Task-Based English Grammar Instruction: A Focus on Meaning

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Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is renowned for providing authentic opportunities for second language (L2) skill development (Han, 2018). The cognitive interactionist perspective adopted by information processing models within TBLT has delivered valuable results from research into manipulating L2 task design features (Robinson, 2001a, 2001b; Skehan, 1998). These efforts manipulated task complexity to create specific improvements in learners' TBLT output. The work presented here explores the relationship between those TBLT output dimensions, specifically complexity, accuracy, fluency (CAF), and adequacy, and English grammar instruction for Japanese learners.

Despite positive success in L2 skill development, TBLT's theoretical emphasis on the pivotal importance of manipulating task design features may not have encouraged research into alternative approaches to grammar instruction within TBLT. In the TBLT framework, grammar descriptions are customarily viewed as a task feature that is not subject to manipulation (Robinson, 2001b). Additionally, TBLT has theoretically minimized the importance of the L2's social function as well as the influence of learners' choice; both of which go hand in hand with many functional approaches to grammar instruction.

The work presented here was motivated specifically by the benefits gained in the above three areas by adapting a Meaning-order Approach to Pedagogical grammar (MAP Grammar) for use in TBLT. MAP Grammar provides a systemic process means to understand the pragmatic function of grammar as well as an explicit method to both interpret L2 input and facilitate grammatically correct output. The original MAP Grammar was first proposed by Akira Tajino as IMIJUN (1995, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2018).

The focus here was to explore changes in learners' output resulting from manipulating the grammar used to describe content within L2 TBLT tasks. The main research question (RQ) addressed is as follows:

RQ. How is L2 learners' TBLT output affected by the incorporation of MAP Grammar?

In order to better explore the above research question, the following four sub-questions (Sub-Qs) were formulated:

Sub-Q1. How do increased task complexity and MAP Grammar affect measures of complexity, accuracy, and fluency in learners' written L2 TBLT output?

Sub-Q2. How does the combination of MAP Grammar and TBLT affect measures of complexity, accuracy, and fluency in learners' spoken L2 TBLT output?

Sub-Q3. How does MAP Grammar affect ratings of narrative task adequacy and learners' perceptions of task based L2 classes?

Sub-Q4. How does cross-linguistic instruction affect task-based MAP Grammar L2 classes?

Chapter 1 explains the context of this research within the second language acquisition field as well as the purpose and scope of the work presented here. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background behind TBLT. This discussion begins with the definition of task-based language teaching, task, and task complexity and presents TBLT's contributions to the L2 teaching field as well as L2 research. TBLT is educationally derived from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and thus is primary driven towards making L2 education more communicative and genuine. The discussion makes a distinction between weak and strong forms of CLT and discusses the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of each and makes central to this discussion the work of Long (1985, 2000) and Skehan (1996, 1998). A discussion of information processing models within TBLT is presented with empirical evidence to support the presence of tradeoffs in L2 information processing, both for L2 input and output. The similarities and differences in how these processes are theoretically accounted for by Skehan's Trade-Off Hypothesis (Skehan 1996, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 2001) and Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson 2001a, 2001b, 2007) are then discussed from a cognitive interactionist perspective. The next section of the chapter treats form-focused instruction within TBLT and discusses Schmidt's (1990, 2001) Noticing Hypothesis and Swain's (1985) Pushed Output Hypothesis. The final section explores the theoretical background of the TBLT performance measures of complexity, accuracy, fluency, and adequacy.

Chapter 3 theoretical situates MAP Grammar within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The chapter begins with a discussion of how SFL and TBLT share many similarities in

their approaches to L2 acquisition (Schleppegrel, 2013). Within the SFL context, MAP Grammar can act as a pedagogic tool to help overcome specific SFL characteristics which inhibit its use in the TBLT classroom. The chapter introduces the MAP tags of: *α*, *Who*, *Does*, *What*, *Where*, and *When*, and then provides a description of how MAP Grammar is incorporated into TBLT. The chapter introduces a number of instruction practices that utilize the MAP Grammar framework before discussing research related specifically to MAP Grammar.

In Chapter 4, traditional grammar explanations were replaced with the semantic meaning-order approach of MAP Grammar. The chapter explores the effect of the interaction of task complexity and MAP Grammar to look for changes in CAF features in L2 learners' written output. The chapter discusses how TBLT and MAP Grammar interact to encourage increases in all three CAF features. Theoretically, the interaction of task complexity and MAP Grammar may systematically direct learners' attention to a sequence of functional choices thereby simplifying necessary metalinguistic explanations and facilitating increases in all CAF features.

In Chapter 5, MAP Grammar is used within TBLT to look for changes in CAF features in L2 learners' spoken narratives. Narratives were selected for their ability to impart a social perspective into TBLT classroom activities. The combination of MAP and TBLT narrative practice increased accuracy and fluency, as well as decreased complexity. The discussions in the chapter explain these effects by negotiating the pedagogical commonality and theoretical distance between SFL and TBLT. The inclusion of MAP Grammar is viewed as facilitating a more socially based, learner-centered approach where CAF task measures are a representation of learners' choice and designed to achieve specific social purposes.

Chapter 6 addresses task adequacy, which is separate from CAF features because it is customarily not derived from lexogrammatical features in the L2 output. A task adequacy rubric is presented and used to establish if learners have completed the task they were assigned. The chapter discusses how the combination of MAP Grammar and TBLT increased adequacy performance ratings. A panel of six raters, two L2 professionals and four lay raters, rated learners' task adequacy on a spoken L2 task to gage the effect of MAP Grammar and TBLT on task adequacy. Adequacy scores are used to interpret changes in learners' CAF features since neither improvements nor deteriorations in CAF features may necessarily be valid indictors of actual learners' L2 task performance (Révész, Sachs, & Hama, 2014). Finally, the chapter explores the views expressed by learners toward the use of MAP Grammar in the TBLT classroom.

Chapter 7 is aimed at providing a pedagogical perspective on the use of MAP in the TBLT classroom. The use of learners' native language in TBLT is discussed with reference to form-focused instruction through cross-linguistic instruction as a means to better incorporate MAP into the TBLT classroom.

Finally, Chapter 8 presents an interpretation and overview of the primary research question (RQ). This discussion addresses the role of task-complexity within TBLT, discusses how MAP Grammar affects L2 learners' TBLT written and spoken CAF features and task accuracy ratings, before discussing issued related to the incorporation of MAP Grammar into TBLT.