
The Effect of Task-Based Instruction on the Acquisition of Content and Academic Language

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the number of English language learners (ELLs) has risen tremendously. In the United States, it is reported that ELL enrollment “has increased nearly seven times the rate of total student enrollment” (Pompa & Hakuta, 2012, p.123). To meet the need of ELLs’ learning in academic settings, a great deal of research has been done to analyze and interpret effective methods of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction in the classroom. Among language pedagogy, curriculums that emphasize communication and experiential learning have proven effective and offered empirical insights into the process of language acquisition (Nunan, 1991; 2004). Within the breadth of communicative teaching, methods that integrate content and language offer students meaningful opportunities to develop their academic language proficiency.

Beginning in the 1980s, one increasingly popular method that incorporates both language and content, is a method called Task-Based Instruction (TBI) (Ellis, 2000; Nunan, 1991; Slimani-Rolls, 2005). TBI emphasizes communication in the target language through authentic texts, focuses on the learning process, capitalizes on the learner’s personal experiences, and provides a link to real-world language situations (Ellis, 2009; Nunan, 1991, 2004; Willis, 1996). While abundant empirical data have been gathered to conclude the benefit of TBI on second language acquisition (SLA), there lacks data on research conducted to assess the implications of TBI on improving ELLs’ subject-specific knowledge and understanding. Great emphasis on academic achievement for all students increases the need for studies to seek effective instructional strategies to facilitate ELLs’ learning. Thus, this study aimed to explore how TBI promotes ELLs’ academic language and content knowledge, specifically in Social Studies at the secondary school level.

Literature Review

Task Definition and Design

To facilitate content understanding in ELLs, many instructors adopt a learner-centered approach to language teaching that focuses on the integration of subject matter and language development, referred to as Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Drawing influence from the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), CBI focuses on the meaning of language negotiated by students through communicative practice (Brown and Lee, 2015; Heo, 2006; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, within CBI, the primary objective is the development of content understanding through the use of language practice. This method lacks the emphasis on the development of subject-specific academic language that ELLs need to be successful in future academic courses (Omoto & Nyongesa, 2013). Alternatively, TBI tasks that are communicative and utilize meaningful input from subject content can be an effective method of instruction to aid ELLs in both academic language acquisition and subject comprehension.

TBI is a method built on the principles of CLT, when the theoretical paradigm began to shift away from traditional form-focused, grammar-based classroom approaches. TBI emphasizes authentic communication, meaningful input, and real-world context through which students are given opportunities to take part in a task to achieve a goal (Brown and Lee, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Savignon, 1997). To closely analyze the effect of TBI on SLA, it is important to first distinguish what defines a “task.” In the context of second language learning, a task is defined as an activity in which students are engaged in the process of language learning (Williams & Burden, 1997). While researchers and educators often argue differing views on the specifications of a task, a general consensus among scholars recognizes a task under the following criteria: 1) the meaning of a task is primary, 2) the task presents a specific goal which needs to be achieved, 3) the task activity is evaluated by outcome, and 4) the task has real-world context (Skehan, 1998; Nunan, 2004).

Rather than focusing on the development of linguistic skills needed to communicate effectively, TBI places significance on the communicative activity itself, accentuating the process through which linguistic skills are developed (Ellis, 2000). In addition, students are able to use various language forms to accomplish a task.

Thus, the role of TBI in a classroom greatly differs from traditional, form-focused grammar exercises used in ESL instruction (Willis & Willis, 2001). Since its inception, the scope of TBI has broadened from involving tasks strictly drawn from everyday life, to incorporating content-based tasks that enhance learners' proficiency in core academic subjects. TBI aims to provide activities in which the negotiation of meaning is primary and the task outcomes result in SLA (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2008).

Research on Task-Based Instruction

A body of research has been implemented to investigate the effectiveness of TBI (e.g., Cao, 2012; Marashi & Dadari, 2012; Miao, 2014; Wong & Conley, 2016; Zhang & Hung, 2013). Analysis of the research provides empirical support for the effectiveness of TBI in a variety of academic facets. Researchers have explored the role of TBI at the university level in both language-specific and content-based academic courses. A fundamental study conducted by Shih (1986) demonstrated that content-based writing tasks in academic subjects promoted both academic language development, as well as content understanding by strengthening ELLs' critical thinking, research, and rhetorical skills. From the study, it is clear that integrating content-based tasks into the subject classroom develops the skills necessary for ELLs to write effectively. Recent research has reinforced this conclusion, which demonstrates the benefits of TBI not only on ELLs' writing competence, but also reading skills which are crucial for them to reach academic subject proficiency at the university level (Seyedi & Farahani, 2014; Zhaochun, 2015).

Within the K-12 spectrum, studies have focused on the impact of TBI on academic skill development, such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar, and writing performance (Marashi & Dadari, 2012; Shintani, 2012; Wong & Conley, 2016). A study conducted by Shintani (2012) aimed to measure acquisition of vocabulary and grammar skills and focused on young learners with little, to no experience of language learning. From the study, the author concluded that TBI is an effective method to promote vocabulary and grammar acquisition in ELLs with lower levels of proficiency. However, it furthers the question of whether TBI benefits students of different age groups in the development of academic language. As content learning presents complex vocabulary that ELLs must acquire to adequately communicate about different subjects, vocabulary acquisition techniques are essential to

instruction. The research investigated by Marashi and Dadari (2012) focused on the effectiveness of group-based TBI on secondary level students' writing abilities. From the study outcomes, it can be concluded that writing tasks which derive input from individual experience and maintain a real-world application promote creativity and performance.

Nonetheless, while a great deal of research supports the effectiveness of TBI in academic settings, a recent research study conducted by Wong and Conley (2016) indicates that although TBI allows ELLs to explore the language and to think deeply about a content topic, relying on tasks alone does not promote academic language development significantly, especially for students with lower levels of language proficiency. It is suggested that both implicit knowledge and explicit instruction of the language are necessary in order to see substantial improvement in academic language (Ellis, 2005).

While there is research conducted within the K-12 level range, it is not sufficient to assess TBI in subject-specific classes. Utilizing group-based TBI in the secondary level classroom has also proven to be effective in building ELLs' writing proficiency. While the research findings are positive regarding the benefit of implementing TBI into ESL instruction, there is inadequate study into the utilization of TBI in secondary level core subject classrooms. Specifically, the impact of TBI on promoting ELLs' subject-specific academic language proficiency and content writing abilities has yet to be determined.

Social Studies and English Language Learners

One academic subject that has proven to be a particular challenge for ELLs comprehension and performance is secondary Social Studies (Choi, 2013; Short, 1994; Szpara & Ahmad, 2006; Vaughn, Martinez, Reutebuch, Carlson, Thompson & Franci, 2010). Educators have determined that the subject of Social Studies poses unique difficulties in that the content covers history, politics, geography, and economics, and whereas each facet contains specialized language, complex vocabulary, and abstract concepts (Egbert & Ernst-Slavit, 2010). Within the scope of complex language, Social Studies texts often contain rarely encountered terms which can overwhelm ELLs and lead to misinterpretation of the passage (Egbert & Ernst-Slavit, 2010). Therefore, it is clear that a vital aspect of Social

Studies instruction is the development of specialized academic language proficiency to fully comprehend content and adequately discuss historical topics.

Social Studies texts also present unfamiliar grammatical structures, such as passive voice and multiple clause sentences, which students are sometimes unable to decipher (Egbert & Ernst-Slavit, 2010). Writing tasks often access students' prior background knowledge on historical events or social phenomena, as well as require critical thinking skills, such as analyzing and summarizing data (Short, 1994). Unfortunately, many ELLs do not possess the literacy skills or content understanding to complete these assessments independently, which places the population at risk for failure in content area classes (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). Educators must seek methods of instruction that explicitly develop critical academic skills while furthering student comprehension of content.

While studies have been conducted to capture the effectiveness of TBI on writing at the secondary level age group, the research is limited to generic, academic writing and does not indicate the effects of TBI on core subject writing. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine whether TBI is effective in developing ELLs' academic language proficiency and subject understanding. In particular, the study aimed to look at whether implementing TBI facilitates ELLs' writing performance within the Social Studies classroom.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the present study:

- 1) Is Task-Based Instruction effective in promoting English Language Learners' content knowledge and academic language in Social Studies?
- 2) In what ways does Task-Based Instruction facilitate the development of English Language Learners' academic language in Social Studies?

Method

This is a qualitative case study. To examine whether and how TBI facilitates content knowledge and academic language development of ELLs, we used the qualitative paradigm (Preissle, 2006) because it provides an in-depth understanding of how the method benefits the learning of ELLs. Additionally, a case study design was chosen because we were interested in how the method could help a particular group of ELLs learn academic language and content (Stake, 2005).

Among a variety of TBI designs, we selected Willis' (1996) Task-Based Instruction (TBI) framework that consists of pre-task cycle, task cycle, and language focus. The framework emphasizes both fluency and accuracy within the task.

Setting and Participants

The study took place at a high school on the East Coast of the United States. It was implemented in a 10th grade ESL Social Studies class with a focus on the U.S. History. There were 15 ELLs in the class. All of the students were included in the study. Of the 15 students, there were six students from Brazil, three from Mexico, three from Ecuador, one from Portugal, and one from Haiti.

In describing the participants' language proficiency, WIDA (2012)'s English language proficiency standards were used. Aspiring to advance language development and academic achievement for ELLs, WIDA is a multi-state collaborative organization which offers resources, conducts research, and provides education for professionals working with language learners. To further the goal of academic achievement, WIDA has adopted a "Can Do" philosophy, focusing on student proficiencies at various levels of language abilities, rather than deficiencies. More specifically, WIDA offers various Can Do Descriptors which outline six levels of English Language proficiency, from "Entering" the language to "Reaching" the optimal use of English. Within each level, students Can Do various skills related to the four domains of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For instance within the listening domain, a Level 1 ELL at the "Entering" phase can "match everyday oral information to pictures, diagrams, or photographs", whereas a Level 5 ELL can "make inferences from oral discourse containing satire, sarcasm, or humor" (WIDA, 2012). As a student progresses through each ability level, the skill complexity increases as well. Thus, WIDA provides an accessible tool for educators to measure student language development in accordance to level of proficiency.

Thus, based on WIDA (2012), three of the participants were at level one, one was at level two, nine were at level three, and two were at level four.

Design

The topic that was chosen for this study was "Compare and Contrast the Views of Anti-Federalists and Federalists", which was part of the curriculum of the school

district. The participants had learned about the topic prior to the study, but the teacher reported that the participants' knowledge on the topic was not sufficient enough for them to write an essay on it. Therefore, before implementing the task, the teacher first provided a summary of the topic accompanied by a T-Chart as a review. A T-Chart is a graphic organizer which allows students to create a visual representation of the comparisons and contrasts of two ideas, figures, topics, etc. (See Appendix A).

After the review, the participants were asked to write a compare and contrast essay on the chosen topic as a pre-test. Upon completion of the entire task, they composed another piece of compare and contrast writing on the same topic as a post-test.

During the pre-task cycle, the teacher explained to the participants what comparison writing was. The teacher also instructed the class on specific language, vocabulary, and phrases needed for compare and contrast writing. Sample essays were also provided for the participants. After that, the class was introduced to the role-play activity that they were to perform during the task cycle. In the task cycle, the participants were divided into teams. Each team assigned roles to the group members and crafted a script for the role-play to compare and contrast two sides of the chosen topic. They also had to discuss how they would present their script to the class. According to the participants' performance on the pre-test, the teacher selected simple past tense as the grammar feature for the language focus phase. The teacher explained what past tense was and provided examples of the grammar feature. The participants were then instructed to examine their writing and edit any incorrect use of the grammar that they could find. In the following class period, the students were asked to write a comparison of the same topic as a post-test.

Data and Data Analysis

Data consisted of the participants' pre and post-test writing samples. The data were analyzed to examine how TBI benefited the participants' development of academic writing in Social Studies. Adopting the Performance Definitions for writing and the Features of Academic Language in WIDA's standards (WIDA, 2012) as well as the Writing Assessment Scoring Model by North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Test Development Section (2003), the researchers created a writing rubric to assess the participants' writing samples. These two instruments were

selected because, together, they addressed the components of academic language as well as specific content knowledge and language for the chosen topic for the study. The researchers analyzed and compared the participants' pre- and post-task writing samples in terms of their content knowledge, vocabulary usage, and grammar through ongoing and recursive analysis methods (Merriam, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

In terms of determining whether TBI is effective in developing content understanding, there was no noticeable change in students' pre-task and post-task writing. Rather, much of the content seemed to be copied from the first writing activity to the next, with changes mainly in the language feature usage. As the participants lacked prior-knowledge on the chosen topic, the teacher first reviewed a summary accompanied by a T-Chart to supplement student understanding. However, after analyzing student pre- and post-task writing, the phraseology was strikingly similar across various students' writings, regardless of language level. The repeated phrases indicate a heavy reliance on the summary to complete the pre- and post-task writing prompt. As identified by Short (1994), writing tasks in the subject of Social Studies often require students to access background knowledge on historical events and social phenomena. Thus, as the participants did not possess adequate understanding of the topic, a review of the topic was certainly required for completion of the task. However, student dependence on the summary and T-Chart skewed the pre-task results with an artificially deeper measurement of content knowledge than in actuality. However, in accordance to greater language capacity, the participants with higher levels of proficiency demonstrated more successful incorporation of academic vocabulary, as well as use of compare and contrast language features in post-task writing, which reveals a higher mastery level of the topic derived from the summary and T-Chart. It can be concluded that the students' lack of language ability and topic awareness hindered the composition of the writing prompts, resulting in fewer subject-specific vocabulary terms and language features integrated.

Drawing from these conclusions, it is essential that future studies on TBI employ methods that are better able to support content comprehension for all students. To ensure understanding for all level language learners, instructional strategies could be implemented that allow for scaffolding of challenging material. For in-

stance, an adapted version of the text could be provided for students with lower levels of proficiency to promote understanding and alleviate the language burden (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2017). Having a deeper knowledge of the topic can help students incorporate additional language features, as well as expand upon individual ideas. Alternatively, utilization of heterogeneous collaborative student groupings to complete the summary and T-Chart activity could be arranged to foster scaffolding off of students with higher level language proficiencies. Collaborative student groupings both promote comprehension and allow for communicative opportunities (Gibbons, 2015).

In concordance with a demonstrating a greater content understanding, the pre- and post-task writing results also reveal that the participants of levels three and four presented growth in language feature integration and use of academic vocabulary from the task completion. In the post-task writing samples, key academic phrases were included. For instance,

“By the same token, the powers of the national government are separated and balanced among the three branches.”

“In comparison, the Federalists believed that the Bill of Rights was unnecessary.”

The participants not only were able to improve use of vocabulary in the post-test, but they were able to utilize compare and contrast language features to expand upon their ideas:

“Regardless, I like the Anti-Federalists because they want for all people.”

In the excerpt above, the participant presented the ability to summarize a main facet of the Anti-Federalists, as well as express personal opinion and identify a preference. As ELLs often lack essential literacy skills to achieve in content-specific classes, building academic proficiencies, such as analyzing content through comparing and contrasting differing political movements, improves chances for success in all core subjects (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). Therefore, the students' improvement in utilizing compare and contrast language features confirms the effectiveness of TBI in strengthening students' ability to develop academic language, as concluded in prior studies (Marashi & Dadari, 2012; Seyedi & Farahani, 2014; Shih, 1986; Shintani, 2012; Zhaochun, 2015).

However, in contrast to findings in previous studies conducted on TBI, the participants' grammar usage presented no significant improvement across pre- and post-task writing tasks. Specifically, the participants struggled with writing in the past tense, which was the grammar feature selected for the language-focus phase. In the post-task results, present tense verbs were commonly found erroneously where past tense should have been utilized:

"The anti-federalists believe that people should have their rights..."

In the above excerpt, past tense "believed" should have been used because the participant was referring to events that happened in American history. Additionally, in both the pre- and post-task writing assessments, there were numerous and repeated errors in using subject-verb agreement and consistent verb tense. For example,

"And they was fighting for the quality unlike the federalist."

"The anti-federalists is a large republic where the government was organized on the basis of checks and balance."

The participants seemed to replicate mistakes from the pre- to post-task activities. One possible explanation for the lack of improvement in grammar may stem from the design of one of the learning tasks. Unfortunately, the communicative skit allowed the use of present tense in the dialogue. Thus, the participants might have been unintentionally switching between past and present tense in the pre-task, task, and post-task cycle.

Previous research (e.g., Wong, Armento, & Staggard, 2015) indicates that being able to use consistent verb tenses tends to be one of the challenges among ELLs. To remediate the grammatical confusion for students, teachers should select one distinct, consistent grammar tense for the entirety of the TBI cycle. Therefore, as a teacher identifies, for example, past tense as the language focus, the communicative tasks should be composed accordingly to ensure uniformity across the lesson. Moreover, grammar acquisition is enhanced through meaningful input with real world connection to students' lives (Brown & Lee, 2015; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Therefore, the language focus portion of the task-cycle should provide language learners with opportunities to practice grammatical forms through meaningful activities. Relying on their personal experiences and individual perspectives

can increase language learners' awareness of the grammar feature (Cullen, 2012; Thornbury, 1999).

To adequately assess the effectiveness of TBI, it is also imperative to analyze whether the participants were successful in completing the task itself. Analyzing the writing samples, it becomes apparent that the participants, especially those at level one, did not quite understand the goals set forth in the task. Rather than drawing comparisons and contrasts through crafted dialogue, the participants tended to focus on summary of the ideologies of the Federalists and Anti-federalists. The inability to expand upon ideas through the communicative dialogue could derive from various causes, either the students did not fully comprehend compare and contrast, or, the content topic was too abstract and difficult to understand without sufficient background knowledge. This suggests a certain proficiency threshold for certain task types. This finding also reflects the necessity of maintaining critical task criteria, namely, that the task presents a specific goal which needs to be achieved (Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998). Without a clear instruction in task objective, the participants were not able to fully benefit from the completion of the task cycle. Therefore, to ensure that future students are able to maximize learning potential in task implementation, teachers must create level-appropriate tasks, and delineate clear, specific goals which students can work to accomplish.

Pedagogical Implications

Drawing from the study results and discussion points above, the learning task itself could be altered for improvement. For instance, the teacher noted that the participants were distracted during the role-play presentations, as they were nervous preparing for their own demonstration of compare and contrast dialogue. Therefore, the participants were not able to benefit from watching and listening to the academic language and content presented in their peers' skit dialogues.

Moving forward in TBI implementation, students should be provided with a specific activity or comprehensive directions as to what output should be produced with the oral and visual language input (Lee and VanPatten, 2003; VanPatten, 2003). Categorizing, noting, or recording input would help students better digest the content, in addition to fostering the academic language acquisition. Careful scaffolding is crucial.

Furthermore, providing an organizational template for input, such as a graphic organizer, would allow for scaffolding of the challenging content material and more effectively accommodating students with various language levels of proficiency (Gallavan & Kotler, 2007).

The significant improvement on the use academic vocabulary and phrases for compare and contrast writing shows that while teaching content and language communicatively is vital, explicit instruction on academic language, such as content area vocabulary and sentence structures is beneficial to ELLs (Goldenberg, 2008; Short & Echevarría, 2016).

Conclusion

Through this study, we examined the effectiveness of using TBI to facilitate high school ELLs' learning of content knowledge and academic language, particularly in Social Studies. The study offers insights into how teachers can make good use of TBI to improve ELLs' writing performance in various content areas. In the study, the participants with a stronger understanding of English were better able to incorporate language features associated with compare and contrast, as well as further develop upon the content material, whereas the lower level students seemed to merely copy key phrases from their topic summary notes, without expansion of ideas or use of language features. Primarily, through analysis, contrasts developed between growth measured in pre- and post-task writing samples from the participants with lower levels of proficiency. This finding illustrates a profound challenge that many secondary level, subject-specific teachers face when attempting to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of a variety of language levels and academic abilities. Our future work will continue to explore how TBI could be applied to teach different content subjects to ELLs at various grade levels.

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APPENDIX A

T-Chart

Federalists	Antifederalists