How Far Do the Theories of Task-Based Learning Succeed in Combining Communicative and from-Focused Approaches to L2 Research

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Abstract:

Debate about the importance of attention to linguistic form and accuracy in language learning has been a feature of language learning research and discussion for more than 20 years. Many have examined the relative merits and efficacy of a focus on language form and accuracy as contrasted with a focus on meaning and fluency, in an attempt to determine the key to successful second language acquisition (Murphy, 2005:295). Researchers have pointed out there are clear disadvantages to an extreme focus in either direction and the most sensible way to proceed would be covering both form and meaning, accuracy and fluency (Seedhouse, 1997). Despite the broad consensus that is emerging on the beneficial effect of attention to form and the possibility of integrating this successfully into a communicative approach (Murphy, 2005), concerns remain about how best to achieve this. The purpose of this article is to investigate the role that task-based learning theories plays in combining communicative and form-focused approaches in L2 research by answering the following five questions in a sequence: (1) What is task-based learning? (2) What is the communicative approach and what is its relationship with task-based learning? (3) What is the form-focused approach and what is its relationship with task-based learning? (4) Why do we need to combine the communicative approach with the form-focused approach? (5) How do task-based learning and teaching succeed in combining communicative and form-focused approaches? Finally, in the conclusion section of the article, certain issues that might warrant our attention concerning this topic are put forward according to the prior clarification.

Key Words: Task-based learning, Communicative language teaching, Form-focused language teaching

INTRODUCTION

An enormous growth of interest in task-based language learning and teaching has been seen in recent years (e.g., Ellis, 2000, 2003; Skehan; 2003b and Littlewood, 2004). The reasons for such a phenomenon may be complex and one of the reasons, according to Willis (1996, in Swan, 2005:378), may be that it offers the possibility of combining 'the best insights from communicative language teaching with an organized focus on language form' and thus avoiding the drawbacks of more narrowly form-centred or communication-centred approaches.

A number of researchers have highlighted the importance of prompting learners to 'notice' or attend to language forms, or to promote each other to do so (e.g., Doughty and Varela, 1998; Murphy, 2005) whether within or outside the formal teaching environment. Foster and Skehan (1999:216) note that form-orientated approaches have largely been replaced by an emphasis on meaningful tasks seeking to balance attention to both accuracy and fluency. However, they also point out that 'learners have limited attention capacities and that different aspects of comprehension and language production, i.e. accuracy, complexity and fluency, compete for these capacities'. Van Patten (1990; 1996, in Ellis, 2001:8) suggests that learners have difficulties in attending to form and meaning at the same time and often prioritize one at the expense of the other. According to Lightbown and Spada (1993:105), 'classroom data from a number of studies offer support for the view that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of a communicative program are more effective in promoting second language learning than programs which are limited to an exclusive emphasis on accuracy on the one hand or an exclusive emphasis on fluency on the other.'

1. TASK-BASED LEARNING

1.1 What is a task?

Tasks hold a central place both in current second language acquisition research and in language pedagogy (Ellis, 2003). This is evident in the large number of recent publications relating to task-based learning and teaching (e.g., Willis 1996; Skehan 1998; Ellis, 2003). Then, what exactly is a 'task'? It should be acknowledged from the start that in neither research nor language pedagogy is there complete agreement as to what constitutes a task, which makes the definition problematic. Ellis (2003) lists a number of definitions of task in his book, which address the following dimensions: (1) the scope of a task; (2) the perspective from which a task is viewed; (3) the authenticity of a task; (4) the linguistic skills required to perform a task; (5) the psychological processes involved in task performance, and (6) the outcome of a task. In this articlee, I'd like to adopt Littlewood's (2004) viewpoint on the definitions of task and clarify it further with those definitions listed by Ellis.

According to Littlewood (2004:320), 'definitions of task range along a continuum according to the extent to which they insist on communicative purpose as an essential criterion.' There are three points along the continuum, from the least emphasis on focus on meaning to the most:

- For some researchers, communicative purpose is not an essential criterion at all. Breen (1987, in Ellis, 2003:4), for example, defines a task as 'a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication'. He specifically states that a 'task' can be 'a brief practice exercise' or 'a more complex workplan that requires spontaneous communication of meaning'. Estaire and Zanon (1994: 13) work with this broad definition but distinguish two main categories of task within it: 'communicative tasks', in which the 'learner's attention is focused on meaning rather than form', and 'enabling tasks', in which the 'main focus is on linguistic aspects (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions, and discourse).'

- Moving along the continuum, some researchers do not go so far as to define tasks purely in communicative terms but clearly think of them primarily as involving communication. Thus Stern (1992:195) associates tasks with 'realistic language use' when he writes that 'communicative exercises…provide opportunities for relatively realistic language use, focusing the learner's attention on a task, problem, activity, or topic, and not on a particular language point'.

- Moving still further along the continuum, some researchers wish to restrict the use of the term to activities where meaning is primary. Take Nunan's (1989) definition for example, in his opinion, 'a task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focus on meaning rather than form. The task should have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right'. Besides, Skehan (1996) also points that 'a task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of outcome'.

However, no matter how restricted the definitions are pointed to the communicative purpose, most researchers do not deny the necessity of focusing on form when learners engage in tasks. As Ellis (2003:5) points out:

> *When learners engage in tasks they do not always focus on meaning and act as language*
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> *users …. While a task requires a learner to act primarily as a language user and give focal*
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> *attention to message conveyance, it allows for peripheral attention to be paid to deciding what*
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> *forms to use. Also, when performing a task, learners' focal attention may switch momentarily to*
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> *form as they temporarily adopt the role of language learners… the extent to which a learner acts*
>
> *as language user or language learner and attends to message or code when undertaking tasks*

and exercises is best seen as variable rather than categorical.

1.2 What is task-based learning?

Task-based language learning was defined by Breen (1987:23) as 'any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task.' In this view, 'task' is assumed to refer to all kinds of work plans that have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning, from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem solving or simulations and decision making (Wesche and Skehan, 2002). In this article, the terms 'task-based learning' and 'task-based approach' are used interchangeably and all of them are used in a strictly circumscribed sense, following R. Ellis (2003).

According to Ellis (2003), there are two ways of using tasks in language teaching, they are task-supported language teaching (tasks are incorporated into traditional language-based approaches to teaching) and task-based language teaching (tasks have been treated as units of teaching in their own right and whole courses are designed around them). In both cases, tasks have been employed to make language teaching more communicative. Tasks, therefore, are an important feature of communicative language teaching. In other words, task-based learning and teaching places the task centrally, as the unit of syllabus design, with language use during tasks as the driving force for language development (Wesche and Skehan, 2002). This interpretation is linked to second language acquisition research that suggests that 'interlanguage development will come about, not through control and practice, but through the meaningful use of language and the engagement of more naturalistic acquisitional processes' (Skehan and Foster, 1997:186).

Ellis (2003) points out that the overall purpose of a task-based approach is to create opportunities for language learning and skill development through collaborative knowledge building. Hence while proponents of task-based teaching naturally vary in their emphases and beliefs, there is broad agreement on several principles. For example, once we look through the principles proposed by Willis (1996) and Skehan (1998); Ellis (2003) and Swan (2005), the following common principles can be obtained:

- Instructed language learning should primarily involve 'natural' or 'naturalistic' language use, based on activities concerned with meaning rather than language.

- Instruction should motivate learners to engage in language use rather than teacher control.

- Students should be primarily focused on meaning when they carry out a task.

- There should be opportunities for focusing on form.

- Formal pre- or post-task language study will be useful.

From these principles, we may conclude that task-based teaching is ready to combine form- and meaning-based approaches.

As referred to at the very beginning, researchers in recent years have shown particular interest in task-based approach. Wesche and Skehan (2002:218) state that 'task-based instruction is particularly interesting because it is associated on the one hand with considerable research activity and on the other with active pedagogic investigation and materials preparation'. Ellis (2003) identified a number of rather different approaches to use tasks in language pedagogy, such as task-based teaching associated with humanistic language teaching and the 'process syllabus' advocated by Breen and Candlin (1980). He finally pointed out that these kinds of approaches to task-based teaching reflect the issues that figure prominently in current discussions of language pedagogy, such as the role of meaning-focused activities, the need for more learner-centred curricula, the contribution of learner-training, and the need for some focus-on-form. Hence, task-based pedagogy provides 'a way of addressing these various concerns and for this reason alone is attracting increasing attention' (Ellis, 2003:33).

2. COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

2.1 What is communicative language teaching?

Communicative language teaching (CLT) aims to develop the ability of learners to use language in real communication. It is directed at enabling learners to function interactionally and transactionally in an L2. In this respect, the goal of CLT is not so different from that of earlier methods such as the audiolingual or oral-situational method, which also claimed to develop the ability to use language communicatively. The difference, then, lies in that CLT drew on very different models of language (Ellis, 2003:27). To adopt Widdowson's (1978) terms, whereas structural approaches to teaching focus on usage, i.e. the ability to use language correctly, communicative language teaching is directed at use, i.e. the ability to use language meaningfully and appropriately in the construction of discourse.

Over the past several decades, CLT has evolved in response to changing views on the nature of communicative language use and the abilities that underlie it. Nevertheless, from the beginnings of CLT to the present, it has been possible to distinguish a 'weak' version of it from a 'strong' one. According to Howatt (1984), the weak and strong versions of CLT share the same objectives but reflect different assumptions about how second languages are learned. The former is based on the assumptions that the components of communicative competence can be identified and systematically taught. It essentially implies that there is a set of classroom practices that describes and exemplifies relationships between form and meaning (Wesche and Skehan, 2002). In contrast, the strong version of CLT rests on the assumption that communicative language ability is mainly acquired through communication. Therefore, instruction is organised around situations, oral and written texts, skill or knowledge domains, or

tasks that require communicative language use of various kinds. Though task-based teaching is not the only way of achieving a strong version of CLT, it has been an interesting development of CLT (Ellis, 2003).

The current situation of CLT is complex, as the weak forms have increasingly appropriated elements of communicative language use into the classroom, and the strong forms have increasingly sought ways to incorporate a focus on form and language awareness into classroom practice (Wesche and Skehan, 2002). We can see then, the distinction between a weak and a strong version of CLT parallels the distinction between task-supported language teaching and task-based language teaching. Tasks in the weak version are viewed as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a more traditional way. They are only a necessary while not sufficient basis for a language curriculum. In contrast, the strong version regards tasks as both necessary and sufficient for learning. They are a means of enabling learners to learn a language by experiencing how it is used in communication (Ellis, 2003).

2.2 Communicative language teaching and task-based learning

On the one hand, as referred to above, task-based language teaching constitutes a strong version of CLT. Actually, communicative language teaching is the origin of task-based language teaching (Skehan, 2003b). During the 1970s there were considerable moves within language teaching to embrace the communicative approach. At that time, the assumption seemed to be that it was not enough in language teaching to focus only on language structure, but that this needed to be accompanied by a concern to develop the capacity to express meanings (Widdowson, 1978). The implications of these pedagogic developments were widespread, and influenced the design of syllabus, the methodology and assessment of language teaching and an early and influential proposal for the use of task-based approaches (Skehan, 2003b).

On the other hand, communicative language teaching may be increasingly replaced in some contexts by approaches comparable in principle but different in degree or in contextualization. Task-based language teaching could be considered simply a more thoroughgoing version of CLT. It may be that versions of task-based teaching with clear provision for focus on form will show that continued progress is possible in promoting accuracy and complexity, as well as fluency (Wesche and Skehan, 2002).

3. FORM-FOCUSED APPROACH

3.1 What is form-focused instruction?

The area of form-focused instruction (FFI) has attracted considerable attention over the last 30 years. Initially, it was conceptualised in relation to method, a little later as a type of exposure distinct from natural exposure, a little later still as a set of classroom processes, and, increasingly, as a set of psycholinguistically motivated pedagogic options (Ellis, 2001:12).

Current interest in focus on form is motivated, in part, by the findings of immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies that suggest that when classroom second language learning is entirely experiential and meaning-focused, some linguistics features do not ultimately develop to target like levels despite plentiful meaningful input and opportunities for interaction (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2001). What's more, on the basis of the classroom research work which indicates that pedagogical interventions embedded in primarily communicative activities can be effective in overcoming classroom limitations on SLA (second language acquisition), a strong claim has been made that 'focus on form may be necessary to push learners beyond communicatively effective language toward targetlike second language ability.' A somewhat weaker claim is that, 'even if such a focus may not be absolutely necessary, it may be part of a more efficient language learning experience in that it can speed up natural acquisition processes' (Doughty and Williams, 1998:2).

As far as the term of FFI is concerned, there exist broad and narrow definitions. Ellis (2001) used 'FFI' as a cover term to refer to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to direct language learners to linguistic form. It, thus, includes both traditional approaches to teaching forms based on structural syllabi and more communicative approaches, where attention to form arises out of activities that are primarily meaning-focused. In contrast, Long (1988) holds the idea that there is nothing to be gained by attempting to systematically teach isolated linguistic forms in accordance with a structure syllabus—an approach he characterizes as 'focus on forms'. However, he does not deny the necessity of some attention to form and argues that attention to form needs to be incorporated into meaning-focused activity, an approach that he mentions as 'focus on form'. He defines this term as follows:

> *Focus on form...overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally*
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> *in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. (Long, 1991:45-46)*
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> *Focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features-by the*
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> *teacher and / or one or more students-triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or*
>
> *production. (Long & Robinson, 1998:23)*

Two essential characteristics of focus-on-form can be identified according to the above definition: (1) the overriding focus in a form-focused classroom is meaning or communication, and (2) attention to form arises incidentally in response to communicative need (Ellis, 2001). However, we should also be careful that focus on forms and focus on form are not polar opposites in the way that form and meanings have often been considered to be. Instead, we must kept it in mind that 'the fundamental assumption of focus-on-form instruction is that meaning and use must already be evident to the learner at the time that attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across' (Doughty and Williams, 1998:4).

Comparing to Long's categorization of FFI, Ellis (2001:16) conceptualises it in terms of three types according to (1) where the primary focus of attention is to be place and (2) how attention

to form is distributed in the instruction. They are 'focus-on-forms', which is characterised by a primary focus on form and intensive treatment of preselected forms; 'planned focus-on-forms' which also involves intensive attention to preselected forms, but the primary focus of attention lies on meaning rather than form; and 'incidental focus-on-form', which distributes attention to a wide range of forms that have not been preselected, though its primary attention is also to meaning. Clearly, these three types of FFI rest on the distinction between focus on form and focus on meaning. Actually, it is mainly the relationship between focus on form and focus on meaning that make us think how task-based learning theory combine communicative and form-focused approach in L2 research.

3.2 Form-focused instruction and task-based learning

Some researchers, for example Stern (1990), take the view that FFI contrasts with MFI (meaning-focused instruction). In his opinion, the former describes instruction where there is some attempt to draw learners' attention to linguistic form, which he calls 'analytic strategy'. The latter refers to instruction that requires learners to attend only to the content of what they want to communicate, which he names 'experiential strategies'. However, Widdsowson (1998, in Ellis, 2001) has cristicised this distinction. In his opinion, the so-called form-focused instruction has always required learners to attend to meaning as well as form, whereas meaning-focused activities still require learners to process forms in order to process messages. For him, the key difference lies in the kind of meaning learners must attend to—whether it is semantic meaning, as in the case of language exercises, or pragmatic meaning, as in the case of communicative tasks. Similar opinions can be found from Ellis (2001) who argues that the essential difference between form-focused and meaning-focused instruction lies in how language is viewed (as an object or as a tool) and the role of the learner is invited to play (student or user). In his opinion, 'form' involves some more than grammar, and those attentions to lexical forms and the meanings they realize, where words are treated as objects to be learned, can all constitute form-focused instruction. Various options at the pre-task, during-task, and post-task phases of a lesson have been proposed for achieving a focus on form in Ellis's (2003) book. There he argues that attention to form is both possible and beneficial in the during-task phase and need not conflict with one of the principles of task-based teaching, that is 'ensure that students are primarily focused on meaning when they perform a task' (2003:277).

4. WHY DO WE NEED TO COMBINE THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH WITH THE FORM-FOCUSED APPROACH?

It is argued that current language teaching theory views a 'dual' focus on form and accuracy as well as meaning and fluency. As Swan (2005:376) argues, 'the polarization of meaning-based and form-based instruction is unconstructive, and reflects a recurrent pattern of damaging ideological swings in language teaching theory and practice.' Spada (1997a) also concludes that form-based and meaning-based approaches need not be in opposition to each other but can

operate synergistically. According to Wesche and Skehan (2002), Spada's conclusion seems to be the most realistic current judgment. In short, the goal of foreign language teaching is 'to extend the range of communication situations in which the learner can perform with focus on meaning, without being hindered by the attention he must pay to linguistic form', according to Littlewood (1981:89).

4.1 From the perspectives of communicative approach

In the past twenty-five years, communicative language teaching in the broad sense has undoubtedly represented the most interesting development in language teaching (Wesche and Skehan, 2002). One of the heated debates arises around the issues of whether meaning-focused language pedagogy is sufficient to ensure success in acquiring an L2. As a whole, though few educators or researchers would deny the importance of meaning-focused instruction, such as Prabhu (1987:2) who has argued that attempts to focus learners' attention on grammatical form is 'unhelpful' and that instruction should instead be concerned with creating conditions for coping with meaning in the classroom by following a task-based syllabus, many now recognize that it needs to be complemented with form-focused instruction of some kind (Nassaji, 2000; Ellis, 2003; Sken, 2003b; William, 2004). They argue that to develop an accurate knowledge of the language in question, some kind of form-focused activity needs to be incorporated into communicative contexts, for the reason that activities which focus merely on message are inadequate.

The disadvantage of an extreme focus on meaning and fluency is clear. According to Wesche and Skehan (2001:227), CLT by its nature cannot solve the syllabus problem. It can by no means lend itself to 'organized, accountable, easy-to-teach textbooks and evaluative tools in the way that other syllabi and methodologies may'. Though it encompassed a wide range of formats, serving different clienteles and purposes, none of which can claim to be a complete solution to how language should be taught. Besides, as far as early strong versions of CLT are concerned, in spite of their success in developing highly functional L2 skills in learners, they have not led to matching accuracy in production. The assumption that 'talking to learn' would be sufficient is no longer taken for granted. What's more, Wesche and Skenhan also point out that merely engaging in language use is not enough and some degree of focus on form is needed. This is best done within communicative activities, rather than independently.

Long (1996) took the view that instruction that includes focus on form has at least two advantage over purely meaning-focused instruction: (1) It can increase the salience of positive evidence; and (2) it can provide often essential negative evidence, in the form of direct or indirect negative feedback. There is converging support for this position from both laboratory research and classroom-based studies. For example, descriptive research of immersion and core French classrooms using the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation

Scheme (COLT) (Wesche and Skehan, 2002:211) suggested that, in classrooms that included language analysis as an integral part of communicative activities, learners achieved higher accuracy in speaking and writing.

4.2 From the perspectives of form-focused approach

As implied in the previous section, in the last 10 years, new perspectives advocate a more form-focused approach to language teaching, arguing that a totally message-based approach is inadequate for efficient second language acquisition, some kind of form-focused activity needs to be incorporated into communicative classroom contexts as a compensation for this inadequancy. Barnes (1988) remarks that although schooling should be brought closer to the real world experience, theoretical and formal knowledge should not necessarily be abandoned as a result.

However, the disadvantages of extreme form-focused classroom activities are also apparent. In such kind of a classroom, the learner highlights the lack of correspondence between the forms practiced and any kind of real-world meaning; there is no scope for fluency development in such a rigid lockstep approach; and the discourse is 'unnatural' in that such transformation sequences do not occur outside the classroom etc (Seedhouse, 1997:337). It is also suggests that focus on form is more effective when it is directly related to meaningful communication, whether it be through manipulation of materials and tasks to highlight given language features, communicative feedback to the learner, or explanation when communicative problems arise (Spada, 1997b).

As far as task-based approach is concerned, Swan (2005) points out that, the best strategy for most teaching situations is not to limit oneself to one type of activity, but to draw on all the resources and techniques available. In such an approach, tasks of various kinds will take their place as components of what Ellis (2003) calls 'task-supported' instructional programmes, alongside a variety of other procedures which will range from the most 'natural' to the most 'unreal', traditional and allegedly 'discredited', from the most learner-centred to the most teacher-centred, as complementary components of a multi-faceted syllabus (Cook 2000:172). Bygate also states that (2001:3) 'only by integrating form- and meaning-centred approaches, can teachers maximize their chances of successfully teaching all those aspects of language that learners most need to master, and thus meeting the central challenge for language teaching…to develop learners' communicative language ability through pedagogic intervention.'

5. HOW DO TASK-BASED LEARNING AND TEACHING COMBINE COMMUNICATIVE AND FORM-FOCUSED APPROACHES?

5.1 Theoretical justification for combination

Before starting to discuss how task-based learning combines communicative and form-focused approaches, I would like to provide a theoretical justification for it by drawing on two influential theoretical perspectives briefly: interactive and cognitive theories of L2 learning. According to the interactive perspective, language learning is enhanced 'particularly when they (the learners) negotiate toward mutual comprehension of each other's message meaning' (Pica, Kanagy and Falodun, 1993:11). While from the cognitive perspective, second language learning is a complex cognitive skill, the acquisition of which involves several cognitive stages. Anderson (1995) for example, offers a three-stage model of the skill-learning process: declarative stage when learners acquire knowledge that can be described or declared; procedural stage when learners acquire knowledge that makes them capable of doing something under circumstance; and automatised stage. Dekeyser (1998) later argues that learners develop declarative knowledge first through some language-based activities. They must then assimilate and internalise this knowledge through ample practice before they can use it automatically in real communication. Combining these two theoretical perspectives, we may find the reason why the idea of focus on form in communicative contexts is currently supported by both theory and research. However, many educators believe that focus on form and focus on communication should be treated as separate learning activities, as attempts to emphasise form may cause negative reactions on the part of the learners who are engaged in expressing their meaning. While Nassaji (2000:244) believes that 'the most effective way of addressing this problem is to consider activities that result in attention to form while maintaining meaningful communication and using form for communication.' Focus on language forms in the context of communication may encourage learning, and the forms may be much easier to remember when students need them in future similar contexts (Lightbown, 1998). Then in the classroom context of task-based learning, how can we integrate a focus on form into communication activities?

5.2 Strategies for incorporating a focus on form into communicative classroom contexts

There are two principal ways of attempting to include a specific focus on form into task-based teaching according to Ellis (2003): by means of tasks that have been designed to focus attention on specific properties of the code, which has been referred as 'focused tasks' and secondly by incorporating a focus on form methodologically into the performance of linguistically unfocused tasks, which entails incidental attention to form and can be accomplished pre-emptively. No matter which one is concerned, for a task-based syllabus that incorporates a specific focus on form to be successful it must be compatible with interlanguage development. Besides, Ellis also points out two possible goals for incorporating a focus on form into a task-based syllabus—the development of implicit and explicit knowledge. Here, implicit knowledge refers to 'that knowledge of language that a speaker manifests in performance but has no awareness of'. Explicit knowledge refers to 'knowledge about language that speakers are aware of and, if asked, can verbalise' (Ellis, 2003:105).

Different types of tasks work differently during such an integration process. According to Ellis (2003), the kind of tasks needed to develop implicit knowledge will be either structure-based production tasks (tasks which can be designed to incorporate a specific target language feature), or interpretation tasks (tasks which are based on the assumption that acquisition occurs as a result of input-processing). In the case of explicit knowledge, consciousness-raising tasks (tasks which are designed to cater primarily to explicit learning and make language itself the content) are needed. He concludes that where implicit knowledge is concerned, course designers cannot determine in advance exactly which forms, or range of forms, should be addressed nor can they stipulate when they should be addressed. All that is possible is a checklist of items and procedures for deciding when a particular item can usefully be addressed. Such kind of a checklist can be used by classroom teachers to help them establish which forms their students have and have not mastered and, most importantly, which forms they are in the process of currently mastering. This is precisely the approach that focus-on-form researchers have adopted. In contrast, if the goal is explicit knowledge, a syllabus of linguistic properties can be more easily constructed. Such a syllabus 'delineates the content of consciousness-raising tasks, which serve the dual purpose of focusing attention on specific forms and providing opportunities to communicate' (Ellis, 2003: 237).

There are probably two ways of incorporating a focus on form into communicative activities in classroom contexts, mentioned by Ellis (2003). They are the 'integrated approach' and the 'modular approach'. The integrated approach for incorporating a focus on form originates in work on content-based instruction school contexts with ESL learners. In the integrated syllabus recommended by Snow, Met and Genesee (1989), content and form are closely interwoven by identifying the content-obligatory and content-compatible language of each topic area in the curriculum. Such an approach reflects mainstream thinking about the importance of teaching form and meaning conjointly (Doughty, 2001).

In contrast, in the kind of modular approach, no attempt is made to integrate content and form. The syllabus is conceived of as two entirely separate modules—a communicative module and a code-based module. Of which, the communicative module constitutes the main component of such a syllabus. In such a module, no attempt is made to predetermine through the design of a task which forms learners will attend to. Learners quite naturally focus on form while they are performing unfocused tasks. The code-based module consists of a checklist of linguistic features that are potentially difficult for learners to learn and serves a 'remedial' purpose by helping learners to acquire features that prove resistant to learning 'naturally' (Ellis, 2003:236). Such kind of modular syllabus is broadly applicable to all teaching situations since it, in some ways, is more practicable than the integrated approach as it avoids the learnability problem.

Other than Ellis, Nassji (2000) in his work also mentions two similar ways. One way is by design: that is, communicative activities can be designed with an advanced, deliberate focus on form. The other is by process: that is, by incorporating focus on form naturally in the process of

classroom communications. As Doughty and Varela (1998:114) say that 'a quintessential element of the theoretical construct of focus on form is its dual requirement that the focus must occur in conjunction with—but must not interrupt—communicative interaction.'

CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion, we may find that SLA researchers into task-based instruction are looking for ways to ensure that there is, within a task-based approach, sufficient focus on form (Skehan, 2003a). As Seedhouse (1997) claims, many interactions that occur inside the classroom will be neither entirely form-focused nor meaning-focused but a combination of both, although achieving a dual focus is not easy. Task-based learning and teaching is frequently promoted as an effective approach, superior to 'traditional' methods, in that it pays great attention to combining form-focused approach with communicative approach. It is difficult to predict how task-based learning, communicative language teaching, and form-focused instruction will develop in the future. The manner in which each links with research perspectives means that they will not be easy to ignore; they already influence the ways in which methodologies and syllabuses should be evaluated. Each has limits to its application, but all have been shown to be effective under suitable circumstances (Wesche and Skehan, 2002). It is likely that each will continue to develop once the underlying principles of SLA become better understood and are incorporated into teaching.

Finally, let's look at some issues that warrant attention and potentially further research on this topic:

(1) The growing concern that a focus on form needed to be incorporated into communicative language teaching does not mean a revival of 'old ways' of language teaching-tradition grammar-based syllabuses, pattern drills and the like (Swan, 2005).

(2) The oversimplified version of the communicative approach has, in general, tended to imply that learners will find meaning-focused activities meaningful and form-focused activities meaningless (Seedhouse, 1997). It is vital for us not to simply claim that the communicative approach or the form-focused approach is superior to the other, but what we need to do is to combine them as effectively as possible. From this point of view, task-based approach has much to offer.

(3) There is a general perception among language teachers and educators that task-based instruction is mainly directed at improving students' abilities to use the target language rather than at enabling them to acquire new linguistic skills (Samuda, 2000). However, we should remember that we are dealing not with clear-cut distinctions when we talk about a focus on meaning and a focus on form, but with proper shifts of emphasis. Within task-based learning and teaching, there is a calling for complementarity between a focus on form and a focus on meaning.

(4) As referred to above, form- and meaning-based approaches should be integrated within task-based learning and teaching. However, empirical support for this claim is sparse

(Swan, 2005), which requires more empirical research on this topic, and pedagogically involving not only researchers but also teachers whose teaching goals may go well beyond simply demonstrating some kind of experimental effect and are likely to be integrated with some extended pedagogic sequence (Skenhan, 2003).

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