Addressing The Grammar Gap In Content-Based Instruction

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Common to various approaches to the implementation of content-based instruction is the assumption that learners will acquire the grammar of the target language as a bi-product of studying content through the medium of a second language. While the case for content or meaning-focused instruction rather than language-focused teaching is firmly based on current second language acquisition theory and research (e.g., see Pica, 1997), practitioners have often pointed out that in contexts where learners are engaged in meaning-focused tasks which make little demand for grammatical accuracy they can use communication strategies that enable them to bypass the need for target-language linguistic forms. The result may be the acquisition of fossilised ungrammatical forms, i.e., a *grammar gap* in the learner's communicative competence. The issue raised by Higgs and Clifford in 1982 is still a current one:

> In programs that have as curricular goals an early emphasis on unstructured communication activities - minimising or excluding entirely, considerations of grammatical accuracy - it is possible in a fairly short time ... to provide students with a relatively large vocabulary and a high degree of fluency ... These same data suggest that the premature immersion of a student into an unstructured or "free" conversational setting before certain fundamental linguistic structures are more or less in place is not done without cost. There appears to be a real danger of leading the students too rapidly into the "creative aspects of language use," in that if successful communication is encouraged and rewarded for its own sake, the effects seem to be one of rewarding at the same time the *incorrect* communication strategies seized upon in attempting to deal with the communication strategies presented.
>
> (Higgs & Clifford 1982 :73-4)

The need to address grammatical accuracy within a meaning-based methodology is a challenge both for advocates of content-based instruction as well as other communicative methodologies if the issue of the grammar gap noted by Higgs and Clifford is to be avoided.

In this paper current work on the role of instructional tasks in language teaching will be reviewed to identify ways in which form can be given an appropriate focus in meaning-based methodologies.

The pedagogical unit central to the design of activities that integrate acquisition of content and grammatical form is the **instructional task**. This can be defined as a classroom activity designed to achieve an instructional goal and which involves learners drawing upon their linguistic and communicative resources to achieve a non-linguistic outcome. "Tasks .... are activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in tasks is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use" (Skehan 1996a : 20)

In content-based instruction instructional tasks often have the following characteristics.
  1 they are built around a theme which links to a range of mainstream subjects
  2 they integrate content learning with language learning and study skills
  3 they involve the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in an integrated manner
  (Brinton, Snow & Wesche 1989; Wu 1996; Littlejohn & Hicks 1996).

Examples of tasks used within a unit on teenage smoking in a content-based high school program included "conducting a student survey on smoking and reporting the results," "conducting an experiment and reporting the tar levels found in cigarettes," and "preparation of a kit to advise teenage smokers and non-smokers about smoking" (Wu 1996).

In developing and implementing tasks such as these there are potentially three points at which a focus on form can be provided; prior to the task, during the task, and after the task.

a) **addressing form prior to the task**

The goal of pre-task activities is to provide language items which can be used in completing a task or to clarify the nature of the task so that students can give less attention to procedural aspects of the task and hence monitor the linguistic accuracy of their performance while carrying out a task. Skehan notes (1996b: 53). "Pre-task activities can aim to teach, or mobilise, or make salient language which will be relevant to task performance." This can be accomplished in the following ways.

1. by pre-teaching certain linguistic forms that can be used while completing a task:
For example prior to a task involving description of a process, an activity would be provided that develops awareness and practice in the language of describing a process.
This could be a sequencing task in which students are given a set of sentences describing a process but out of sequence. Students have to find the correct sequence and then write out the sequence employing appropriate sequence markers.

2. by reducing the cognitive complexity of the task:
As preparation for a task students can be given a task similar to a task they will be carrying out but at a simpler level. This is intended to "ease the processing load that learners will encounter when actually doing a task" (Skehan

1996b :54). Such tasks could include watching a video or listening to a cassette of learners doing a task similar to the target task, or could consist of a simplified version of a task similar to the one the learners will carry out.

3. by giving time to plan the task:

Time allocated to planning prior to carrying out a task can likewise provide learners with schema, vocabulary, and language forms that they can call upon while completing the task. Planning activities include vocabulary-generating activities such as word classification and organisation, information generating activities such as brainstorming, or strategy activities in which learners consider a range of strategies in solving a problem, discuss their pros and cons, and then select one which they will apply to the task.

b) addressing form during the task

A focus on form can be facilitated during the completion of a task by choosing how the task is to be carried out. This is an essential feature of task design, since choices made at this stage affect the cognitive, interactional and linguistic complexity of the task (Tikunoff 1985). The way a task is implemented can determine whether a task is carried out fluently with an acceptable level of language output, or disfluently, with excessive dependence on communication strategies, employment of lexical rather than grammaticalized discourse and with excessive dependence on ellipsis and non-linguistic resources. Task implementation factors include:

procedures: the number of procedures involved in completing the task

order: the location of a task within a sequence of other tasks

pacing: the amount of time that is allocated for completing a task

product: the outcome or outcomes students produce, such as a written product or an oral one

participation: whether the task is completed individually or with other learners

resources: the materials and other resources provided for the learners to use while completing the task

For example in carrying out a task such as "conducting a student survey on smoking and reporting the results" the design or the resources students use could have a crucial impact on the appropriacy of the language used in carrying out the task. If the survey form or questionnaire the students use provides models of the types of questions they should ask it may result in a better level of language use during questioning.

c) addressing form after the task

Grammatical appropriacy can also be addressed after a task has been completed (see Willis 1996). Activities of this type include the following:

public performance: after completing a task in small groups, students now carry out the task in front of the class or another group. This can have the effect of requiring them to

perform the task at a more complex linguistic level. Aspects of their performance can become conscious which were not initially in focus during in-group performance as there is an increased capacity for self-monitoring during a public performance of the task.

repeat performance: the same activity might be repeated with some elements modified, such as the amount of time available. Nation (1990) for example, reports improvements in fluency, grammatical accuracy, and control of content, when learners repeated an oral task and argues that this is a way of bringing about long term-improvement in both fluency and accuracy.

other performance: students might hear more advanced learners (or even native speakers) completing the same task, and their attention drawn to some of the linguistic and communicative resources employed in the process (e.g. Richards 1985).

Conclusions

While providing a plausible alternative to language focused instruction, Content Based-Instruction has tended to give little attention to how grammar can be addressed within a content-based curriculum. Grammar is often selected to provide links to themes and topics but is not always seen as an integral part of task design and implementation. Task design in language teaching is currently an area of active theorising and research in language teaching and the principles for integrating grammar focused instruction with content teaching discussed above provide a framework for the use of classroom activities in content based teaching. Further empirical work on the effects of the strategies above is needed to determine the extent to which they address the problem of the grammar gap that sometimes results from communicative methodologies or whether additional grammar focused instruction is also necessary.

The Author

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