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Task-Based Language Teaching: The effects of pre-task explicit instruction on a focused task in oral performances

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of pre-task explicit instruction on the performance of a focused task. 14 EFL learners were assigned to two treatment conditions: Explicit Instruction + Task (EI) and Task-Only. Both groups performed an oral comparative task designed to provide opportunities for the production of cohesive devices and organisational patterns. The EI Group received a brief preparation lesson on linkers followed by 1 min of active assumption reading and planning prior to task performance (Ellis, Li & Zhu, 2019). The Task Only Group performed the same task but with no pre-task instruction nor planning. Each learners' task was recorded, and all utterances of the target grammatical structure of each participant was noted down in order to compare the differences in number of utterances between both groups. In fact, comparison among different variables, in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency, were taken into consideration. Further on, the EI Group was submitted to a questionnaire in order to analyse the learners' responses towards pre-task explicit instruction. The results showed that pre-task instruction led to more instances of the target structure; the Task-Only Group outperformed more complex structures and was more fluent than the EI Group, though they did not carry out the task appropriately and used simpler lexis. Therefore, the learners' overview on the efficiency of explicit pre-task instruction concludes in being beneficial as it was a useful and comfortable tool that led to natural performances and to a correct development of the task. The results are considered in relation to a key controversy in task-based instruction, precisely on whether or not to teach a grammatical structure before the performance of a focused task. Thus, further research in pre-task explicit instruction in cohesive devices in oral comparative tasks should be carried out so as to have enough data for conclusions to be compared.

Key words: EFL; Task-Based Language Teaching; pre-task instruction; pre-task planning; focus on form.

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1. Introduction

Many views on what a task is have conceptualised the framework of Task-based language teaching (TBLT). Either when performing a task using language in the real world or inside a classroom, learners will use all their knowledge of the target language to communicate straightforward ideas, always focusing on meaning. Yet, all tasks must fulfil the criteria for a task (Nunan, 2014; Long, 2016). In a form-focused task, the learner's attention is drawn to a specific language unit in order for the learners to use those structures in the discourse of their task (Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H., Loewen, S., 2002).

A tendency teachers and instructors have in the pre-task stage is to pre-teach the grammatical target of a focused task. This has led to different controversial thoughts on the efficiency of doing such. Experts on the matter (e.g Levelt, 1989) agree on the benefits pre-planning has in speaking performances as it allows students to pay more attention to what the target they are told to focus on. However, others (e.g Van de Guhte et al., 2017) view pre-teaching as a negative concept since it leads to unnatural outcomes where learners do not put the target structure into real use, they simply practise them (Ellis et al., 2019). Two questions arise: (1) does pre-teaching the target grammatical feature result in more frequent use? (2) does pre-teaching the target grammatical feature conclude in an unnatural use of language when the task is performed?

This study reports a focused task where the target is the use of cohesive devices and organisational patterns. For such purposes, additional variables under study, such as complexity, accuracy and fluency, were considered. The structure of this study is as follows: it first presents a general theoretical background on TBLT and the conceptualisation of a *task*. It then clarifies what focus on form stands for. Subsequently, previous research on pre-task planning and pre-task explicit instruction will be introduced, together with motivations for focusing this study on such a field. Finally, the procedure, results and discussion of the present investigation will be addressed, together with final conclusions and limitations.

2. Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to 'an innovative language teaching method' and 'an area of investigation in the field of second language acquisition (SLA)', as stated in

Ahmadian (2016:377). Thus, it is the teachers' role to motivate the students and captivate them into taking part in the tasks. (Samuda 2001; Van den Branden 2006). When it comes to task-based research, Ellis (2003) agrees that both theoretical and practical aspects should be encountered, and it may lead to the same conclusion experts such as Ahmadian (2016) concur in as regards to TBLT and its modern understanding of such a broad wide area that it is hard to adhere to all present-day developments (Ahmadian, 2016). Whatsoever, Nunan (2004) introduces how different principles and practices have been reinforced pedagogically by means of TBLT, as it is seen as a tool that will give learners the chance to focus on both language and the learning process because TBLT emphasises learning to communicate by means of the target language.

This framework Nunan presents may be better understood from the overview Ahmadian takes from Bygate (2016b)'s opening paper on the mainspring of TBLT. It is stated that it has been the motivation for language pedagogues to encourage learners with both acquiring the mastery of the target language and reinforcing their skills and abilities in order to put them into practice in activities of the real world that has raised the popular use of TBLT (Ahmadian, 2016). Therefore, the importance of tasks is a must consideration when talking about it. Ellis (2003) explains that experts on the matter have quickly agreed on how important tasks may be. However, there is a controversy on how they should be made. Before going into deeper concerns, Nunan agrees on the importance of defining what a task is. In his introductory page (Nunan 2004:1) it is clearly distinguished what he calls 'real-world tasks' and 'pedagogical tasks' depending on whether the language is used outside the classroom or inside it.

Long (2016) also seems to conceptualise a *task* as 'the real-world communicative uses to which learners will put the L2 beyond the classroom – the things they will *do* in and through the L2–' (Long, 2016:6) as Nunan above shows. Somehow, real-world tasks may have various purposes, such as 'academic', 'vocational training', 'occupational' etc., still, in short or long terms, they may be seen as "social survival" tasks (e.g., giving directions, speaking to a client, leading a guided tour) as Long (2016) says. Furthermore, when it comes to pedagogical tasks, Nunan (2004) simply sees it as a classroom activity that makes learners take part in comprehension, manipulation and interaction processes using the target language and where the main focus point is in putting into use learners' grammatical knowledge so as to express meaning.

Yet Long (2016) suggests a third use of *task* when referring to a communicative activity to a certain extent where the aim behind it is to practise a certain linguistic unit. A relevant instance of this is a study by Ellis and colleagues (2019) where pre-task explicit instruction of a focused task was examined. For such, the used tasks were planned for learners to produce past passive constructions. Altogether, it is clear that whilst some have introduced tasks into traditional language-based approaches into teaching methods, others have used tasks as elements of teaching and have created entire courses based on them (Ellis, 2003).

2.1- Focus on form tasks

2.1.1- Focus-on-Form Versus Focus-on-Forms

When it comes to teaching grammar or any other linguistic form, different discussions arise on how target features teachers aim to teach should be introduced. ‘Focus-on-form’ (FonF) refers to ‘a particular type of form-focused instruction - the treatment of linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative task.’ (Ellis et al., 2002:419). And, therefore, ‘it is a central construct in TBLT’ (Ellis, 2016:1). According to the first research on this in Long (1988), FonF is a fundamental feature in second language instruction because it focuses on ‘targeted features in classroom input’ and external input to the one in class. Whilst Ellis and colleagues (2002) mention that Long had already made a distinction between ‘focus-on-forms’ and ‘focus-on-form’ in 1991 (see Long, 1991), the main interest here is to analyse what ‘focus-on-form’ instruction refers to, as the distinction between the two has gradually caused confusion with the rapid increase in their terms and distinctions (Storch, 2018). On the one hand, FonF involves different techniques created to ‘attract learners’ attention to form while they are using the L2 as a tool for communicating’ (Ellis, 2016:5), and consequently, that is why ‘in focus-on-form instruction the primary focus of attention is on meaning’ (Ellis et al, 2002:420). For instance, students might be asked to carry out a speaking comparative task and throughout doing so their attention is attracted to specific linguistic forms (e.g., the use of linkers) that are essential to carry out the task effectively, or to other linguistic forms students have more problems with. On the other hand, Ellis (2016) approaches Long's previous studies, where the idea that focus on form happens as a solution whenever there is a problem is firmly held (Ellis, 2016).

Though there may be two perspectives as seen above, either traditional teaching forms (FonFs) or more communicative ones (FonF), all activities in this field are focused on meaning

(Ellis, 2005), and they ‘differ in whether the focus on grammar they promote is reactive’ (FonF) ‘or proactive.’ (FonFs).’ (Storch, 2018:3). When it comes to classroom activities, these may combine elements of FonF and FonFs in one same setting, as sometimes a main focus on meaning is blended with some focus on grammar too (Storch, 2018). For instance, a study by Leeser (2004) analyses L2 Spanish learners exposed to a video of a model task (meaning) before having to carry out a written text-reconstruction task (grammar). In other words, a combination of focus on meaning and focus on grammar resulted in a successful development of the task.

Moreover, in many cases ‘these focus-on-form episodes are designed to avoid rather than repair a linguistic problem’ (Ellis, 2016:6). Think about a scenario where the teacher emphasises the need to give heed to a specific grammatical feature before learners perform a task (e.g., the correct use of the ‘-s’ ending in the third person singular in present verbs). The aim behind focusing on form in tasks like these might be to direct the learners’ attention to this mistake in order to avoid it in future performances and it not necessarily solves the linguistic issue behind it. Nonetheless, studies on focus-on-form show that ‘what is done during the pre-task phase may influence learners’ attention to form during the main task’ (Park, 2010:13), and results show a better proficiency grammar wise (see Park, 2010). Thus far, confusion has risen between the two terms (Storch, 2018). Hence, in an effort to englobe these two concepts, Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) should be analysed.

2.1.2- Form-Focused Instruction

Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) is the concept that entitles both FonF and FonFs, and is more popularly employed nowadays (Storch, 2018). Indeed, having a wider understanding of what FonF is facilitates the comprehension of Form-Focused Instruction (FFI). That is to say, ‘any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to a linguistic form’ (Ellis, 2001:51), where a main emphasis on meaning is complemented with ‘some focus on grammar’ too (Storch, 2018:4). It may be said that FFI includes two different perspectives on instruction directed at a linguistic form (Ellis, 2012). Therefore, the teacher pre-plans the structures that should be taught while using meaning-based activities in order to allow learners to put the target forms into practise (Storch, 2018). There

is enough evidence, according to Ellis (2002), to state that FFI affects second language (SL) acquisition in a positive way, as somehow, students learn the grammatical structures they are taught. Final conclusions on Ellis' analysis taken from different studies (see Ellis, 2002: 231) suggest that while nine out of seven studies proved the effectiveness of FFI, others concluded in some doubt on whether it is possible for FFI to have an effect on learners' communicative use of grammatical structures. In some cases, Ellis (2002) argues that unsuccessful results might be due to the complexity of the target structure rather than the impact of FFI (e.g., a study by Williams and Evans (1998)). Nonetheless, the main idea Ellis points out here is that whenever the task is focused-on-form type, FFI seems to be effective. Yet, pre-task planning seemed to be a key point for form-focused tasks to have a successful outcome. Therefore, it is essential to analyse further concerns on how pre-task planning and pre-task explicit instruction affects learners' performance in a focused task.

3. Motivations for investigating the role of pre-task planning and pre-task explicit instruction in focus on form

As attentional capacity to process information is rather limited in humans (Yuan & Ellis, 2003), planning prior to a second language (L2) task is an essential aspect in order to improve task performance (Park, 2010). Thus, pre-task planning helps learners with the problems they may encounter in L2 performances as a consequence of this limited working-memory capacity. In fact, in speaking performances, for instance, it helps students to decide what to say and, therefore, it allows them to pay more attention to formulation when carrying out the task (Levelt, 1989). It may help learners attend to form whilst fulfilling a communicative task (Ellis, 2016) as planning processes encourage a focus on form (Park, 2010).

A further motive for the present study is to go through the obfuscation between pre-task instruction and planning. A study by Park (2010) aims to analyse the effects of pre-task instructions and planning on focus on form in a task-based performance. The tasks were two oral narrative tasks carried out by 11 Korean EFL learners enrolled in an English conversation course at a university in South Korea. When it comes to instruction types, the general instructions were simply task descriptions on how to carry out the narrative task in dyads. In the specific instructions, though, the centre of interest was focused on the general instructions.

Whilst the planners had 10 minutes, non-planners were given no time to plan the task-based interaction ahead. Conclusions to this study state that participants constructed the same amount of and type of Language Related Episodes (LRE)¹ (Swain, 1998, as cited in Basterrechea & Garcia Mayo, 2013). Furthermore, those who received specific instructions paid more attention to morphosyntax and less to lexis than those students who were given general instructions. The final conclusions made by Park (2010) were that whenever the instructor makes an emphasis on a specific language feature, students are more likely to stick to that guidance throughout the task. Yet, when it comes to pre-task planning, Park (2010)'s study showed no main effects from planning and neither interaction effects between planning nor other variables.

In previous studies, such as Yuan & Ellis (2003), the effects of pre-task planning and on-line planning were compared on the three aspects of language production (complexity, accuracy and fluency). Results between planning and non-planning groups showed that pre-task planning supports grammatical complexity and that neither type of planning helped fluency nor lexical variety.

As regards to pre-task explicit instruction, the controversy on whether explicit instruction should take place before the performance of a task has resulted in different conclusions. Long (2016) suggests that when providing explicit instruction, the outcome is learners giving automatic declarative knowledge and not implicit one. Moreover, learners might focus the task as an exercise to practise certain structures more than one that guides them to conduct. In fact, they might focus obsessively on the production of the linguistic target and, consequently, forget about the meaning behind the task (Ellis et al, 2019; Ellis, 2003). Therefore, the conclusion to which Ellis and colleagues (2019) reach is that explicit pre-teaching may result in unnatural outcomes as learners simply practise the target structure instead of using them. However, when a focused task is carried out, 'explicit pre-teaching of the target structure' Ellis (et al, 2019:39) allows the focused linguistic form to be used more times than in a non-explicit instruction setting.

In order to explore more the constraints of whether pre-teaching grammar affects L2 oral performance on tasks, Ellis and colleagues (2019) exemplify their point with a study by De la Fuente (2006), where learners were provided with explicit explanation of certain words and carried out a 'meaning-based production task' with 'the target words'. The conclusion to the

¹ LREs are defined as any type of the dialog in which students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct. Swain (1998:70)

task-supported instruction reported a bare use of the targeted words when students went through the 'free production stage' because of the lack of essentiality given to the targeted words for which learners were given explicit instruction.

Another study by Van de Guhte, Rijilaarsdam, Braaksma and Bimmel (2017) cited in Ellis and colleagues (2019) encounters the effects of pre-task modelling on a language-focused group and a meaning-focused group's oral performance. After allowing them a ten-minute period of time before performing the task, conclusions after the outperformance in accuracy of the target structure of the language-focused group to the meaning-focused group proved that pre-task instruction had a negative effect in terms of global complexity, as this last group was asked to answer some questions after watching the video, whilst the language-focused group was allowed to write down sentences during watching so. However, in a study by Foster and Skehan (1996) mentioned in Park (2010) where a group of learners was given general instructions and the other explicit instruction, results show that the former performed worse in terms of complexity than the latter. Explanations to this phenomenon may be derived from the idea that whenever an instructor asks learners to plan complex ideas and organise them, linguistic complexity might increase and consequently, the final performance is less accurate. Nonetheless, instructions without an explicit focus might lead learners, once again, to simply practise and not take further risks. (Park, 2010).

Furthermore, Mochizuki and Ortega (2008) also analysed the effect of explicit instruction in an English class where students were also set into three groups: no-planning, unguided planning and guided planning. This last group was given explicit instruction on relative clauses throughout their planning time. In conclusion, the guided planning group was found to construct more precise relative clauses, though they did not vary to the other groups in terms of complexity and fluency.

Indeed, it is a complex task to verify the effectiveness of explicit instruction. Thus, there is a need for further research to go through the effects of pre-task explicit instruction on the performance of a focused task. The present study aims to examine the effects of pre-task explicit instruction on the use of cohesive devices in oral production between two experimental groups of the same proficiency level. Following Ellis and colleagues (2019), it also examines the impact that pre-task grammar instruction may have on the performance of a focused oral task in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency by addressing these research questions:

1. Did pre-task explicit instruction affect the use of cohesive devices in oral production?
2. What effect did pre-task grammar instruction have on the performance of a focused oral task in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency?
3. Which attitudes and opinions do learners in the EI + Task Group have towards pre-task grammar instruction?

4- Method

4.1- Participants

The participants were fourteen Spanish-Basque upper-intermediate learners who attended the same English academy ('Global English') in Vitoria-Gasteiz, in the Basque Autonomous Country (BAC) in Spain. Two groups were made, from which seven belonged to the first group (Explicit Instruction + Task (EI)) and seven to the second one (Task-Only). All students had studied in that academy with the same instructor for at least a year.

4.1.1- Explicit Instruction + Task (EI) group

The seven participants in this group were enrolled in a *First Certificate Exam (FCE) of Cambridge* preparation course. There were 3 females and 4 males, and their ages ranged from 16 to 19 (mean age: 17.5). When it comes to when each learner started studying English, 4 students began their studies at the age of 6; 1 student at the age of 7; and 1 student at the age of 8. (mean age: 7). Spanish was the first language (L1) of all participants and Basque their second language (L2). According to the evaluation of Cambridge English and their instructor, their English level was considered to be upper-intermediate.

4.1.2- Task-Only group

The seven participants in this group were enrolled in an *Upper-Intermediate (B2)* course. There were 3 females and 4 males, and their ages ranged from 15 to 17 (mean age: 16). Furthermore, 1 student started learning English at the age of 5; 3 students at the age of 6, and

3 other students at the age of 7. Spanish was the first language (L1) of 6 students, and Basque was L1 for 1 student. However, despite the age difference with the first group, according to the evaluation of Cambridge English and their instructor, their English level was also considered to be upper-intermediate, though their course was not explicitly focused on the FCE.

4.2- *The target structure*

The use of cohesive devices and organisational patterns in oral performance was selected as the target structure because it had briefly been taught when this study commenced (e.g., “*Firstly,*”; “*whereas*”; “*In my opinion*”; “*However,*”). In this way it was possible to investigate whether the inclusion of explicit instruction affected the use of a new and complex structure to learn when performing a task. Using cohesive devices and organisational patterns in an oral performance in speaking part 2 of the FCE (First Certificate Exam) of Cambridge allows students to organise their ideas more efficiently as well as allowing them to make comparisons more accurately whilst not getting lost in their production. In addition, students get higher marks in their discourse management by implementing such devices in their speech. In fact, cohesive devices are essential tools that help keep the development and flow of information as they are used to make relationships between current and former ideas (Emanuel, 2013).

4.3- *Treatment*

All students completed Part 2 of the FCE Speaking task (see appendix A) that aimed at examining each group’s different performance after having received different types of instruction on the same task. While the participants of the first group (Explicit Instruction + Task (EI)) were provided with explicit instruction about the target structure before performing the task, the second group (Task-Only) performed the task without receiving pre-task instruction. They were informed about the purposes of the task by the author of this study, and after having agreed to take part, participants from the same groups were randomly put together in pairs by their instructor, who would also be the interlocutor throughout the speaking task. Then, they were taken to another room to carry out the task. The material was taken from *First for Schools Trainer* - Cambridge English (Elliot, Tiliouine & O’Dell, 2015) and it followed the same procedure as the real FCE for Schools Speaking Part 2 test.

4.4- Speaking comparative tasks

The spoken tasks consisted of comparisons between photographs, where the interlocutor would give each participant two photographs (see appendixes A and B). Learners would have to talk about their photographs on their own for about a minute, and also answer a question about their partner's photographs. For such purposes, the interlocutor would record their voices while developing the task in order to have all the data collected together efficiently. The aim behind it was to compare the different performances from both groups. Two pairs of pictures were utilised, each seeded with a question that allowed the use of cohesive devices in the student's speech – a linguistic device that had briefly been taught in speaking sessions and about which the learners had limited knowledge and practise. One of the pairs of photographs showed people painting in different situations. The other pair showed people with animals in different scenarios (see Appendix B for the photographs for these tasks). In the task of the first pair of photographs, the learner compared the photographs and had to say what he/she thought the reasons were for people to paint in those situations; whilst for the second pair, the learner had to compare the photographs and say what people were enjoying about being with animals in those situations.

The two comparative tasks followed identical steps. To prepare the learners for task performance, the instructor, an undergraduate student in English Studies at the time of data collection who was familiar with the academy and the students, read the text of the task at a normal speed to give the learners an initial idea before presenting each pair of pictures to each candidate. The instructor read each individual instruction at a slow pace so that the learners had time to process and brainstorm the content and language they would use for the material. Afterwards the instructor read the individual question for the corresponding photograph to provide an opportunity for the learners to start connecting their ideas with the provided question and to enhance understanding. In case students misunderstood the task, the same explanation would be provided, with no paraphrase. Throughout the explanation, the learners were told to simply listen and not to take any notes. As noted earlier, after listening to their partners, the second speaker would answer a brief question about their partners' photographs. In this way, the learners not only had the opportunity to perform their task individually but were also engaged in the performance of other students. This may have benefited those second students, as they would have had a previous reference and would have had more time to think on the content ahead. However, this was the same for both participants, in simply a different order.

As mentioned, the learners' oral comparisons in the reporting stage were audio-recorded and analysed for the purpose of examining the "process" dimension of their oral performance. As reported earlier, each group started with 7 learners. After invalid data were excluded, 6 remained in the EI group and 7 in the Task-Only treatment group, and these were then included in the data analysis for all the research questions.

4.5- Explicit instruction

The participants attended one session, which took place within their regular class hour. The two experimental groups received a fifteen-minute task-based treatment either with or without pre-task instruction. The learners were not informed about the goals of the study, and they had not been provided with information of the target structure in previous speaking classes (though, they had seen such in written tasks). Subsequently, explicit instruction about the target structure was provided to the EI group before they performed the task. It consisted of a mini lesson (lasting approximately 5 min), where the instructor explained the form, meaning and use of cohesive devices and organisational patterns in oral speech focused on the FCE part 2 speaking test. The instructor started by asking the learners what contrast linkers and organisational patterns they knew and wrote them down on the digital board. Then, they all chose from the list the ones they were more comfortable with and came up with a useful template they ought to follow in their performance. Finally, for practice the learners were asked to read several times the template from the board for one minute before they performed the final task using the devices we had explicitly looked at in the session.

4.6- Measures of task performance

The learners' production of the task was analysed and the number of instances in which each participant used the target feature was counted in the first place. The data were subsequently analysed using descriptive statistics and compared between the two groups by means of percentages displayed in a table, as shown in Table 1. Counting the number of utterances of the target feature each learner performed allowed me to examine in what ways pre-task grammar affected different aspects of the learners' oral production. Using the same procedure, complexity was then determined as the average length of complete sentences, that is to say, Analyses of Speech (AS) units (Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008). In fact, subordinate clauses are studied as an index of complexity, however, because of the proficiency levels learners are limited to, they barely produce any subordination (Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008). Moreover,

accuracy was examined in the same way as Ellis et al. (2019)'s study. It was represented by the number of errors in the lexical, syntactic and morphological aspects of the learners' L2 use. Nevertheless, this study did not focus on the errors per hundred words as in Ellis and colleagues, it simply took the number of errors throughout the performance. Counting the total fatal utterances in each group allowed me to see whether more or fewer errors occur whenever different pre-task stages take place. Fluency was evaluated considering the average pause length, counting utterances of filled and unfilled pauses Skehan, (2014) classifies and other studies (e.g., Ellis et al, 2019) also covered in their research too.

Furthermore, the EI + Task group completed a questionnaire² (see Appendix C) that aimed at examining their attitudes towards the pre-stage session they had before going through the task. With such a procedure, it was possible to analyse the third question to this research and determine the effect the pre-task grammar instruction had on L2 learners' production of the target structure when performing a focused task and examine the learners' attitudes and opinions towards pre-task grammar instruction. The questionnaire was done using Google Forms and the design of the questions and the survey were made from scratch and sent online to each participant of the study. It consisted of three parts: the first one was designed to collect data of the background information of the students (e.g., age, gender, L1). For the second part, a five-point Likert scale was used in which students were given several questions and they had to choose an option from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This section, shown in the appendix, gathered information on how useful they found the pre-task stage they went through, how natural they felt their performance was and how comfortable they felt needing to follow explicit instruction. Finally, in the last section of the questionnaire, a voluntary open question was provided for participants to give further thoughts if wanted.

5. Results

The descriptive statistics for the two experimental groups' task performance are presented in Table 1. The mean for attempted use of cohesive devices and organisational patterns constructions was 5.85 in the EI Group and 3.28 in the Task-Only group. On the general task measures, the EI Group produced fewer AS units (EI + Task: mean = 0, SD= 0; Task-Only: mean= 0.5, SD= 0.7), made fewer errors (EI + Task: mean = 9.33, SD = 5.13; Task-Only:

2

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdUBiLalxUjtni0aiA6pOZN67Vzce9TP4WUYECUK8n1Gb9Euw/viewform?usp=sf_link

mean = 13.66, SD = 13.57) and paused longer than the Task-Only Group (EI + Task: mean = 5.85, SD = 2.85; Task-Only: mean = 3.28, SD = 1.11). In addition, some examples of students' production of cohesive devices and organisational patterns were: “*In both pictures we can see*”; “*In the first one*”; “*whereas in the second picture*”; “*From my point of view,*”; “*(...) and in the second one maybe...*”.

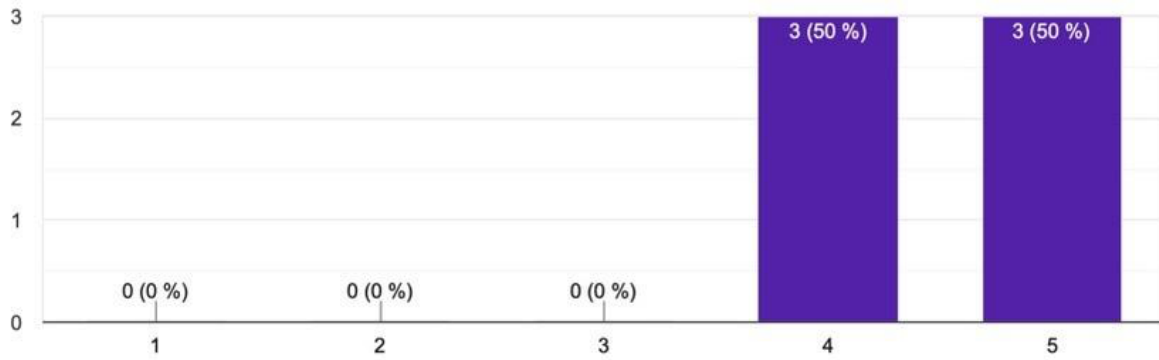
Table 1

Descriptive statistics for task performance.

	Construct	Measures	EI + Task		Task-Only	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Target-related	Target use	Incidence of linkers	5.85	2.85	3.28	1.11
General	Complexity	Length of AS unit	0	0	.5	.7
	Accuracy	Errors	9.33	5.13	13.66	13.57
	Fluency	Average pause length	30	39.59	19.5	26.16

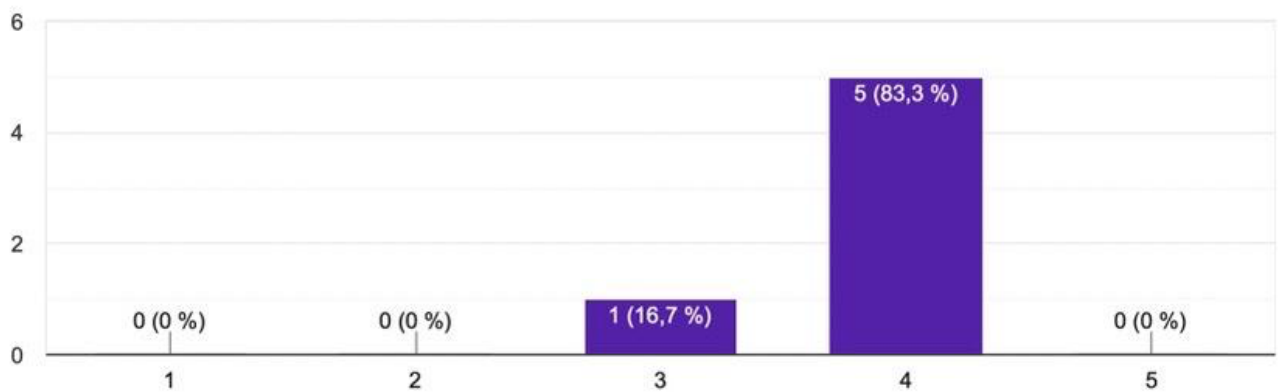
The result of the questionnaire answered the third research question presented above. More precisely, these responses referred to the items 1-4 in section 2 (see Appendix C). Overall, the views of each participant from the EI Group were indeed homogeneous and showed a neutral attitude towards pre-task of cohesive devices and organisational patterns. Graph 1 represents the main findings of the responses the EI Group provided and their view after they carried out the task. The numbers seen in Graph 1 represent the feedback taken from the questionnaire (1 = totally useless, 5 = very useful), and the numbers in the left column indicate the number of students³. The following graph shows that most students who went through the pre-tasking stage found it useful, represented by a 50 % in bar 4, and another 50% in bar 5.

³ The analysis of each graph presented follows the same pattern explained in Graph 1.



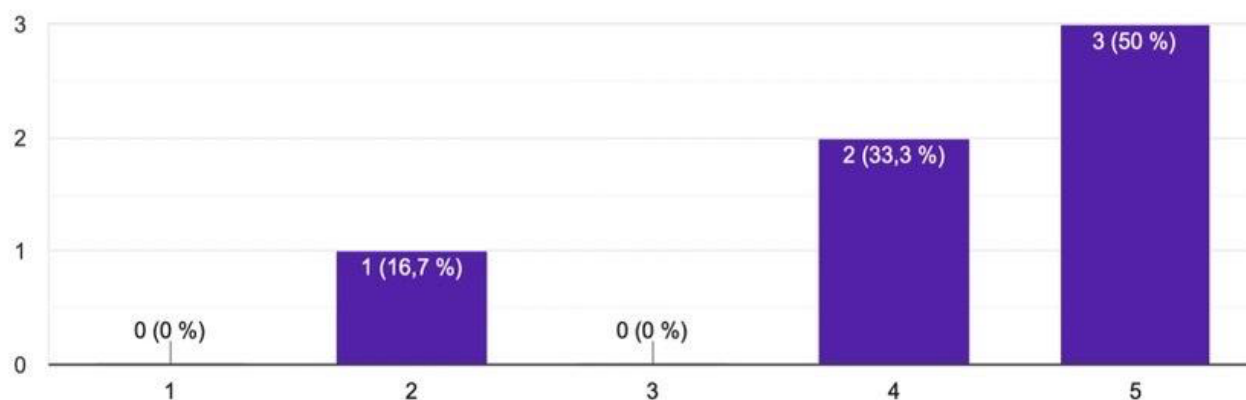
Graph 1: Students' attitude towards the usefulness of pre-task.

Research question 3 (RQ3) also aimed to explore the effect of pre-task grammar instruction on L1 learners' natural performance of the target structure; that is to say, whether students believed going through the pre-task grammar instruction stage resulted in a natural speech in the use of linkers throughout their task. Hence, the question addressed in Graph 2 allowed the comparison of different perspectives students had on their oral production when following explicit instruction and the present responses referred to how natural they felt their performance was. As a reminder to the reader, the specific question learners were to answer (how natural they felt their performance was) may be read in item 3 in the appendix section (see Appendix C). The graph shows that 83.3% of participants from the EI + Task Group felt their production was natural, whilst 13.7 % had a neutral view on their natural performance.



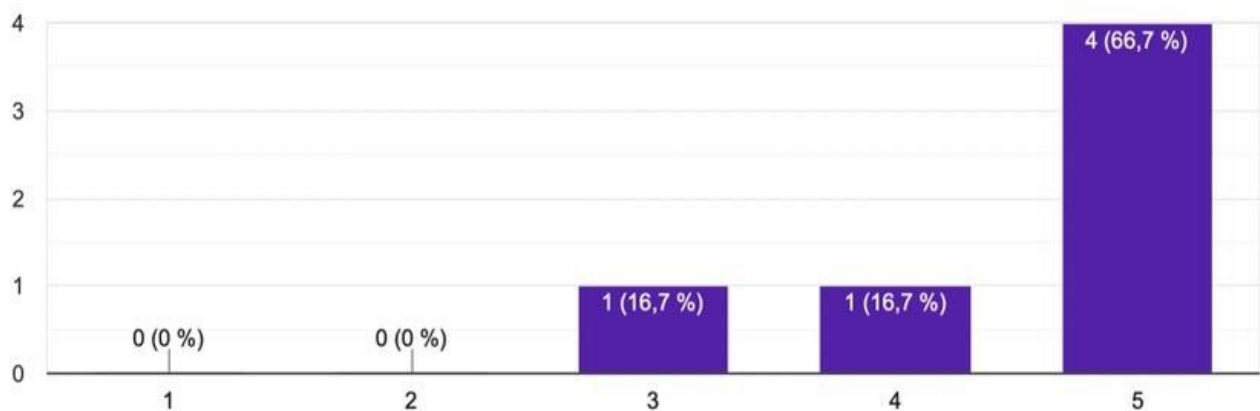
Graph 2: Students' view on the naturalness of their production.

In terms of comfort when receiving explicit instruction, Graph 3 (item 2 in Appendix C) shows, on the one hand, that 50% of the students chose option 5 (very comfortable). Therefore, following such instructions had no apparent inconvenience. Similarly, 33.3% of the participants chose option 4, and felt comfortable. On the other hand, however, giving explicit instruction had a negative effect on 16.7% of them who chose option 2 (uncomfortable).



Graph 3: Students' attitudes to how comfortable needing to follow EI is.

Finally, regarding how useful learners thought having key target structure words in front of them when following explicit instruction (item 4, appendix C), different attitudes emerged. Graph 4 shows that while 66.7% of participants saw it as a very helpful tool and 16.7% simply as useful, only another 16.7% show a standard attitude on the matter. Yet, in general terms, results show a positive effect on how having referential patterns and words allows students to perform the explicit instruction task and the use of the target structure solidly (see Table 1, target use) due to the evident confidence having a guideline gave them while performing the task.



Graph 4: Students' attitude towards being provided with referential keywords.

6. Discussion

An essential aim for the study to be valid was to see whether oral tasks successfully elicited attempted use of the target structure. This was addressed by the first research question (RQ1). The results shown in Table 1 prove that the task was indeed convenient and successful. As mentioned above, the mean for attempted use of cohesive devices and organisational patterns in the reporting stage of the session was 5.85 for the EI Group and 3.28 for the Task-Only Group. In fact, the results come to an agreement with Ellis et al. (2019)'s view that when a focused task is carried out and the target structure is explicitly pre-taught, it is more likely for learners to put the target feature into use.

The second question in this study aimed to analyse whether pre-task explicit instruction affected the way learners performed a task. RQ2 addressed the effects of pre-task explicit instruction on complexity, accuracy and fluency, and Table 1 shows in what terms both groups differ. The EI Group outperformed the Task-Only Group in the average pause length. Thus, while providing an opportunity for pre-task explicit instruction was advantageous in terms of the quantity of target structure produced, it was not in terms of production speed. In addition, the EI Group's oral performance may be contrasted with other studies on oral tasks (e.g., Yuan & Ellis, 2004), where pre-tasking increased syntactic complexity and had no effect in accuracy. Yet, we may see that whilst pre-task planning did not have any effects on fluency (see Table 8 in Yuan & Ellis, 2004:77), it did in the present study (see Table 1: mean = 30, SD = 39.59). Therefore, further studies should then be made on different oral comparative tasks in order to see whether pre-task explicit instruction may have an effect on simply pre-planning tasks.

It should be noted, however, that although the average pause was higher in the pre-task Explicit Instruction Group, most students from the Task-Only Group (5 students out of 7) did not reach to the minimum amount of time they should speak - a total of 1 minute and 30 seconds (1 minute of photograph comparison and answering the question followed by 30 seconds to answer another question about their partners' photographs). Therefore, the task was incomplete.

Pre-task explicit instruction did not have an effect on complexity, as the Task-Only Group used more subordination than the EI Group. This phenomenon might be explained based on the idea that there was no intention to direct the Task-Only Group learners' attention to the target structure. The approach was towards meaning, as in some scenarios, there is no benefit in directing learners' attention to form (Spada & Lightown, 2008). Whenever the instruction provided to the learner is simply concentrated on the content on what they want to communicate (see Ellis, 2005), the learners seem to use wider complex structures, as the results in Table 1 show. In contrast, since the EI experimental group received FFI, their focus point of attention was on performing instances of the target structure, forgetting about, or not implying more complex syntactic structures (see Table 1). The main difference between the two groups is on the function the learner has in the interaction and how language is viewed: as a mere object or as a tool to learn the target structure (Ellis, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the EI Group performed a wider range of complex lexis (e.g., phrasal verbs) and made fewer errors than the Task-Only Group, showing that pre-task planning had an effect on lexical variety. These last results may be contrasted with results gathered in other studies on pre-task planning of oral narratives, such as in Yuan & Ellis, (2003), where pre-task planning concluded in more speech and more complexity as opposed to non-planning groups. However, although pre-teaching the target structure increases the chances of its use, it may also have a negative effect on the general feature 'of the language produced' (Ellis et al, 2019:39).

The final research question, RQ3, tried to examine the L2 learners' production after pre-task explicit instruction in order to determine how useful it was. Learners found it useful to write a template and keywords on the board on the pre-task stage, a positive result that might be compared to the conclusions obtained in Van den Guhte, M., Rijlaarsdam, G., Braaksma, M., & Bimmel, R. (2017), where the language focused group was also allowed to write down 12 key sentences that help them with the task later on. When it came to natural performance,

learners from the EI Group agreed their speaking performance was natural, an idea supported in DeKeyser (1998), where pre-teaching not only is helpful, but a necessary condition for students to develop declarative knowledge that can later on improve by mean of practise. However, the results of the learners who felt uncomfortable needing to stick to explicit instruction coincide with Long (2015)'s point that what is done when pre-teaching in this way is a totally unnatural use of language. Thus, these contradictions prove that further research on the field is still to be analysed.

7- Conclusions and limitations

The study was designed to investigate the effects of pre-task grammar instruction on task performance. To cover these concerns, I compared how two groups of upper-intermediate learners carried out the same focus tasks with and without prior explicit instruction. One main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that pre-task explicit instruction resulted in more attempts at producing the target structure when performing the task and it resulted in more accurate production. Therefore, it coincides with previous research that agrees on the effectiveness of explicit instruction (e.g., Ellis et al., 2019). Moreover, the study showed differences in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency between the two experimental groups; The Task-Only Group demonstrated superior complexity in task performance, while the EI Group showed a more accurate performance. Yet this last group lacked fluency in contrast to the Task-Only Group but managed to fulfil the aim of the task effectively in the correct period of time unlike most participants in the other group. Finally, it may be stated that the pre-task stage resulted in a useful tool in order to understand and develop the target structure more attempted times throughout the task, and the way it was pre-taught seemed useful enough for the learners to develop a natural speech.

This study is not without its limitations. It only shows results of small groups of students (as some who were expected to participate failed to come) who had had classes in the same place, and with the same instructor who taught them throughout the course. Therefore, being in a familiar setting might have altered the real results had the study been carried out by a stranger. The experiment only shows that pre-task explicit instruction in a comparative oral task especially focused on the FCE for Schools is effective. Further research is needed to investigate its efficacy in other environments and settings.

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Appendix

A)

Test 6

Speaking • Part 2

Why are the people painting in these situations?

A



B



B)

Test 6

Speaking • Part 2

What are the people enjoying about being with animals in these situations?

A



B



Speaking Part 2

Test 6 | C23

