

## **How Wide Is the Gulp between Task-Based Language Teaching and Focus on Form in Chinese EFL Context?**

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### **Abstract**

The focus of English teaching in China seems to go from one extreme to another between language form and meaning. Over the past few years, grammar instruction has moved from its central position in traditional language teaching approaches to playing almost no role in task-based language teaching (TBLT) that is strongly advocated and frequently applied in the Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. The high-profile use of TBLT is meant to solve the problems in the traditional English classroom that puts grammar in the center of language learning. But ignorance of language form in the meaning-focused TBLT classes poses great difficulty for English learners because English is a foreign language in China and English learners need to grasp a lot of grammatical points before they can use English freely. 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). Focus on form (FoF) provides a solution to that problem because FoF draws the learners' attention to particular linguistic or grammatical forms within meaning-centered communicative activities in order to increase learners' accuracy. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the necessity and feasibility of integrating TBLT and FoF in English teaching to avoid extremities in Chinese EFL context. It argues that TBLT and FoF can be quite complementary to each other to integrate meaning-focused and form-focused instruction in English teaching. It also aims to provide a balancing

solution to the problems in the English teaching in China.

**Key words:** task-based language teaching, focus on form, Chinese EFL context.

## 1. Introduction

During the past two decades, communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have 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. Though few would deny the importance of meaning-focused teaching, 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). 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 meaning are inadequate.

Debate about the importance of focus on form in language teaching has been a feature of language teaching research and discussion for many 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).

English has long been taken as one of the most important school subjects in China. The past three decades have seen a great progress achieved in EFL field ever since China has carried out its reform and opening-up policy to the outside world at the very beginning in the 1980s. Many factors have contributed to this progress and the teaching methods are generally regarded as a very important one among them. In Chinese EFL context, the traditional

approach to ELT has long been the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods which view learning as a linear process of understanding, internalizing and activating language knowledge. In the past few years, CLT and TBLT have been strongly advocated within the school curriculum across China. “As a logical development of CLT” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:223) and a realization form of CLT, TBLT is believed to provide a better solution to the problems in the traditional English classrooms in China by placing learners at the center of the class. Much research even argues that TBLT is taking the place of the long-established traditional teaching methods in second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g., Skehan, 1996, 1998; Willis, 1996, 2004). TBLT seems to begin to form a part of an agenda for change of teaching methods across the school curriculum and it has been widely used in English classrooms from then on. TBLT means to solve the problems in the traditional English language teaching which pays much attention to grammar points while ignores students’ meaningful use of English in social contexts. But the meaning-focused and learner-centered TBLT is not without its problems in the Chinese EFL context; the ignorance of grammar can be the most important one since English is a foreign language in China and English learners need to grasp a lot of grammatical points before they can use English freely. Many researchers have stressed 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. In response to the limitations of purely communicative methodology, a number of linguists have proposed a new approach to grammar instruction called Focus on Form (FoF).

FoF is one of the main ways to deal with grammar within the communicative framework. The role of grammar in language teaching in EFL context is a forever topic to research on. But some scholars misunderstand its status by claiming that there is ‘no grammar syllabus’ in TBLT (Sheen, 2003) and even that TBLT ‘outlaws the grammar syllabus’ (Swan, 2005). Following these claims, many English teachers in China have mistakenly thought that language form is less important in TBLT, instead, meaning, whether semantic or pragmatic meaning, should be the focus of the lesson.

English teaching approaches in China seem to go from one extreme to another between form

and meaning. A lot of studies have examined the probability of integrating form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in the English teaching in China. In form-focused instruction there are some attempts to draw learners' attention to linguistic form while meaning-focused instruction requires learners to attend to the context or what they want to communicate (Ellis, 2001). Lightbown and Spada (1993:105) suggest that, '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.' As a balancing solution, FoF avoids being an extreme teaching approach and is an alternative for the two polarized views, i.e., focus on form to deal with language grammar and focus on meaning that can be achieved by TBLT. In this sense, TBLT and FoF can be quite complementary to each other to solve the most important problems in the traditional English teaching in Chinese EFL context.

## **2. Defining task-based language teaching**

Various definitions have been offered in literature concerning the concept task. Long (1985:89) defines task as "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Breen (1987:23) regards task as "a range of work plans". Nunan (1989:10) states that task is "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form". Skehan (1998:95) summarizes features of "task" as: (1) meaning is primary; (2) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; (3) task completion has some priority; (4) the assessment of tasks is in terms of outcome. Ellis (2003) defines task as a "work plan" that requires learners' cognitive processes via the inclusion of Skehan's four criteria. These definitions suggest that for a language teaching activity to be a 'task', it must satisfy the following criteria: (1) the primary focus should be on 'meaning' (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances). (2) There should be some kind of 'gap' (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning). (3) Learners should largely

have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity. (4) There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).

Task-based instruction was defined by Lightbown and Spada (1993) as “instruction in which classroom activities are tasks similar to those learners might engage in outside the second or foreign language classroom”. In this sense, TBLT refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching, which focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Its assessment is mainly based on task outcome rather than on accuracy of language forms.

### **3. Characteristics and problems of TBLT in Chinese EFL context**

The term “Task-based” was developed in the 1980s and 1990s and was regarded as a pedagogical innovation when people began to realize that language learners needed to be placed at the centre of teaching. The TBLT approach toward language teaching has therefore emerged in response to some constraints of the traditional PPP approach. It means that language learning is a developmental process enhancing communication and social interaction rather than a product internalized by practicing language items, and that learners master the target language more effectively when being exposing to meaningful task-based activities in a natural way. TBLT is characterized by the following features (Nunan, 1991): 1). An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language; 2). The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation; 3). The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself; 4). An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning; 5). An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom

In contrast to the traditional grammar-translation method and the audiolingual method, which see learning as a linear process of understanding, internalizing and activating language knowledge, TBLT, as a realization form of CLT, permits students’ active participation in language classrooms and requires teachers to facilitate students’ learning by using

meaningful pedagogical tasks and help them complete those tasks through modeling, experiencing, practicing, participating, cooperating, and communicating (Klapper, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, TBLT is a student-centered and meaning-focused teaching model which poses great challenges on the traditional Chinese learning traditions, which emphasize hierarchical relations between teachers and students and focuses on the language grammar.

Chinese learners learn English mainly for two goals: a practical goal relating to examinations and another goal for communication, and the former one being more important for learners' educational future because the present Chinese examination system focuses mainly on testing learners' accurate language knowledge. This orientation of examination system exerts a great influence on the teaching and learning of English in China. As a result, in Chinese settings language teaching is generally seen as the delivery of knowledge rather than the development of communicative skills (Hu, 2005). As a meaning-focused approach to teaching language, it is sufficient to acknowledge that task-based approaches emphasize communication of meaning rather than study of grammatical form as the starting point for learning activities (Carless, 2009). Willis and Willis (2007) argue that TBLT is not designed with examination in mind and that it is designed to produce learners who can use their English outside the classroom, even they make grammatical mistakes. But obviously, Chinese learners cannot afford that price because they are still being given the traditional tests such as end-term tests or tests for entrance examinations, which focus on language knowledge and mainly include reading, writing and even listening, but not speaking. TBLT does not sufficiently well prepare learners for the traditional and form-focused examinations. There is therefore a mismatch between examinations and TBLT. Ignorance of language form in TBLT becomes a big problem for Chinese learners to learn English which makes TBLT, to some extent, incompatible with examination demands.

Brown (2006) pointed out that grammatical competence is essential for communication, but it cannot be attained solely through exposure to comprehensible input. But a careful examination of the effectiveness of purely meaning-focused CLT and TBLT revealed that when second language learning is entirely meaning-focused, second language learners do not

acquire high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Therefore, an urgent problem in TBLT classroom is how to deal with language form when language meaning is focused on in a communicative context.

#### **4. Clarifying FoF and its characteristics**

The role of grammar in language teaching in English as a foreign language (EFL) context is a forever topic to research on. “Focus on form...overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, 1991: 45-46 ). In other words, focus on form takes place when learners participate in interactions where communication problems arise, and this leads to negotiation of meaning. Despite its name, FoF does not mean a return to the traditional approach to teaching grammar based on explicit explanations. Instead, FoF, as Long (1991) suggests it, is a teaching approach in which the primary focus is on meaning and communication with the learner’s attention being drawn to linguistic elements incidentally and only when there is a breakdown in meaning during interaction. FoF often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features-by the teacher and/or one or more students-triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production (Long & Robinson, 1998:23). It is one of the main ways to deal with grammar in a communicative context. FoF represents one approach in what has come to be called form-focused instruction (FFI). Ellis (2001:1) defines FFI as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form”. FFI in this sense 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. Zhao (2011) concludes two essential characteristics of focus-on-form according to the 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). Therefore, 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.

#### **5. The need to integrate TBLT and FoF in English teaching**

Language form and meaning are two indispensable parts to constitute a language. We cannot only focus on one part and ignore the other when we are teaching a language. This is especially true in China where English is learned as a foreign language. When language form and meaning are taken into the teaching context, despite the importance of meaning, language form still has its own place. Ellis's (2003:277) 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'. Swan (2005:376) argues that '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 (1997) also holds that form-based and meaning-based approaches need not be in opposition to each other but can operate synergistically. Littlewood (1981:89) concludes that 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'. Therefore, in Chinese EFL context, both TBLT and FoF are important to be applied into teaching to teach language because they provide the teaching practitioners with complementary views and approaches to each other.

#### **6. How to integrate FoF into TBLT?**

Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, (2002) argue that in FoF the attention to form comes out of meaning-centered activity that is derived from the performance of a communicative task. So FoF can provide us with an acceptable rationale for including traditional grammar instruction within CLT framework because while keeping learners' attention on meaning, it makes occasional departures to the target forms and makes learners aware of the forms. As a result, FoF can be an efficient and feasible way to teach grammatical and linguistic forms to learners while keeping their attention on meaning and communication.

Ellis identified two possible goals for incorporating a focus on form into a task-based syllabus—the development of implicit and explicit knowledge. Implicit knowledge refers to 'that knowledge of language that a speaker manifests in performance but has no awareness of' while explicit knowledge refers to 'knowledge about language that speakers are aware of'

and, if asked, can verbalize' (Ellis, 2003:105). There are two major types of form-focused instruction: FoFs and FoF. According to Sheen (2002), these two differ in the degree to which teachers direct learners' attention to grammar. The aim of FoFs instruction is the mastery over grammatical items rather than learning and using language for communication. So the emphasis is on the formal aspects of language through isolated linguistic structures in a sequence predetermined by a syllabus designer or textbook writer, because the assumption is that in classroom settings language competence is best achieved by a return to discrete-point grammar teaching. Intensive and systematic treatment of these linguistic elements is also practiced in class.

Ellis's definition of FFI indicates the way of using it: from explicit, more traditional grammar instruction to implicit, incidental references to form; from planned focus on pre-selected grammatical features to spontaneous focus on form. Ellis (2003) suggests two main ways to integrate FoF into TBLT: first, FoF can be integrated into TBLT 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. Planned FoF and incidental FoF are two feasible teaching options for integrating FoF into TBLT as discussed in the following.

In planned FoF, language forms are selected prior to a meaning-focused activity of TBLT. For this purpose some communicative tasks are designed in order to elicit the application of a specific linguistic form during meaning-focused activities, but this linguistic form is pre-planned and pre-selected. In other words, in this type of FoF, the particular linguistic feature is pre-embedded to the task and during the task there is an intensive and deep treatment of a special language feature.

Incidental FoF occurs spontaneously without prior intention during meaning-focused activities and targets a variety of linguistic forms. Unlike planned FoF instruction, incidental FoF includes unfocused tasks, which are communicative and are designed not to focus on a particular form but elicit meaning-centered language use.

While Long claims that FoF is purely reactive, Ellis (2001) claims that incidental FoF can be

of two main types, namely reactive and preemptive FOF (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002). Reactive FoF has also been known as error correction, corrective feedback, or negative evidence/feedback (Long, 1996), and occurs when learners' attention is drawn to errors in their production during meaning-focused activities. The teacher perceives the learners' utterance as inaccurate or inappropriate and draws their attention to the problematic feature through negative feedback. The second type of incidental focus on form is preemptive which, according to Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002:414), occurs when teachers or learners begin attention to form "even though no actual problem in production has arisen".

## **7. Conclusion**

Nassaji and Fotos (2007) argue that traditional methods and instructions on isolated grammar forms were insufficient to promote learners' acquisition, yet purely communicative approaches had been found inadequate for developing high levels of target language accuracy. In other words, a communicative approach helped learners to become fluent, but was insufficient to insure comparable levels of accuracy as well (Swain, 1998; Ellis, 2001). As a result, an urgent need arose for SLA theorists and practitioners to integrate meaning-focused instructions and form-focused instruction through a new approach (Loewen, 2007). The past ten years of language teaching practice in China revealed a shift of attention from purely linguistic to more communicative approaches by using TBLT. TBLT is a student-centered and meaning-focused instruction in which the students' attention is transferred from focus on the grammatical or linguistic forms to focus on meaning in output. TBLT, based on the notion of CLT, asserts that the primary aim of a second or foreign language teaching should provide language learners with the experience needed to meet the communicational needs in second or foreign language. However, in practice, it was found that this kind of instruction did not work as it was predicted, and an efficient instruction requires attention focused on both form and meaning. As a solution to this problem, FoF is providing some type of implicit focus on grammar during communicative language teaching and it enables learners to take time out from a focus on meaning and notice linguistic forms in the input, thereby overcoming a potential obstacle of purely meaning-focused lessons in which

linguistic forms may go unnoticed (Loewen, 2003). TBLT can be an effective approach in China and be superior to ‘traditional’ methods, only when it pays great attention to combining form-focused approach within a communicative framework.

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