10 The effect of form-focussed pre-task activities on accuracy in L2 production in an ESP course in French higher education

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Abstract

This chapter presents and discusses the results of a large-scale pilot study carried out in the context of a task-based, blended-learning Business English programme in the Foreign Languages and International Trade department of a French University[5]. It seeks to explore the effects of pre-task planned Focus on Form (FonF) on accuracy in students' written production. Using an action-research framework, the study consisted in introducing FonF pre-task activities in the programme and in analysing written productions of students with a B1 level. The researchers compared the results of the students who completed the form-focussed pre-tasks and those who did not complete these activities. The results show no significant differences in the productions of the control and experimental groups, leading the researchers to question the pertinence of pre-task FonF for B1 learners rather than post-task FonF, which can better cater for individual needs.

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5. In French higher education, Foreign Languages and International Trade departments and programmes are referred to as "Langues Étrangères Appliquées" or "LEA".

1. Introduction

Perusal of practical guides for teachers (e.g. Ur, 2004), research papers in Second Language Learning (SLA) (e.g. Anderson, 2016; Long, 2014; Willis & Willis, 2009), as well as discussion with language teachers and future language teachers (Belan & Buck, 2012) quickly show that there is still ongoing debate in the world of language teaching on whether to propel learners into communicative situations and let them infer form from their communicative experiences (communicative approach) or rather to present preselected structures to be applied in controlled practice before taking the plunge into actual language use, or production – Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) –, or perhaps to try to find a middle ground between FonF and communicative language use – Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

Teachers' pedagogical choices tend to be based on their beliefs about how languages should be learned and taught (McAllister, Narcy-Combes, & Starkey-Perret, 2012). Some may repeat the modeling of their secondary school years, or rely on the official instructions provided (Narcy-Combes, 2005). It is recommended, however, to take a theory-grounded approach to teaching in order to update one's pedagogical choices according to the latest findings of research in SLA and in other fields that contribute to a more robust understanding of L2 learning and acquisition in institutional settings, such as psychology (educational, social, cognitive, etc.), sociology (Narcy-Combes, 2005), and, as far as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts are concerned, language for specific purposes and content-based instruction, or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

This chapter presents an action-research project carried out in the context of a Business English course in a French university. A group of teachers, researchers,

and two postgraduate students have come together in an attempt to find common ground between theory-grounded practice, leading to a preference for TBLT, and in-service teacher representations clearly showing a preference for PPP and perceiving language teaching as explicit instruction of morpho-syntactic structures.

The results of the present study may be of particular interest to ESP practitioners and researchers in other contexts, as there seems to be quite a natural link between TBLT and ESP (Whyte, 2013). The TBLT framework is now commonly used in ESP courses as it allows to meet learners' specific needs (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) by introducing real-world tasks (Ellis, 2003) whose completion implies managing both subject-specific content and language to produce meaning (Llinares & Dalton-Puffer, 2015; Ortega, 2015; Whyte, 2016). This approach has been shown to help enhance language development in terms of fluency (McAllister & Belan, 2014). A study of the development of accuracy is also particularly relevant in ESP as learners' needs include acquiring professional competence in English, which is partly judged on language accuracy.

2.   Description of the programme

The blended learning task-based programme was implemented in 2009, after two years of team cooperation (creation of materials, training, etc.) as an attempt to find solutions to the issues faced by the teaching team in their first year Business English classes: overcrowded groups (45 to 60 students) leading to limited individual feedback, lack of motivation and involvement, and high dropout rates (around 45%[6]). The necessity for individualisation became apparent, not only through the lens of SLA literature (Bygate, 2009; Robinson, 2002), but also through empirical data. A task-based written test was carried out at the beginning of the programme to assess students' individual levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). The results showed that the English proficiency levels of first year

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6. This figure reflects a common problem in language courses in French higher education. In 2012, 37.6% of language students left university after their first year (MESR, 2013, p. 2).

students at the University of Nantes are extremely heterogeneous, ranging from A1 to C2 (Buck & McAllister, 2011).

Taking a socio-constructivist and cognitivist/connectionist approach, the team designed a programme, to begin in the second semester of the first year, which combines classroom sessions with collaborative group work using a Moodle learning platform. In groups of three or four, students complete six to eight business-oriented, collaborative real-world tasks (R. Ellis, 2003) leading to oral and written productions. Corrective feedback is given in the form of advice and suggestions in order to help students 'notice' the gap (Schmidt & Frota, 1986) between their productions and the expected target language norms and pragmatic objectives. In the post-task phase, they are encouraged to complete form-focussed micro-tasks (Bertin, Gravé, & Narcy-Combes, 2010; Demaizière & Narcy-Combes, 2005) in a Virtual Resource Center (VRC) to focus their attention on their individual difficulties (Bygate, 2009; Robinson, 2002).

Concretely, the classroom sessions are organised into a one hour plenary (in theory 45 students) and one hour sessions in smaller groups of 15 students. The two hours that each student spends with the teacher are supplemented by two to four hours of computer-mediated work on the tasks outside of the classroom via three distinct spaces on a Moodle platform:

- 'The course space', which includes the scenarios and instructions for the preparatory work to carry out in order to complete each task, as well as additional resources and a course calendar.

- 'The class space', where students are enrolled manually by their teacher and which is organised as he/she wants. In this space, students submit the written task-productions for evaluation and feedback is given by the teachers. It includes a class forum, links to resources, reading materials, and homework corrections, etc.

- 'The VRC', which was built for form-focus troubleshooting. It contains contextualised practice exercises and explanations of specific forms

as well as an explicit focus on specialised business vocabulary and pronunciation.

3. Theoretical underpinnings of the programme

The researchers involved in implementing the new programme adhered to the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT from a psychological perspective (socio-constructivist, cognitivist, and connectionist models of language acquisition) (Randall, 2007). A clear definition of how these theories of language acquisition relate to the programme will shed light on how student and teacher representations of the role of explicit grammar teaching have led them to experience cognitive dissonance with the programme and how the researchers have proposed to deal with the conflicting views on language and its acquisition in this specific context.

3.1. Connectionism, socio-constructivism, and cognitivism

In the connectionist framework, the object of language has been defined as a collection of patterns found in contextualised use of the target language by proficient users. According to this outlook, the rules of language are not prescriptive but usage-based, and therefore changes occur when speakers use language to communicate with each other, depending on the context (Lindquist, 2009). New models of how language is received, stored in memory, and then retrieved for use have emerged alongside the change in perception of the object of language itself. Connectionist accounts of language reception, storage, and retrieval can quite simply be put as follows: individuals notice frequent patterns in the input to which they are exposed and they store these data as prefabricated sequences in the brain which are then retrieved as chunks for use during communication (N. Ellis, 2003). This has an impact on pedagogy and on the way that form is dealt with in the institutional learning environment. Within the connectionist framework, learners of English wishing to communicate within specific contexts, instead of learning rules and then trying to apply them to communicative contexts, may study authentic language data to notice recurrent patterns of language use within targeted contexts in order to either infer rules

from them, or to memorise them as formulaic chunks (Wray, 2002). This way of dealing with language structures is the one chosen by TBLT, and goes hand in hand with socio-constructivist and cognitivist paradigms of language learning.

In the socio-constructivist view, the role of interaction in the acquisition of L2 is primordial (Bruner, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). This view is concerned with the interpsychological processes involved in learning and focusses on co-construction of knowledge. Cognitivism, on the other hand, is focussed on the intrapsychological processes which are triggered by the interaction. The central notions retained for the present context are temporarily directing learners' attention to form in context (Long, 1997) and individual practice (Robinson, 2002). The stance taken here is that in the institutional context, in which input is limited, it is possible to optimise input processing by helping the learners to direct their attention to salient features of the input, such as recurrent patterns/ structures. This enables them to create hypotheses about the L2. In our programme, both authentic data in the pre-task phase (press articles on business issues, for example) and activities from the coursebook, *Market Leader intermediate*, are used. During these activities, learners are led to identify patterns and to practice the identified structures.

Attention will also be essential during output, whose importance for language learning has been highlighted by Swain (1985): the learner must pay attention to form in order to be understood by his or her interlocutor and is able to test and modify his or her hypotheses during communication until comprehension (or meaning) is reached. This process, known as negotiation of meaning (Swain, 2000), illustrates the essential link between form and meaning. The tasks used in our programme offer opportunities for negotiation of meaning during interaction as students must make decisions and solve problems[7].

After production, when the learner receives feedback, his/her attention will be focussed on noticing the gap between what he or she is able to produce in L2 and what he or she wanted to express; and/or the gap between what was said, and

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[7]. See supplementary material parts 1-3 at https://research-publishing.box.com/s/uk3fc6fmax09odsk45z6h4s9wemzxbxz

the expected, most frequently found structures or collocations. According to the cognitivist framework, noticing must be supplemented with practice in order to make the language associations become more automatic (Ur, 2004). Because of individual differences in cognitive resources and capacity, this focussed practice should be done individually (Robinson, 2002), in the form of post-task form-focussed activities (Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997). Hence, within our programme, post-task form-focussed practice activities are proposed on the VRC, based on individual feedback.

Although the blended TBLT programme implemented is firmly rooted in SLA theory, one cannot overlook the weight of student and teacher representations and affect in the success or failure of a given pedagogical programme. If a student perceives the programme as being useful for language learning and for his/her professional objectives, he or she will more likely invest in the programme than if he or she perceives it as being inefficient (Whyte, 2013; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In the same vein, if a teacher does not identify with the underlying principles behind a programme, or does not believe in the students' abilities, their engagement could be hindered (McAllister et al., 2012) and/or their lack of enthusiasm could be contagious (Hatfield & Cacioppo, 1994).

3.2.   Student and teacher representations

Previous studies on students' and teachers' representations (McAllister & Narcy-Combes, 2015; McAllister et al., 2012; Narcy-Combes & McAllister, 2011; Starkey-Perret, McAllister, & Narcy-Combes, 2012) on the development of accuracy, fluency, and complexity of written production between the beginning and the end of the programme (McAllister, 2013; McAllister & Belan, 2014) and on the students' use of the virtual resource center (McAllister, 2013; Starkey-Perret, McAllister, Belan, & Ngo, 2015) showed that although the programme is generally appreciated for the opportunities it generates for small-group interaction (McAllister et al., 2012; Starkey-Perret et al., 2012), students and teachers tend to prefer a PPP approach, claiming that TBLT does not leave sufficient room for FonF (Belan & Buck, 2012; McAllister, 2013). Questionnaire studies carried out with the students showed that the way 'grammar' is dealt with is the least

satisfactory element of the programme and that there simply is not enough FonF (Belan & Buck, 2012). It seems that many of the in-service teachers and the students in the present study take a symbolic view of language in which it is perceived as a set of rules to be memorised and then applied to production. Informal discussions with teachers during meetings in 2015 and 2016 reveal general dissatisfaction among the in-service teachers. Recurrent comments include "it doesn't work", "their English is getting worse", "they don't do the work anyway" and "in Spanish they actually work, because they have grammar classes".

Studies also showed that the VRC is underexploited by the students, which implies that they do not do the individual post-task form-focussed activities, which makes it difficult to assess the VRC's effects on language development (McAllister, 2013; Starkey-Perret et al., 2015). A questionnaire study showed that just under half of the students (48%) visited the VRC, 66% of whom used it between one and three times over the course of the semester for a duration of under 30 minutes each time (Starkey-Perret et al., 2015). However, it was noted in the same study that the students who used the VRC found it useful for learning and that the more they used it, the more they found it useful.

Another questionnaire concerning the VRC was distributed to the 12 teachers involved in the programme but only four responded, two of whom were also researchers involved in setting up the programme and who claimed to encourage their students to visit the VRC during the post-task phase. The other two respondents declared that they did not advise the students to use the VRC for individual troubleshooting and practice because "they would not do it anyway". Here, the weight of teachers' representations of students in their pedagogical choices, and the negative Pygmalion effect (Rosenthral & Jacobsen, 1968), or self-fulfilling prophecy, this can generate, is clearly demonstrated. Further comments concerning the computer-mediated aspect of the programme include "they don't have enough hours of real class time" and "a computer doesn't replace a teacher". For the majority of the teachers involved, the only solution was to abandon the programme entirely in order to reinstitute face-to-face 'grammar' classes for first year students.

These results show that the application of the blended learning task-based programme for this Business English course has not been entirely successful, even though positive results have been found. The resistance with which the programme was met led the researchers in the team, clearly involved in an action-research perspective, to go back to the drawing board and find ways to modify the programme so as to make its application more palatable to all of the users involved, all the while trying to remain coherent with current research in SLA, one of the greatest challenges of large-scale classroom-based research.

3.3. Exploring the potential of interface between declarative knowledge and automatised use of L2

The main area that necessitated our attention to SLA theory was the place of FonF in meaning-focussed programmes and how this place relates to declarative and procedural memory and knowledge, which in turn affects learners' abilities to use language in real-life communication. A lack of consensus in the field led us to choose the perspective that we believed would be the most coherent with a TBLT course in an ESP context, all the while making the necessary concessions to facilitate acceptance of our programme by the teachers and the students who have a preference for PPP.

We decided to follow the weak interface position presented by Ellis (2002) as a compromise between Krashen's (1981) non-interface position and a strong interface position. In the non-interface position, it was noted that learning explicit grammar rules enables learners to improve their explicit knowledge of English grammar and leads them to better perform on activities requiring explanation of language rules or demonstration of explicit knowledge of grammar. However, this type of declarative knowledge does not enable learners to better perform on activities requiring the use of language in real-life communicative contexts (Maraco & Masterman, 2006). In other terms, a learner can study grammar rules for years on end without ever being able to produce real-world language with a high-degree of accuracy, fluidity, or complexity. In the strong interface position, explicit knowledge becomes automatised through practice, just like any other skill, such as driving a car.

If this is the case, then why is it that after eight years of English study many learners, although good at reciting grammar rules, cannot seem to use them when communicating under the constraints of online processing of language during actual language use? If it is simply that they were not given ample opportunity to practise, then a strong case has been made for PPP, as long as the final P is given full attention: "the importance of the production phase, which is often shortened or omitted in practice (e.g. Choi & Andon, 2014; Sato, 2010), should be emphasised" (Anderson, 2016, p. 20).

In Ellis's (2002) weak interface position, explicit and implicit knowledge do interact in some way in long term memory but it is unknown to what extent. Students who are involved in meaning-focussed language programmes which incorporate form-focussed activities as moments of 'time-out' (Belan & Buck, 2012) when encountering a problem during task-preparation attain higher degrees of accuracy. This position seemed the most coherent to our programme as it is the basis for the concepts of noticing and attention central to TBLT. Furthermore, it concorded with research carried out by psychologists specialised in memory such as Baddeley, Eysenk, and Anderson (2009) who established that explicit knowledge cannot become procedural, but that explicit knowledge can facilitate the acquisition of procedural knowledge and that the two systems are built up at the same time during real-life language use.

3.4.   Bridging the gap:
finding the right point of convergence

In order to find applicable solutions, we decided to seek out where the points of view of the students, the teachers, and the researchers converged. The point of convergence seems to be the following: focussing only on content is insufficient to attain high-degrees of accuracy during production, and learning can be accelerated and optimised in adult learners if they periodically direct their attention to form (Long, 1997). It was previously thought that, in our programme, the periodic FonF was being carried out via post-task form focus on the VRC, as originally planned when designing the course, but studies on the use of the VRC indicated that this was not the case.

The compromise that was found after determining that we accept, for the current study, a weak interface position, was to introduce contextualised form-focussed pre-task activities via the use of the VRC. Giving the place of FonF to the pre-task phase definitely feels more PPP than TBLT. However, finding a common ground with student and teacher representations seemed essential.

> "As such, PPP may or may not be an accurate representation of how languages are learnt on an individual level, but it reflects well how many of us expect to be taught a new skill on a social level (Borg, 1998; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Widdowson, 1990)" (Anderson, 2016, p. 16).

However, the way in which to go about this needed to be carefully construed. According to Ellis and Shintani (2014),

> "explicit grammar instruction has a place in language teaching but not based on a grammatical syllabus. Instead, it should draw on a checklist of problematic structures and observational evidence of their partial acquisition" (p. 112).

This led us to study student productions in order to pinpoint recurrent problems.

4. Research questions

Following our action-research orientation, it was deemed necessary to adapt the programme to the participants' desire for form-focussed instruction by adding pre-task, computer-mediated form-focussed activities. In this study, we sought to assess the effectiveness of these activities on accuracy in students' written production. Hence, the following research questions were formulated:

- What effects of completing pre-task, form-focussed, computer-mediated activities can be observed on **frequency** of use of targeted forms?

- What effects of completing pre-task, form-focussed, computer-mediated activities can be observed on **accuracy** of use of targeted forms?

5.   Planned pre-task FonF activities: procedure

For the current study, three of the eight macro-tasks were selected for integration of pre-task FonF. In order to determine which structures would be targeted upstream, two procedures were used simultaneously. On the one hand, the forms students need to be able to use in order to complete the tasks successfully were identified, hence maintaining the link between form and meaning. On the other hand, we studied a small sample (n=20) of student productions on the same tasks from the previous year to identify recurring problems. Once the problematic forms were identified, preparatory micro-tasks were created via the software LearningApps and Quizlet, and integrated in the platform. Additionally, pre-existing micro-tasks on the VRC dealing with the selected forms were identified. The form-focussed micro-tasks led learners to focus on the pre-selected forms to identify (notice) them in short authentic documents (input enhancement), categorise them, and use them in controlled exercises and games that are corrected automatically. Links to contextualised explanations of the forms were incorporated within the activities for the learners who prefer to be able to 'read the rule'. The software programmes chosen were those that seemed the most ergonomic: the automatic feedback is easy to access, and links to further explanations and information were easy to integrate for the developers and easy to locate for the students. Furthermore, they offer opportunities to set up the micro-tasks in game form, which was deemed more motivating for the students. However, data has not been collected concerning the students' perception of the software, leading to a bias in the current study.

Altogether, 18 activities of pre-task form focus were included (Table 1). Macro-task instructions were rewritten to include links to the form-focussed pre-task activities in the VRC. A bias may have been introduced by the fact that the number of micro-tasks for each task varies. It was hoped that by the time students reached the third task, they would already be familiar with the

procedure and would have seen the benefit of pre-task FonF. It should be noted here that students had been working with the platform for a semester before participating in the current study.

Table 1.   Description of the planned FonF activities

Theme	Macro-task	Identified forms	Types of activities
International Markets	Carrying out market research for a chosen country to analyse the opportunities and threats associated with doing business there, then writing a report to present the results[8]	• connectives • adverbs • adjectives	• identification of forms while reading authentic marketing documents • categorising forms • classifying forms according to their function in a sentence.
Ethics	Writing a personal narrative[9]	• past tenses • prepositions of time and place	• identification of forms • classifying forms according to their function • cloze tests
Competition	Carrying out analysis of the French market and the potential competition for Costa Coffee, then summing up the findings and making recommendations in a formal written report[10]	• definite/indefinite articles • demonstratives • possessives • quantifiers • phrasal verbs • comparatives • superlatives • relative pronouns • modals • conditionals	• identification of forms • classifying forms according to their function • categorising forms • linking phrasal verbs to definitions • cloze tests

8. See supplementary material part 1 for the scenario and task instructions: https://research-publishing.box.com/s/uk3fc6fmax09odsk45z6h4s9wemzxbxz

9. See supplementary material part 2 for the scenario and task instructions: https://research-publishing.box.com/s/uk3fc6fmax09odsk45z6h4s9wemzxbxz

10. See supplementary material part 3 for the scenario and task instructions: https://research-publishing.box.com/s/uk3fc6fmax09odsk45z6h4s9wemzxbxz

6.   Procedure

6.1.   Data collection

The students' online activity was monitored over the course of a 12-week semester. The researchers could see who engaged in the pre-tasks and which activities were completed. Then, three written productions, corresponding to the three macro-tasks of the study, per student were collected and analysed to identify if the targeted forms were used, if the targeted forms used were consistent with L2 norms, and if the completion of the online pre-task activities had any effect. Additionally, the entire group of first year students (n=564) took a pre-intervention test to control for proficiency. The test showed that 337 students (60%) were at B1 level. As previous research showed that the blended TBLT programme was more effective for B1 learners than for A2 or B2 learners (Buck & McAllister, 2011), the researchers decided to focus only on this sub-group.

6.2.   Sampling: control group and experimental group

One of the biggest challenges in classroom-based research is the establishment of control groups and experimental groups in order to increase the interpretative value of the results. In our study, students were assigned to control and experimental groups by self-selection: all were offered pre-task activities, but only some chose to complete them. For each of the three tasks, some students chose not to complete all the preparatory activities, hence the differences that appear in the tables presented below. We acknowledge a bias in our research with the possibility that the students in the experimental group were more motivated and spent more time overall on tasks, but felt that it was not ethically acceptable to use random assignment to one condition or the other.

7.   Results

Table 2 shows that the number of students who completed the micro-tasks varied over the course of the semester. The students participated the most in the micro-

tasks related to the first task of the study. There was a severe drop in the numbers of those who completed the micro-tasks for the second task. A closer look at the data showed that for two of the teachers in the programme, none of the students completed the micro-tasks, which may indicate that for the second task, those teachers did not remind their students to complete the preparatory activities online. Concerning the micro-tasks for the third task, a clear drop in participation can be seen between the first activities proposed and the subsequent ones. This may indicate that students lost interest in the activities before completing them.

Table 2. Number of students who completed the online micro-tasks and the tasks

		Micro-tasks and task	Task only
T1 (192 productions)	Connectives	67	125
	Adjectives & adverbs	70	122
T2 (71 productions)	Simple past	18	53
	Prepositions of time & place	12	59
T3 (101 productions)	Determiners (definite & indefinite articles, quantifiers, possessives, demonstratives)	36	65
	Comparatives & superlatives	7	94
	Relative pronouns	8	93
	Modals	9	92

Based on the forms identified by the researchers for each task, the analysis of students' written productions consisted in determining the number of occurrences of each form and the number of these occurrences that conformed with the L2 norms. The following paragraphs focus on each task and on each group's performance in terms of number of occurrences and levels of conformity to L2 norms.

7.1. Task 1 – writing a report to present the results of market research

In Table 3, the data show that the group of students who completed the micro-tasks (A) in Task 1 produced slightly more occurrences of each targeted form

than those who did not (B), however, the percentages of conformity for each form are very similar in both groups.

Table 3. Analysis of students' productions, task 1

Group	Connectives		Adjectives		Adverbs	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
n =	67	125	70	122	70	122
average nb of occurrences	37.4 SD=16.6	36.1 SD=14.7	58.4 SD=24.8	55.1 SD=24.3	20.7 SD=9.9	18.1 SD=7.8
average % of conformity	97.6% SD=3.2	97.5% SD=3.6	91.1% SD=5.9	91% SD=8.2	96.4% SD=5.4	96.7% SD=5.1

7.2.   Task 2 – writing a personal narrative

This second task was designed so that students could use the simple past and prepositions of time and place. As shown in Table 4, the students who had completed the micro-tasks on the simple past produced slightly fewer occurrences of the targeted tense and their results in terms of conformity are very similar to those of the students who did not do the pre-task activities.

As for prepositions of time and place, the students who had completed the micro-tasks performed better and produced more occurrences than the students who did not. Their productions show a higher percentage of appropriate use for prepositions of time. However, it should be noted that the differences between groups are not statistically significant. A comparison of group means shows that the intergroup differences all fall within the standard deviation, which is sufficient to determine their lack of statistical significance.

Table 4. Analysis of students' productions, Task 2

Group	Simple Past		Prepositions of time		Prepositions of place	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
n =	18	53	12	59	12	59
average nb of occurrences	18 SD=6.8	22.4 SD=11.8	3.3 SD=1.8	2.5 SD=2	9 SD=3.9	7.6 SD=5.4
average % of conformity	89.3% SD=9	89.1% SD=16.4	90.1% SD=15.5	86.8% SD=26.3	84.5% SD=14.6	83.7% SD=20

7.3. Task 3 – summing up the findings of market research and making recommendations in a formal report

Task 3 was the most complex and the most demanding of the three tasks examined in this study. For this task, the researchers identified 11 forms to focus on (Table 5). Two of them – phrasal verbs and conditionals – were used by very few students in their productions (less than one occurrence on average) so they were not taken into account for this study as no significant data could be exploited. This may show that the forms the researchers deemed necessary for task completion could be avoided by the students, without impeding their capability to successfully complete the task.

Table 5. Analysis of students' productions, Task 3

	Definite article		Indefinite article		Quantifiers		Possessives		Demonstratives	
Group	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
n=	36	65	36	65	36	65	36	65	36	65
average nb of occurrences	41.9 SD = 13.3	39.1 SD = 20.6	19.6 SD = 11.3	14.8 SD = 7.8	2.3 SD = 2.1	2 SD = 2.1	3.2 SD = 1.9	4.9 SD = 4.3	3.7 SD = 2.3	3 SD = 1.7
average % of conformity	87.9% SD = 4.9	87.9 SD = 10.1	89.6% SD = 6.7	86.8% SD = 13	79.3% SD = 25.8	67% SD = 40.6	88.4% SD = 26.1	96.3% SD = 7.4	85.5% SD = 17.7	93.8% SD = 14.6

	Comparatives		Superlatives		Relative pronouns		Modals	
Group	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
n=	7	94	7	94	8	93	9	92
average nb of occurrences	2.3 SD=2.0	3.3 SD=2.5	2 SD=1.5	1.7 SD=1.6	8 SD=3.9	4.6 SD=3.5	18.7 SD=2.6	12.6 SD=5.9
average % of conformity	100% SD=0	76.8 SD=30.5	80% SD=16.3	88.8% SD=18.6	97.5% SD=6.6	88.2% SD=25.7	98.1% SD=2.8	97.6% SD=6.6

In the determiners category (Table 5), which comprises five different forms, articles were naturally the most frequently used. For possessives and demonstratives, the number of occurrences of each form was quite low (less

than five occurrences per production on average), with more possessives used by the students who chose not to do the preparatory tasks and higher conformity in the use of both forms. The second most frequent form in this third task was modals. The difference between the two groups is quite clear as far as quantity is concerned, but the percentages of conformity of both groups are very close, with a difference of only 0.51%. However, as for the previous results, a comparison between means and standard deviations shows that these differences cannot be considered statistically significant.

8.   Discussion

The study shows that it is indeed possible to create form-focussed pre-tasks, but it is difficult to anticipate their effects on student engagement and on language acquisition. Looking at the research questions (what effects on frequency and accuracy of these forms are observed?), we note that out of the 15 targeted forms presented in the results, 12 were found more frequently in the productions of students having done the pre-tasks. Caution must be used, however, when interpreting the results, as the difference in frequency of use of the targeted forms in the two groups is often very slight and none of the differences observed between groups is statistically significant. Frequency of use of a form is interesting from an acquisitional standpoint, as it highlights the necessary risk-taking in using new forms involved in the process of language development. However, this does not always lead to higher degrees of accuracy of these forms during production, indicating perhaps that their acquisition is not yet fully attained. The present study did not show that there was any significant gain in accuracy for the group of students who completed the pre-tasks. To get more precise and significant data about the efficiency of FonF pre-task activities for the development of accuracy, further studies could focus on fewer variables (one or two grammar points) over a longer period of time (for example an entire academic year).

The results of this study could be used to destabilise teacher representations of language learning and teaching and to reinforce the argument for individualised *post-task* FonF as originally planned in the programme: teachers were asked

to give corrective feedback in the form of advice and suggestions to complete form-focussed micro-tasks in the VRC, but did not do it as this procedure did not correspond to their representations of language teaching and learning.

This leads us to reiterate the necessity of fostering opportunities for individualisation, especially in large-group settings, which is exactly what the hybrid language classroom enables. Offering pre-task form-focussed activities may not be useless. However, gains in accuracy were not shown systematically in the productions of the experimental group, and none of the gains were statistically significant. Pre-task form focus may be most beneficial if the students are not forced to do the activities but *choose* to do them because they realise that the task demands command of specific forms in order to express desired meanings. This is coherent with research in SLA and in TBLT showing that language learning is enhanced when the learner becomes aware of the gaps that exist between what they *would like* to communicate and what they *are able* to communicate. For each learner these gaps will be different, hence the benefit in offering up a wide variety of FonF activities that they can choose from depending on their individual needs at a given-time (pre- or post-task).

Additionally, we are able to partially analyse what users of platforms actually do with the resources compared to the way the developers imagined the resources would be used. Many previous studies have shown discrepancies between developers' envisioned use of the resources and actual use by the learners (see Andrianirina & Foucher, 2007; Docq & Daele, 2003; Fischer, 2012). We noted for example, that the students' engagement in the tasks decreased throughout the semester and remained rather low. This is a common problem in first year language courses in French universities, but there may be other reasons that are not currently measured, such as the types of pre-task activities proposed (game, gap-fill, etc.), the software used, the students' representations of whether or not they need to focus on said form, the students' representations of their ability to tackle said forms, and the involvement of each teacher.

Other factors may also need to be taken into account, like the students' study level and the characteristics of their study programme, Foreign Languages and

International Trade. These language programmes aim at training students in at least two foreign languages applied to various professional domains within the business and trade sphere (e.g. economics, marketing, management). Although it can be argued that Business English in Foreign Languages and International Trade is "one of the branches of ESP" (Narcy-Combes, 2008, p. 133), it is sometimes not considered a language for specific purposes course like those designed for 'specialists of other disciplines' (Van der Yeught, 2014), which are often more ESP-oriented given the students' profiles (e.g. students at Economics faculties) and the more specific professional domains they relate to.

This study enabled us to further validate previous studies showing that a majority of students upon entry to university do not have the institutionally targeted B2 level (Buck & McAllister, 2011; Frost & O'Donnell, 2015). In their first year, Foreign Languages and International Trade students may have similar linguistic and pragmatic needs as students specialised in other disciplines, but these needs could be different to some extent as students may lack subject knowledge (business-related issues) and lexis, both in L1 and L2. This probably results in a lack of motivation to explore a specialised domain and could explain their low level of engagement in the Business English programme. A similar study involving ESP learners at the same level or more advanced Foreign Languages and International Trade students (Master's students for example) could help to determine whether a higher level of specialisation has an impact on student engagement in pre-task form-focussed activities and in contextualised tasks in general.

Further research will focus on who actually uses the resources the most (A2, B1, B2, or C1 learners?), and when they use them (pre-task or post-task). Is it those who need them the most in order to succeed in their first year Business English courses (A2/B1 learners)? Or is it those who need them the least (B2/C1 learners)? Previous research has indicated that those who have higher levels are those who tend to use them the most as they are also those who tend to be the most autonomous in their learning (McAllister, 2013; Prince, 2009).

Further pedagogical development will focus on enriching the VRC so as to offer students an extensive database of contextualised activities on a wide variety of

problematic structures, adapted to all levels of the CEFR. Beyond developing the resources, making the students more aware of their failings in performing the different tasks may help them understand the importance of having more autonomous attitudes toward language learning, and may encourage them to use the resources available to them.

9.   Conclusion

This study shows that there were no statistically significant differences in accuracy of use of targeted forms between the students who had completed the form-focussed pre-tasks and those who had not. This reinforces recommendations of post-task FonF post-task based on each learner's individual needs. Greater focus should then be given to destabilising student and teacher representations of language learning and guiding students towards more autonomous behaviours related to language learning in order to foster their engagement in individualised post-task FonF.

Further research could also help determine the forms students at each level of the CEFR specifically need to focus on, thus helping the researchers and practitioners develop more relevant micro-tasks in the VRC, so as to cater for students' individual needs more efficiently, both in pre-task and post-task phases.

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