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TASK-BASED TEACHING OF GERMAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to find out the students' attitudes on task-based teaching of German as a foreign language, that is, on tasks that might positively influence the acquisition of new lexical items, enhance pronunciation, and improve grammatical accuracy. Also, the research aimed at addressing the importance of rethinking the existing teaching methods, especially in the context of higher education teaching. Twenty-three graduate students of German studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Split, Croatia, participated in this research. During the course *Development of Speech Fluency*, the students were introduced to the concept of task-based teaching and performed various tasks – role plays, argumentation and writing tasks, as well as story retelling and problem-solving tasks. Upon completion of the course, the students completed a questionnaire, stating their level of agreement with each statement. A significantly greater degree of agreement was recorded for the statement that more complex grammatical structures, such as the word order in German dependent clauses, should be taught through writing, rather than translation tasks, due to the possibility to plan and self-monitor. The obtained preference of the students in this study for the implementation of writing tasks has been documented by numerous studies that have confirmed the positive effects of writing on the development of grammatical accuracy in the context of teaching English as L2. The conclusions of this study, despite the relatively small sample of respondents, might be used to design more contemporary tasks with the ultimate goal of developing the learner's interlanguage.

Key words: task-based language teaching, reading fluency, creative drama, grammar acquisition

1. Task-based language teaching: Literature review

In the seventies and eighties of the 20th century, the existing educational practice of foreign language teaching began to change, which was primarily based on explicit grammar teaching. Hence, the primary focus shifted towards communicative competence as the fundamental goal of teaching, thus, emphasizing the inseparability of language (linguistic) and communicative competence. The communicative approach to foreign language teaching was a reaction to the very exclusive audiolingual method of the 60s. Linguists were critical of traditional methods, primarily because they ignored the learners' developmental stages (Ellis et al., 2020). Mastering a foreign language is a developmental phenomenon that involves constant restructuring. The basic guidelines of the communicative approach included the following: i) the grammatical form was not explicitly taught, ii) the focus was on the meaning, not the linguistic form, iii) grammar was only a means to achieve a given communicative goal, iv) learners were not only recipients of teaching, but actively contributed to the development of new teaching methods.

Task-based teaching is a kind of extension of the communicative approach (Nunan, 2004). According to Littlewood (1999), the essential difference between a communicative approach and task-based language teaching is minimal, except that in the latter, the role of the learner, as an important factor in the teaching process, is more pronounced. In addition to active involvement in purposeful communicative tasks, task-based teaching, as opposed to a communicative approach, imposes greater cognitive demands.

However, despite numerous criticisms of the traditional approach, Ellis et al. (2020) highlighted some positive effects of the traditional teaching method, such as the repetition of given language structures (until they were completely automated). Namely, through repetition, learners incidentally adopt formulaic language in controlled activities aimed at mastering a certain grammatical form. Given the individual "moment of readiness", individual learners may not adopt the target grammatical structures for which they are not cognitively prepared, but will instead adopt formulaic expressions with clear communicative functions. In other words, formulaic language will be acquired incidentally, because the learner will encounter these sequences in various activities, that are primarily aimed at practicing grammatical forms.

A task-based teaching approach is clearly oriented towards spontaneous language acquisition, where language is a tool for making meaning, and tasks are designed to generate opportunities for language acquisition of new lexical and/

or grammatical structures (Ellis and Shintani, 2014; Ellis et al., 2020). Samuda and Bygate (2008) stated three important factors when defining a task – i) focus on the teaching process (how to internalize different language forms?), ii) efficiency (how much time is needed to acquire language forms?; the probability of achieving the given outcome with a relatively small number of errors; the learner's awareness when acquiring the target form) and iii) the nature of the task (goals, structure, existence of corrective feedback and its quality). The basic vagueness of this approach refers to the absence of clearly defined criteria for task sequencing (from simple to more complex) and to different understandings of how grammatical content should be presented. Therefore, the synergistic effect of the traditional way of teaching (explicit teaching) and the task-based approach would result in acquisition and learning (conscious attention to grammatical form).

Also, research has shown the positive effect of using the mother tongue in mastering a foreign language, and the importance of translation (Ellis and Shintani, 2014; Ellis et al., 2020). Corrective feedback, alerting the learner to a grammatical, spelling, lexical or stylistic error that needs to be corrected, is an essential feature of task-based teaching. Self-corrections, as part of corrective feedback, are indirect evidence of deep language processing and self-monitoring. Monitoring in spoken and/or written performance is included at almost every level of language production, and the quality of the performance itself depends on its effectiveness. The process itself can be explained by Levelt's (1989) model for speech production. Shen and Chong (2023) complied a qualitative research synthesis using a perception-based framework, emphasizing the importance of corrective feedback in spoken and written performance, but also warned that excessive correction could have a negative impact on motivation.

According to Ellis et al. (2020), tasks can be based on linguistic input as an external attentional mechanism. This type of task is particularly appropriate at the beginning levels of language learning, where the emphasis is on the linguistic activity of listening rather than speaking. For example, the teacher says *Please show me the fridge*, and expects the learner to understand the meaning and react non-verbally. However, by analyzing input and output based tasks, proposed by different authors, Ellis et al. (2020) found that output-based activities constitute the absolute majority of tasks, thus, highlighting the superiority of speaking or interactive tasks. As opposed to speaking tasks, input-based tasks (understanding of the language input) are significantly less common. The authors also concluded that a smaller number of tasks is directed towards the development of reading fluency, aiming at the correct pronunciation.

The implementation of extensive reading is extremely useful for the development of the learner's interlanguage. Paired reading, for instance, is a designed process that helps students develop reading fluency and learn new vocabulary in a foreign language (Sandrieser, 2018).   According to Schneider (2019), engaging in paired reading more frequently enhances motivation and contributes to the development of reading habits. Also, many studies have confirmed that the reading aloud technique enhances reading fluency. It aims to improve decoding accuracy, word automatization, reading speed, and expressive reading. Therefore, modern teaching should encourage the parallel development of all four language skills, for example, practicing a particular grammatical structure should encourage the development of communicative competence. However, regardless of the current guidelines for creating the syllabus, in recent years, there has been a tendency to prioritize the communicative aspect of language, while neglecting the development of other language competencies (Ellis et al., 2020). Vocabulary, being a complex language system, has limitations when taught formally. Namely, explicit teaching cannot cover all collocations or grammatical structures of a language. Thus, reading is an excellent tool to not only enhance reading fluency, but also acquire new vocabulary. In addition to the development of reading skills, texts are an important instrument in the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Other activities for the development of speaking skills, as well as pronunciation, within the task-based teaching approach, include role plays and creative drama. Role-play is a teaching technique in which students are given specific roles and they must speak and behave based on the roles they receive (Suryani, 2015). This modern teaching technique has resulted, according to the findings of a large number of studies, in the following benefits - it has a positive effect on motivation, increases learners' self-confidence and reduces the fear of speaking, and has positive effect on correct pronunciation (Arham et al., 2016). Korkut and Çelik (2018) in their study emphasized that creative drama has been shown to be a contributor to pronunciation improvement. Namely, it is through drama techniques that learners become more expressive and more willing to experiment with sounds or intonation patterns. In their research, dramatic situations were used to provide students with a meaningful context, fostering a communicative purpose and prioritizing accuracy. The effect of the creative drama sessions was measured via a read-aloud task which was given to the participants as a pre- and post-test. All participating students did better in the post-test. The results showed that the students' pronunciation improved more at the suprasegmental level.

However, it is important to point out that unintentional acquisition is possible only if the learner understands the language input to which he/she is exposed. This problematizes the overemphasized focus on the use of authentic teaching materials. In other words, authentic language input, without simplification, is effective primarily for students at higher levels of language proficiency (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). Also, contemporary research emphasizes the importance of adopting formulaic language that is recalled more quickly and with less cognitive engagement compared to creatively *ad hoc* formed sentences. In addition, opportunities for practice and repetition will speed up the encoding of words and will result in an automated formulation process (Kovač, 2020). The positive effects on spoken/written performance due to repetition are the result of strong connections between the conceptual plan and the lexical-grammatical forms that are stimulated by the previous activation (Lambert et al., 2017). Despite the numerous studies and significant interest of researchers in the possibilities provided by the task-based teaching approach, to date there are no detailed and empirically confirmed guidelines for the design of pedagogical tasks of different complexity, with the aim of developing lexical and syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy and fluent oral/written performance.

In contrast to a great number of studies that have investigated the impact of tasks on speaking performance, studies on written production, as a very complex and demanding cognitive activity, have been relatively neglected (e.g. Kormos, 2012). Ortega (2012) thus emphasized the insufficient presence of writing tasks in foreign language teaching programs. She also highlighted the inferior role of writing in task-based teaching. Nevertheless, in the last two decades there has been a noticable increase in research interest regarding the impact of writing on the development of the learner's interlanguage. The exceptional potential of written expression in fostering the overall development of linguistic competences has been highlighted in various studies (e.g. Rahimi and Zhang, 2018; Zhan et al., 2021, and others). Writing *per s*e requires a higher level of syntactic complexity, a richer vocabulary, and the ability of logical coherence when expressing intended messages in a foreign language.

The aim of this research is to find out the students' attitudes on task-based teaching of German as foreign language, that is, on tasks that might positively influence the acquisition of new lexical items, enhance pronunciation, and improve grammatical accuracy. Thus, the goal of the present study is to address the importance of rethinking existing teaching methods, especially in the context of German as a foreign language. The considered research is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to address the above-mentioned issue dealing with German as L2.

2. Methodological procedures

Twenty-three graduate students of German studies, who encountered the concept of task-based teaching within the course *Development of speech fluency* in the academic year 2022/23 and 2023/24, took part in this research. The students performed speaking tasks for 12 consecutive weeks, which were organized according to the principles of task-based teaching. Students performed various tasks - role plays, argumentation and writing tasks, as well as story retelling and problem-solving tasks.

At the end of the semester, students filled out a questionnaire with the aim of obtaining retrospective comments on the teaching methods and task types that might positively influence the learners' interlanguage. The questionnaire consisted of 11 statements.

The participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement by selecting responses on a 5-degree Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). Given the previous quantification, ratings above 3.5 can be considered as an agreement, while ratings lower than 2.5 can be considered as a disagreement with a particular claim. The items can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Statements to be judged along a five-point Likert scale.

Statement No.	Statement
1	The traditional way of presenting grammatical contents is very often boring and uncreative.
2	Students do not have enough opportunities to practice speaking.
3	The reason for an inadequate knowledge of grammar is insufficient teacher competence in language teaching.
4	Simple grammatical structures should be taught in form of formulaic language without metalinguistic explanation (especially at beginning levels of language learning through authentic communicative situations).
5	The German simple past and present perfect forms should be taught through simple dialogues (everyday communicative situations) without metalinguistic explanation at the beginning levels of language learning.
6	Selected vocabulary and its repetition through various tasks will contribute to the acquisition of target language structures.

7	Vocabulary could be taught more efficiently through reading tasks, where the target vocabulary would be repeated.
8	Vocabulary could be taught more efficiently through writing tasks, where the target vocabulary would be repeated.
9	Teaching grammar rules: Dependent clauses in German should be practiced through writing tasks (e.g. writing a letter to a friend, explaining the reasons for deciding to choose a certain destination).
10	Teaching grammar rules: Dependent clauses should be practiced through written translation tasks (with the possibility of using a dictionary).
11	Pronunciation should be practiced by reading simple texts or role plays and creative drama.

3. Results and discussion

Research results are based on the group of 23 graduate students of German studies who expressed their attitudes towards the teaching methods in German as foreign language. Table 2 illustrates arithmetic means and standard deviations for each statement in the questionnaire.

Table 2: Arithmetic means and standard deviations of the statements.

Statement number	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation
1	3,391	1,118
2	3,870	0,694
3	2,478	0,846
4	3,522	1,082
5	3,348	0,982
6	4,044	0,976
7	4,087	0,848
8	3,652	1,071
9	4,087	0,848
10	3,522	1,039
11	4,348	0,885

Considering that the Likert scale is of ordinal type, and two dependent samples are compared, we used the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-rank test to investigate significant differences between the compared statements. The results are presented in Table 3 (level of significance 0.05).

Table 3: Wilcoxon Signed-rank test results

Wilcoxon Signed-rank test	Sum of positive ranks	Sum of negative ranks	p	Statistically significant difference
Statement comparisons				
4 - 9	77,5	- 13,5	0,024	Yes
7 - 8	2	- 26	0,063	No
9 - 10	0	- 55	0,002	Yes

As shown in Table 2, the students claim that they have not had sufficient opportunities to practice speaking (2). As for the way of teaching grammatical forms, the students agree that simple grammatical structures should be taught as formulaic sequences without metalinguistic explanation (especially at beginning levels of language learning through authentic communicative situations) (4). Interestingly, they also recognize the importance of reading and writing tasks, with an emphasis on repetition, for a more successful acquisition of the target language forms (6, 7, 8). Students agree with the statements related to the implementation of writing tasks. In their opinion, dependent clauses should be practiced through writing tasks (e.g. writing an email to a friend, explaining the reasons for deciding to choose a certain destination) and written translation tasks (9 and 10). Finally, they agree that pronunciation should be practiced through reading simple texts, role plays and creative drama (11).

With regard to the issue of acquiring grammatical forms, a significant difference was recorded in the degree of agreement between the two statements – 4 and 9 (Table 3). Namely, a significant preference was recorded for teaching more complex grammar structures through writing tasks (e. g. word order in dependent clauses in German), compared to simple grammatical structures that ought to be taught as formulaic language without metalinguistic explanation (especially at beginning levels of language learning through authentic communicative situations). The importance of writing tasks in mastering more

complex grammatical structures is also visible in the significant difference obtained by comparing the statements 9 and 10 (Table 3). A higher degree of agreement was recorded for the statement that more complex grammatical structures should be taught through writing rather than translation tasks.

The insufficient representation of reading activity has been recorded in a large number of studies. According to Lonigan and Burgess (2017), teaching fluent reading is often underrepresented in elementary school, possibly because classroom teachers are rarely provided with appropriate training on strategies to promote reading fluency. Furthermore, many scientific studies have confirmed that the technique of reading aloud serves to promote reading fluency. It aims to improve decoding accuracy, word automatization, pronunciation, reading speed, and expressive reading (Ehri, 2017).

The students' preference for the implementation of writing tasks in this study aligns with findings from numerous studies confirming the positive effects of such tasks on the development of grammatical accuracy. The most frequently used tasks in research studies are decision-making tasks, storytelling, argumentation tasks and writing letters. For example, Rahimi (2019), Golparvar and Rashidi (2021), Sanchez and Kalamakis (2023) recorded positive effects on grammatical accuracy in more complex written tasks.

In this research the students expressed a high awareness of the importance of repetition, which is in line with the research conducted by Kovač (2023). In her study, the respondents emphasized the benefits of formulaic language and task repetition on overall performance. The author explained the positive effect of repeated performance by proceduralized knowledge and a certain degree of automation, as a consequence of repetition. DeKeyser (2007) pointed out that automation is the central mechanism, which is characterized by unintentional, uncontrolled, unconscious, efficient and fast processing. Thus, familiarity with the content and reduced cognitive requirements at the level of content planning and organization of speech acts, as well as formulation and articulation, will have a positive effect on noticing a certain linguistic form.

The students of German studies in this research claimed that pronunciation could be practiced through role plays and drama, a viewpoint supported by numerous studies confirming the positive impact of creative drama on the development of learners' motor skills, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and motivation. Vukojević (2016), studying the application of dramatic techniques in language teaching, concluded that role plays and other communication games significantly develop vocabulary, influence the structure

of sentences and contribute to better pronunciation. In another study, Matekalo et al. (2020) examined the representation of dramatic techniques on a sample of Croatian students of English studies. The authors found that the students did not use drama techniques to an adequate extent during their studies and lacked the practical application, despite being theoretically relatively well-acquainted with such techniques. However, the authors pointed out that it is encouraging that students want to use dramatic techniques in their future work and thus make a departure from the traditional way of teaching.

4. Conclusion

The gradual development of communicative competence is connected with the question of how linguistic forms are taught. Explicit explanation of rules, very often in isolation without communicative context, is a more traditional teaching approach. As opposed to this, in task-based teaching, grammatical rules are taught implicitly and the teacher's direct help is needed at the moment when the learner faces a difficulty in formulating the content of the message. In other words, the emphasis is on language as a tool for conveying meaning and the authentic use of language in a communicative context in which the learner will use his/her own language resources. In addition to tasks that require the production of linguistic forms, task-based teaching also includes tasks that are based on comprehensible linguistic input. Furthermore, the emphasis is not only on the improvement of speaking skills, but also on the development of reading fluency and writing skills, aiming at adopting target structures, such as frequently used formulaic language, as a characteristic of authentic communication. Twenty-three Croatian graduate students of German studies took part in this research. The students performed various tasks - role plays, argumentation and writing tasks, as well as story retelling and problem-solving tasks. At the end of the semester, students completed a questionnaire with the aim of obtaining retrospective comments on the teaching methods and task types that might positively influence the learner's interlanguage. As for the teaching of grammatical structures, the students stated that simpler grammatical structures could be presented in the form of formulaic language that learners, especially at lower levels of language acquisition, will adopt without metalinguistic explanation and, thus, automate more easily. On the other hand, students believe that more complex grammatical structures, such as the word order in dependent clauses in German, should be taught through

written tasks, due to the planning time and the possibility of self-monitoring. A higher degree of agreement was recorded for the statement that more complex grammatical structures should be taught through writing tasks, compared to translation tasks. Moreover, students recognized the importance of role plays and creative drama for teaching pronunciation, emphasizing the importance of repetition, which gradually leads to automation.

The conclusions of this research are based on a relatively small sample of respondents, but they provide valuable information on the possible improvement of teaching methods, regarding German as L2, for which, to our knowledge, there is a lack of studies dealing with the considered research topic.

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