Task-Based Language Teaching Focusing on Pragmatics

Jing Wang

Wuhan University of Engineering Science, Wuhan 430200, China.

*Abstract：*Regarding the field of teaching pragmatics, much-existing literature is extensive and focuses particularly on explicit instruction and implicit instruction, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has rarely been explored together. Thus, there is still a gap in the research regarding how pragmatics can be taught by TBLT. The present study examines the effects of TBLT on the development of pragmatic competence. The results produced evidence supporting the advantages of TBLT over explicit instruction only when learning pragmatics.

Keywords: Instruction; TBLT; Explicit; Implicit; Pragmatics

Introduction

A large number of empirical studies show that the pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners is generally poor and is not expected to be promoted accompanied by the accumulation of language knowledge (Hong, 1991; Dong, 1994). The teaching of pragmatics knowledge in the classroom is given neither the attention nor the prominence they deserve (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Much existing classroom observational data show that pragmatic instruction still faces many challenges that both the time and chances for learners to obtain pragmatic knowledge are limited in classroom teaching (Rose & Kasper, 2006).

Task-based Language Teaching

According to Ellis (1994), implicit learning is a process in which learners achieve knowledge under the stimulus environment unconsciously without intentional knowledge input. In the present study, the task is defined as "an activity in which a person engages to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language" according to Van den Branden (2006, p. 4). Together, these studies indicate that tasks typically fall under implicit instruction.

Regarding TBLT, Skehan (1996) put forward a framework for the implementation of TBLT involving 3 stages: pre-task; task-cycle; post-task. Target forms are explained or taught explicitly after the main tasks required being done. An activity may promote the chance for implicit learning to occur, but in one activity, whether that particular language skill becomes automatic (implicit knowledge) is not guaranteed. Teachers can take explicit instruction as a supplement when correcting or giving feedback on students' performance at the post-task stage. After all of that, students are asked to repeat the task. Therefore, TBLT is a teaching method involving both explicit instruction and implicit instruction.

Pragmatic Competence

According to different standards and theoretical orientations, a variety of definitions of the term pragmatics have been suggested. This paper will use Crystal's (1997) definition:

The study of language from point of view of speakers, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. (p. 301)

In this quote, the word "*act*" refers to different types of discourse and speech acts. Without mastering or understanding speech acts and the norms of various conversations, people may fail in communication.

TBLT Focusing on Teaching Pragmatics

The research to date has tended to focus on the differences between explicit instruction and implicit instruction on teaching pragmatics (Taguchi, 2015). Task-based language teaching (TBLT), a type of instruction including goal, input, and activities (Nunan, 1989), has seldom been explored together with pragmatic competence.

Until now, in the field of pragmatics instruction, previous research comparing explicit instruction and implicit instruction have found that both are beneficial for improving pragmatic competence though, the effect of explicit instruction is more positive (House, 1996). However, in the research on psychological development and education, the relative importance of explicit learning is debated. Some studies have found that explicit learning and implicit learning are not discrete, they have a synergistic effect as they can support each other in language learning (Guo & Yang, 2002). Taking the synergistic effects of explicit and implicit learning into consideration, TBLT could play a role in teaching pragmatics. TBLT aims to develop implicit knowledge through meaning-focused tasks that are similar to activities that happen in our daily lives. It is hoped that learners will achieve the development of their linguistic abilities by undertaking the activities (Long, 1985). Besides, explicit instruction is provided at the post-task stage when giving feedback to students' performance. It makes certain forms more salient and also helps learners process the target features. Thus, the specific objective of this study is to investigate whether TBLT is more effective than explicit instruction alone in improving Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

Regarding TBLT, Willis and Willis (2007) stated that the pre-teaching of forms be avoided in the main task. Rather, learners should be allowed to employ their language resources. In this stage, they focus on meaning, and how to best convey their message to their interlocutors. Concerning the explicit teaching part involved in TBLT, they claimed that the explicit focus on isolated forms is necessary for the post-task and it assists in understanding and also brings motivational benefits.

Taguchi & Kim (2016) discussed what TBLT could provide to the teaching of pragmatics based on the nature and features of TBLT and pragmatics:

A. Both pragmatics and TBLT focus on the social perspective of language use. In TBLT, the tasks aim to help learners use language in the real world through goal-oriented, meaning-oriented activities.

B. TBLT provides authentic tasks that promote learners' language use from a pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspective.

C. Instructional activities adopted in teaching pragmatics usually ignored that different activities may lead to different learning outcomes. However, much research in TBLT has got results on the learning outcome of different activities, and this may help conduct TBLT on teaching pragmatics.

D. Pragmagtic competence refers to the ability to use language in the real-life. However, the assessment methods of pragmatic competence until now have concentrated on speech acts, implicature, and routines by DCT or role-play which can assess learners' pragmatic knowledge but are not adequate to assess their performance. Besides, assessment mainly focuses on what learners achieve in the classroom without the necessary link to social life. Task-based performance assessment could make up for this deficiency.

Reagan & Payant (2018) conducted research aimed at revealing the effect of task on Spanish learners' interlanguage pragmatic development regarding the speech act of requests. The 25 participants were registered in two groups and both of the groups shared the same Spanish courses which used a collaborative story completion task. But the task modalities adopted in the two groups were different. The oral group was asked to complete the task in the oral modality, while the written group was required to complete it in the written modality. To encourage learners to use their own linguistic and pragmatic resources, a two-way story completion gap task was devised. During the experiment, all the students were required to complete the DCT in both oral and written modalities first, and then the explicit instruction introducing the target speech

acts was conducted using a PowerPoint file. Additionally, the importance of being familiar with Spanish pragmatics was briefly explained. After, the teacher drew students' attention to three core components of Spanish requests by making them read and practice a brief dialogue. Meanwhile, helpful vocabulary and structures were provided for each of these stages. Following this, learners completed the story completion task according to their groups' modality twice with different partners. The main findings of the post-test and delayed post-test indicated that TBLT indeed had an effective impact on the development of pragmatics.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed here seems to suggest a pertinent role in adopting a teaching method that combines explicit instruction and implicit instruction for teaching pragmatics. If so, what kind of combination teaching method would be a good choice? In TBLT, a form of implicit instruction takes place at the pre-task, then students also have the chance to develop implicit knowledge of pragmatics during the task-cycle via the tasks. After, the teacher conducts explicit teaching like explaining the rules of pragmatics knowledge and the differences in a culture based on the students' performance of a task, and then repeat the same task done before or different tasks that allow the deep processing of explicit knowledge. These findings suggest a potentially beneficial role for TBLT in teaching pragmatics. The findings of this study could also provide a reference for teaching pragmatics among EFL learners in China, especially for developing both implicit and explicit knowledge of pragmatics at the same time.

References

[1] Crystal, D. (1997). The Cambridge encyclopedia of language. CUP.

[2] Dong, X. (1994). Dui bu tong jie duan ying yu zhuan ye xue sheng yu yong neng li de diao cha yu fen xi [The investigation and analysis of pragmatic competence of English major students]. Foreign Language Education, 3, 91-95.

[3] Ellis, R. (1994). The study of second language acquisition. OUP.

[4] Guo, X., & Yang Z. (2002). Research on interrelation of implicit and explicit learning. Acta Psychologica Sinica, 34(4), 21-26.

[5] Hong, G. (1991). Ying yu yu yong neng li diao cha ji qi dui wai yu jiao xue de qi shi [The investigation of English pragmatic competence and its complication of foreign language teaching]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 4, 56-60.

[6] House, J. (1996). Developing pragmatic fluency in English as a foreign language: routines and metapragmatic awareness. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 18(2), 225-252.

[7] Long, M. H. (1985). Input and second language acquisition theory. In S. M. Gass, & C. G. Madden. (Eds.), Input in SLA (pp. 377-393). Newbury House.

[8] Nunan, D. (1989). Designing tasks for the communicative classroom. CUP.

[9] Reagan, D., & Payant, C. (2018). Task modality effects on Spanish learners' interlanguage pragmatic development. In N. Taguchi, & Y. Kim (Eds.), Task-based approaches to teaching and assessing pragmatics (pp. 113-136). John Benjamins.

[10] Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. Applied Linguistics, 17(1). https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/17.1.38

[11] Taguchi, N. (2015). Instructed pragmaticys at a glance: Where instructional studies were, are, and should be going. Language Teaching, 48(1), 1-50.

[12] Taguchi, N., & Kim, Y. (2016). Collaborative dialogue in learning pragmatics: Pragmatic-related episodes as an opportunit for learning request-making. Applied Linguistics, 37(3), 416-437.

[13] Van den Branden, K. (Ed.) (2006). Task-based language teaching in practice. CUP.

[14] Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). Doing task-based teaching. OUP.