Examining Focus on Form in a Task-based English Textbook

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Abstract
The present study addresses the question how Go for it!, a textbook developed on task-based language instruction mode, treats language forms. Tasks and activities from a sample unit in Go for it! are analyzed to examine whether and how textbook writers incorporate a Focus on Form in the task and activity design. The results show that equal emphasis is laid on both meaning and form, and three major types of Focus on Form tasks and two types of Focus on Form activities are identified. The study may contribute to textbook designers and teachers in treating the issue of how to design Focus on Form activities in task-based language teaching.

Keywords: meaning, form, focus on form, task-based teaching

1. Introduction
Form, meaning and their interactions have been widely studied in second language (L2) acquisition and teaching (e.g. Ellis, 2001). L2 teaching methods, to a large extent, differ with respect to their emphasis laid on form or meaning. Task-based language teaching, which focuses on meaningful communication, enjoys tremendous popularity around the world today (Bygate et al., 2001). However, it has been doubted whether meaning-centered instruction alone could enable learners to acquire a second language successfully (e.g. Ellis, 1993). Consequently, how to incorporate an emphasis on language forms into meaning-centered instruction constitutes an important issue for textbook writers and language teachers to consider, as both are involved in the design and implementation of language teaching tasks and activities.

1.1. Form, Meaning and L2 Teaching
L2 teaching methodology has undergone a series of changes over the years. Traditional L2 teaching methods, like the Grammar Translation Method, mainly stress language forms and decontextualized practice. In these methods, accuracy is emphasized at all costs. The advantage is that L2 learners can master a great many linguistic rules. However, these methods gradually lost their popularity due to their failure in enabling learners to communicate in the L2 effectively (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). With the proposal of communicative competence by Hymes (1971), communicative language teaching, which stresses the communicative function and pragmatic meaning of language, gained considerable attention and support. At present, task-based language teaching, which requires learners to understand, operate on, output and interact with the target language in task implementation (Nunan, 1989), has become the leading L2 language instruction mode.

However, a problem with it is that it tends to neglect the treatment of language forms. Studies show that communicative and task-based teaching could be successful in developing language fluency in L2 learners; however, they usually fail to
encourage accuracy of language use (Doughty and Williams, 1998). As grammatical competence is also an integral part of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980), it is necessary to develop accuracy of language use in meaning-centered L2 teaching as well.

To address this necessity, Long and Crookes (1992) proposed the idea of Focus on Form (FonF) and defined it as the temporary attention allocated to language forms in meaningful communications. The definition was later revised by Long and Robinson (1998), who claim that FonF arises when the teacher or L2 learners direct their attention to language forms when a problem in understanding or output occurs. FonF can be either planned or unplanned (Ellis et al., 2002). Planned FonF takes place on occasions when a particular language form is predetermined, and it is contextualized in a “focused task.” On the contrary, unplanned FonF occurs in situations where learners focus their attention incidentally to particular language forms in unfocused tasks. A number of studies have confirmed that FonF is effective in promoting L2 learners’ acquisition of language forms at no expense of sacrificing communication (Andrews, 2007).

Presently, a great many ESL (English as a second language) textbooks are developed on the task-based instruction mode. For example, Go for it!, a textbook developed by People’s Education Press of China and Thompson Educational Publishing of America (2005) and widely used in junior high schools of China, boasts the task-based language teaching mode. Language communication is a meaning-based process; however, it can only be made possible with the help of language forms. An L2 beginner, whose interlanguage development is still in his/her initial phase, is bound to encounter problems with the target language forms. Therefore, how to develop accuracy and fluency simultaneously presents a challenge to ESL textbook writers. The present paper aims to examine how tasks and activities in Go for it! are designed to reflect its meaning-centeredness and whether and how a FonF is incorporated into the task design. As the study is limited to textbook analysis, to our purpose, FonF refers to ostensible attempts to build language forms into task and activity design for meaningful practice. In addition, in the present paper “form” refers to both grammatical items, like the plural form of nouns and grammatical structures, like the comparative structure.

1.2. Theoretical Basis of FonF

Skill acquisition theory and the interface position of implicit learning theory provide the theoretic rationale for FonF. Anderson (2000) holds that skill acquisition entails the proceduralization of declarative knowledge. According to Anderson, the acquisition of skills (e.g. using language) starts with declarative knowledge and ends with procedural knowledge, and the necessary condition for the conversion from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge is repetitive learning, i.e. learners need to practice the skill over and over again until they could perform the skill with no attention allocated to it (McLaughlin and Heredia, 1996). However, in terms of language learning, the practice should be contextualized and aim at native-like performance, but not the learning of language forms (DeKeyser, 1998), i.e. learners should be provided with practice that resembles actual language use. It is believed that FonF offers a possible solution to the ongoing issue in that L2 teachers and textbook writers could incorporate FonF into the L2 learning tasks and activities which requires learners to practice some target language forms before they engage in actual communicative tasks. In this way, learners get corrective feedback in the process, and it contributes to the conversion of declarative knowledge of linguistic forms to procedural knowledge.

Though researchers hold different views on whether declarative knowledge (or explicit knowledge) can be converted into procedural knowledge (or implicit knowledge), it is generally believed that at least explicit knowledge could contribute the development of implicit knowledge in two ways, as shown in Figure 1:

![Figure 1. The role of explicit knowledge in implicit learning (Ellis, 2003)]
As demonstrated in Figure 1, the prerequisite for the conversion of input into intake is noticing (Schmidt, 1990). In the respect, explicit knowledge makes the language forms stand out, so learners can notice the existence of certain L2 language forms and beware of the gap between their own production of those forms and the target language forms.

2. Research Questions
What are the types of tasks and activities in Go for it!, and how are they designed to reflect a FonF in meaning-based instruction?

3. Research Methods
A qualitative and quantitative approach is adopted in the present study. A unit from Go for it! is randomly taken out as a sample for analysis. The tasks and activities are first described and classified in terms of their emphasis on meaning or form. Then the percentage of each type of task is calculated in order to lay bare their differential stress on meaning or form. Finally, how FonF is achieved in the textbook design is discussed.

4. Results and Discussion
The title of the sample unit is “I’m taller than my sister” and it introduces the comparative structure as a new grammatical item. According to Ellis (2003), a task should be a meaning-based activity in which learners utilize their own resources, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, to communicate in order to fill certain gaps, such as an information gap. In addition, tasks should offer effective practice, which is meaningful, interactive and task essential (Ortega, 2007). According to this definition, or their focus on meaning or form, the tasks and activities in the sample unit mainly fall into two categories, communicative tasks and FonF tasks and activities, as shown in Table 1.

As exhibited in Table 1, the 21 tasks and activities in this unit can be grouped into two major types: communicative tasks and FonF tasks and activities. The number of the two types (10 and 11) constitutes similar percentage (47.6% and 52.4%), which indicates that a balance is struck in the emphasis on meaning and form. As a book developed on the mode of task-based language instruction, the textbook writers include a number of communicative tasks to promote meaningful communication, which aims at developing fluency. However, what is of real interest here is the FonF tasks and FonF activities. A closer look brings us to the following summary:

As shown in Figure 2, there are mainly three FonF tasks and two FonF activities. The tasks can be input-based or output-based. In input-based tasks, learners have to comprehend input and the task outcome does not include language production, while an output-based task asks learners to use the target language to fulfill certain task requirements. However, both expose learners to some pre-designated linguistic forms for focused attention, resulting in what Ellis (2001) has termed Planned FonF, which means “intensive attention to preselected forms” (Ellis, 2001: 16).

A related question remains unaddressed here, i.e. how are these FonF tasks and activities designed to develop accuracy while maintaining the goal of task-based language teaching? To probe into this question, each of the FonF tasks and activities is discussed in the following.

First, structure-based communicative tasks require learners to use particular language forms in their communication. For example, 2c of Section A requires learners to use the comparative degrees of “smart,” “athletic,” etc. to ask and answer questions about Sam and Tom. Without the use of the target structure (comparative degree), learners will find it impossible to
make a comparison between them. To put it in another way, the target language form is essential to task completion. Another noticeable fact is that there are more structure-based communicative tasks than any other type of FonF tasks, which suggests that though these tasks focus on the use of certain language forms, they are still meaning-centered in nature, as required by a task-based mode of instruction. As meaning and form are intricately linked with each other, ideal practice should enable learners to focus on both. Structure-based communicative tasks offer a possible solution for learners to practice language forms in meaningful communication, because communicative practice is effective in assisting L2 learners to reach automaticity (Khatib and Nikouee, 2012). When learners perform these tasks, they practice the target language forms, and the more they use these forms, the more automatically they could retrieve them from implicit memory.

Secondly, structure-based output tasks require learners to write a short passage with the prompts given (e.g. 3b of Section B). These tasks provide learners with opportunities to produce the target forms so that they could notice the gap between their own use of the target forms and the correct use of them. These tasks require learners to use the designated linguistic forms, which may force the learners to incorporate these forms into their production. In this aspect, this type of task is similar to elicitation, which is found to be the most effective means leading to successful uptake (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). The more students practice using the comparative degrees, the greater chances they will have to develop automatization of this rule (DeKeyser, 2003).

Next, FonF input tasks make the target form as the goal of the tasks (e.g. 2a of Section A). These tasks require the learners to pay special attention to the target forms in the input, so they can successfully promote salience of the language forms, which will trigger more noticing and processing. Studies on context effect show that when target words are imbedded in a coherent context, implicit memory will be attenuated or totally eliminated, because a meaningful context will divert learners’ attention to the meaning aspect of the input (Jiang and Liu, 2014). However, when learners are required to direct their attention to the target forms, the perceptual processing of these forms will be enhanced and finally result in the implicit acquisition of the form-related aspects (grammar and collocations) of an L2 (Ellis, 1994).

Finally, judged by the criteria of a task, form-based summary and form-based exercises cannot be counted as tasks, as they purely focus on language forms and do not involve any intention for learners to communicate. However, these form-based activities could enable learners to consolidate what they have been practicing (e.g. Grammar Focus) and offer an effective means to check their attainment at the end of a unit (e.g. Activity 1 of Self-check). This metalinguistic knowledge is actually essential for learners, as it is both a reminder and a reference for the correct use of the L2.

5. Conclusion
Developing fluency and accuracy constitute two major tasks for L2 beginners. The present study examines how Go for it!, a textbook developed on the task-based language teaching mode, attains the goal of promoting meaning-centered communication and how it encourages learners to develop accuracy of language use. An analysis of a sample unit reveals that the textbook writers have struck a balance in the emphasis on meaning and form by designing communicative tasks and FonF tasks and activities. Three major FonF tasks and two FonF activities are identified and analyzed. As discussed, FonF tasks and FonF activities could provide L2 learners with valuable opportunities to notice and understand the linguistic forms in the input so that they may facilitate learners’ overall understanding of the meaning of the input, which may finally become intake and the learners’ interlanguage could be restructured to a higher level.

Hopefully, the present paper may contribute to L2 textbook writers and teachers in the design of classroom tasks and activities that may effectively enhance the communicative competence of the learners and help them achieve linguistic accuracy in the meantime. However, the limitation of the study is that we are unable to observe how these FonF tasks and FonF activities are actually implemented in the classroom, so we are not able to examine another type of FonF, incidental FonF.
(Ellis, 2001). Future research should involve classroom observation so that the effectiveness of the FonF tasks and FonF activities in the textbook could be further verified.

Notes
1. L2 in the present paper refers to a language other than one’s native language.
2. Declarative knowledge refers to the explicit knowledge.
3. Procedural knowledge refers to the fully autonomised declarative knowledge, or implicit knowledge.
4. The description and analysis of the sample unit is provided in the appendix.
5. Incidental FonF refers to situations in which FonF arises spontaneously in meaning-centered activities. It is often analyzed in terms of focus on form episodes, in which teachers and learners talk about a specific word or structure.

References:
Activity 1
Fill in each blank with the correct word given. Change the form of the word if necessary. Then make your own sentences with each word. (The words given are: “quiet,” “funny,” “outgoing,” “smart,” and “athletic.”)

Activity 2
Think of yourself two years ago. Write about how you are different now. (The given prompts are: “Are you taller now?” “Are you smarter?” “Are you more athletic?” “Are you more outgoing?” “Are you a better student?”)

Appendix: Description and analysis of FonF tasks and activities in Unit 6, Book 8a of Go for it!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Focus on form</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section A 1c</td>
<td>Pairwork: Practice the conversation in the picture above. Then make conversations about the other twins. A: Is that Tara? B: No, it isn’t. It’s Tina. Tina is shorter than Tara.</td>
<td>Structure-based communicative task: Students use the comparative degrees of words like “tall,” “thin,” “short,” etc. to describe the characters in the picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section A 2a</td>
<td>Listen. Are the words in the box used with “-er/-ier” or “more”? Complete the chart.</td>
<td>Focus on form input task: students mainly focus on the language forms in the auditory input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section A 2c</td>
<td>Pairwork: Student A, look at the chart below. Student B, look at the chart on Page 83. Ask and answer questions about Sam and Tom.</td>
<td>Structure-based communicative task: Students use the comparative degrees of “smart” and “athletic” to compare Sam and Tom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Focus</td>
<td></td>
<td>Form-based summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro is funnier than Paul. funny (change “y” to “i”, then add “-er”) funnier</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina is taller than Tara. tall (add “-er”) taller</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom is more athletic than Sam. Athletic (use “more”) more athletic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Section A 3b</td>
<td>Pairwork: Tell your partner about things that are the same and different between you and a member of your family or a friend.</td>
<td>Structure-based communicative task: Students use adjectives and their comparative degrees to compare themselves with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section B 1b</td>
<td>Talk about what you think a good friend should be like. A: I think a good friend makes me laugh. B: For me, a good friend likes to do the same things as me.</td>
<td>Structure-based communicative task: Students use the six phrases in Section B, 1a to define what a good friend is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section B 2c</td>
<td>Pairwork: Talk about Holly and Maria and their best friends.</td>
<td>Structure-based communicative task: Students use the comparative degrees of the adjectives which appeared in Section B, 2a and 2b to perform this task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section B 3a</td>
<td>Read the article. Underline the words that describe what people are like.</td>
<td>FonF input task: students read the passage and underline the comparative degrees in it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section B 3b</td>
<td>Look at the chart in 2a on Page 34. Write about Holly, Maria and their best friends.</td>
<td>Structure-based output task: Students describe Holly, Maria and their best friends by using information provided in the box in 2a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Check Activity 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Form-based exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Check Activity 2</td>
<td>Think of yourself two years ago. Write about how you are different now. (The given prompts are: “Are you taller now?” “Are you smarter?” “Are you more athletic?” “Are you more outgoing?” “Are you a better student?”)</td>
<td>Structure-based output task: Students use the comparative degrees to compare themselves of different time.</td>
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