In defence of a modular curriculum for tasks

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In this article, I start by distinguishing two approaches to the design of a language curriculum: the structural approach and the task-based approach. I then present my views relating to three key question: Is one approach superior to the other? When implemented, do these approaches result in different classroom processes? Are there advantages in combining the two approaches? I argue that the evidence points to the superiority of a task-based approach, that prior explicit instruction can have a deleterious effect on the performance of tasks and that a curriculum that combines the two approaches is preferable. I conclude by pointing out the flexibility of a modular curriculum that makes it well suited to a variety of instructional contexts.

Introduction

There are two fundamentally different approaches for designing of a language curriculum depending on what the starting point is. One approach takes 'language' as the starting point and builds the curriculum around units of language—phonological, lexical, and grammatical—with the aim of systematically teaching each unit. I will refer to this approach as the 'structural' approach. The other approach takes 'activity' as the starting point and builds the curriculum around tasks where the primary focus is on meaning and learners use their own linguistic resources to perform them. I will refer to this approach as the 'task-based approach'. Anderson's (2020) TATE framework is language centred and so constitutes a structural approach. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is activity centred.[1]

Curricula based on these two approaches, however, can involve the same instructional components albeit in a different sequence. As shown in Figure 1, the TATE framework involves four sequential components: text, analysis, task, and exploration (see Figure 2 in Anderson 2020). The task-based framework consists of three components: pre-task, main task, and post-task. However, the components of the TATE curriculum can also fit into the task-based framework. 'Text' constitutes a possible pre-task activity, 'analysis' can occur in the post-task phase, while in both models there is opportunity for 'focus on form'[2] as the task is being performed. The key difference lies in the positioning of the 'analysis' component. In TATE, it precedes the task with the expectancy that the target feature(s) introduced through analysis will be used in the task. In

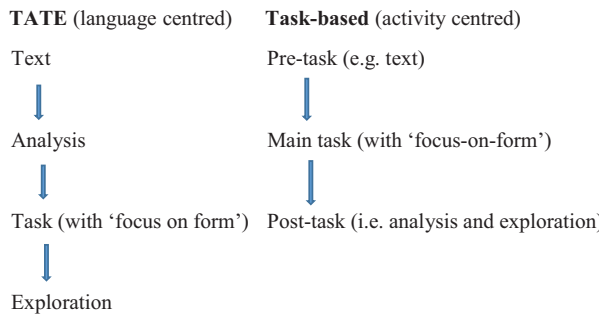

FIGURE 1
The TATE and task-based curriculum frameworks compared

the task-based model, analysis occurs only in the post-task phase as one kind of 'exploration' and learners choose their own linguistic resources for performing the main task. This difference potentially affects how learners orientate to learning the language. In a structural approach such as TATE, they are invited to treat language as a set of linguistic objects to practise and learn. In a task-based approach, they are expected to treat language as a tool for communicating. In both approaches, however, there is attention to form, differing only in whether this is pre-planned and emergent, as in TATE, or just emergent, as in the task-based approach.

Recognizing this fundamental difference in the design of a language curriculum allows us to ask a number of questions:

1 Is one approach superior to the other?
2 When implemented, do these approaches result in different classroom processes?
3 Are there advantages in combining the two approaches?

Anderson and I differ in the answers we give to each of these questions. In the following sections, I will present what I understand to be Anderson's view and then respond with my own. First, though, I will provide a brief outline of the modular framework for using tasks in language teaching, which I presented in Ellis (2019).

The modular curriculum for using tasks

The model that I have proposed assumes the importance of developing fluency first. It consists of a primary task-based module implemented with focus-on-form (Long 1991) and, once a basic fluency has been achieved, a secondary structural module to provide for explicit accuracy-oriented work to counteract learned selective attention, which is one of the main sources of persistent error. In making this proposal, I emphasized the incompatibility of the two approaches the modules are based on, and thus rejected the idea of an integrated curriculum, arguing instead for two distinct modules. I also considered the spacing of the two modules over an entire curriculum, discussing three possibilities. I concluded by arguing for the model shown in Figure 2. Initially, the curriculum is entirely task-based with the structural module commencing at the post-beginner stage and gradually taking up more space in the curriculum. I also suggested that the structural module should consist of a 'checklist' rather than a 'syllabus', with teachers left to select which items in the checklist needed attention by observing their students' performance in the task-based

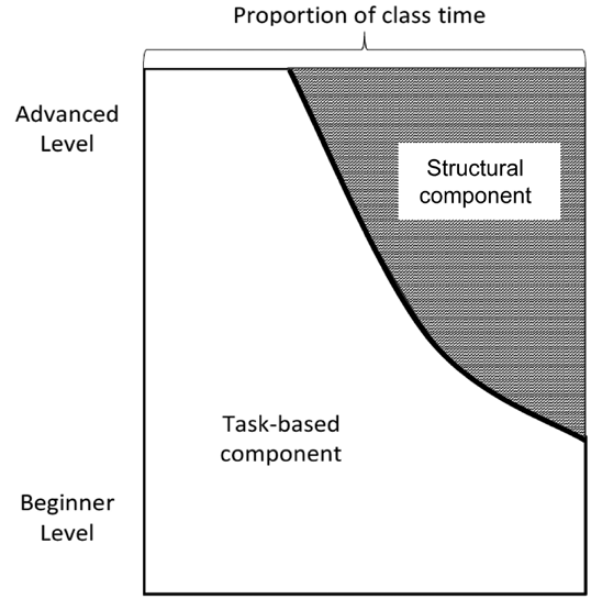

FIGURE 2
A modular curriculum model

module. My rationale for this model will emerge in the sections that follow.

Is one approach superior to the other?

Anderson is clearly of the view that TATE is superior to TBLT. He presents three arguments. The first is that when learners perform a task following prior instruction in a target feature, there will be opportunities for the implicit learning of non-targeted features as well as explicit learning of the targeted feature. He gives the example of a narrative task designed to practise past tense, which will also involve learners in using a range of other grammatical features. The focus-on-form that occurs during the performance of the task can be directed at both the targeted and non-targeted features. Second, he notes that a structural approach is well suited to the learning of vocabulary. Third, he suggests that the TATE framework is ideal for training pre-service teachers as this is the approach found in available published resources.

My own view draws heavily on second language acquisition theory. As Long (2015) commented: 'the basic tenets of TBLT are motivated by, and broadly consistent with, the past 40 years of SLA research findings' (p. 8). These basic tenets include:

- The learning of implicit knowledge, the kind of knowledge needed for fluent communication, involves different processes from the processes involved in learning explicit knowledge.
- The acquisition of any particular grammatical feature as implicit knowledge is a slow and gradual process that resists direct intervention; it is learners not teachers (or curriculum designers) who have control over what is acquired and when it is acquired.
- Acquisition requires conscious attention to linguistic forms but that this is most effective when it occurs in a context where learners are struggling to communicate.

Anderson seems to acknowledge the need to take account of the SLA findings and the importance of implicit knowledge. His argument is that TATE ensures the best of both worlds—explicit instruction catering to the development of explicit knowledge and tasks that foster the acquisition of implicit knowledge. I certainly agree that tasks—even following explicit instruction—can provide learners with opportunities for practising and potentially acquiring features others than those explicitly targeted. However, this can only be used as an argument for the superiority of TATE if it can be argued that (1) a structure-based approach does result in the acquisition of implicit knowledge and (2) it is more effective in this respect than TBLT. We are a long way from definitive answers to these points, but the evidence points in favour of TBLT.

Both Long and I recognize that explicit instruction can result in measurable learning. However, many studies have measured acquisition using tests that bias towards explicit knowledge. There are still very few studies that have convincingly shown that explicit instruction benefits the acquisition of implicit knowledge and those that have done so generally involve post-beginners and very intensive and extensive instruction directed at the target feature (e.g. Harley 1989). There is very little evidence that explicit instruction results in acquisition of new grammatical features.

Ideally, to decide whether one approach is superior to the other, we need studies that compare the relative effects of TBLT and structure-based instruction. Anderson cites Li, Ellis and Zhu (2016), who reported such a study. Anderson claims that the results pointed to the superiority of the explicit instruction over the task-based, but this was only true for those learners who already had some knowledge of the target structure at the beginning of the study. Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani and Lambert (2019) (see Chapter 10) offer a review of the comparative method studies carried out to date. They acknowledge that it is difficult to design such studies, given that neither TBLT nor PPP are monolithic and the need to control the various factors than impact learning inside the classroom. Nevertheless, they felt able to conclude that 'the particular version of TBLT that they investigated led to superior outcomes than the particular version of PPP with which it was compared' (p. 299). On balance, then, the case for TBLT is stronger than for structure-based instruction. Explicit instruction may benefit learners but only if they are developmentally ready, which neither the course designer not the teacher can easily determine. TBLT avoids this problem and it can result in superior learning even when this is measured in terms of grammar.

Anderson's second point is that the TATE framework caters to the teaching of vocabulary. He points out correctly that I have largely neglected this in my proposal for a modular syllabus. However, I did acknowledge that the early stages of L2 acquisition are lexical rather than grammatical. TBLT can easily cater to vocabulary acquisition as the performance of any task will provide opportunities for it. I also noted that because vocabulary involves item learning (in contrast to grammar, which involves system learning), it is more amenable to

intervention and intentional language learning. There is, therefore, a case for explicitly teaching vocabulary from the beginning. However, I did not elaborate on this and did not include a lexical component in my modular syllabus. Later, in the concluding section, I will offer a suggestion for incorporating it that does not involve the TATE framework.

Anderson's final argument is that the TATE framework is better suited than TBLT for initial teacher trainees because it reflects the kind of structural approach that is common in course books and in many instructional contexts. I find this a rather vacuous argument in favour of the status quo although I am sure that publishers of the course books that Anderson examines in Figure 1 of his article will support it. As classroom language learners themselves, many pre-service teachers are likely to have experienced teacher-centred, structure-based instruction, involving heavy doses of explicit grammar. Teachers tend to teach in the way they were taught so there is a danger that training them to use TATE will lead them to treat the 'analysis' component as central and the 'task' component as peripheral. When this happens, the predominant interaction in the classroom is likely to be of the ubiquitous initiate-respond-follow up (IRF) type, which arguably limits opportunities for acquisition. Introducing teachers to TBLT can help to foster the interactional conditions (for example, the use of referential rather than display question) known to support acquisition.

In my modular curriculum, however, I do not argue that one approach is superior to the other. I present the case for combining both although not in an integrated way as they are fundamentally different and have different purposes.

How different are the approaches?

It is one thing to distinguish approaches externally in terms of descriptions of curriculum models. It does not follow, however, that these approaches are different when implemented in classrooms. To establish whether the structure-based and activity-based approaches are really different, we need to look at the processes that arise in actual teaching.

Anderson argues that tasks that have been preceded by 'analysis' will retain the 'primarily meaningful communication and holistic language use that allows for implicit learning to occur alongside the explicit practice of specific structures' (p. x). In other words, he proposes that the way in which a task is performed is not affected by the 'analysis' stage of a lesson. This argument is the basis for his claim that the structural component of my modular curriculum warrants a larger share of the total curriculum space and that 'the TBLT component may be not necessary at all' (p. x). However, Anderson offers no evidence to support his claim that prior explicit instruction has no impact on the quality of task performance.

Proponents of TBLT, however, have adopted a different position. In Ellis (2003) I warned against prior explicit instruction on the grounds that it may result in learners 'orienting to the activity more as an exercise that requires them to practice a "structure" than as a task that leads to "behavior"' (p. 153). Willis and Willis (2007) expressed a similar concern, suggesting that presenting and practising specific forms immediately

before a task will lead learners to focus on using the target forms rather than expressing their message. However, neither Ellis nor Willis and Willis offered any evidence to support their views.

Ellis, Li and Zhu (2019) set out to investigate these competing positions. They examined the process features of a task performance carried out both with and without explicit instruction. The learners were two groups of Chinese middle school students with similar levels of L2 proficiency. The focus of the task was past passive—a structure that many of the learners did not know. One group received explicit instruction in the use of past passive before performing two dictogloss tasks that involved narratives seeded with the target structure. The other group performed the same tasks without any explicit instruction. We addressed two main questions. The first asked whether the explicit instruction had any effect on the learners' production of the target structure. The second asked whether it had any effect on the complexity, accuracy and fluency of the learners' production (i.e. the overall quality of the task performance).

The results showed that the explicit instruction did result in greater attempted use of past passive although, interestingly, there was no difference in the two groups' correct use of the structure, suggesting that the explicit instruction had no effect on acquisition. There were also significant differences in the complexity, accuracy and fluency of the two groups' production, with the task-only group demonstrating superior overall performance—that is, their production was more complex, more accurate and more fluent than the group that had received explicit instruction. These results suggest that the explicit instruction group did indeed treat the task more as an exercise for practising the target structure and that this had a detrimental effect on the overall quality of their language use. Learners with limited knowledge of the target structure are likely to have difficulty attending to production of the target structure and to other aspects of their language use.

This is, of course, only one study so care must be taken not to generalize. It does nevertheless throw some doubt on Anderson's claim that prior instruction in a target feature has no effect on the 'holistic language use that allows for implicit learning to occur alongside the explicit practice of target structures' (p. x). It lends some support to the claim of Ellis and Willis and Willis that explicit instruction can have a deleterious effect on overall task performance. This is clearly an important issue and one that warrants more research. At this point, however, contrary to Anderson's position, we should perhaps start with the assumption that task-supported language teaching involving explicit instruction will result in a very different kind of task performance from task-based language teaching.

The advantages of combining approaches

As Anderson notes, the TATE framework involves 'a single structural component' (p. x). In other words, he sees no advantage in combining a structural and a task-based approach as in my modular approach. The basis for his position is that a structural approach that integrates the four language skills through a theme is sufficient to ensure that learners acquire both explicit and implicit knowledge. I have already challenged this claim by suggesting that prior explicit instruction (in the form of

'analysis') may in fact impact negatively on how a task is performed, making it questionable as to whether tasks in a task-supported approach are able to create the necessary conditions for language development and that, therefore, a task-based approach is needed.

The case for including tasks in a language curriculum was first made in the 1980s as commentators acknowledged 'that there is more to the business of communicating than the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences' (Johnson 1982: 12). One solution they proposed was to introduce 'fluency' activities through tasks where the focus was on achieving a communicative outcome. The 1980s saw a number of publications with suggestions for teachers about the kinds of tasks they could use for fluency work (e.g. Ladousse's (1983) *Speaking Personally*) along with student books with task-like activities. The assumption was that these tasks should occur *alongside* more traditional, structure-focused activities but not be separate from them. In other words, although not always explicitly stated, there was an assumption of modularity. Johnson, however, proposed another solution. He advocated what he called the 'deep-end strategy' (p. 193), where students first performed a communicative task using whatever resources they had available, the teacher then presented those linguistic items the students' performance of the task showed they had not yet mastered, and finally, if necessary, these items were drilled. In effect, the deep-end strategy constituted an embryonic task-based approach, which Johnson advocated as a replacement for a structure-based one.[3]

My modular curriculum draws on both these ideas but develops them into a proposal for a full curriculum. The task-based component draws on the deep-end strategy but includes an element missing in Johnson's proposal—focus on form (i.e. the incidental attention to form that can occur during the performance of a task). Also, it does not completely replace the structure-based component but rather complements it. I acknowledge that accuracy is important for language learners and that a purely task-based approach will not prevent continuing problems with phonology, lexis and, in particular, grammar occurring. Thus, I propose a separate module to help address these residual problems. This led me to ask three questions. (1) How to space the two components in the full curriculum? (2) What form should the structure-based component take? (3) Would there be an advantage in integrating the task-based and structure-based component?

Regarding, the first question, I proposed that the initial focus should be on 'fluency' rather than 'accuracy' and, therefore, the task-based module should take precedence. My reasons for this were both theoretical and practical. As I have already pointed out, SLA research indicates that the early stages of acquisition are lexical rather than grammatical and lexis can be acquired naturally through performing tasks. I acknowledged, however, that lexis is 'teachable' and that there is a case for some explicit teaching of vocabulary. One way of achieving this might be through out-of-class activities, thus reserving precious and limited classroom time for the performance of tasks. My practical reason for starting with the task-based component was what I perceived as the danger of

emphasising accuracy at the start of a language programme. Much of my recent experience has been with Asian instructional contexts, where traditionally the focus—even with very young learners—is on accuracy, resulting in learners treating language as a set of objects to be mastered and the failure to develop any procedural ability in using the language. Starting with the task-based component would encourage learners to treat the language as a tool for communicating and would prioritize fluency over accuracy. Thus, I proposed delaying the structure-based component until learners had achieved some fluency. Applying the curriculum model shown in Figure 2 to the state school systems currently found in many Asian (and also European) state education systems, I envisage the task-based module figuring more or less exclusively at the elementary school level and the structure-based module starting at the secondary school level. The task-based module, however, would continue to occupy a substantial space in the curriculum even with more advanced learners.

Regarding the second question, it seemed clear that there was little point in the structural module specifying the order for teaching the target items as the purpose was not the coverage of the entire linguistic system (which is, in fact, an impossibility) but rather the remediation of those features that learners could still not use accurately. I thus concluded that a checklist rather than a syllabus was preferable. A checklist would draw teachers' attention to problematic linguistic features that research has shown learners often fail to use accurately even after they have had ample input and output opportunities, but it would leave it to the teachers to decide which particular features to teach after observing their students' communicative performances.

Regarding the third question, I concluded that there would be no advantage in trying to integrate the task-based and structure-based components and, in fact, there would be considerable disadvantages in trying to do so. We can of course teach explicit knowledge, and this has some value (hence the inclusion of a structure-based module in the modular curriculum). However, trying to integrate the facilitation of implicit knowledge with the teaching of explicit knowledge runs the danger of learners prioritizing accuracy over fluency, to the detriment of how they tackle tasks. The drive for integration in language teaching has always struck me as satisfying the perceived needs of teachers and teacher trainers but as ignoring how learners actually learn.

Conclusion

There are two further issues arising from Anderson's article I would like to address. The first concerns his claim that introducing task-based language teaching into state school education systems has had only limited success. It is true that some research has shown this (see Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani and Lambert (2019), Chapter 11) but, as Long (2016) pointed out, many of the problems—such as the low level of English proficiency of teachers—apply equally to a structure-based approach. I do not know of any evidence to support the claim that the TATE model (or any other structure-based model) is easier to implement than the task-based approach. Research investigating the introduction of TBLT points to the need for carefully designed teacher training and I have addressed

what this might look like in Ellis (2020). Also, there is evidence of the very successful implementation of task-based language in the Flanders project described in Van den Branden (2006), which Anderson does not seem aware of.

The second issue is whether any curriculum model is applicable to all teaching contexts. Anderson concludes his article by noting that the TATE model would not be appropriate for very young learners and for ESP courses at higher proficiency levels. He sees it as relevant for secondary and tertiary sectors and for general English for adult learners. I would argue, however, that the modular curriculum is sufficiently flexible for all these contexts. It can be used with young learners—and is in fact ideal in this context. It can also be used with ESP learners if the selection of tasks is based on a needs analysis of the target tasks learners are required to perform, and I have already argued that the modular curriculum is ideally suited to the full range of learners in state education systems. It is important to recognize that TBLT is not monolithic, however, and so will need to be adapted, especially regarding task selection to suit particular groups of learners. As shown in Figure 2, the modular curriculum also provides for flexibility in the timing of and emphasis placed on the structure-based component. The spacing of the two components can be adjusted to suit different instructional contexts.

Final version received February 2020

Notes

1 I have chosen to label the two curriculum approaches as 'language-centred' and 'activity-centred'. The literature is, however, replete with terms referring to what is essentially the same distinction. For example, the TATE framework can be described as 'task-supported' (as opposed to task-based) as Anderson (2020) points out. Long (1991) refers to the structural approach as 'focus on forms' and the task-based as 'focus on form'.

2 According to Long (1991) 'focus on form' 'overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication' (pp. 45–46).

3 There is, however, a difference between the deep-end strategy and task-based teaching as this is now stands. Johnson proposed selecting tasks based on an inventory of semantic categories (e.g. inviting). In current versions of task-based teaching, task-selection is based on either a needs analysis of the target tasks relevant to a particular group of learners—as in Long (2015)—or on topics (e.g. family) of general interest to the learners. A further difference is that Johnson excluded any 'focus on form' when learners performed a task.

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