From form to meaning: evidence from the design, implementation and analysis of a focused task

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Abstract

This study reports on the design, implementation and analysis of a task cycle (Skehan, 1998) comprising two grammar exercises, a focused task (Ellis, 2003) and a communicative task administered to 47 EFL learners in 10 intact classes in Brazil. Results suggest that focused tasks may help learners automatize specific linguistic forms, freeing up cognitive resources to focus on meaning, thus fostering the acquisition of complex linguistic structures in L2. Results are discussed in terms of psycholinguistic accounts of skill building which view the acquisition of language as the automatization of processes which develop out of controlled processes (McLaughlin & Heredia, 1996).

Key words: focused tasks, focus on form and meaning, L2 acquisition.

1 Introduction

Research on second[1] language acquisition (SLA) has moved away from the search for the Holy Graal of applied linguistics or "the best method", to a more mature approach that attempts to understand the many processes involved in acquiring a second language (Larsen-Freeman, 1993). Different approaches (for example: socio-cultural theory, task-based instruction (TBI), linguistic approaches based on Universal Grammar) have been used to investigate the issue of how people come to master a second language. Though these approaches differ in their departure points and assumptions, they coincide in their goal, namely, to explain different aspects of second language (L2) use and acquisition.

One such approach that has gained considerable popularity is the task-based instruction (TBI) which followed the Communicative Approach (CA) in a reaction against years of form-focused instruction in

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L2 (SKEHAN, 2003). As the name suggests, the communicative approach aimed at developing learners' ability to communicate meanings and proposed that this was achieved through learners' engagement in communicative activities which later became known as "tasks" (BYGATE, SKEHAN & SWAIN, 2001). Though both approaches focus on meaning rather than on form, they differ in that the TBI approach uses tasks as the basic unit of syllabi (WILLIS & WILLIS, 2001; SKEHAN & FOSTER, 1999).

Ellis (2003) defines tasks as activities in which there is a primary concern for message content and that have a clearly defined outcome, but he distinguishes between focused and unfocused tasks in that the former are used to elicit specific linguistic features, either by design or by the use of methodological procedures that focus attention on form, whereas the latter are those in which general samples of language are elicited. He also distinguishes between focused tasks and grammar exercises in that the latter are designed to provide contextualized practice of specific linguistic features while in the focused task learners are not informed of the specific linguistic focus and so treat the task in the same way as they would treat an unfocused task. In that sense, he claims, attention to form is intentional in the grammar exercise and incidental in the focused task (p. 141).

The TBI is based on the psycholinguistic assumption that people have a limited capacity cognitive system and that because of limitations in this system during processing, learners have to focus on some aspects of language while ignoring others, producing the so-called trade-off effects which have been well reported by Skehan and company (e.g.: SKEHAN, 1998; FOSTER & SKEHAN, 1996). These trade-off effects mean that in production (for example speaking), gains in one dimension (for example fluency), are usually achieved at the cost of gains in other dimensions (for example, accuracy and complexity).

Another important psycholinguistic assumption of TBI is that during L2 speaking, learners' perform under time pressure and, again, because of limitations in their cognitive system, they prioritize meaning, focusing on form only if there are enough attentional resources or if attention is directed to form through the manipulation of tasks (VANPATTEN, 1990; SKEHAN, 1998). These assumptions are important for TBI because knowing the demands that a task will make on learners'

cognitive system enables an informed task design, manipulating learners' attention between meaning and form, thus fostering interlanguage (IL) development (Skehan & Foster, 2001).

Of special interest to the present study, because of the rationale for using focused tasks, is the psycholinguistic assumption, based on skill building theories, that language development (or automatization) proceeds from controlled to automatic modes of processing (Dekeyser, 2007). In this view, language development involves the transfer of information from short-term memory to long-term memory and this transfer is regulated by controlled processes that are serial and slow, requiring attention for their execution and predominating in initial stages of learning. Automatic processes develop out of controlled processes and predominate in later stages of learning when processing is fast and parallel (McLaughlin & Heredia, 1996). A similar account of skill building is that of Anderson (1993) and Dekeyser (2007, p. 9) who propose that learning involves the proceduralization of declarative knowledge. In the case of language learning, this linguistic knowledge could be understood as grammatical rules (as is the case of the syntactic structure investigated in this study) that become automatized through practice (Muranoi, 2007, p. 70). For Anderson, procedural knowledge is declarative knowledge that has become automatized through practice. These two accounts of learning have in common the view that skills are developed when controlled processes/declarative knowledge evolve, through practice, to automatic processes/procedural knowledge and according to Ellis (2003), focused tasks are the ideal means through which this practice can happen.

Ellis (2003) was careful to note that the concept of practice has been broadly defined in the literature (p. 146) and claims that while it is usually understood as the process of repeatedly and deliberately attempting to produce some specific target structure, special care must be taken to practice the behavior rather than the structure. Ellis (1987) has shown that practising linguistic structures mechanically is not effective because it reifies the structure by decontextualizing it and thus does not lead to any change in behavior. To change behavior one must practice the behavior (Ellis, 2003, p. 146). This is the rationale for using focused tasks which, while contextualized and oriented towards meaning, force learners to use/practice specific linguistic forms.

Since its initial proposal, different TBI approaches have been put forward (e.g.: Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993; Willis & Willis, 2001). Skehan's (1998) framework was selected for this study because of the following reasons: 1) it is based on previous empirical work (e.g.: Foster & Skehan, 1996); 2) it considers the cognitive difficulty of tasks as significant characteristics for their design; 3) it is based on a powerful psycholinguistic account of focus-on-form (Skehan & Foster, 2005); 4) it assumes a strong link between production and acquisition and states that through task manipulation it is possible to promote the use of specific linguistic structures, thus fostering their acquisition.

Skehan (1998) proposes the use of tasks in cycles and his task cycle proposal includes three phases, namely: pre-, during and post-task. Pre-task activities can be implemented in the form of teaching, consciousness raising activities or planning and they are helpful in a number of ways: they introduce new language, enable restructuring and recycling and ease the processing load, pushing learners to interpret tasks in more demanding ways. In the during-task phase, tasks are manipulated to influence the amount of attention available to the learner. This task manipulation can be done in the form of time pressure, modality, support, surprise control, and stakes. Finally, post-task activities aim at altering the attentional balance, engaging learners in reflection and consolidation of what was learned so as to enable restructuring.

Based on Skehan's (1998) task cycle proposal and on Ellis' (2003) definition of focused tasks, the present study designed and implemented a task cycle to test the use and acquisition of a specific syntactic structure in L2 English: agreeing using the formula *So+aux+I* and *Neither+aux+I*. The main aim of the study was to analyze the task cycle implemented so as to answer the following research questions:

1 Is it possible to manipulate learners' attention from a focus on form to a focus on meaning through the design of tasks?
2 Is the acquisition of the target language structure helped by the use of a task cycle comprising teaching and grammar exercises (pre-task), a focused task (during-task) and a communicative task (post-task)? Put differently, is the practice provided by a focused task cycle beneficial for language acquisition?

This study is organized in 5 sections. Section 1 presented the review of literature which fore-grounded the study and the research questions which motivated this investigation. Section 2 will present the method used in the study along with the instruments and procedures for data collection and a brief description of the context and participants. Section 3 will present the analysis of the data and will be divided in two sub-sections, the first will present the quantitative analysis and the second will present the qualitative analysis. Section 4 will present the discussion of the data and will be followed by section 5 with the conclusion of the study and some pedagogical implications.

2 Method

So as to answer the research questions, a mixed methods design (Dornyei, 2007) was used to analyze the implementation of the task cycle proposed in the study. Fifty-five adult learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), enrolled in 11 intact classes of basic 2 (second semester) level of the Extracurricular Course of the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Brazil in 2007 comprised the original pool of participants who were divided in an experimental group with 47 participants in 10 intact groups who received instruction on the target language structure (agreeing with *So+aux+I* and *Neither+aux+I)* and 8 control participants in one intact group who did not receive instruction on the target language structure. The data used in this study are part of a larger study (Finardi, 2007; Finardi & Silveira, in press).

Each group had a different teacher, but they all followed the same book (Interchange 3 by Jack Richards), program, schedule and in the case of the experimental group, received the same treatment - the instruction focused on form. The researcher gave the instruction by writing the formula *So+aux+I* and *Neither+aux+I* on the board explaining the rule by saying that we use the first formula to agree with affirmative sentences and the second to agree with negative sentences. The instruction was given in L1 (Portuguese) and followed by ten examples in L2 (English), five in the affirmative and five in the negative form. After eliciting answers from the students the researcher confirmed the correct answers and wrote all the answers on the board.

Once the aim of the study was to analyze the possible acquisition of the target language structure as a result of the treatment (instruction of the target language structure focused on its form and the use of a task cycle), it was important to make sure that the participants of the study did not know the target language structure prior to the study, thus the use of a control group made up of learners in the same proficiency group who were tested to see whether they had any familiarity with the target language structure. The learners in the control group were used to ensure that learners with this proficiency level did not know the target language structure so as to enable claims about its possible acquisition as a result of the instruction and use of the task cycle. The participants in the control group did not receive the treatment (instruction focused on form and task cycle) and thus were tested only once and so as to verify that learners in that proficiency level did not know the target language structure investigated. All participants were volunteers, having signed a consent form (Appendix 1) and all the teachers agreed to let the researcher teach the target language structure to their students and sit in their classes for observation.

2.1 Instruments

Five instruments of data collection were used: two grammar exercises (Appendix 2), a focused task (Appendix 3), a communicative task (Appendix 4) and an interview (Appendix 5). The grammar exercises comprised ten sentences with which participants had to agree using the target form taught. They were administered immediately after the instruction and were done in a written mode first, with all the participants in the group and then in a speaking mode in individual sessions with the researcher. After they finished the speaking exercise the researcher interviewed participants so as to gather their perceptions on the exercise and to collect biographical information to construct the focused task. The idea underlying the grammar exercises was that students would practice the form of the target structure in a written mode first, with the help of the formula provided in the paper, before they were required to produce the target structure in the speaking mode, thus moving from completely controlled activities to freer forms of practice

during the cycle. The control group was used to pre-test the sample, making sure that the target language structure had not been acquired without the treatment. Participants in the control group completed only one test, namely: the grammar exercise in the written mode. The other tasks described in what follows were administered only to the experimental group.

The focused task was administered two weeks after the instruction and grammar exercises and also comprised ten sentences with which participants had to agree <u>or disagree</u> using any forms they wished to do so and was also administered in the speaking mode and designed in such a way that participants would have to agree with five sentences and disagree with the other five. An assumption in the design of the focused task was that the task would force participants to focus on meaning and form. So as to agree or disagree with the sentences heard correctly, participants would have to process meaning first and then form.

Finally, the communicative task involved students talking to other students in the class to find out how much they had in common. Students could use any forms they wished in the communicative task and because the use of the target language structure was not mandatory or even necessary to complete the task (though the researcher expected it to emerge during the interactions), the analysis of the communicative task was made only with class observation, no scores were assigned and so this task was not computed in the quantitative analysis.

2.2 Procedures

During the pre-task phase, the researcher taught the target language instruction to the whole class, to the 10 classes, with a focus on form, and immediately after the instruction she administered the grammar exercise in the written mode. After participants had finished the grammar exercise, the researcher administered the grammar exercise in the speaking mode and interviewed them individually so as to gather biographical information to construct the focused task which was administered two weeks after the instruction and grammar exercises. During the focused task the researcher instructed participants to say the truth instead of just agreeing with the sentences heard,

that is, participants now were required to agree <u>or disagree</u> with the sentences heard, depending on their real life situation. It is important to call the reader's attention to the fact that by this time the researcher had collected enough biographical information (in the interviews with participants) to build a task in which participants would have to agree with five sentences and disagree with the other five. For instance, the researcher knew that all participants were Brazilian and so if the researcher said: "I'm Brazilian", participants would have to agree, necessarily. By the same token, if the researcher said "I'm Chilean", participants were expected to disagree with the researcher. Once more, after the focused task the researcher interviewed participants so as to gather their perceptions on the task.

Two weeks after the focused task had been implemented the researcher returned to some of the groups to observe the communicative task. This task was administered by the teachers of the groups and not by the researcher and was part of their normal program and schedule. During the communicative task the researcher only observed and took notes, no scores or other data were collected in the post-task phase.

The statistical analysis was conducted only with the grammar exercise in the speaking mode and the focused task, in a pre/post design using a comparison of means. The reason why the first grammar exercise was not computed in the statistical analysis is that most participants scored 10 (the highest possible score), suggesting ceiling effects in the written grammar exercise. As previously stated, the communicative task was not computed in the statistical analysis because it generated no scores, therefore, only the speaking exercise of the pre-task phase and the focused task of the during-task phase were statistically analyzed.

The grammar exercises and focused task generated two scores. In the lenient score of the grammar exercise, half a point was given if the target structure (*So* or *Neither*) was correct but the auxiliary verb was not or vice versa. The strict score assigned one point only to sentences in which both target language structure and auxiliary verb were correct. For example, if the researcher said "I don't speak Chinese" and the participant replied "Neither am I" or "So do I", half a point would be given in the lenient score to this sentence since the structure (neither) and the auxiliary verb (do) were correct in the sentences, respectively.

According to the criteria for the strict score, no points would be given to these answers.

For the focused task, one point was assigned to sentences in which the participant had agreed or disagreed with the sentence when they had to, using the correct form in the strict score. In the lenient score, half a point was given to sentences in which either the form or the meaning (agree or disagree when they had to) were correct. So for example, if the researcher said: "I'm Chilean" and the participant replied "So am I", he/she would be given only half a point in the lenient score because he/she had used the correct form but had not processed the meaning correctly. By the same token, if the participant had said, to the same sentence "I don't", he/she would still get only half a point for, although he/she had disagreed when he/she had to disagree, the form was not correct. According to the criteria for the strict score, only sentences in which both meaning (agree or disagree) and form (target language structure) were correct received one point. The list of raw scores for the speaking grammar exercise and the focused task can be seen in Appendix 6.

3. ANALYSIS

This section will be divided in two parts. The first part will present the results of the statistical procedures used to analyze the performance in the speaking exercise and the focused task, and the second part will present the qualitative analysis of classroom observations and interviews with participants so as to triangulate the data, answering the research questions.

3.1 Statistical analysis

Recall that the grammar exercise required participants to process only the form of the sentences by asking them to agree with the sentences given using the target language structure to do so, whereas the focused task required participants to process both meaning and form to answer the questions correctly. Based on this double processing (meaning and form) imposed by the focused task design, performance in the focused task was expected to be worse (since the task was more demanding)

than the performance in the grammar exercise. So as to analyze the performance on the grammar exercise and the focused task, descriptive statistics and paired samples T-tests were run and can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for grammar exercise and focused task

	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
exercise strict	1.0	10.0	6.5	2.51	-.465	.347	-.742	.681
exercise lenient	3.0	10.0	7.6	2.04	-.900	.347	-.101	.681
focused strict	.0	10.0	5.6	2.54	-.380	.347	-.746	.681
focused lenient	1.0	10.0	6.8	2.24	-.815	.347	-.224	.681

N = 47

As can be seen in Table 1, though the means for the exercise were higher (6.5 and 7.6) than the means for the focused task (5.6 and 6.8), this difference was not large. So as to check if this difference was statistically significant, paired samples T-tests were run. Results of this test can be seen in the table below.

Table 2. Paired samples t-tests between exercise and focused task
Paired Samples Test

		Paired Dif	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean			
Pair 1	exercise strict and lenient	-1.13	-10.05	46	.000*
Pair 2	focused strict and lenient	-1.17	-10.26	46	.000*

N=47

As can be seen in Table 2, results of the T-tests show that the difference in performance in the exercise and focused task was statistically significant t (46) = -10.05, p <.001 and t (46) = -10.26, p < .001, respectively.

The statistical analysis has shown that the performance in the exercise was more accurate (as shown by the higher means) than that of the focused task. Put differently, we can say that the exercise was easier than the focused task and that the difference in their performance was statistically significant. The design of the tasks used in this study was elaborated in such a way as to require participants to focus on form in the exercise and to focus both on meaning and form in the focused task. The statistical analysis can only tell us so much about the data. It showed us, for instance, that the focused task was, as expected, more demanding than the exercise. Nevertheless, the statistical analysis cannot tell us why one task was more difficult than another. So as to check whether this difference in task demand was indeed caused by the double processing imposed by the focused task design (processing meaning and form) as assumed, the participants' reports on the tests used in this study will be analyzed next.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Recall that the exercise and task were implemented in individual meetings in which the researcher asked participants their perceptions on the tests. These meetings were recorded and transcribed for analysis. During the implementation of the exercise, the researcher noticed that participants were not waiting for her to read the whole sentence before they started to speak. Instead, participants started responding to the sentences as soon as they had figured out whether the sentence was affirmative or negative (so as to insert *So* or *Neither* in the formula) and the auxiliary verb which should be inserted in the formula.

Based on this observation the researcher asked participants why they started to speak before the researcher finished saying the sentence. Participants said that they did not have to pay attention to the whole sentence or its meaning to respond correctly, all they needed to know was whether the sentence was affirmative or negative and which was the

correct auxiliary verb to insert in the formula. Moreover, participants said that it was hard to keep the whole sentence in mind while trying to compute the right formula and that if they paid attention to the meaning of the sentence, they would not be able to supply the correct form because attention to the meaning interfered with their ability to compute the correct form in the formula. Thus, during the exercise participants focused on form so as to respond correctly. In what follows one excerpt from one of the transcriptions is used as an example of the types of answers given by the participants during the interview, in the excerpt T stands for teacher and P for participant.

T – Eu notei que você não esperou eu terminar a frase antes de começar a responder. Você pode me dizer por que?

P1 – Não, não esperei né... é que eu entendi que tinha que dar a resposta correta usando a regrinha que você ensinou... então eu tava tentando colocar a fórmula certinha e se eu esperasse você terminar a frase toda eu ia acabar me confundindo e esquecendo qual era o verbo que você tinha usado no começo e qual era o verbo que eu tinha que colocar no começo da frase...

T- Então você estava concentrada em dar a fórmula correta, é isso?

P1- Exatamente, por isso eu foquei na fórmula e não esperei você dizer a frase toda para traduzir pois eu não tinha que traduzir nem entender o significado da frase, só tinha que saber se era afirmativa ou negativa e qual o verbo que eu tinha que pôr na frente não é isso? Era isso mesmo que era para fazer não era?

The participants' reaction in the focused task was different. Since they were instructed to tell the truth, agreeing or disagreeing with what was real in their lives, they had to wait for the researcher to read the whole sentence, focusing on meaning and still supplying the correct form to complete the task successfully. When asked about their impressions on the task, all participants, no exception, said that the focused task was much harder than the exercise because they had to think about the meaning of the sentence and still compute the correct form to respond. Some of them even said that when they felt that they would not be able to pay attention to meaning and form at the same time, they opted to pay attention to one aspect only (meaning or form). Indeed, an analysis of participants' errors shows that in the focused task

they opted to focus either on meaning (agreeing or disagreeing when they had to) or on form (supplying the correct form regardless of the meaning). One excerpt is shown below as way of example for the types of answers given by participants in the focused task.

T- Quando eu te disse "I am Brazilian" você deveria ter discordado de mim pois eu sei que você é brasileira e no entanto você concordou, você disse "Neither am I". Por que?

P9- Então, isso tem a ver com o que eu acabei de te dizer. Nesse exercício foi tudo mais difícil, quero dizer, era mais difícil do que o primeiro que você deu porque eu tinha que lembrar da fórmula e ainda pensar no que você tava dizendo, traduzir....as vezes eu me confundia quando eu tentava pensar no que você estava dizendo e ainda responder com a regra certa... então eu acho que quando você disse "I am Brazilian" eu acabei prestando atenção só no verbo para dar a regra certa e acabei esquecendo de traduzir a frase para dizer a verdade, como você tinha pedido.

The qualitative analysis of participants' perceptions enabled data triangulation and suggests that the task design was indeed constrained in such a way as to require participants to focus on form during the exercise and to focus both on meaning and form during the focused task. The analysis of the class observations suggest that when performance was free and focused on meaning, the production of the target language structure was variable. Since the communicative task was performed by students in pairs in the class, it was impossible to observe all the interactions. While participants were talking to their peers in the communicative task, the researcher was walking around the class, listening to their interactions and taking notes. Because of the nature of the communicative task it is impossible to say whether all participants used or acquired the syntactic structure investigated. However, it was possible to see that some participants used the target language structure in a variable way. For instance, most participants used the formulaic expressions "*So do I*" but failed to use others such as "So have I", "So can I", etc. Moreover, participants failed to use the negative form "Neither", preferring, instead, the formulaic expression "Me too". The following excerpt is representative of the type of interaction observed by the researcher during the communicative task:

> A - *I am not Figueira, I am Havai.* (Figueira and Havai are two local soccer teams)
> B - Me too but Havai is… not so good now…
> A - *Yes, I know…Because of this I prefer tennis.*
> B - *So do I, especially because of Guga.* (Guga is a local famous ennis player)

Unfortunately, it was not possible to observe all the interactions and so claims about the effectiveness of the communicative task have to be made and taken with caution. Nevertheless, the observation of the communicative task suggests that most participants were using the target language structure correctly at least in the affirmative form and that the production of the target language structure was still variable reflecting, perhaps incomplete automatization and/or restructuring. The next session will discuss these findings in light of psycholinguistic accounts of skill building, suggesting some pedagogical implications for the use of focused tasks.

4 Discussion

Based on the assumption that participants would have to process only the form of the sentence to answer the exercise correctly whereas in the focused task, they would have to process both meaning and form, it was predicted that participants' performance in the grammar exercise would be more accurate than in the focused task. Results of the statistical analysis and data triangulation confirm that the focused task was more demanding than the exercise because of the double processing (meaning and form) imposed by the focused task. Reports of participants confirm that they thought the focused task was more difficult than the exercise because in the former, they had to think about the meaning of the sentence, while manipulating the form of the response whereas in the exercise participants only had to focus on the form of the sentence to respond correctly. The observation of the communicative task suggests that participants acquired the form of the target structure in the affirmative form but not in the negative form. Moreover, this observation suggests that the performance in initial stages of acquisition is variable, that is, participants use the target form

correctly (for example "So do I") and then fall back to the use of the formulaic expression "Me too" , only to return to the correct use of the target structure later on.

Finally, the analysis of the task cycle suggests that participants moved from controlled activities with a focus on form to freer activities with a focus on meaning, using the target form in a variable way. The variability of use of the target language structure was explained in terms of incomplete automatization or restructuring. Either way, given the difficulty of producing the target language structure in L2 given its difference in their L1,[2] the focused task cycle was found to be beneficial in helping participants automatize controlled processes or proceduralize declarative knowledge which, in this case, was a complex syntactic grammar rule.

Bygate (2001b) studied the effects of task repetition and found that when repeating a task learners channel attention to different aspects of the task, gaining in one dimension (complexity) but losing in others (fluency and accuracy). Mirroring these findings, Finardi (2008) studied the effects of task repetition in a picture description task and found that learners gained in complexity of speech at the expense of fluency and accuracy, thus, corroborating Bygate's findings and claim that task repetition enables the focus on different aspects of the task.

Given the nature of the exercises and tasks in the task cycle investigated in this study, it is possible to suggest that they involved some sort of overlapping and repetition (once all of them required some sort of agreeing with sentences). Because only one aspect of the target structure was investigated in this study (accuracy), it is impossible to make claims for the other dimensions of speech production but it is possible to suggest, based on the observation of the communicative task that perhaps participants focused more on meaning and fluency at the expense of accuracy of the target language form during the performance in the communicative task.

5 CONCLUSION

This study departed from psycholinguistic accounts of task-based instruction to propose a cycle of tasks composed of three moments,

namely, a pre-task phase in which instruction focused on form and grammar exercises were used to introduce a syntactic structure (agreeing using *So+aux+I* and *Neither+aux+I*), a during-task phase with a focused task to practice the form of the target language structure, and a post-task phase with a communicative task in which production was free and focused on meaning. The rationale motivating this design was that the syntactic language structure investigated was difficult to acquire for Portuguese speakers who had to undergo syntactic computation to produce the form of the target structure in L2 and that perhaps a task cycle which manipulated learners' attention from a complete focus on form to a focus on meaning would benefit the acquisition of this structure in L2.

The first research question raised in this study was whether it was possible to manipulate learners' attention from a focus on form to a focus on meaning through the design of tasks. Based on both the quantitative and the qualitative analysis of the data it is possible to answer that question with a "yes". According to learners' reported perceptions on the task cycle implemented it is possible to say that their attention moved from a focus on form to a focus on meaning during the execution of the exercises and tasks proposed.

Since the communicative task used in this study cannot be analyzed in a quantitative way, it is impossible to affirm that the target language structure was in fact acquired. It is possible to suggest, however, based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the task cycle, that this design helped participants automatize at least one form of the target language structure, namely "So do I" which was produced in communicative tasks which did not required the use of this form. Thus, the production of this form in communicative tasks is believed to reflect implicit, automatized or proceduralized knowledge which, in turn, is claimed to have reached this stage through the practice enabled by the task design used in this study.

Thus the second research question raised in this study, namely, whether the acquisition of the target language structure would be helped by the use of a task cycle comprising teaching and grammar exercises (pre-task), a focused task (during-task) and a communicative task (post-task) can be answered affirmatively once learners acquired at least one form of the target language (So do I) as shown by their use of this structure in the communicative task.

That having been said, this study concludes with some pedagogical suggestions made in light of what found in the implementation of this task cycle. The first suggestion is that focused tasks may be an ideal means to present and practice complex structures in L2. The second suggestion is that a task cycle which moves from a focus on form to a focus on meaning may provide learners with the necessary support (scaffolding) to learn difficult or complex linguistic structures in L2.

Finally, it is imported to highlight the fact that though the theory informing TBI is appealing, more empirical studies on task design, manipulation and implementation are needed so as to help teachers make informed decisions. This study contributed to the literature on tasks by providing insights of a focused task cycle and to the literature on second language acquisition by offering a glimpse of variables that may be at play during the acquisition of complex syntactic structures such as the focus on meaning and form.

DA FORMA AO SIGNIFICADO: EVIDÊNCIAS DA ELABORAÇÃO, IMPLEMENTAÇÃO E ANÁLISE DE UMA TAREFA FOCADA

RESUMO

Este estudo relata a elaboração, implementação e análise de um ciclo de tarefas (SKEHAN, 1998) envolvendo dois exercícios gramaticais, uma tarefa focada (ELLIS, 2003) e uma tarefa comunicativa aplicada a 47 aprendizes de inglês com língua estrangeira em 10 aulas ministradas no Brasil. Os resultados sugerem que as tarefas focadas podem ajudar os aprendizes a automatizar formas linguísticas específicas, ativando recursos cognitivos focalizados no significado e assim promovendo a aquisição de estruturas linguísticas complexas na L2. Os resultados são discutidos em termos de relatos psicolinguísticos acerca da construção de habilidades que consideram a aquisição da língua como um processo de automatização que se desenvolve a partir processos controlados (MCLAUGHLIN & HEREDIA, 1996).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: tarefas focadas, foco na forma e significado, aquisição de L2.

NOTES

1 Though the author acknowledges the difference in terminology between second and foreign language acquisition, these terms will be used interchangeably here unless otherwise stated.

2   In Portuguese speakers do not have to undergo syntactic computation to agree with a sentence, it is enough to repeat the main verb as in: A- Eu gosto de futebol (I like football). B – Eu também gosto (I too like it).

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Appendix 1 - Consent Form

A pesquisa de aprendizagem de segunda língua envolve uma série de métodos dentre os quais a gravação em áudio. Todos os dados fornecidos na pesquisa são absolutamente sigilosos e os participantes da mesma não são identificados em nenhum momento da pesquisa, seus nomes são omitidos durante a análise de dados. A participação nesta pesquisa não acarreta, de maneira alguma, prejuízo ou privilégio na disciplina cursada, sendo a participação na mesma, totalmente independente e desvinculada da disciplina cursada. O participante pode, a qualquer momento, desistir de participar da pesquisa, bastando, para tanto, informar o pesquisador a fim de que não utilize seus dados.

Por ter lido, compreendido e concordado com a informação acima descrita, assino, abaixo autorizando minha inclusão como participante nesta pesquisa de doutorado entitulada "A memória de trabalho e a aquisição de uma estrutura sintática na produção oral em L2" realizada pela doutoranda da pós-graduação em Inglês da UFSC, Kyria Finardi.

Appendix 2 - Grammar Exercise (Pre-task)

Agree with the following sentences using the formula *So+aux+I* or *Neither+aux+I*

Written mode

1) I study at UFSC. _____ (so do I)
2) I can't play the violin. _____(neither can I)
3) I don't have a lot of homework. _____ (neither do I)
4) I am not Chinese. _____ (neither am I)
5) I have never been to China. _____ (neither have I)
6) I can count in English. _____ (so can I)
7) I won't travel next vacations. _____ (neither will I)
8) I went out last night. _____(so did I)
9) I will call my friend tonight. _____(so will I)
10) I'm from Brazil. _____(so am I)

Speaking mode

Agree with the sentences you hear:
1) I'm Brazilian._____ (so am I)

2) I don´t like cats._____ (neither do I)
3) I went out last night._____(so did I)
4) I´m not an astronaut._____ (neither am I)
5) I didn´t see a film yesterday._____ (neither did I)
6) I love chocolate._____ (so do I)
7) I can speak Portuguese fluently._____ (so can I)
8) I have a black car._____ (so do I)
9) I can´t speak Chinese._____ (neither can I)
10) I don´t have a cat._____ (neither do I)

Appendix 3 - Focused Task (During-task)

Agree or disagree with the sentences you hear, depending on what is true for you:
1) I don´t have a million dollars. _____ (neither do I)
2) I´ve already been to Canasvieiras._____ (so have I)
3) I can speak four languages._____ (I can't)
4) I can´t speak Chinese. _____(neither can I)
5) I´m not Brazilian. _____ (I am)
6) I can´t speak Portuguese without an accent. _____ (I can)
7) I´m going to travel tonight. _____ (I am not)
8) I don´t have friends in Florianopolis. _____ (I have)
9) I´m going to take a shower tomorrow._____ (so am I)
10) I don´t study Russian. _____ (neither do I)

Appendix 4 - Communicative Task (Post-task)

Interview a partner. Find out if he/she likes the same kind of music, sports, films, food and say if you are similar or different.

Appendix 5 - Interview

Grammar exercise
1) How old are you?
2) Where do you live/ study/ work?
3) Where are you from?
4) What languages do you speak?
5) Have you ever been to Canasvieiras?
6) What did you think about this exercise/task?
7) Was it hard? Why? Why not?
8) Did you use or try to use any strategy to do it?

Focused task

       1) What did you think about this test?

       2) Was it harder or easier than the exercise we did two weeks ago? Why?

Appendix 6 - Raw scores exercise and focused tasks

Participant -	Exercise strict	Exercise lenient	Focused strict	Focused lenient
P1	6.0	7.0	6.0	7.5
P2	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
P3	10.0	10.0	7.0	8.0
P4	8.0	9.0	9.0	9.0
P5	8.0	8.0	7.0	8.0
P6	6.0	8.0	9.0	9.5
P7	6.0	8.0	9.0	9.5
P8	6.0	8.0	5.0	7.5
P9	7.0	8.0	9.0	9.0
P10	6.0	7.5	6.0	7.5
P11	9.0	9.5	7.0	8.5
P12	6.0	7.5	5.5	7.0
P13	8.0	9.0	8.0	9.0
P14	4.0	5.5	5.0	7.0
P15	2.0	3.0	7.0	8.0
P16	7.0	8.0	8.0	9.0
P17	10.0	10.0	8.0	9.0
P18	7.0	8.5	8.0	8.5
P19	5.0	6.0	3.0	6.5
P20	3.0	5.0	5.0	5.5
P21	9.0	9.5	6.0	6.5
P22	5.0	7.0	3.0	3.5
P23	3.0	3.5	2.0	3.0
P24	8.0	9.0	7.0	8.0
P25	7.0	8.0	7.0	8.0
P26	9.0	9.5	5.0	7.5
P27	10.0	10.0	9.0	9.0

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P28	9.0	9.5	7.0	8.0
P29	8.0	9.0	4.0	6.5
P30	1.0	3.0	4.0	5.5
P31	8.0	9.0	7.0	7.5
P32	9.0	9.5	5.0	6.0
P33	3.0	5.0	4.0	5.0
P34	9.0	9.5	9.0	9.5
P35	7.0	8.5	7.0	8.5
P36	8.0	9.0	7.0	8.0
P37	2.0	3.5	4.0	5.5
P38	3.0	6.0	2.0	4.0
P39	10.0	10.0	8.0	9.0
P40	9.0	9.5	1.0	4.0
P41	6.0	8.0	0.0	1.0
P42	2.0	3.5	2.0	3.0
P43	7.0	8.0	2.0	3.0
P44	6.0	6.0	4.0	6.5
P45	3.0	6.0	5.0	6.0
P46	5.0	6.5	3.0	3.5
P47	5.0	7.0	1.0	2.5