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THE ROLE OF FOCUS ON FORM IN MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHING: STRATEGIES AND CONTROVERSIES

The article focuses on the features of the popular method «focus on form» (form-focus) in modern foreign language teaching. The main points of the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach are briefly reviewed and the notion of a task is considered. The key characteristics of the TBLT approach are highlighted based on the research of R. Ellis, D. and J. Willis, M. Long, and D. Lynch. These include a clear communicative focus of tasks, the use of language based on authentic texts, attention to meaning, and a carefully thought-out form. An important interpretation of task is given, according to which a task has three main stages: pre-task, main task and post-task.

In order to accomplish the objectives of task-based learning, pre- and post-task activities are essential. The pre-task stage serves to prepare learners for the main task and the post-task stage provide them with opportunities to analyze the process and linguistic forms used during task completion.

Focus on form is presented as a necessary component of the task-based language teaching approach and at the same time as an independent phenomenon demonstrated to be effective in practice. A number of types of focus on form have been considered: grammar instruction, modelling, corrective feedback, providing a model and consciousness raising. These types of focus are correlated with task stages.

It is shown that focus on form has a number of controversial aspects that require further study, specifically the use of form-focus on pre-task, main task or post-task stage, the corrective feedback and the relevance of its use on a particular task-stage. It is concluded that teachers have the opportunity to apply focus on form strategies that have proven to be effective. They also should take into account some important factors such as teaching goals, social context of teaching, teacher's own experience, knowledge and intuition.

Key words: *focus on form, task-based language teaching, task, online learning, offline learning.*

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РОЛЬ ФОКУСУВАННЯ НА ФОРМІ В СУЧАСНОМУ ВИКЛАДАННІ МОВИ: СТРАТЕГІЇ ТА ВИКЛИКИ

Статтю присвячено особливостям популярного методу «фокусування на формі» (focus on form, form-focus) у сучасному викладанні іноземних мов. Розглянуто основні положення підходу, орієнтованого на виконання завдань та поняття завдання (task). Ключові характеристики підходу, орієнтованого на виконання завдань, виокремлено з опорою на дослідження Р. Елліса, Д. та Дж. Улліс, М. Лонга, Д. Лінча. Серед них – чітка комунікативна спрямованість завдань, використання мови на матеріалі автентичних текстів, приділення уваги значенню, ретельно продумана форма. Подано тлумачення завдання, згідно з яким воно складається з трьох основних етапів: передзавдання (pre-task), основне завдання (main task) та післязавдання (post-task).

Для того, щоб досягти цілей навчання, заснованого на завданнях, важливими є до- та післязавданні види діяльності. Передзавдання (pre-task) слугує для підготовки учнів до виконання основного завдання (main task), а етап післязавдання (post-task) надає їм можливість проаналізувати процес і мовні форми, використані під час виконання завдання.

Фокусування на формі представлено як необхідний компонент задачного підходу до викладання мови і водночас як самостійне явище, що продемонструвало свою ефективність на практиці. Розглянуто декілька типів фокусування на формі: навчання граматики, моделювання, коригувальний зворотний зв'язок, надання прикладу та підвищення рівня свідомості. Ці типи фокусування співвіднесено з етапами виконання завдання.

Показано, що фокусування на формі має низку суперечливих аспектів, які потребують подальшого вивчення, зокрема використання фокусування на формі на етапах передзавдання, основного завдання чи післязавдання, коригувального зворотного зв'язку та доречності його використання на конкретному етапі завдання. Зроблено висновок, що викладачі мають можливість застосовувати стратегії фокусування на формі, які довели свою ефективність. Їм також варто враховувати деякі важливі фактори, такі як цілі навчання, соціальний контекст викладання, власний досвід, знання та інтуїцію педагога.

***Ключові слова:** фокусування на формі, навчання мови, засноване на завданнях, завдання, онлайн-навчання, офлайн-навчання.*

The Problem Statement. Actually Task-based language teaching approach (TBLT) is one of the most demanded and used in mass learning. Many modern textbooks of English as a foreign language are built on it, it is widely practiced both in face-to-face teaching and in distance teaching. TBLT has gained popularity in language education due to its focus on developing students' communicative competence and its alignment with communicative language teaching principles. It provides a more natural and motivating environment for language learning, as it encourages learners to use the language in ways that are relevant to their everyday lives.

The popularity of Task-based language teaching is explained by its versatility: it is employed to teach students of any level from A1 to C2. It also is well combined with other approaches such as communicative, content-based or computer-mediated language teaching. Its effectiveness has been proven in the works of researchers around the world (Ellis, 1997; Ellis, 2017; Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 2015; Littlewood, 2007; Lynch, 2009; Lyster &Ranta, 1997; Willis&Willis 2007; Benati, 2021).

In TBLT the term «focus on form» refers to the deliberate attention to specific language elements in the context of meaningful, communicative tasks. While the focus of TBLT is on engaging learners in authentic language use through tasks, the developers of this approach also recognise the importance of working on language accuracy and proficiency.

The key difference with TBLT is that the focus on form is integrated into task-based activities rather than being the primary goal of the learning. This approach is based on the principle that learners are more likely to learn and retain language forms when they are encountered in a meaningful, communicative context.

R. Ellis, M. Long, and N. Spada have made significant contributions to the theoretical perspectives of integrating a form focus in the context of TBLT. In their works, they proposed models for balancing form-based learning with task-based learning, taking into account such factors as task complexity, learners' language proficiency and the nature of the target language features (Ellis, 1997; Ellis, 2007; Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 2015; Spada and Lightbown, 2008).

M. Swain has explored the role of explicit and implicit form-based learning in TBLT, considering the potential advantages and challenges of each approach. Her research provided valuable information about the cognitive and pedagogical considerations involved in integrating form-based learning into a task-based language learning environment (Swan, 1995; Swan, 2000).

The Analysis of Recent Researches and Publications. The use of TBLT in language education has been studied in a number of studies. S. Li and D. Larsen-Freeman both emphasise the importance of a balanced approach that combines form-based learning with a content or communicative approach (Li, 2021; Larsen-Freeman, 2021). This is supported by Bryfonski's research: he showed that novice teachers trained in TBLT were more successful in implementing TBLT principles, including a focus on form, in their lessons (Bryfonski, 2021). Afshar also highlights the effectiveness of task-related form focus exercises, such as focusing on spoken form and word parts, for ESP vocabulary development (Afshar, 2021). Together, these studies emphasise the value of integrating form-focused learning into a task-based approach to language teaching.

A range of researchers have focused on the effectiveness of different types of form focus, as well as the specifics of their practical application in the context of TBLT (Benati, 2021; Chrissou, 2020; Değirmencioğlu, 2023).

Some researchers have studied the timing and nature of corrective feedback provided during tasks, investigating the impact of immediate or delayed feedback on learners' accuracy and fluency (Chrissou, 2020; Pouresmaeil and Gholami, 2023).

In addition, specialists have examined the role of learners' attention to form during task performance: in particular, they have investigated how learners notice and adopt linguistic forms in the context of meaningful tasks. This line of research has shed light on the interaction between form attention and meaning attention, as well as on the factors that influence learners' perceptions of form-focused feedback (Choi K. et al., 2022). At the same time, focus on form retains its debatable aspects, as we will show later.

The purpose of the research. The purpose of this article is to analyse the key aspects of the concept of focus on form in the context of the TBLT approach to teaching foreign languages, to highlight the advantages and problems of focus on form, and to outline possible ways of solving them.

The methodology of the research. The methods of observation, analysis and synthesis are used in the paper. Based on the key research, the most relevant points of focus on form are presented. We consider the concept of a task, its structure, consisting of a pre-task, a main task and a post-task. We then look at the implementation of the focus on form at each of the levels of tasks. The difficulties that a teacher may face in the classroom are discussed and possible ways to overcome them.

The Statement of the Basic Material. Review the main points we need in this article. Three are in question: task, focus on form, and the TBLT conception. The TBLT technique possesses a number of attributes (Ellis et al., 2020; Willis and Willis, 2007):

– Its main goal is to assist students in becoming ready to use the language in authentic contexts;

– When teachers enable students to share their thoughts using language resources they own, they are serving a clearly defined communicative function;

– The primary focus is on meaning;

– There is a gap that necessitates informational communication;

– Form is given careful consideration. The teacher calls the students' attention to any challenges they encountered while completing the activity;

– Pre-task, main task, and post-task are the three stages of a standard task structure.

We have chosen the definition of task that best fits our goals and context out of all the ones that have been proposed. Assuming that a task is "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective", as defined by Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (Bygate et al., 2001), we also adhere to R. Ellis's interpretation, which views a task as a workplan rather than a process (Ellis et al., 2020). Pre-task, main task, and post-task are the three phases of the typical task structure. We argue that in order to accomplish the objectives of task-based learning, pre- and post-task activities are essential. The pre-task stage serves to prepare learners for the main task and the post-task stage provide them with opportunities to analyze the process and linguistic forms used during task completion.

Researchers acknowledge that one of the main components of task-based language instruction is focus on form. D. Willis and J. Willis define focus on form as drawing learners' attention to specific form which occur in the course of a task or an associated text (Willis&Willis, 2007). The teacher can demonstrate, clarify, and use these forms. He or she can work with students to analyze and comment on specific lexical or grammatical forms by isolating and defining them.

The researchers point out that meaning is primary and focus on form is secondary. This recognition of the secondary nature of form has given cause for debate. Some researchers believe that focus on form should be introduced at pre-task or main task stages (Long, 2015; Littlewood, 2007; Lyster and Ranta, 1997). Some contend that focus on form should be used only after focus on meaning, that is, at the post-task stage (Skenan, 1998; Willis and Willis, 2007).

Another controversial issue is the question about types and strategies of form focus. Various types of form focus have been proposed and their effectiveness has been examined. We are examining different types of focus on form in additional detail.

Pre-task modeling and pre-task grammar instruction are the two forms of pre-task focus on form that are offered. Teaching a grammar rule prior to doing a task is known as pre-task grammar instruction. For example, the teacher gives the class a ten-minute grammar lesson on the use of the past simple tense before moving on to task performance. Pre-task grammar instruction proponents (Littlewood, 2007; Lyster and Ranta, 1997) argue that while grammar knowledge is necessary for students to complete a work, teachers would rather teach grammar before providing a task. There are researchers that contest the necessity of pre-task instruction. D. Willis and J. Willis worry that explicit grammar instruction predisposes learners to focus on the target structure, with the result that they may treat a task as language practice rather than a site for information exchange. This practice, it is claimed, will subvert the meaning-primary principle of task-based teaching (Willis and Willis, 2007).

An alternative to grammar instruction in the pre-task stage is modelling. Pre-task modelling is providing with a model performance. Teacher can offer to students a short task modelling video (about, for example, question formation). It makes clear task procedures and affords learning opportunities by focusing on a particular linguistic structure.

Corrective feedback is used at the main task level to apply the form focus. There are five to seven different categories of corrective feedback. The most popular ones are the explicit correction, metalinguistic clue, and explicit correction. Experts describe a clarification request as any statement that prompts further explanation of the previous statement. Clarifi-

cation can be in form of question. Metalinguistic clue is a move that provides a comment or questions some aspect of the preceding utterance, signalling a linguistic problem. Teacher can clarify which part of speech student should use, without naming the correct word. Also popular is explicit correction, a move that indicates that the statement is problematic and at the same time corrects the error (Lyster and Ranta, 1997).

As R. Ellis correctly notes, the impacts of various feedback formats are context-dependent, meaning that one format may work better in one situation while another may work better in a different one. Additionally, while resolving a specific issue, it is possible to mix multiple strategies (Ellis, 2017). In actuality, the selection of the corrective feedback method is directly influenced by a number of variables, primarily the mode of instruction (online versus offline), the group's language and cultural background, the task's specialization, and the topic for study.

Corrective feedback can be immediate and delayed. In the immediate feedback condition, students receive feedback while they are performing the task. In the delayed feedback condition they receive feedback after the task have been completed. In the case of delayed feedback, they get feedback after finishing the task. Within the teaching and research community, there is disagreement over the precise moment when making a correction is more acceptable. Delayed corrective feedback is more relevant for tasks such as a dialogue between students or other paired work. Immediate corrective feedback is best given in a monological form of speaking, for instance, during a student's oral presentation or watching a video of the students' responses. Researchers are studying immediate and delayed feedback in order to find out which one is more effective. In fact, further empirical study is required to answer this question.

Post-task focus on form provides opportunities for students to practice producing structures they found difficult during performing the task. The teacher can create a variety of form-focused exercises to demonstrate how language forms are used. Form is the emphasis of post-task categories such as raising consciousness and offering a model. Providing a model can be achieved by having more proficient speakers (or native speakers) complete the same activity. Thus, by identifying the gap between their own performance and the appropriate models, students can self-correct (Lynch, 2009).

Consciousness raising is another type of post-task focus on form. It is called input-based strategy and considered as quite effective. R. Ellis defined consciousness raising as a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic properties of the target language (Ellis, 1997). During consciousness-raising task, L2 learners develop explicit knowledge about how the target language works and are pushed to negotiate meaning (Benati, 2021).

In a typical activity of consciousness raising students are provided with text and asked to find some ways expressing specific meanings (for example, ways of giving permission), phrases with specific words or phrases they think will be useful in the future.

The Conclusions and Prospects for Further Research. Not all focus on form strategies were named. They are being actively examined all over the world and it is extremely difficult to consider all the studies. Something else is important for us: amount of problematic issues in the concept of focus on form

Table 1

Types of form focus

Stage of task	Type of focus on form	Description
Pre-task focus on form	Grammar instruction	Teaching a grammar rule before task performance
	Modelling	Providing with a model performance during pre-task stage
Main task focus on form	Corrective feedback (clarification request, metalinguistic clue, explicit correction)	Providing feedback on errors
Post-task focus on form	Providing a model	Providing with a correct model performance during post-task stage
	Consciousness raising	Activity where the students are provided with some document and required to perform some operation with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an understanding of some linguistic features of the target language

emphasize the need for further research. Actually, teachers have the opportunity to apply focus on form strategies that have proven to be effective. They also should take into account some important factors:

– teaching goals;

– social context of teaching;

– teacher's own experience, knowledge and intuition.

Research on the role of form focus in TBLT has shown that it can contribute to learners' language development by meeting their immediate communicative needs as well as paying attention to their long-term linguistic accuracy. However, the optimal balance between focusing on form and maintaining the communicative nature of the tasks remains a subject of ongoing research and debate in the field of language education.

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