

Implementing Structure-based Production Tasks in EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Foreign language education in Japan has highlighted the necessity of cultivating students' communicative competence in response to ongoing educational reform. Therefore, it is vital to reconsider the importance of implementing tasks and the degree to which language learning is based on tasks in the classroom. In order to do so effectively, we need to consider both the current learning environment (i.e., EFL context), where there is very limited opportunity for exposure to the target language outside the classroom in terms of interaction or feedback, and the use of authorized textbooks that are based on a grammar-orientated syllabus. In this paper I discuss the use of structure-based production tasks as a type of focused task based on SLA research. In addition, integrating form-focused instruction, that is, integrating focus-on-form and focus-on-forms into the 3Ps approach, is proposed as a feasible and applicable method of instruction for EFL classes in Japan.

Key words: Structure-based production tasks, Task Activities (TAs), Focused tasks, Form-focused instruction, 3Ps approach

Introduction

Responding to the present growing need to embrace the importance of internationalizing education, many non-English speaking countries¹, especially those in Asia, are now placing a greater emphasis on English education than ever before. That is, the use of English or Englishes² as a means or tool of communication has become more significant worldwide.

Timed with the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, in order for the full-scale development of a new approach to English education in Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2013) has proposed the “Execution Plan for the Reform of English Education in Response to Globalization” to strengthen English language education from elementary to university levels. This change seeks to increase the level of English proficiency through school education. MEXT has been

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¹ Kachru (1985) suggests the division of the English-speaking world into three concentric circles; the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. In the third expanding circle, which includes Japan, Korea, and China, English is learned and spoken as a foreign language.

² The expression “World Englishes” embodies a range of meanings and interpretations. In the first sense, the term functions as an umbrella label referring to a wide range of differing approaches to the description and analysis of English(es) worldwide (Bolton, 2010, p. 367).

promoting educational reform for the new *Course of Study for Foreign Languages*. One of significant changes is the introduction of English classes as ‘Foreign Language Activities’ from the 3rd grade of elementary school and the corresponding move to make the subject compulsory from the 5th grade. As a consequence, the lower and upper secondary education levels will require curricular changes to advance English education.

Teachers in Japan have been striving to develop students’ communicative skills in recent years. However, the actual situation is limited by the fact that what students are able to do with the language in the formal part of a lesson often does not carry over or transfer to its use in the more communicative part of a lesson, let alone to a non-instructional setting or real-world actual use.

The purpose of this paper is to propose structure-based production tasks in order to solve this language teaching problem and to foster students’ communicative competence in English.

1. Problems with Language Use

English education in Japan has required that students have the ability to apply the language rules that they have learned in their lessons for the purpose of real communication. The current *Course of Study for Elementary School* has been implemented since March 2011, and the Foreign Language Activities program for upper graders (5th and 6th graders) was introduced into all elementary schools. Regarding lower secondary schools, the overall objectives of the *Course of Study for Foreign Languages* are to develop students’ basic communication abilities, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. In addition, according to the *Course of Study for Foreign Languages for Upper Secondary School*, one of the overall objectives is to advance students’ communication abilities to the degree where students can both understand and communicate information and ideas accurately and appropriately. Teachers are required to improve students’ communicative competence through instruction which integrates the four language skills with activities, such as speaking or writing about everyday things familiar to the students. In other words, for communicative competence, English education has required that students not simply have linguistic knowledge (e.g., knowledge of grammatical rules or vocabulary), but also have the proficiency to apply English for the purpose of real communication. However, the actual situation is that students cannot use that information in order to express themselves in real communication; they seldom have the chance to put their knowledge to use in a realistic situation where it is potentially applicable. Larsen-Freeman (2003) recognizes the inert knowledge problem among students, that is, “knowledge that is gained in (formal lessons in) the classroom remains inactive or inert when put into service (in communication within and) outside the classroom” (p. 8). This serious problem, which is repeatedly referred to in the literature, is a crucial issue to solve in Japan. In other words, students cannot convert declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to knowledge about facts and things whereas procedural knowledge refers to knowledge about how to perform various cognitive activities³ (Anderson, 1983). Anderson assumes that conversion of declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge is crucial for learning complex skills.

³ This is based on Anderson’s Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) model. This model views skill learning as proceduralization of rule-bound declarative knowledge through practice and feedback (Ranta and Lyster, 2007).

To address this inert knowledge problem, it is important to create opportunities for learners to experience cognitive activities so that they can rapidly convert declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. Overcoming the inert knowledge problem is necessary to achieve the stated communicative objectives for English language education.

2. Effective Pedagogical Activities in Second Language Learning

2.1 SLA and Input, Output, and Interaction Perspectives

The roles and the importance of language input and output in second language acquisition (SLA) are incontrovertible. Language acquisition and/or learning cannot take place without exposure to comprehensible language input. Gass (1997) mentions that some sort of input is essential for language learning. Clearly, languages are not and cannot be learned in a vacuum. She also states that all input is potentially important for building up through experience the automatic processes necessary to deal with fluent language. As Krashen (1982) mentioned, that input must contain $i + 1$ to be useful for language acquisition⁴, comprehensible input is important so that learners notice linguistic features in the input.

Undoubtedly, ample input is a necessary condition for acquisition. However, input alone is not sufficient for acquisition. When we hear language, we can interpret the meaning of it without the use of syntax knowledge. Therefore, as Swain (1985) mentions, output may force the learner to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing.

Swain (1995, 2005) stated that output seems to have a potentially significant role in the development of syntax and morphology knowledge. She also discusses three functions of output which she hypothesizes as being related to accuracy rather than fluency: (1) the ‘noticing/triggering’ function, or what might be referred to as its consciousness-raising role; (2) the hypothesis-testing function; and (3) the metalinguistic function, or what might be referred to as its ‘reflective’ role (1995, p. 128).

In producing the target language, learners encounter their linguistic shortcomings leading them to consciously recognize what they do not know, or know only partially, as the first function suggests. In other words, output can stimulate noticing because it raises learners’ awareness of gaps in their knowledge. Swain (1995) concluded that “noticing can trigger cognitive processes that have been implicated in second language learning; cognitive processes that generate linguistic knowledge that is new for learners, or that consolidates their existing knowledge” (p. 130). Further to this, Swain (1985, 1995, 2005) argues the necessity of ‘pushed output’⁵. This can result in learners moving from a purely semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it. When learners have to make effort to ensure that their output is comprehensible (i.e., produce pushed output), acquisition may be fostered. Under certain circumstances, output promotes ‘noticing’ (Swain, 1995).

Schmidt (1990, 2001) argues that ‘noticing’ is necessarily a conscious process and is a prerequisite for

⁴ Gass (1997) points out that Krashen gave us little indication of how we can know whether specific input is indeed at the $i + 1$ level or at the $i + 23$ level (p. 100).

⁵ This is a term used by Swain (1985) to refer to learner output that is produced with effort and reflects the outer limits of their linguistic competence (Ellis, 2008, p. 977).

learning to take place. He further claims that ‘attention’ and its subjective correlate ‘noticing’ are essential processes in L2 acquisition. Swain (1998) proposes that there are three levels of noticing: noticing a form, noticing a gap, and noticing a hole. That is, first, learners may simply ‘notice a form’ in the target language due to the frequency or salience of the features themselves. Second, learners may notice not only the target language form itself, but also that it is different from something in their own language (i.e., noticing the gap⁶ between the target language and the interlanguage⁷). Third, learners may notice that they cannot precisely say what they want to say in the target language (in her terms, noticing a ‘hole’). Swain hypothesizes that noticing the hole may be an important stimulus for noticing the gap. She emphasizes the importance of producing the target language, because it is while attempting to produce the target language that learners may notice that they do not know how to say (or write) precisely the meaning they wish to convey.

Output by L2 learners often leads to some kind of communication problem in understanding and communication breakdown. Frequently, the learner or the interlocutor attempts to remedy this by engaging in interactional work (or collaborative work) to secure mutual understanding. This function is called negotiation of meaning where learners work to achieve comprehensibility of what is being said, and interlocutors shift the flow of conversation to clarify misunderstandings caused by insufficient or faulty linguistic knowledge. In addition, Gass (1997) has presented the role of interaction in second language acquisition in the following way:

Negotiation is a means of drawing attention to linguistic form, making it salient and thereby creating a readiness for learning. Rather, negotiation is a facilitator of learning; it is one means but not the only means of drawing attention to areas of needed change. (p. 131)

As Ellis (2008) mentions, the opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.

2.2 The Rationale for Tasks – Focused and Unfocused Tasks

Teachers should consider what helps students expose comprehensible input, and induce their output and interaction. That is, in order to address inertia in helping students use what they have learned, and to more adequately realize what is required of English education in Japan, it is necessary to reconsider what kind of activity should be implemented in the classroom and how students should be encouraged to use English communicatively. Teachers are thus entirely responsible for what to do or what not to do. They must find ways for students to experience using English in situations in which communication can only be carried out in English.

As a concrete method, it is necessary to focus on ‘tasks’, which hold a central place in SLA research and language pedagogy. Van den Branden (2006) notes that tasks invite the learner to act primarily as a language

⁶ Swain cites the ‘noticing the gap principle’ from Schmidt & Frota (1986).

⁷ The term interlanguage, coined by Selinker (1972), refers to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learners’ L1 and the target language. The term has come to be used with different but related meanings: (1) to refer to the series of interlocking systems which characterize acquisition; (2) to refer to the system that is observed at a single stage of development (‘an interlanguage’); and (3) to refer to particular L1/L2 combinations (for example, L1 French/L2 English versus L1 Japanese/L2 English (Ellis, 2008, p. 968).

user, and not as a language learner⁸. In addition, he suggests that tasks are supposed to elicit the kinds of communicative behavior that naturally arise from performing real-life language tasks, therefore, these are believed to foster language acquisition. In Anderson's (1983) model, the shift to using rules (the proceduralization of declarative knowledge) is a primary characteristic of automatic performance. Tasks are supposed to play an important role in converting the learners' declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge.

It is undeniable that tasks are intended to be conducted as vehicles to elicit output (i.e., language production), interaction, negotiation of meaning, and noticing. Certainly considering both the realities of the present EFL learning environment in Japan and that the official textbooks are based on a grammar-orientated syllabus, the 'task' undoubtedly has an essential role to play. Moreover, it has been observed that communication with peers has an authentic and purposeful use. Peer work enables students to use language more communicatively and across a broader range of functions than do lessons characterized by lock-step, teacher-led classroom interaction. Most teachers would agree that there is a need for communication that balances teacher-led instruction with group work and peer interaction.

2.2.1 Defining Tasks

The term 'task' is sometimes used with the same generic meaning as 'activity' in Japan. Furthermore, some Japanese teachers might broadly refer to a 'task' as almost anything from an information gap activity to a fill-in-the-gap grammar exercise. Breen's broad use of 'task' includes a spectrum of classroom activities from 'a brief practice exercise' or 'a more complex workplan that requires spontaneous communication of meaning' (Breen, 1985, cited by Ellis, 2012, p. 198). However, in the SLA research, it has been used as a narrower meaning.

In the literature, various wide-ranging definitions of 'task' have emerged (Bygate et al., 2001; Ellis, 2008; Skehan, 2009; Willis, 1996). The word 'task' indeed has somewhat different meanings in different contexts of use. Bygate et al. (2001) suggest that the word 'task' can be used for different purposes: the activity of the teacher, the process of learning and the role of the learner, and the assessment of learning. Skehan (2009) mentions that, "for present purposes, a task is taken to be 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 the task performance is in terms of task outcome" (p. 83). Willis (1996) defines tasks as activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. In terms of definitions of 'task' as an educational activity, Van den Branden (2006) suggests the following:

There should be a close link between the tasks performed by learners in the language classroom and on the outside. The things learners do with the target language in the classroom (i.e., the classroom tasks) should be related to, or derived from, what the learners are supposed to be able to do with the target language in the real world (target tasks). (p. 6)

According to Ellis (2008), a task is a language-teaching activity where meaning is primary, there is

⁸ Cook (2002) mentions the difference between language *users* and language *learners*: "language *users* are exploiting whatever linguistic resources they have for real-life purposes, while language *learners* are acquiring a system for later use" (p. 2).

some kind of gap, learners are required to use their own linguistic resources, and there is an outcome other than the display of language for its own sake. Given this more detailed definition by Ellis, the essential four key criteria for a task are as follows: (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 nonlinguistic) in order to complete the activity; and (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).

All in all, a task seeks to engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than in simply displaying language to accomplish a given exercise. For this purpose, a task is a very effective way for inducing authentic language use from learners in the classroom, and it provides an indisputable way to stretch manipulative activities into more communicative activities.

2.2.2 The Design of Tasks

Different types of tasks can be identified depending on the design variables involved. Ellis (2012) makes mention of the following five design variables: (1) unfocused or focused; (2) input-providing or output-promoting; (3) closed (i.e., there is just one or a very limited number of possible outcomes) or open (i.e., there are a number of different outcomes that are possible); (4) the type of ‘gap’ which tasks contain (an information gap, an opinion gap, or a reasoning gap); and (5) complexity. These design variables potentially impact how students perform. Other design variables include whether the task is monologic or dialogic, the nature of the input provided by the task (e.g. how structured it is and how familiar the topic is to the students), and the nature of the output (e.g. whether it is oral or written and how complex it is) (Ellis, 2012).

2.2.3 Defining Focused Tasks: Structure-based Production Tasks

In this section, considering the great restriction of the use of authorized textbooks, we will consider focused tasks which can be employed to elicit use of specific linguistic features. First, we need to recognize the distinction between unfocused and focused tasks. Ellis (2012) identifies the distinction as below:

Unfocused tasks are tasks that are designed to provide learners with opportunities for communicating using language in general. Focused tasks are tasks that have been designed to provide opportunities for communicating using some specific linguistic feature (typically a grammatical structure). However, focused tasks must still satisfy the four criteria. (p. 200)

As mentioned above, focused tasks aim to induce learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, such as a grammatical feature. That is, an activity that has all the qualities of a task but has been designed to induce learners’ attention to some specific linguistic form when processing either input or output. Therefore, Ellis (2012) mentions that “the target linguistic feature of a focused task is ‘hidden’ (i.e., learners are not told explicitly what the feature is)” (p. 200).

There is general agreement that focused tasks are suited to the learning environment in EFL contexts (Takashima, 2005, 2011; Ortega, 2007). Takashima (2005, 2011) suggests that focused tasks are more feasible

in Japan, where the 3Ps approach (see 3.2) based on a structural syllabus is very common in classroom teaching procedures.

In focused tasks, three principal types are considered: consciousness-raising (C-R) tasks, comprehension tasks, and structure-based production tasks. A summary of each task is described below. C-R tasks are designed to cater primarily to explicit learning, meaning they are intended to develop awareness at the level of ‘understanding’ rather than awareness at the level of ‘noticing’ (Ellis, 2003). One of the characteristics of C-R tasks is that the learners may be optionally required to verbalize a rule describing the grammatical structure (i.e., metatalk). Thus, C-R tasks engage learners in thinking and communicating about language and they are effective in developing explicit knowledge of the L2. In an example of a C-R task based on Ellis (2003), learners read a written and continuous text, underline the time expressions in the given passage, write the time phrases such as ‘at,’ ‘in,’ and ‘on’ in the table, and make up a rule to explain when to use these time expressions. Comprehension tasks⁹ are designed to elicit attention to a targeted feature in oral or written input. In addition, they are based on the assumption that acquisition occurs as a result of input processing. Structure-based production tasks are designed to elicit production of a specific feature (production). According to the strong necessity of using a specific target structure feature, Loschky & Bley-Vroman (1993) distinguish three ways in which a structure-based production task can be designed to incorporate a specific target language feature: task-naturalness, task-utility, and task-essentialness. Especially, out of these, task-essentialness requires that learners must use the feature in order to complete the task successfully¹⁰.

Ellis (2003) identifies what we can learn from various studies about the validity of structure-based production tasks: (1) it is possible to design tasks that successfully target the use of specific grammatical structures; (2) it seems to be easier to elicit some features over others; (3) there is likely to be individual learner variation—whether a task is successful in eliciting the use of the target structure will depend on the learner’s stage of development; and (4) there is evidence that when performing structure-based communicative tasks, learners treat them as opportunities for communicating rather than for learning.

In the next section, we will discuss structure-based production tasks as effective activities.

2.2.4 Implementing Structure-based Production Tasks

Structure-based production tasks are considered to be effective and practical activities in language teaching in Japan. However, there seems to be a significant gap between these tasks and the controlled activities which are very common in Japan, where students are required to use the target structure they have just learned, following a set formatted dialogue in a given situation. In fact, in the classroom, a series of activities such as drills, exercises, and controlled activities are commonly employed after the explicit grammar instruction including oral introduction and rule explanation. Therefore, I propose Task Activities (TAs) (Takashima, 2005) as structure-based production tasks or activities that can bridge the gap.

TAs are staged structure-based production tasks, where the students are implicitly required to use

⁹ Ellis mentions that these tasks go under various names — comprehension tasks (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), interpretation tasks (Ellis, 1995), and structured-input tasks (VanPattern, 1996) (Ellis, 2003, p. 157).

¹⁰ Loschky & Bley-Vroman take pains to point out that it is not easy to design structure-based production tasks in these three ways. However, they suggest that the role of such tasks in language pedagogy should be seen as that of automatizing existing knowledge.

specified grammatical structures during a process of certain guided steps before completing a given task. TAs are designed to induce students at some point to use one particular structure selected from among other similar structures to best suit the required context, while keeping the primary focus on the message completion of the activity. In addition, TAs can be classified as convergent tasks¹¹, in which an arbitrary but agreed solution has to be arrived at collectively. Duff (1986) contrasts divergent and convergent tasks, and proposes that convergent tasks have greater potential to generate negotiation of meaning, a theoretically valued form of conversational interaction. TAs provide learners with opportunities to have the kind of interaction required to promote language acquisition.

The specific characteristics of TAs are whether or not a comparison of structures is entailed and whether or not any guidance is provided at certain steps during the process. The theoretical basis of the TAs is the same as that of a task. They are designed to induce more interaction by providing steps to help the students complete the activity. By dividing the activity into several steps, the students are focused on exchanging information and negotiating meaning before completing the goal of the activity. Such steps will naturally make the activity easier since they provide students with a route toward the goal, as well as guidelines to reach their destination. TAs are characterized by six necessary conditions: (1) They should require completion; (2) They should be message-focused; (3) They should involve negotiation of meaning; (4) They should entail comparison of structures; (5) They should contain an information gap; and (6) They should be of interest to the students (Takashima, 2005, p. 9). The most characteristic condition of TAs is (4), in which the students are required to choose and use an appropriate specific structure within a given context, after consideration of, and comparison with, other structures. This characteristic is based on the concept of cognitive comparison. The most important language learning experiences are those in which it is possible for learners to compare and note discrepancies between their own language structures and those of mature speakers (Nelson, 1981). As a corollary to this statement, learners learn similar but different grammatical structures distinctively, having compared them with each other in meaning as well as in function, and thus, will be able to use them appropriately and grammatically.

With regard to the advantage of engaging students in TAs, various empirical research studies have been carried out in Japan. Most of the experimental research on TAs shows that students in groups engaged in these activities are able to enhance their understanding of the target forms and use the targeted forms more accurately and appropriately (Sugiura, 2006). Also, Imai (2003) has investigated the effects of the TAs in promoting students' understanding on listening tests about how the target structure (= the present perfect) is used by implementing a TA for the present perfect and past tense. The data analyses showed significant difference between the listening pre-test and the listening post-test. Listening tests, unlike written tests, require students, while listening, to quickly judge and decide on-line which language structure is appropriate for their responses. Such listening tests are similar to TAs in a sense: both listening tests and TAs require students to judge on the spot which form is appropriate for a certain purpose or in a certain context.

As mentioned above, the implementation of TAs has an obviously effective place in Japan.

¹¹ A convergent task is an opinion-gap task that requires students to agree to a solution to a problem, e.g. deciding what items to take on to a desert island (Ellis, 2003, p. 341). A divergent task is an opinion-gap task where students are assigned different viewpoints on an issue and have to defend their position and refute their partners', e.g. discussing the pros and cons of television (Ellis, 2003, p. 342).

3. Form-Focused Instruction

In this section, I will discuss when and how to utilize TAs as structured-based production tasks. Form-focused instruction (FFI) can be proposed as an effective type of instruction. According to Ellis (2001), FFI 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; it is based on a prior specification of the language forms and/or functions and their linguistic realization to be taught. Many SLA researchers and educators have recognized the importance of the role of FFI in language teaching, learning and learning theory.

As for FFI, there have been some attempts to propose various taxonomies and classification of pedagogic options. One of the classifications, which has been widely cited and has had a considerable impact on our understanding of the concept of FFI, is the binary distinction between what Long (1991) calls focus-on-forms and focus-on-form. Focus-on-forms is based on traditional structural and synthetic approaches to language teaching in which language is segmented into discrete items and is then presented to the learners in an isolated and decontextualized manner. On the other hand, “focus-on-form”¹² involves overtly drawing learners’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, pp. 45-6).

As mentioned above, FFI includes both traditional and more communicative approaches because it constitutes two different ways of focusing instruction directly on linguistic form. Ellis (2012) summarizes the key differences between focus-on-form and focus-on-forms (see the table below). He states that a main difference lies in how the instruction orientates the learner to language — to either viewing language as a tool for communicating in the case of focus on form or to treating it as an object to be studied and mastered in focus on forms (pp. 272-3).

Table 1. Focus-on-Form Versus Focus-on-Forms
(Based on Ellis, 2012, p. 272)

Aspect	Focus-on-form	Focus-on-forms
Orientation	Language-as-tool	Language-as-object
Type of learning	Incidental	Intentional
Primary focus on attention	Message	Code
Secondary focus on attention	Code	Message
Syllabus type	Task-based	Structural

3.1 Focus-on-Form and Focus-on-Forms: Separation or Integration?

Focus-on-forms implies that the teachers and learners are aware that the primary purpose of the activity is to learn a pre-selected form and that learners are required to focus their attention on some specific form

¹² Long & Robinson (1998) define focus-on-form as often consisting 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 (p. 23).

intensively in order to learn it. It therefore represents a traditional approach to grammar teaching based on a structural (or synthetic) syllabus, and it is a very common approach in Japan. The underlying assumption is that language is a process of accumulating distinct entries. In such an approach, learners are required both to treat language primarily as an object to be studied and practiced, and to function as learners rather than as users of the language (Ellis, 2001). Whereas focus-on-forms refers to instruction directed at teaching linguistic items in activities where the learners' primary focus of attention is on form rather than meaning, focus-on-form draws learners' attention to linguistic elements while they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on message content or communication (Ellis, 2008).

It is generally the case that when there are two approaches, both of which are partially attractive, the effective way would be to make the best use of the best features in each approach. Focus-on-forms might entail the pitfall that too much attention to form results in deliberate rather than automatic language use. Therefore, integrating focus-on-form and focus-on-forms is an attempt to draw a line between traditional grammar teaching and communication-oriented instruction. Doughty & Williams (1998) stress that "focus on formS and focus on form are not polar opposites in the way that form and meaning have often been considered to be" (p. 4). Ellis (2008) concluded that both focus-on-forms and focus-on-form instruction are effective as one of ten conclusions in terms of the effects of FFI on second language acquisition. That is, focus-on-forms can contribute to implicit knowledge, and there is also growing evidence that focus-on-form instruction facilitates acquisition.

In an EFL context such as Japan, in contrast with an English as a Second Language (ESL) context, outside of the classroom, the learners cannot enjoy the luxury of using English interactively and getting corrective feedback on its use. Therefore, it would be best both to give these learners grammatical explanations to compensate for this lack of exposure which would normally help them deduce grammatical rules from input, and to give them opportunities to use these rules in a communicative activity in order to see how well or how much they have learned to use them in a specific context.

3.2 Focus-on-Form Implemented in the Classroom Through 3Ps

Integrating focus-on-form and focus-on-forms into the classroom in Japan can be feasible and applicable. As Takashima (2011) suggests, the best method for English language education in Japan is a combination of both focus-on-form and focus-on-forms. I will now consider how to incorporate traditional focus-on-forms and communicative focus-on-form approaches into the classroom.

In Japan, the 3Ps (presentation–practice–production) approach is the methodology traditionally employed. The 3Ps is required as useful for the intensive study of grammar and vocabulary and is valuable in helping students understand important rules.

In the first stage, the presentation stage, a new grammar item is presented to the students by means of examples with an explanation. Structured input, input specially designed to provide plentiful examples of the target grammar structure, is often used as an introduction. This input is designed both to enable students to give their primary attention to form rather than meaning and to focus students' attention repeatedly on a specific, pre-selected linguistic feature. This first stage is generally focused on a single point of grammar which is presented explicitly or implicitly to maximize the opportunities that can allow the underlying rule

to be understood and internalized. Ellis (1991) mentions that the purpose of the presentation stage is to help the learner acquire new linguistic knowledge or to restructure knowledge that has been wrongly represented. This initial stage is then followed by the next stage, the practice stage (the term ‘manipulation’ is also used for this stage), in which the grammar item is practiced in a controlled manner using what we have called ‘exercises’ in which students practice mechanical activities such as oral and written transformations and substitution drills, and skillfully manipulate what teachers present. In this stage, the students already know the target forms and they are required to gain control over them through controlled practice. In the final stage, the production stage, opportunities are provided for using the item in free language production. In this stage, which is meant to allow language use in a meaningful context, teachers provide communicative exercises where the use of specific features is intended. The first and second stages are aimed at achieving accuracy, and use of such explicit grammar instruction by teachers as a focus-on-forms approach is common. However, in the final stage, the production stage, the degree of control and support should be reduced so that the students are required to produce language more spontaneously, based on the meaning each student would like to express. That is, a trial-and-error type of communicative activity followed by explicit feedback could be implemented as a focus-on-form approach. Therefore, linking grammar instruction to production organically can be feasible. Also, language instruction should not be regarded as separate from language use, but as a closely connected continuation of one process to another.

As mentioned above, in the initial and second stages, a focus-on-forms approach can be a useful working solution in actual classrooms in Japan. Thus, a focus-on-form approach can be incorporated into the final stage of the 3Ps (see Figure 1).

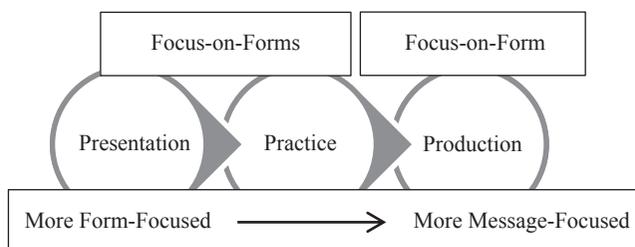


Figure 1. 3Ps Approach and FFI

Our usual method of instruction in Japan has been greatly restricted to the use of authorized textbooks which are based on a structural syllabus, i.e., a syllabus that specifies the content in terms of the linguistic structures to be taught. TAs, as structure-based production tasks, can be utilized to provide free language production in the production stage. In order to secure more time for the last ‘P’, the production stage, I propose that reducing the time allocation of the first and second Ps can be accomplished through instructing grammar items explicitly (see Figure 2).

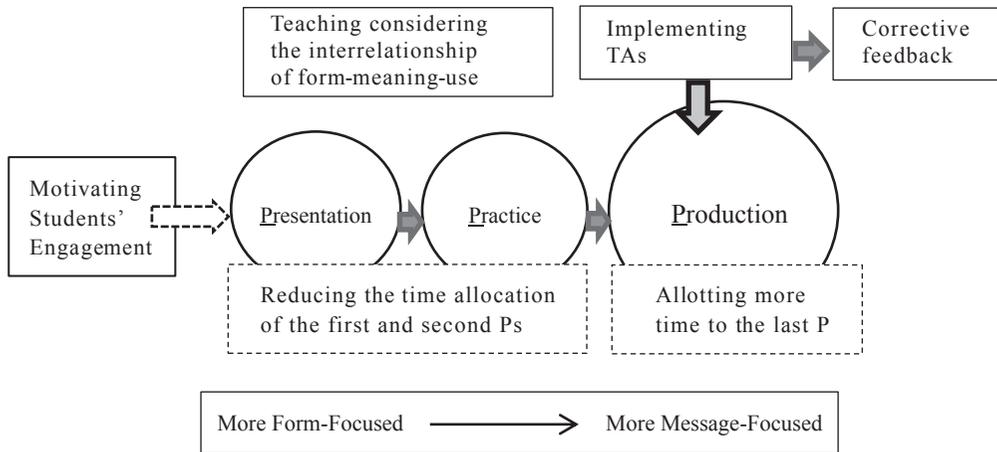


Figure 2. 3Ps Approach and Time Allocation

(Based on Imai & Takashima, 2015, p. 74)

3.3 Necessity of Corrective Feedback: Avoiding Fossilization

Within the EFL context, in which there is very limited opportunity for exposure to the target language outside the classroom in terms of interaction or feedback, students need to be directed to pay particular attention to grammatical forms. In using TAs, students do not necessarily select the correct and appropriate form or expression. In this way, TAs can be performed and completed even though the targeted structure is not used. If, however, students do not have the opportunity to receive corrective feedback, they continue to manifest grammatical and lexical errors in their L2 production. Selinker (1992) notes that non-learning is a persistent problem in SLA, that fossilization¹³, or a cessation of interlanguage learning often far from target language norms, is a reasonable way of looking at this non-learning. Fossilization is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, and appears to be ubiquitous. Ellis (2008) mentions that there is considerable variation in the extent to which individual learners fossilize; that is, learners vary at what point in their development of an L2 they fossilize. Therefore, providing feedback according to an individual's level is another essential function of teaching. As Schmidt (1990, 2001) argues, both noticing (i.e., registering formal features in the input) and noticing-the-gap (i.e., identifying how the input to which the learner is exposed differs from the output the learner is able to generate) are essential processes in L2 acquisition. Therefore, learners need to have an opportunity to notice. Johnson (1996) emphasizes that learners must have the opportunity to receive feedback during (or perhaps after) the performing stage. He suggests that this feedback should consist of mistake correction, i.e., negative evidence about the misuse of features about which the learners already have knowledge but cannot yet use automatically. He emphasizes that for feedback to be effective, learners need to understand for themselves what has gone wrong in the operating conditions under which they went wrong.

In TAs, which function as listening and speaking activities, the importance of explicit feedback is

¹³ Selinker (1972) first suggested the problem of fossilization. He has pointed out that most L2 learners stop learning when their internalized rule system satisfies their own idiosyncratic rules, though these may be different from those of the target system.

emphasized, in order to avoid students' fossilization. As regular feedback, not during the performance stage, but after the implementation of the TA, three steps are recommended. In Step 1, the class observes a demonstration by one or two pairs. Through observation of their peers' performances, students will have opportunities to notice how to complete the task and what kinds of words or phrases and structures are used. In Step 2, students reflect on the TA. Through filling in a self-evaluation sheet, students are able to notice what they can and cannot do. It is possible and necessary to ask students to reflect on and evaluate their own performance of the TA. Also, students can become aware of what they wanted to know or the language they wanted to use during the TA. In Step 3, there is a focus-on-forms opportunity through the provision a model dialogue script. Teachers explain appropriate expressions or structures. Students are encouraged to pay attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to them when they performed the activity. Presentation of a model dialogue (i.e., the teachers' explanation) enables students to identify gaps between what they wanted to express and the output they were actually able to generate. Schmidt (1990) argues that noticing is necessarily a conscious process and is a prerequisite for learning to take place.

TA implementation, as a means of producing output, can help students notice that there is something that they cannot say accurately and appropriately though they want to convey it in the target language. Through these three steps, they can notice the difference between what they themselves have said and what more competent speakers of the target language say, to convey the same intention under the same social conditions (Doughty, 2001). This process is called cognitive comparison and has been seen as one of the crucial processes in language acquisition (Doughty, 2003). Through corrective feedback, students notice both a gap between their own knowledge and the target language and what forms are appropriate in each situation.

4. Conclusion

In response to the growing need to foster communicative competence in Japan, the educational reform for the new *Course of Study for Foreign Languages* has been promoted. It is important that teachers have a clear picture of overall instruction and that they reaffirm the necessity and importance of providing the opportunity for student output in the language classroom.

It is undeniable that a series of activities, such as drills, exercises, and practice, is necessary and important in order to begin cultivating students' communication abilities. Nevertheless, even after numerous drills, exercises, and practice, students may remain unmotivated and unprepared. Such a series of activities is not sufficient to foster students' real communication abilities. Therefore, in the language classroom in Japan, utilizing TAs as structure-based production tasks seems an especially effective way of helping students to use English appropriately as well as accurately. It is absolutely feasible and practicable to implement TAs within the framework of the existing 3Ps approach. This paper has suggested a combination of conducting both focus-on-forms and focus-on-form utilizing implementation of TAs.

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