Grammar Instruction Through Task Activities and Tasks in the EFL Context

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the applicability of two different kinds of activities, task activities and tasks, as a means for the improvement of the participants’ understanding of the present perfect and the past tense at a technical college in Japan. A quasi-experimental study was conducted, setting four intact classes as experimental groups and one as a control group. Two of the experimental groups had initially experienced engaging in task activities three times, and the other two experimental groups had not experienced such activities. In the study, one of the experienced groups and one of the non-experienced groups practiced a task, and the rest practiced a task activity. The groups were compared in terms of their scores on multiple-choice tests, assessing if the learner could supply the most appropriate verb forms in a written dialogue. The quantitative results show that for the improvement of the target structures, the groups which engaged in a task showed significant improvement after the treatment whether or not they had previous experience with task activities. However, when the results of the test for other tenses were analyzed in order to see if there were any effects of overgeneralization, only the experienced groups which then engaged in either a task activity or a task showed an immediate significant difference.

1. Rationale for Tasks and Task Activities

The utilization of tasks in second language learning and teaching has been gaining great attention (e.g., Skehan 1998; Ellis 2003; Willis 2004). In fact, according to Willis (2004), three main premises for using tasks in the classroom have been derived from second language acquisition research. First, language learning does not proceed in a linear additive fashion but is a complex organic process. Second, learning must be primarily meaning-focused, rather than form-focused. Third, learners need opportunities to use the language for real purposes. A task is believed to provide the conditions these premises suggest. Because of the characteristics of a task, learners are believed to engage in natural acquisition, causing their underlying interlanguage systems to be expanded (Skehan 1998). While researchers define a task in various ways, Ellis’s definition (2003) of a task seems to be comprehensive. Ellis (2003: 9, 10) identifies the
following six features of a task.

1. It is a workplan.
2. It involves a primary focus on meaning.
3. It involves real-world processes of language use.
4. It can involve any of the four language skills.
5. It engages cognitive processes (for example, selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information.).
6. It has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

In order to exploit tasks for the learners' benefit, it is necessary to consider what kinds of tasks can cause more interaction and how and when tasks should be used. However, especially in the EFL context, Takashima (2005) argues that tasks are too difficult for most learners, and he proposes task activities as a bridge to move on to tasks. According to Takashima (2000: 36), task activities have to meet the following conditions:

1. require completion,
2. be message focused,
3. involve negotiation of meaning,
4. entail comparison of structures,
5. contain an information gap, and
6. be of interest to the learners.

Among the six characteristics, two of them are worth noting here, as they are directly relevant to this research: One entails the comparison of structures in which the learners are required to choose between two similar but different structures (e.g., the present perfect and the past tense), picking one structure over the other(s) in a given context. Task activities are selectively designed for the learners to practice reviewing some of the difficult structures, i.e., those for which they find it difficult to differentiate meanings and uses. Takashima (2000; 2005) claims that, unless the learner knows the differences between such structures, s/he cannot distinctively use one structure over the other(s).

The other characteristic involves the negotiation of meaning. Task activities are designed to help the beginning level learners negotiate meaning. Task activities, whose theoretical basis is the same as that for tasks in the ESL context, are designed to induce more interaction by providing steps to help the learners complete the activity. By dividing the activity into several steps, the learners are forced to exchange information and negotiate meaning before completing the goal of the activity. Steps will naturally make the activity easier since the learners are given a route toward the goal as well as being given guidelines to reach the destination through these steps.

In congruence with this "easiness", another outstanding difference between tasks and task activities is the requirement of the cognitive load. Robinson (2001) contends that it is important to arrange tasks taking into account the cognitive perspectives of task complexity, task conditions, and task difficulty. Task complexity is especially concerned with cognitive factors, such as the
number of elements involved in the task, the existence of planning time, the degree of prior knowledge, and so on. Whether a task is a single task or a multi task is also among the criteria for assessing task complexity. One example of a single task is requesting students who have access to complete maps to give directions from point A to point B on the map to partners who only have point A on their maps. This means that the speakers with the complete maps must only articulate the route to their partners. On the other hand, in a dual-task situation, the route is not marked, which means the speaker has to think up the best route to point B (the first task) and then articulate it (the second task). The steps provided in task activities can then be considered as lowering the cognitive demand on the learner.

One of the rationales for using tasks and task activities in the classroom can be drawn from the extensive research on focus-on-form. Long and Robinson (1998: 23) characterize focus-on-form as an approach that 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.” To practice the focus-on-form approach, tasks are assumed to be particularly useful since they can draw the learners’ attention to linguistic features while the learners are primarily engaging in meaningful communication. Schmidt (1990) claims that the learners acquire linguistic regularities through “noticing”.

Based on the focus-on-form approach, one of the crucial factors for successful language learning is whether the learners are really negotiating meanings or interacting sufficiently for language learning to truly occur while learners are engaged in a task or a task activity. In order to induce focus-on-form, repeating the same or similar tasks might also be useful. Bygates (2002) studied the influence of learners’ repeating a task or practicing a type of task (the narrative task or the interview task¹). The research showed that there is a strong effect for task repetition; that is, the learners produced significantly more complex utterances when repeating the same task after 10 weeks. Fluency was also significantly affected through the interview task, although no effect was observed in the narrative task. This result indicates that earlier experiences in a task can affect the performance on the task when it is encountered the second time. Then, in order to exploit tasks in the EFL context effectively, consideration of previous experiences of similar activities is in order.

Though tasks can be useful for the learners whose language proficiency has reached a certain level, it might be difficult for the learners at the beginning level to interact in the target language. VanPatten (1990) argues that the learners may not be able to focus attention on both meaning and form simultaneously if they are still beginners. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often have little opportunity to use English in communication, while English as a Second Language (ESL) learners frequently communicate in English. Consequently, the learners in the EFL context, such as in Japan, often seem to have difficulty completing a task.

However, task activities have proven to be effective for learning targeted structures (for a review, see Sugiura 2002). However, little research has been done to show how tasks can
improve the grammatical knowledge of the learner in the EFL context. Takashima (2005) argues that to be able to complete tasks is the final goal for language learners in the classroom and that learners beyond high school level should engage in tasks after practicing task activities in order to prepare for using the target language in the real world. On the other hand, Seedhouse (1999) warns that tasks may minimize language forms to accomplish the completion of the task, while Skehan (1998) argues that learners may rely too heavily on communication strategies for the sake of communicative effectiveness.

2. The Study

2.1 The Purpose of This Study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effectiveness of using two different language activities; tasks and task activities, in an EFL context. The study focused on the improvement of the participants' understanding of the target structures; the present perfect and the past tense, after engaging in a task or a task activity.²

The following two research questions were formulated.

1. Would there be significant differences in the understanding of the target structures between the groups which engaged in a task and those in a task activity?

2. Would there be significant differences in the understanding of the target structures between the groups which have prior experience in task activities and the groups which have no previous experience?

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were first-year students (aged fifteen to sixteen) at a college of technology in Ibaraki, Japan.³ The study used five intact classes. Four classes each had 42 students, and one had 43 students. The present study assessed only the participants who received all the procedures, including instruction, a pre-test, a post-test, and a follow-up test. Therefore, the final number of the participants became 190 out of the initial 211.

One class, the control group, was given no special instruction for the study and only took the pre-test and the post test. These students had no previous experiences in task activities. The other four classes were all experimental groups. Two of these classes had engaged in task activities three times in the past three months,⁴ and the other two classes had never engaged in such activities. Thus, there were two different groups with regard to their experience in task activities. During the instruction in the study, one of the non-experienced groups engaged in a task (Task 1 Group), and one engaged in a task activity (TA 1 Group). Furthermore, one of the experienced groups engaged in a task (Task 2 Group), and one engaged in a task activity (TA 2 Group).
2.3 Procedure

Every group received the same grammar explanation from the researcher in Japanese. In the explanation, the teacher explained when and why the present perfect or the past tense should be used showing different contexts. The task activity used in this study was based on a study by Tanaka (2003), who examined the effects of a task activity at the high school level. The goal of the activity was to decide in pairs a place where they would like to go for a one-day trip. Each participant had a different sheet from his/her partner. The sheets provided some possible places as destinations, past experiences (e.g., whether they had visited the place or not), and memories relating to the places. Although Tanaka used places in Hyogo prefecture where his experimental school was located, the places on the sheets used in this study were changed to famous places in Ibaraki prefecture in order to make the information familiar to the participants.

Next, the task used in the study was created by eliminating the steps or the turn-taking instructions of the task activity (see Takashima 2005). Therefore, the main difference of the two activities was whether the activity had steps. The information to be exchanged was the same. The present perfect and the past tense were the target structures needed to complete both the task and the task activity.

For feedback, the participants were given a model dialogue. They were then asked to underline the past tense and circle the present perfect in the dialogue. Then, they were asked to read the dialogue aloud in pairs. Finally, they filled in the self-evaluation sheet, which had questions asking whether they had been able to use the present perfect and the past tense while engaged in the activity. On the sheet, the participants were also asked to write English expressions they had wanted to use but had not been able to use in the activity.

2.4 Analysis

A multiple choice written test was administered to assess the participants' ability to use the appropriate verb forms in a given context. Each question was composed of three utterances, two of which were made by Person A in Japanese, and one by Person B in English. The subjects then had to fill in a blank space. The utterance by Person A was provided in Japanese to make the context clear to the participants. The test consisted of 14 questions on five verb forms: the Present, the Present Progressive, the Simple Past, the Past Progressive, and the Present Perfect. Eight out of 14 questions were for the present perfect tense and the past tense. Although the treatment focused on the present perfect and the past tense, the test included other structures. This is based on the assumption that the instruction could cause overgeneralization and possibly affect the instruction of the present perfect and the past tense due to confusion from other structures.5

The pre-test was administered one week before the treatment. The post-test was carried out the next day after the treatment, and the follow-up test was three weeks after the treatment. Between the post-test and the follow-up test, the participants had English classes three times a
week, and the focuses of those classes were modal verbs and passive voice. The contents of the post-test were different from those of the pre-test only in the use of different nouns and/or other peripheral words in the sentences; the verbs remained the same. The follow-up test used the pre-test again.

2.5 Hypotheses
The present study tested two hypotheses:

(1) The groups with no prior experience in task activities would improve their understanding of the target structures more when they engaged in a task activity than when they engaged in a task.

(2) The groups with prior experience in task activities would improve their understanding of the target structures after the treatment whether they engaged in a task or a task activity.

These hypotheses are based on the assumption that experience in similar activities induces more fluent and/or complex utterances, resulting in more interaction. On the other hand, the group which had no prior experience in similar activities may not be able to produce enough utterances to negotiate meaning. Though a task may be cognitively more demanding and difficult than a task activity, if the learners had prior experience in task activities, they would have become accustomed to using English and could spare attention for the relationships of meaning and forms. Then it would be possible that they could improve their understanding of the target structures through a task.

3. Results

The results of the tests on the target structures (the present perfect and the past tense) were statistically analyzed (the possible scores ranged from 0 to 8). Table 1 shows the means of the scores and the standard deviations for the target structures on the tests of each group. One-way ANOVA indicated no significant difference among the groups at the pre-test. Thus, all the groups were considered to be equivalent in their knowledge of the target structures before the experimental instruction. Two-way ANOVA was carried out and found significant differences among the tests, but none among the groups, nor any interactions between the tests and the groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Follow-up test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>5.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>5.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to see whether or not there are differences between the scores in each test within the groups, Paired Sample T-tests, with alpha being set at the .01 level as the T-test was repeated three times, were applied to the data. In the control group in the first row in Table 2, the results show no significant differences between the pre-test and the post-test. In the TA 1 and the TA 2 Groups, no significant differences were seen. On the other hand, in the Task 1 and the Task 2 Groups, significant improvements were observed after the instruction. Between the pre-test and the follow-up test, the Task 1 Group showed a significant difference, which indicates an advantage for the instruction lasted for three weeks. In addition, there was no significant difference between the post-test and the follow-up test in the Task 2 Group. This also indicates the gain after the instruction did not disappear after three weeks.

Table 2. Mean Differences Between the Tests for the Target Structures by Paired T-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Test Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pre-test—post-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$t$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>-4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1</td>
<td>-2.830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 1</td>
<td>-1.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>-3.284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 2</td>
<td>-2.028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01

In order to determine if any effects on understanding of the five verb forms occurred, the results of the tests for the five verb forms were also statistically analyzed (the possible scores ranged from 0 to 14). Table 3 shows the means of the scores and the standard deviations on the tests of each group. Again, one-way ANOVA indicated no significant difference among the groups at the pre-test. Thus, all the groups were considered to be equivalent in their knowledge of the five verb forms before the experimental instruction. In the same way as before, two-way ANOVA was carried out and found significant differences among the tests, but none among the groups, nor any interactions between the tests and the groups.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for the Five Verb Forms on the Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>$N$</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Follow-up test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10.02</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>10.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>9.84</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>10.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10.38</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>10.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10.12</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>11.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the differences between the scores in each test in the Task 1 and the TA 1 Groups, the results of the paired sample T-tests show no significant differences were seen. On the other hand,
in the Task 2 and the TA 2 Groups, significant improvements were observed after the instruction at the .01 significance level (see Table 4). No significant differences were observed between the post-test and the follow-up test in the Task 2 and the TA 2 Groups. This also indicates the gain after the instruction did not disappear after three weeks. No other significant differences were found in between the remaining tests.

Table 4. Mean Differences Between the Tests for the Five Verb Forms by Paired T-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>pre-test—post-test</th>
<th>post-test—follow-up test</th>
<th>pre-test—follow-up test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(t)</td>
<td>(p)</td>
<td>(t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>-0.066</td>
<td>.948</td>
<td>-0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1</td>
<td>-0.888</td>
<td>.330</td>
<td>-1.376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 1</td>
<td>-1.141</td>
<td>.889</td>
<td>-0.665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>-3.648</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td>2.331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA 2</td>
<td>-2.827</td>
<td>.008*</td>
<td>1.098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\(p<.01\)

4. Discussion

The first hypothesis was not supported by the experiment. The Task 1 Group improved significantly while the TA 1 Group did not. This indicates that engaging the learners in a task is effective in improving the target structures at the high school level students. Yet, considering the results for the five verb forms, neither the Task 1 Group nor the TA 1 Group showed any significant differences between the pre-test and the post-test. An explanation of this result might be that the learners could use the target structures but could not use other forms during the activities. Some pairs of the non-experienced groups, in particular, the Task 1 Group, completed the activity in a few minutes, which means they did not really negotiate meanings and jumped to the conclusion.

The second hypothesis was not supported by the experiment either. Among the experienced groups, only the Task 2 Group showed significant improvement, though the TA 2 Group showed a slight tendency of improvement (\(p > .051\)). This suggests that tasks can help EFL students improve their understanding of the specific grammatical structures at the high school level. On the self-evaluation sheet, some of the participants in the Task 2 Group commented that they could interact during the task as well as during the time when they were engaged in the task activities. The participants were accustomed to interacting in English, so they could develop the conversation to complete the task without the detailed steps of the task activity.

However, it is possible that the second hypothesis was partly supported if we consider the results of the test for the five verb forms. The results of the experienced groups showed significant differences between the pre-test and the post-test whether they engaged in a task or in a task activity. This may be attributed to the fact that the learners were accustomed to
communicating in English so that they could spare their attention resources not only for the target structures, but also for the other verb forms.

With regard to the comparison among groups, no significant differences were found either for the target structures or for the five verb forms. This suggests that engaging in a task or a task activity only once is not sufficient. Practicing activities frequently is necessary.

5. Conclusion

The present study showed that tasks can be applicable at the high school level in the EFL context. The results indicated that the groups who engaged in a task could improve their understanding of the target structures immediately after the instruction.

It was also found that the groups which had former experiences of task activities could significantly improve on the test for the five verb forms. This indicates that the former experiences of task activities may have helped the learners deepen their understanding of a relatively wider range of structures. In other words, the learners might have been able to use various structures other than the target structures during the activities because they are used to communicating in the target language. For the pedagogical implication, teachers should not expect the learners to improve their grammatical knowledge after providing only one activity. The learners need previous experience in engaging in a task activity or a task in order to fully negotiate meaning or form in their interactions. Frequent use of task activities or tasks in the classroom would be necessary to encourage the learners to use their target language.

However, the limitations of this study should be noted. The study only assessed the learners’ grammatical knowledge but did not assess their oral skills, that is, whether or not the learners can use their language in real communicative situations. In addition, the instruction was only for a short term and did not follow the complex development of the language learning of the learners. Further longitudinal study is required to see whether applying task activities and tasks in the classroom has any effects on the learners’ speaking abilities.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. In the interview task, participants were asked to comment on the pictures reflecting some aspect of life in Britain. For example, they were asked for their impressions of the pictures, noting the differences and similarities between the images of the pictures and those of their own country. In the narrative task, the participants watched short video extracts from Tom and Jerry film cartoons and then recounted the story.

2. The present perfect and the past tense were the items the participants had already learned. However, when a pilot test of the pre-test was conducted in a different class at the college, it was observed that the students had
difficulty using those structures appropriately according to the context. Thus, those structures were chosen as the target structures.

3. The college has first to fifth year students (aged fifteen to twenty). The first-year students at the college are equivalent to first-year students at high school.

4. The three task activities previously engaged in by the students targeted the comparison of structures; will and be going to, the past and the present perfect, modal verbs (can, have to, must) respectively.

5. Drawing on the ideas from the science of chaos/complexity theory, Larsen-Freeman (1997) suggests that one treatment could become an avalanche trigger for further language learning.

References


Tanaka, K. (2003). Form-focused instruction at the Japanese high school level — Effects of input processing instruction and task activities —. Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Hyogo University of Teacher Education.
