

ENHANCING AUTOMATISATION THROUGH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

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1. Introduction

Students only seldom come to a fluent, natural and current use of the knowledge items in a traditional communicative approach whose main characteristics are:

- a) The emphasis on the acquisition of the communicative skills.
- b) The acquisition of the knowledge contents in a supportive role.

The language acquisition obtained through this method does not seem profound enough to make a state of automaticity feasible.



2. Research aims and rationale.

Automatisation:

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 in the learning process "of significant consequence, such as a restructuring of underlying processes"
(Segalowitz 2003 : 387)



Which language learning method is now the most appropriate to reach a state of automaticity?



According to Nation (2001) a communicative task-based approach offers the appropriate setting to organize activities that are presumed to promote automatism.

Main characteristics:

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 systematicity or the indispensable analytical component of language, with a task-based approach.



Does a communicative approach with a strong task-based component indeed lead to better results with regard to automaticity?



3. Hypothesis

In order to examine this idea an experiment was conducted at the University of Antwerp with 65 intermediate-level students of Spanish as a foreign language.



HYPOTHESIS

Given the fact that the task-based approach proposed by Nation meets all the necessary conditions to improve automaticity (systematicity, repetition, creativity and authentic communication), it is expected that in the experimental group the process of automatism will be in a more advanced state than in the control group.



4. Method.

4.1. Subjects and design

- Comparison of a control group with an experimental group.
- Composition of the groups: at random.
- Total number: 68 students.
 - Subjects in control group:35
 - Subjects in experimental group:33
 - Total number of males: 30 (13 in CG and 17 in EG)
 - Total number of females: 38 (22 in CG and 16 in EG)
- Language: Spanish foreign language for Business and Economics.
- Language level: Intermediate (second year of Spanish foreign language).
- Age: 20-23 (third course of a four-year training).
- Native tongue: Dutch.



4. Method: 4.2. Material.

The first three stages of the course coincide for both groups:

1. First phase: Implicit supplying of the course content in a communicative exercise.
2. Second phase: Explicit mastering by drill practice.
3. Third phase: Implicit use in a communicative context.



4. Method:

4.2. Material.

4.2.1. The control group

Fourth phase: Individual “homework”.

- ① The reading of 12 different texts of the specialized business press on Spanish companies.
- ② The composing of an individual dossier related to the subject of one of those texts.
- ③ The making of a brief presentation of the company selected.
- ④ Oral test about the own presentation and the others.



4. Method:

4.2. Material.

4.2.2. The experimental group

- Fourth phase: Task-based phase.

- Task-based phase characteristics:

① 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).

② Developed outside the actual classes as a kind of workshop or *práctica comunicativa*.

③ Structured by the principles of the task-based approach: built upon a process that has to be completed in order to end successfully the final task.



4. Method:

4.2. Material.

④ This phase supports the traditional classes but does not replace them.

⑤ Therefore, the principles of the task-based approach were adjusted.

⑥ 2 x 5 hours

First term: Time: 5 hours (1 hour every 2 weeks).

Subject: La empresa.

Final task: To found a new firm.

Second term: Time: 5 hours (1 hour every 2 weeks).

Subject: El spot publicitario.

Final task: To shoot an advertising spot for a new product.



4. Method:

4.3. Instrumentation and observation.

1. Evaluated output: Previously prepared discourse

1.1. The experimental group: An advertising spot

- Real workpieces of the students (video-recordings of the final tasks: the advertising spots).

1.2. The control group: an oral test.

- The oral assessment consisted in the presentation of one of the companies and a loose conversation about the firm and its product.



4. Method:

4.3. Instrumentation and observation.

2. Evaluated contents:

In both cases

- Knowledge contents (grammar and lexicon) we expected the students to have assimilated during the course and the fourth phase.

- Speaking ability with regard to pronunciation, intonation and fluency.



4. Method:

4.3. Instrumentation and observation.

3. Assessment criteria and method.

- Inspired by *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* .

- Adjusted to the specific purposes of the course and to what was supposed to be acquired knowledge after taking the course successfully.

- Criteria:

1. Pronunciation: distinctness, intelligibility, naturalness.
2. Fluency: pauses, reformulating phrases, fillers, recurrences.
3. Intonation: clearness, intelligibility, naturalness, melodic bows.



4. Method:

4.3. Instrumentation and observation.

4. **Grammar**: morphology and syntax of the present and past tenses, use of the pronouns, use of ser/estar, use of por/para, use of prepositions, use of concordance rules.
 5. **Lexicon**: mastery of the core vocabulary, lexical adjustment to the situation, use of phraseology, richness of the lexicon.
 6. **Sociolinguistic adequacy**: adjustment to the situation, use of tú/usted.
- Scales: 1 to 4
- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 0= Not applicable. | 3= Good. |
| 1= Insufficient. | 4= Outstanding. |
| 2= Sufficient. | |



4. Method:

4.3. Instrumentation and observation.

- 2 independant raters:
 - Agreement measured by the Pearson Product Correlation Coefficients (for all criteria the coefficients were between .900* and .998* - significant at the .01 level)
 - Both evaluators decided on one final score.
- All of the scores were added per major evaluation criterion in order to obtain six final percentages (calculated on te basis of a maximum score).



4. Method:

4.4. Procedure.

Control group	Experimental group
<p data-bbox="709 768 1283 816">Classes of 50 minutes.</p> <p data-bbox="737 846 1255 894">Two classes weekly.</p> <p data-bbox="632 922 1360 971">Two terms of 12 weeks each.</p> <p data-bbox="348 998 1644 1047">There was a gap of 7 weeks between the two terms.</p>	
Individual preparation of an oral exam (10 hours in total).	<i>prácticas comunicativas:</i> 5 classes x 60 minutes per term (10 hours in total).



5. Results on the 6 major criteria in percentage (independant samples t-test – at the .05 level)

Criterion	Condition	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	N.
Pronunciation	Control	74.76	22.28	25.00	100.00	35
	Experimental	58.58	14.36	33.33	83.33	33
Intonation	Control	70.71	23.02	25.00	100.00	35
	Experimental	54.92	24.59	25.00	100.00	33
Grammar	Control	63.27	18.18	28.94	89.47	35
	Experimental	88.89	16.59	43.75	100.00	33
Vocabulary	Control	65.89	23.64	25.00	100.00	35
	Experimental	91.18	11.90	44.44	100.00	33
Social Adequacy	Control	68.57	29.61	25.00	100.00	35
	Experimental	85.92	22.48	25.00	100.00	33
Fluency	Control	67.50	24.47	25.00	100.00	35
	Experimental	74.00	25.74	25.00	100.00	33



5. Results on the 6 major criteria in percentage (independant samples t-test – at the .05 level)

- (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.



6. Discussion

The hypothesis has proven to be only partly true:

1. Knowledge items (lexicon and grammar) and the level of sociolinguistic competence:

- The experimental group outperforms clearly the control group → the assumption of a positive influence of the *task-based approach* on the process of automatization seems plausible.

2. This conclusion seems to be refuted by the equal performances with regard to fluency (cfr. Segalowitz 2003, automatization promotes fluency):

- Is this due to the fact that the evaluated discourse can't be categorized as a spontaneous linguistic performance?



6. Discussion

3. Pronunciation and intonation:

- The control group turns out to be the best.

The logical explanation is that in the experimental group the students are each other's conversation partner, whereas the students of the control group enter into conversation with the evaluator, a native or near-native speaker (Flege 1997, 2002; Piske 2001, Marx 2002).



7. Conclusion and further research.

The experimental group outperforms the control group on the subject of grammatical and lexical knowledge.

FIRST CONCLUSION

A task-based approach stimulates the process of automatism to a larger extent than a purely communicative course with a strong systematic component.



7. Conclusion and further research.

- ⌘ There is no difference in performance with regard to the criterion of fluency between the two groups.
- ⌘ For pronunciation and intonation, the control group scores higher.

SECOND CONCLUSION

Further research that examines the different criteria in an isolated way is needed, so that their exact relation with the automatism process can be established.



7. Conclusion and further research.

⌘ Better results of the experimental group are due mostly to a higher motivation?

⌘ If such is the case, is this motivation an intrinsic part of the task-based approach or can it be considered independently?

THIRD CONCLUSION

The question whether each task-based activity *in se* is able to arouse enough motivation and influence the automatisisation process in the same way, needs further examination.

7. Conclusion and further research.

Research has shown that, the greater the psychological similarities between the learner context and the transfer context, the higher the degree of automatisisation (Segalowitz 2003)
→ cfr. the basic principle of the task-based approach.

FOURTH CONCLUSION

Segalowitz (2003 : 402):

“Future research will have to determine which dimensions of psychological similarity are relevant to the establishment of automaticity that is transferable to new situations.”