Designing and Implementing Focused Tasks for a Foreign Language Context

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Why do TBLT?

1. A task-based approach helps learners develop the procedural knowledge needed to communicate in the real-world.

2. An L2 is best learned <u>through</u> communicating. It involves incidental acquisition.

3. Students are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation in a task-based approach.

4. A task-based approach enables teachers to see if students are developing the ability to communicate in an L2.

Criteria for tasks in general

Focused grammar tasks must satisfy the criteria for tasks in general:

1. primary focus on meaning
2. some kind of gap
3. the learners use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed to complete the task
4. a clearly defined outcome other than practising the grammatical feature.

Comparing a task and an exercise

A task

1. Primary focus on trying to communicate

2. There is a gap

3. Text creating

4. Successful performance = outcome of task achieved

An exercise

1. Primary focus on using language correctly

2. There is no gap

3. Text manipulating

4. Successful performance = accurate use of target feature

The Going Shopping Exercise

Look at Mary's shopping list. Then look at the list of items in Abdullah's store.

Mary's Shopping List

1. oranges
2. eggs
3. flour
4. powdered milk
5. biscuits
6. jam

Abdullah's Store

1. bread
2. salt
3. apples
4. tins of fish
5. coca cola
6. flour
7. rice
8. sugar
9. curry powder
10. biscuits
11. powdered milk
12. dried beans

Work with a partner. One person is Mary and the other person is Mr. Abdullah. Make conversations like this.

Mary: Good morning. Do you have any flour?
Abdullah: Yes, I have some./ No, I don't have any.

The 'What Can You Buy' Task

Student A:

You are going shopping at Student B's store. Here is your shopping list. Put ticks next to the items on your list you can buy.

1. oranges
2. eggs
3. flour
4. powdered milk
5. biscuits
6. jam

Student B:

You own a store. Here is a list of items for sale in your store. Find the items that Student A asks for that you do not stock.

1. bread
2. salt
3. apples
4. tins of fish
5. coca cola
6. flour
7. rice
8. sugar
9. curry powder
10. biscuits
11. powdered milk
12. dried beans

What is a focused grammar task?

A focused grammar task is a task that is intended to elicit the understanding or use of some specific grammatical feature(s) through the design of the task and by the use of methodological procedures that focus attention on specific form(s) in the implementation of the task.

Things-in-pocket task (Samuda, 2001)

Work in groups. Each group will be given a set of objects (the contents of a person's pockets).

Who do you think the person is? Complete this chart.
_____
                          How Certain Are You?
                 Possible   Probable   Certain
_____
Name
Sex
Age
Marital Status

_____

Designing grammar tasks

Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) suggest
 that such tasks can cater for:
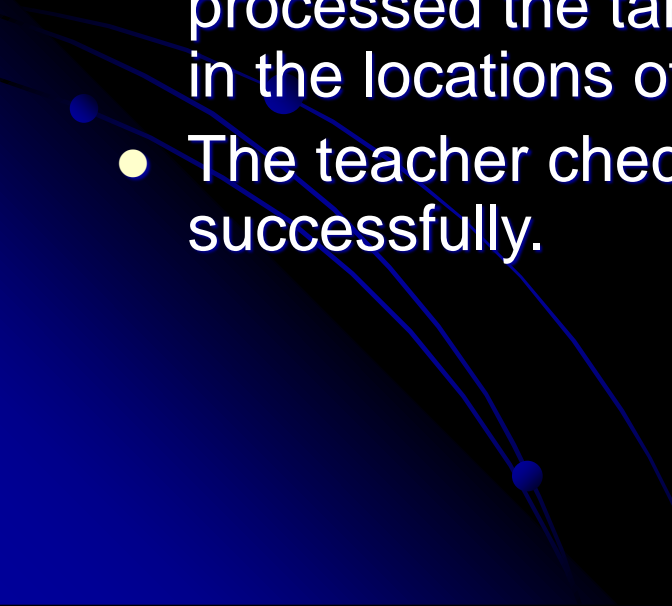a. task-naturalness
b. task-usefulness
c. task-essentialness
They recognize the difficulty of constructing
 tasks that make production of the target structure
 'essential'.

Three types of grammar tasks

1. Input-based grammar task
2. Production-based grammar task
3. Consciousness-raising task
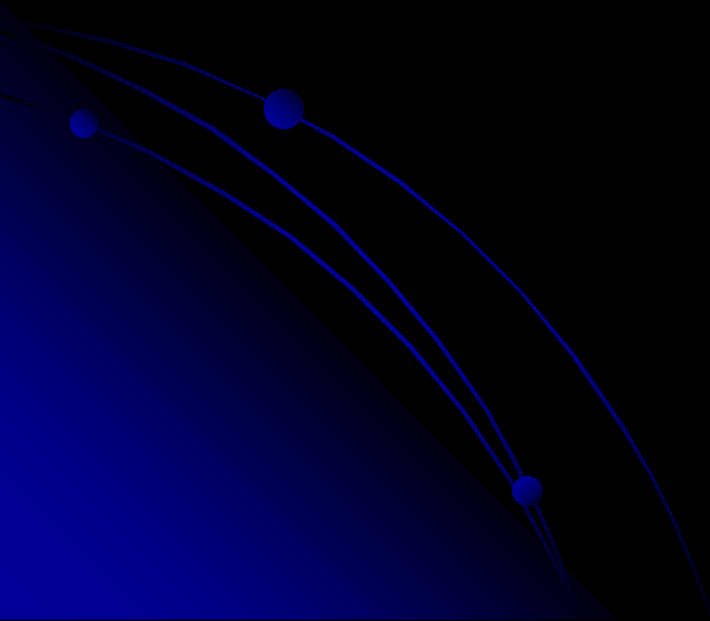
Input-based grammar task

- Students listen to instructions (e.g. where to draw in locations on a map), descriptions or a narrative text.
- The input is designed so that the students have to process the target feature in order to understand it.
- The teacher 'negotiates' the input with the students
- The students demonstrate they have successfully processed the target structure non-verbally (e.g. drawing in the locations of the map).
- The teacher checks they have completed the task successfully.

Example of an input-based task

1. The teacher displays twenty picture cards (they show ten different items – ten showing single items and some pairs of items)

2. The teacher tells the students they are going shopping and she will tell them what to put in their shopping basket.

3. The teacher gives instructions:

e.g. *Find the toothbrush. Put it in your basket.*

   Find the toothbrushes. Put them in your basket.

4. The students listen and carry out the instructions. Teacher provides feedback as they do the task.

5. After all the instructions completed, the teacher checks the students' shopping bags.

How it works

Teacher: Okay, next one. Please take the toothbrush. Toothbrush.

Student 2:   One?

Teacher: Toothbrush. One toothbrush, two toothbrushes.

Student 2:   Two?

Teacher: No, no, no. Toothbrush, toothbrush.

Student 1:   (Indicating two with fingers) two-thbrush?

Teacher: Not two. One toothbrush.

Student 2:   Eh? One, two, brush?

Teacher: No, no (indicating 'one' with fingers) toothbrush. One toothbrush. Okay? Put it in your basket.

Zoo task

Look at pictures of the animals and the map of a zoo. It shows the cages where the animals live. Listen to the descriptions of where they live. Write the name of each animal in its cage.

Target feature = expressions of location (e.g. next to; alongside of; under; above)
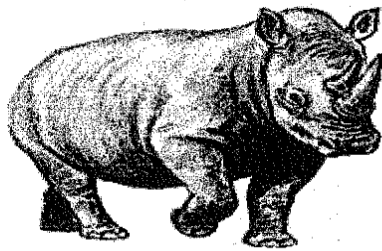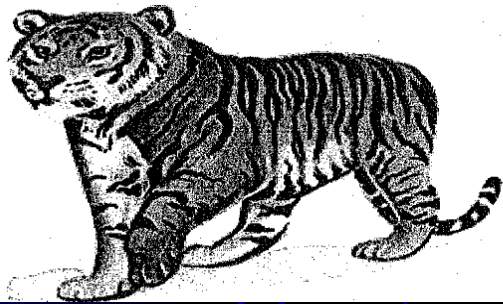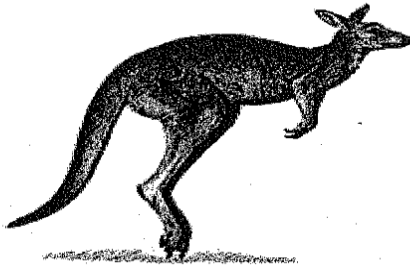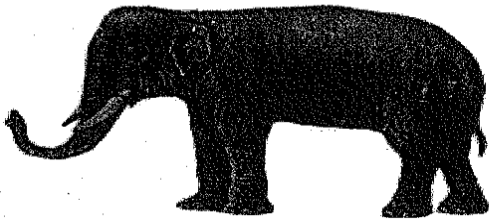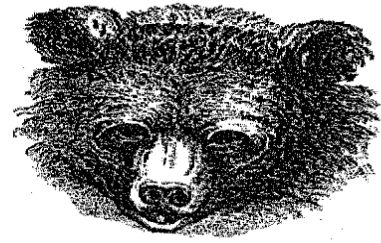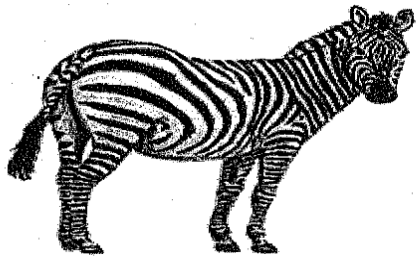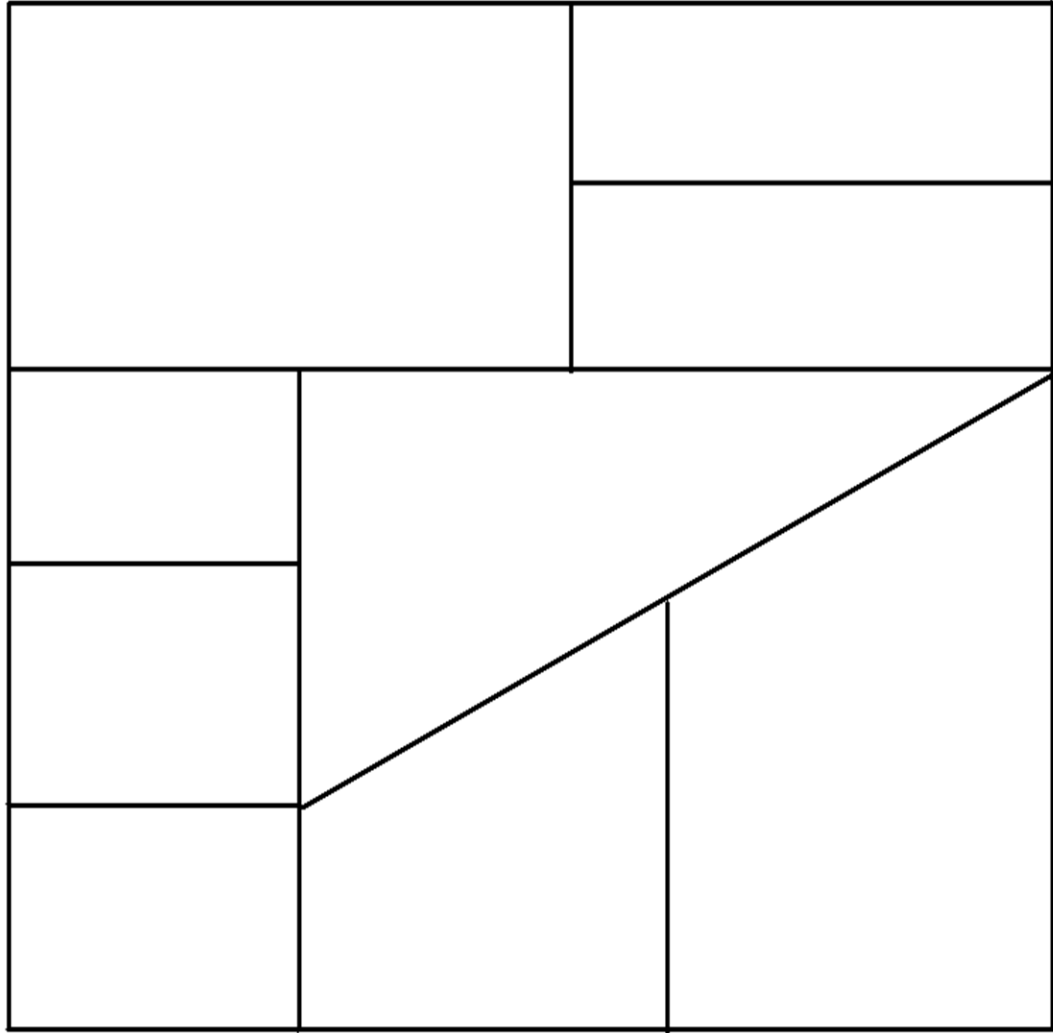
Rationale

1. Acquisition begins with comprehending the meaning of a grammatical feature.

2. This involves 'noticing' the feature in input.

3. Successful performance of the task requires 'noticing'.

4. Through performing the task the learner creates a form-function mapping.

Advantages of comprehension-based structure tasks

1. A cognitive advantage:

Learners gain knowledge through processing input not through production. Asking learners to attend to input and produce at the same time can overload short-term memory.

2. An affective advantage

Comprehension-based instruction creates less anxiety.
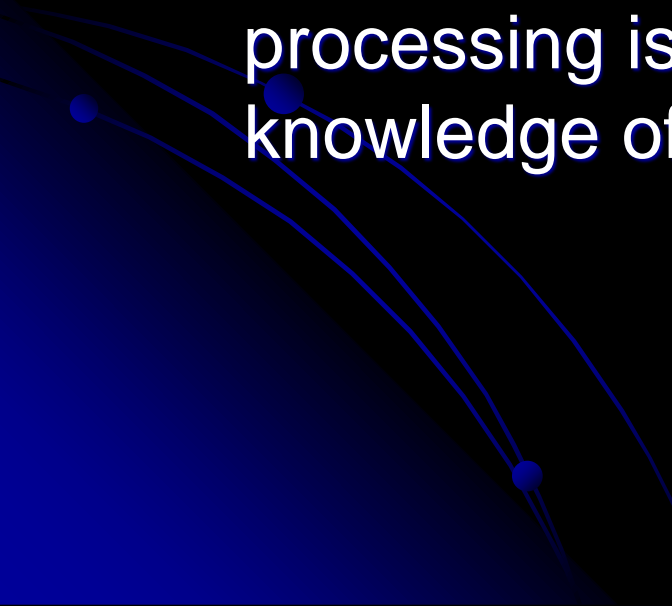
3. An efficiency advantage

There is a lag between the development or receptive and productive competence. Learners can be exposed to more language if he/she is not required to produce it. Differences in language aptitude are less apparent in listening.

4. Utility advantage

A comprehension-based approach lends itself to self-directed study.

Some evidence

- Research investigating relative effectiveness of input- and output-based instruction provides mixed results.

- However, all studies show that input-processing is effective in developing knowledge of grammatical structures.

Production-based grammar tasks

- Students provided with 'data' for the task (this can be pictorial, oral or written)
- The teacher explains the intended outcome of the task.
- The students perform the task either with the whole class or in small groups.
- While the task is being performed students receive corrective feedback when they make errors in the target structure.
- The teacher checks the outcome of the task.

Example of a production-based task

Job	Emi	Her husband
Cook meals		
Do the laundry		
Walk the dog		
Clean the house		
Do the food shopping		
Wash the dirty plates		
Pay the bills		

How it works

S: Who is cook the meals?

T: Who cooks the meals?

S: Yes, who cooks the meals?
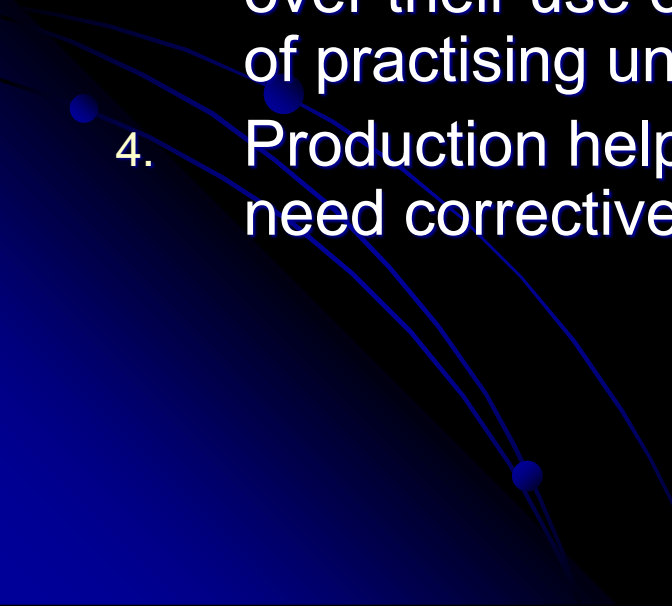
T: Okay, It's Emi's husband.

S: Emi?

T: No, Emi's husband.

T: Okay.

Rationale
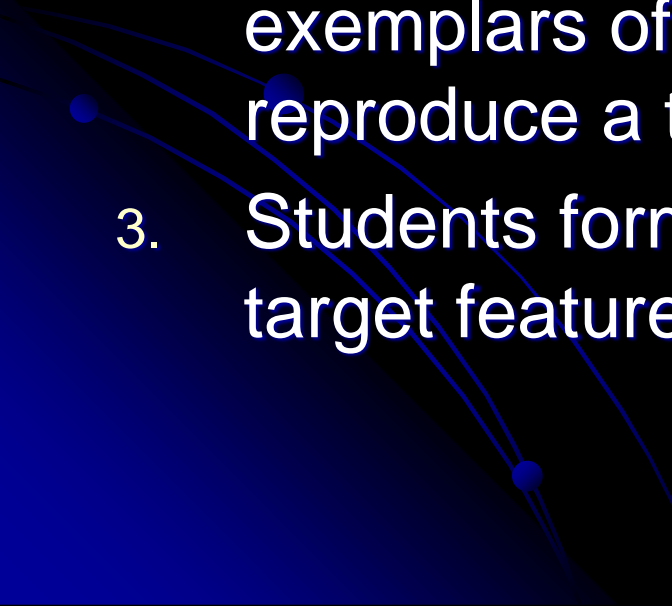
1. Learners can only produce a grammatical structure if they are developmentally ready to do so.

2. Therefore grammar-based production tasks need to be directed at features that learners have already begun to use but do not use accurately.

3. Production enables learners to gain greater control over their use of grammatical structures – importance of practising under 'real operating conditions'.

4. Production helps learners to 'notice-the-gap' – they need corrective feedback.

Some evidence

1. Carefully designed production tasks can successfully elicit attempts to produce the target structure (Mackey, 2000).

2. Performing production tasks can enable students to produce the target structure more accurately (Harley, 1989)

3. This is especially the case when they receive feedback on their attempts to do so (Ellis, Loewen and Erlam, 2006).

4. Improvement is evident in both task-based and task-supported language teaching (e.g. Erlam, Loewen and Philp, 2009).

5. Gains in accuracy are evident in both discrete-point tests and communicative tests (Norris and Ortega, 2000).

Consciousness-raising activities

1. Students provided with data that illustrate the target feature.

2. Students work in pairs to carry out some operation of the data (e.g. identify grammatical and ungrammatical sentences; classify exemplars of the target feature into categories; reproduce a text).

3. Students formulate an explicit rule for the target feature.

Example of a consciousness-raising task

1. Listen while you teacher reads out the passage about Monika Kovac. You can write down key words.
2. Listen again.
3. Now work in pairs and try to write the passage out.
4. When you have finished write a grammar rule to explain when to use the simple past tense (e.g. 'won') and when to use the present perfect tense ('has won').

Monika Kovak is a tennis player. She is only 14 years old, but she has already won many tournaments in her life. She started playing tennis with her father when she was three years old. Two years ago she went to America to a famous tennis school in California. Monika and her father have travelled to many countries. She has played in several big tournaments. Last month she went with her father to a tournament in Australia. Monika played well, but she didn't win.

How it works

S1: Next sentence. I think 'she already won many tournament'

S2: We need 'has won'.

S1: I don't know.

S2: It's present perfect tense – 'has won'. After 'already'.

S1: Yeah.

S2: So - 'She has already won many tournament'.

S1: 'Many tournaments'?

Vague language

How many examples of vague language cn you find in this conversation?

SB: What's your favourite colour?

CM: My favourite colour? Mmm. I suppose it's blue. I don't know why I like blue, except it's probably the most popular colour for … for a majority of the population.

SB: You think … more than red?

CM: Well if you look at erm, any group of people together, like say in a football stadium or something like that you'll find the predominant colour – I find the predominant colour invariably is – is blue. Blue jerseys and things like that.
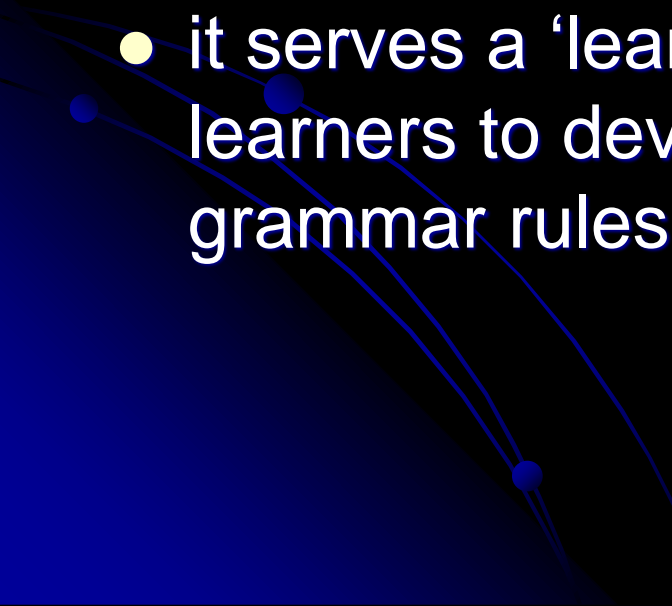
SB: Not if it's Liverpool and they're all in red!

I don't think I have a favourite colour. I just sort of wake up in the morning and I just feel like pulling on clothes of one colour or another..

CM: Yeah, but if you go shopping or something don't you choose say a blue shirt rather than a pink shirt?

SB: Well, I tend to buy – when I buy clothes, most clothes buy tend to be sort of khaki or olive or sort of greyish, and then I have things with bright colours to go with them. Not green. I don't like green. I'm not too keen on yellow either. But apart from that – red, blue, purple, black, white – you know.
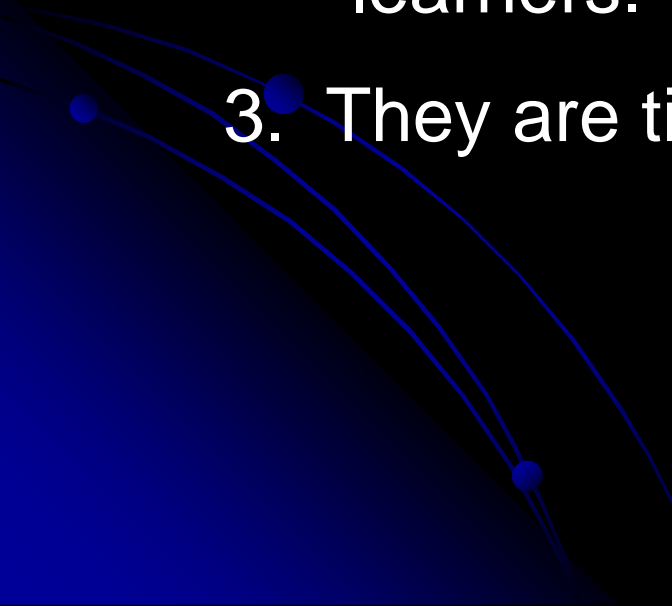
Rationale for CR

- it involves the learners in actively discovering and building their own explicit L2 grammar

- it lends itself to group work so learners have chance to interact with each other communicatively ('grammar' as content).

- it serves a 'learner training' function, helping learners to develop the skills needed to discover grammar rules autonomously.

Some evidence

- Asking learners to 'discover' rules for themselves is just as effective as 'telling' them the rules (Fotos, 1994).

- Mohamed (2001) found that a CR task was more effective than direct explanation with groups of high-intermediate ESL learners from mixed L1 backgrounds but not with a group of low-intermediate learners.

- Such tasks create 'language related episodes' where learners try work out together what is correct.

- When students perform CR tasks collaboratively they engage in negotiation of meaning and form (Fotos and Ellis, 1991: Eckertth, 2008)

- 'Collaborative task completion made a sizable contribution to the articulation, reasoning and negotiation of hypotheses that lay outside the actual structural focus of the task' (Eckerth, 2008: 109).

Limitations of CR Tasks

1. They cannot be expected to develop implicit knowledge of target structures

2. They are not well-suited to young learners, beginner learners or experiential learners.

3. They are time-consuming.
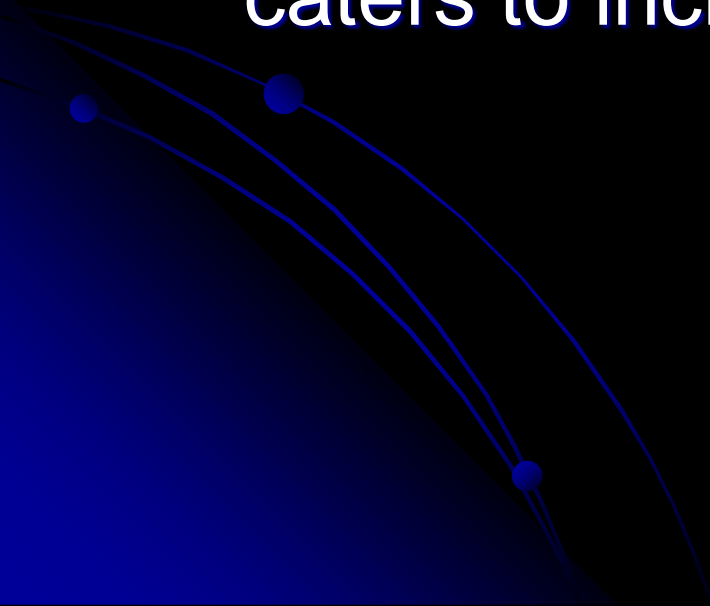
Importance of feedback

1. Feedback helps learners to revise their interlanguage hypotheses. Without feedback they do not have the chance to 'notice-the-gap'.

2. Students generally want feedback.

3. Feedback need not disturb the communicative flow of a task.

Feedback on task-performance

Type of task	Feedback
Input-based tasks	Teacher needs to inform students if they have processed the input correctly.
Production-based tasks	Students or teachers provide corrective feedback (implicit vs. explicit; input-providing vs. output-prompting)
Consciousness-raising tasks	Teacher provides feedback on the accuracy of the rules the students have discovered.

Two ways of using focused grammar tasks

1. Task-supported language teaching (TSLT) – caters to intentional language learning.

2. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) – caters to incidental language acquisition

Task-supported language teaching

- Provide oral or written input (audiotape, reading selection) that addresses the topic (structured input)

- Review the point of grammar, using examples from the material (structured input)

- Ask students to practice the grammar point in communicative drills that focus on the topic (structured output)

- Have students do a on the topic (communicative output).

An alternative sequence

1. Students do a CR task to clarify their explicit knowledge of the target feature.

2. Students to an input-based task to provide an opportunity to process the target feature under real-operating conditions.

3. Students practise production of the target feature under controlled conditions.

4. Students practise production of the target feature in a communicative task.

Skill-learning theory

declarative knowledge → procedural knowledge

… proceduralization is achieved by engaging in the target behavior – or procedure – while temporarily leaning on declarative crutches … Repeated behaviors of this kind allow the restructuring of declarative knowledge in ways that make it easier to proceduralize and allow the combination of co-occurring elements into larger chunks that reduce the working memory load. (De Keyser 1998).

Task-based language teaching

In task-based language teaching the focused task is used without prior explicit instruction.
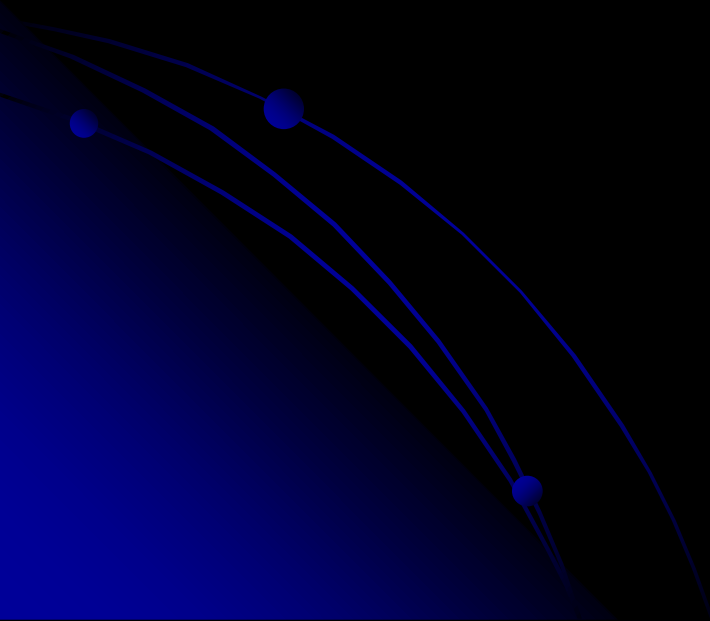
Some key questions

- 1. In TSLT does the explicit instruction affect how learners perform the task?

- 2. In TBLT, do learners use the target feature and if so do they use it correctly?

- 3. What kind of knowledge (implicit or explicit) results from TSLT and TBLT?