Task-based language learning put to the test: the case of the *prácticas comunicativas* in Spanish as a foreign language for Business and Economics

Isabelle De Ridder  
Lieve Vangehuchten  
Marta Seseña Gómez  
University of Antwerp

**Abstract**

In order to examine whether the task-based approach offers the appropriate setting to organize activities that are presumed to promote automatisation, an experiment was conducted with 65 intermediate-level students of Spanish as a foreign language for Business and Economics from the Faculty of Applied Economics at the University of Antwerp. Two groups were evaluated: an experimental group and a control group. The control group took a one-year integrated course where knowledge items were indirectly introduced, further assimilated in a focus-on-form phase, and finally trained in a course-content related communicative situation. As far as the experimental group is concerned, the transfer conditions were varied with a task-based component: the so-called *prácticas comunicativas*. Through creative skill training activities, students engaged in different communicative situations, unrelated to the actual course but organised as such that the participants were compelled to use the previously acquired lexico-grammar. Two independent raters performed a qualitative analysis of both groups’ discourse, according to well-defined criteria (cf. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*). Results indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group.

**Key words:** Task-based language learning, Automaticity, Second Language Acquisition, Experimental Research

**Introduction**

Students only seldom come to a fluent, natural and correct use of the language knowledge items in a traditional communicative approach which main characteristic is the emphasis on the acquisition of the communicative skills with the knowledge contents merely in a supportive role. The acquisition within this method does not seem profound enough to achieve automaticity, defined for language learning as a more efficient, more accurate and more stable performance by Segalowitz (2003). Nation (2001: 3, 68, 385) suggests that the chances of achieving the intended transfer -that is the ability to use adequately and fluently previously acquired knowledge in a new context-, improve substantially by adding to the traditional communicative structure a creative phase that requires an inventive and original use of the course content in a new communicative situation. In order to examine whether the task-based approach offers the appropriate setting to organize activities that are presumed to promote this kind of automatisation, an experiment was conducted with 65 intermediate-level students of Spanish foreign language for Business and Economics at the University of Antwerp. The control group attended a traditional communicative course, whereas the experimental group’s course had a task-based component built in, the so-called *prácticas comunicativas*. This paper presents the results of the experiment, which indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group at least as far as the automatisation of the course contents is concerned.
About automatisation and automaticity

Although automatisation is often considered as the mere speeding-up of a certain action, –thus as a quantititative change–, we prefer a larger, qualitative definition of this concept, as found in, for instance, DeKeyser (2001, 2003), Hulstijn (2002) Gatbonton & Segalowitz (1988); Segalowitz & Gatbonton (1995) and Segalowitz (2003). These authors consider automatisation as a gradual process wherein the language rules are assimilated in such a way that their use is not only increasingly more fluent and efficient, but also more natural, which enables a change “of significant consequence, such as a restructuring of underlying processes” (Segalowitz, 2003: 387) in the learning process. Moreover, the results of cognitive psychology as well as SLA research all point in the same direction: automaticity is best achieved by a repeated creative use of the language rules in a context of authentic communication.

Which language learning method is the most appropriate to comply with these demands? According to Nation (2001) a communicative task-based approach offers many advantages. This method is based on the well-balanced presence of the following 4 components: systematicity, repetition, creativity and authentic communication. The underlying idea is that automaticity benefits from the combination of a task-based approach with systematicity or the indispensable analytical component of language that very often is the only content of the sheer linguistically or structurally oriented language course but is missing, or is to weakly represented, in the communicative methods by lack of revision.

Implementing the task-based approach: the prácticas comunicativas

For both groups involved in the experiment, the first three stages of the course coincide. They were built according to the concept of a communicative course, implying a strong systematic or focus-on-form component. The first phase consists of the implicite presentation of the course content in a communicative exercise. The second phase is the explicit mastering by drill practice, whereas the third phase focusses on the implicit use in a communicative context. To these three phases a fourth one was added in the experimental group containing activities chosen “not only because of their non-linguistic content and their interactional demands, but also as a function of their potential for systematic, yet truly meaningful and context-embedded practice of forms that have previously been in focus” (DeKeyser, 2001: 146).

The fourth phase took place outside of the actual classes, as a workshop or práctica comunicativa, and this in order to make a clear-cut difference –as well in content as for the teaching environment– with the three previous ones. After all, the purpose of the fourth implicit stage is to enhance automatisation by communicating within a “new” context, that requires the spontaneous and creative use of the same contents introduced and practised previously, but without noticing. The structure of these workshops was defined by the principles of the task based approach, since this method offers the adequate means and techniques to realize the objectives of the fourth phase, and at the same time avoids the pitfalls of the traditional communicative method, such as the lack of systematic revision, of student-centred activities and of authentic –this is elaborated on by the students
themselves—, communicative settings. The task assures that the linguistic contents are no longer predominating the structure of the course. Instead, the class is built upon the process that has to be completed in order to end the task successfully. Therefore, the task has to comply with some well-defined criteria. In the first place, it has to trigger an authentic communication process that can be realized in a classroom setting. Secondly, the task should be composed of various phases, each of one with their own concrete objective, as well as one common objective for all of them (Nunan, 1989; Zanón, 1990, 1999).

The experiment

68 students participated in the experiment: 35 in the control group and 33 in the experimental group. Within this group of 68 students, there were 30 male students (13 in the control group en 17 in the experimental group) and 38 female (respectively 22 en 16). The groups were formed at random. The subjects were all students of the Faculty of Applied Economics at the University of Antwerp. During the experiment, they were taking the third course of a four-year training and they were all between 20 and 23 years of age.

The control group took exactly the same course as the experimental one (i.e., two classes of fifty minutes weekly during two terms of 12 weeks each), but without the task-based component. The hours of the prácticas comunicativas were replaced by the individual preparation of an oral test that implied the reading of 12 different texts of the specialized business press on Spanish companies, the composition of a personal dossier, and finally, during the examination, an oral presentation on one of these companies followed by a free conversation about the dossier. While having this conversation the students were not only tested on the correct use of the grammar and lexicon taught during the course, but also on their oral skills, especially speaking ability and fluency. We estimated that the preparation and the test itself demanded as much time as attending the prácticas comunicativas, i.e., ca. 10 hours in total.

The output was thus for both the experimental and the control group previously prepared oral discourse, that is, respectively, advertising spots that were recorded during the prácticas comunicativas and the oral examinations. The assessment criteria were based upon the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, but were, of course, adjusted to the specific purposes of the course and, in a more concrete manner, to what was supposed to be acquired knowledge after taking the course successfully. The main criteria were: Pronunciation, Fluency, Intonation, Sociolinguistic competence, Lexical competence and Grammatical competence. The oral discourse was judged for each of these criteria by two independent raters on a scale of 1 to 4, wherein 0 stands for ‘not applicable’, 1 for ‘insufficient’, 2 for ‘sufficient’, 3 for ‘good’ and 4 for ‘outstanding’.

The results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of results on the six major criteria in percentage. These results were analysed with an independent samples t-test. All statistical tests were performed at the .05 level. These results indicate that:
(a) the control group outperformed the experimental group on pronunciation \[ t (66) = -3.53, p \ (two \ tailed) = .001^* \] and intonation \[ t (66) = -2.73, p \ (two \ tailed) = .008^* \]
(b) the experimental group outperformed the control group on grammar \[ t (66) = 6.06, p \ (two \ tailed) = .000^* \], vocabulary \[ t (66) = 5.51, p \ (two \ tailed) = .000^* \], and social adequacy \[ t (66) = 5.52, p \ (two \ tailed) = .000^* \]
(c) no significant difference could be established on fluency.

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<tr>
<th>Criterium</th>
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<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
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**Discussion and conclusions**

When considering the results it seems that the answer to our initial research question is threefold. As far as the knowledge items (lexicon and grammar) and the level of sociolinguistic competence are concerned, the experimental group clearly outperforms the control group, as a result of which the assumption of a positive influence of the task-based approach on the process of automatisation seems plausible. Nevertheless, this conclusion seems to be refuted by the equal performances of both groups with regard to fluency, that is if we accept, according to the line of reasoning of Segalowitz (2003: 401), that a thorough mastery of the grammar and lexicon contents logically improves the level of fluency. A possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is to be found in the fact that the discourse that was presented for evaluation of both the experimental and the control group was to a considerable extent prepared and studied in advance. Although this oral discourse reflects in a correct way the level of linguistic competence of each student at the time of the evaluation, it cannot be categorized as a spontaneous linguistic performance. This explains the absence in the discourse of both groups of reformulating phrases, pauses, fillers, etc., which normally characterize spoken discourse and influence the level of fluency.
With regard to the criteria of pronunciation and intonation, the control group turns out to outperform the experimental group. Although this might seem surprising at first, it can again be explained by referring to the context of the oral output. In the experimental group, the students are each other’s conversation partner, whereas the students of the control group, during their oral examination, engage in a conversation with the evaluator, a native or near-native speaker. The literature shows that the linguistic competence of the interlocutor strongly influences the level of pronunciation and intonation of the L2-learner. Numerous studies (e.g. Flege et al., 1997; Flege, 2002; Piske et al., 2001) prove that, in combination with the age of the L2-learner and the quantity of the L2-input, the quality of this input is decisive for the level of phonetic and prosodic competence. In addition, the importance of psychological and sociological factors should not be underestimated (Llisterri, 1995; Marx, 2002). The more the L2-learner identifies him or herself with his speaking partner, the more he or she will try to adjust his or her accent, as we find confirmed in Jones (1997: 109):

[...] the more learners identify with native speakers of a second language, the more likely they are to sound like native speakers. Conversely, learners who wish to retain identification with their own culture or social category may consciously or unconsciously retain a foreign accent as a marker of in-group affiliation.

Therefore, in the case of the experimental group it seems normal that the L2-learner will not run counter to the L2-accent of his fellow-students, reinforcing this way the non-native level of this group with regard to pronunciation and intonation. On the other hand, it is but logical that the students of the control group will do their utmost to adapt themselves during the official oral examination to the way of speaking of the evaluator.

In sum, the results of this study regarding the effectivity of the task-based approach are promising but not conclusive. More and more thorough research is needed, in order to establish the exact role of the task-based approach in the automatisation process

References


Notes

1. If the student passes the course Spanish for Business and Economics Intermediate Level, his/her competence can be put on a par with the European C1-level in the matter of reading proficiency, and with the B2-level in respect of the remaining skills.