noted that the mean score of the post-test (53.646153), is greater than that of the pre-test (49.38462). The standard deviation score of 4.525727 in the post-test suggests that the difference in the

scores between the highly proficient and the limited proficient is reduced. The statistical calculation shows that the language usage of the students has improved significantly on account of their participation in role play under the task based approach which used brainstorming for vocabulary, reading for gathering information and formulaic language and repeat performances to ease out shyness and fear in handling the language.

FINDINGS

It was found that the controlled repeat performance gave the learners confidence to perform well. They had problem when it was narrating the event of enjoying fine dining at a hotel. The first task of expressing in simple present and simple future did not pose much of a problem. While comparing the hotels and the food items the students made certain errors in the adjectives used; because the adjectives are essential components of descriptions, the error correction was done during the debriefing/ feedback sessions. While narrating their experience the students made inflectional errors and the use of auxiliaries were taken into account. But in the repeat performance, the errors were consciously brought down by the individuals showing a shift of attention towards form. The research findings have made it clear that practice and performance are interrelated and this as a language learning strategy has helped the research participants shed off shyness and fear to develop confidence in speaking English.

DISCUSSION

Pronunciation was not at all considered firstly because raising consciousness over pronunciation during previous occasions drove the participants reticent and in the globalised context intelligibility has substituted native pronunciation.

Apart from having learnt to use the structure and vocabulary appropriate for the context, the students showed confidence to handle the language the shyness and anxiety which were part of their behaviour seemed to be under control. The Basic Interpersonal Communication seemed to be simple for the students as they answered the questions without any inhibition during the debriefing session.

The investigation showed the academically oriented learners with better language skill performed well with no errors in the main task and repeat task; students with low proficiency in the target language showed interest in the entire task and in the repeat task focused on form there was some improvement. Students who were not so serious about the task could only be reprimanded for better performance the next time.

Implication to Research And Practice

It may not be true that the learner memorises the language use but the repeated practice automatizes the usage while keeping them ready in their repertoire. The teachers who believe in the strong form of TBLT (focus on meaning alone) can think about the weaker form (form focused) for handling grammar based syllabus. The twin (main and repeat) performance may be time consuming but quite rewarding in an English for Specific Purpose classroom which requires apt vocabulary and syntax for academic communication.

CONCLUSION

The task based language instruction that the present research adopted role play as a communication tool to enhance and scaffold the language skills of the students. It has understood that role play can be beneficial to the learners as long as the need based language teaching process is a learner centred pedagogy. Further, role play is not a panacea. While preparing and practicing the role play the students make the classroom noisy forcing the researcher to think about calling off the procedure. Never the less, role play has proved in building team spirit and cooperative learning. The stable understanding of the language through the playful medium of role plays has helped the engineering students to internalise the basic interpersonal and academic communication to the satisfaction of their own self and that of the researcher herself.

Further Research

While it is true that justification for task based activities is based on the learners' ability to incorporate negotiating meaning through language use for social interaction and academic interaction, the form focused interaction in the tasks discussed earlier in this article give ample scope for further research on form focus. The author believes that the focus on language maximises the gain from learning opportunities when the learners willingly learn the use of language with its associated structures and vocabulary.

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