The Use of Task-based Grammar Teaching to Enhance Grammatical Competence for Kachin Students in Myanmar

Kaw Mai, M.A. in TESOL

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Abstract

This study implemented grammar teaching by using task-based teaching approach to improve grammatical competency for ten low intermediate Kachin students in Myanmar. The researcher collected the data by using multiple data collecting instruments. They are pre-test, post-test, and two formative assessments. The data obtained were analyzed quantitatively. After taking 32 hour long task-based grammar classes, the students' grammatical competence resulted to be improved.

Key words: Task-based grammar teaching, Grammatical competence,

Introduction

Learning English has been a challenge for Myanmar students where English is a foreign language. Bianco (2013) describes Myanmar language setting as "multi-lingual education in ethnic minority languages, Myanmar (national language) and strategic foreign languages (English as a medium of instruction in grades 10 and 11)". Myanmar students study English as a compulsory subject in all the government run schools in basic education schooling years. Tin (2014) briefed the history of English language in Myanmar as once the country was a British colony, English language played an important role for administration and education. However, after Myanmar gained independence in 1948, English was regarded as a foreign language in Myanmar. As English language proficiency gradually declined, by the policy set in 1981, Myanmar government made English became the instructional medium for science subjects and economic in secondary school and higher level of education in 1986-1987. Now English is a popular foreign language taught in private schools.

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In general, English language classes in Myanmar use grammar-translation methodology. Students learn English through either grammar based language classroom or context-based English in teacher centered classroom. As a result of it, Tin (2014) points out that Myanmar has many English learners and knowers rather than English 'users'. The disadvantage of grammar-translation teaching is that the knowledge learnt in grammar class does not link to language use opportunities outside the classroom. After class periods, students rarely use the learnt language. Huang (2010) mentions that traditional grammar teaching including explicit teaching of grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary lists, and translation of passages from one language to the other produces students with extensive knowledge of grammatical rules but little communicative ability. However, in this study, grammar teaching was integrated with weak task-based methodology. Weaker task-based approach allows space for "focus on forms" grammar teaching. Zhao (2011) points out the characteristic of weak task-based approach agrees on integrating focus on form with task-based approach as focus on form is more effective when it is directly related to meaningful communication. In addition, Ellis (2003) views weak task-based as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a more traditional way, and teaching based on linguistic features such as structural items as a list of grammatical features. As Nunan (2004) mentions the students will see a different version of learning grammar that allows them to express meaning, highlighting the fact that meaning and forms are highly interrelated, and that grammar exists to enable the language users to express different communicative meaning. Strank (2003) also supports using tasks in grammar classes because task-based approach because the task-based grammar teaching will expose students to language forms instead of merely memorizing grammatical forms and rule. Integrating teaching grammar in task-based approach provides students the opportunities of learning by doing in the learner-centered classroom.

Literature Review

Task-based Teaching

The task-based approach given by Skehen (1988) are "meaning is primary, learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate, task completion has some priority, and the task assessment of the task is in term of outcome". In addition, Ellis (2003) mentions task-based

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methodology creates opportunities for language learning and skill development through collaborative knowledge building. Whereas Nunan (1991) describes that task-based teaching is to encourage the improvement speaking skill, the fluency of speaking, and chances of using the language in the classroom that can apply to real world communicative purposes. Ellis (2003) defines task-based teaching prescribes teaching methodology in board term, as fluency rather than accuracy.

Nunan (1991) highlights mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second language or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language.Hadley (2001) mentions that oral interaction as an important factor in the shaping of the learners' developing language. Therefore, speaking skill in a second language can be an important asset for any language learner

Tasks in This Study

Six types of tasks used in this study are taken and adapted from Willies (1996). They are listing, the result of which is a completed list or draft mind map, 2) ordering and sorting which outcome is a set of information or data that has been ordered and sorted according to specified criteria, 3) comparing which outcome is appropriately matched or assembled, identification for the similarities and/ or differences, 4) problem solving which has to find solutions to the problem, which can be then be evaluated, 5) sharing personal experience which outcome is finding and sharing attitude, opinions, and preferences, and 6) creative tasks which outcome is media project or creative activity.

The lesson format of task-based teaching in this study is adapted from Ellis's (2003) model consisting three steps: pre-task, task-cycle, and language focus. The explanations of the three steps are presented in the following section.

Pre-task is to prepare the students to perform the task that will promote acquisition of the students and at the same time students can observe how the tasks can be performed without requiring them to undertake a trial performance. In this study, Pre-task works to introduce to

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topics and task. Teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, helps students understand task instructions and prepare. Students may hear a recording of others doing a similar task.

In this study, in task cycle stage, three steps are consisted: task, plan, and report. In task stage, students do the tasks either in pair or small groups. Teacher acts as a monitor or a facilitator from a distance. In plan stage, students prepare to report to the whole class either oral form or in written form how they have done the task, what they have decided or discovered. In report stage, the students present their reports to the class or exchange written reports and compare results, and report orally as presentation. During tasks or task-cycles can be divided into two: task-performance option and process option. However, there are three task performances in task-performance option. Firstly, the concern whether to require the students to perform the task under time pressure. Secondly, deciding whether to allow the students access to the input data while they perform a task. The third will be introducing some surprise element into tasks. However, in process option, the concern is in the way in which the discourse arising from the task is enacted rather than pedagogical decision about the way task is to be handled.

The language focus includes three major pedagogical goals: to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task, to encourage reflection on how the task was performed: and to encourage attention to forms that are problematic when they perform the task. More importantly, in terms of focusing on forms: review of learners errors, consciousness-raising tasks, production-practice activities, noticing activities are used. In this study, there are two stages, language analysis and language practice. In analysis stage: students examine and discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording such as analyzing texts, transcripts, and sets of examples. Teacher reviews the analysis with class. Moreover, teaching the rules and drilling grammar forms occurs in this stage. In language practice stage, teacher presents and prepare the exercises and tasks that conducts practice of the learnt pattern occurring in the analysis such as practicing patterns and sentences from the analysis activities.

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Grammatical competence

The grammatical competence covers the accuracy. Larsen-Freeman (1997) mentions that the idealization and the generalization of the pedagogical grammar are more effective for beginners. Pedagogic grammar is a rough but it is a kind of ready map for students. In this study, students were low-intermediate of English proficiency level, therefore, for the participants of this study, it is easier to learn the pedagogical grammar with some generalization. Long's (2000) suggestion of teaching grammar is favored to task-based using because Long considered grammar teaching and learning to be best when it occurs incidentally and implicitly.

Batstone's (1994) definition of teaching grammar as a skill recommends that learning grammar as not just a pure knowledge but as a skill in English language. The main idea of teaching grammar as skill approach means that the learners to appreciate and use grammar as communicative device, encouraging a richer deployment of grammar in more subtly regulated process tasks. In addition, Brown (2006) points out grammatical is essential for communication, but it cannot be attained solely through exposure to comprehensible input but interaction and output play important roles in learners' language acquisition. (Cited in Huang, 2010).

Methodology

In this article, the research objective "To what extent does the task-based grammar teaching improve students' grammatical competence?" is answered. Ten low-intermediate students from Kachin state, Myanmar participated in this study. Five lesson plans for 32 hours served as a treatment for this study. Pre-test and post-test, and two formative assessments were data collecting instruments.

Treatment Instrument

A task-based grammar syllabus is a treatment for this study. In order to design task-based grammar syllabus, needs analysis for teachers and students was conducted. A questionnaire for students, a questionnaire for teachers, and an interview for teachers were the instruments for needs analysis process. Based on the result of the needs analysis, 5 lesson plans were designed. Two experts evaluated the lesson plans using the lesson plan evaluation form. According to the

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recommendation obtained from the lesson plan evaluation, the lessons were adjusted and modified. As Ellis (2003) model was a frame-work for the syllabus in this study, every lesson plan contained three stages namely pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. One lesson takes for six hours.

Grammar Pre-test and Grammar Post-test

Grammar pre-test and grammar post-test served as the main tools to take record of the students' grammatical competence before and after receiving the treatment of task-based grammar teaching. The pre-test grammar section focused on testing the target tenses they would be learning in the coming lessons. After the course finished, the grammar post-test was administered. It was conducted to measure the students' grammatical competence after receiving a treatment of the task-based grammar teaching. There are 20 test items in both pre-test and post-test . The full score is 20 points. The scores were converted into percent, and the interpretations were made according the interpretation codes in Table 1.

Table 1 Interpretation and description of score in pre-test and post-test

Raw score	Percentage	Interpretation	Descriptions
16-20	80 -100%	Excellent	Demonstrate mastery of grammatical competence (grammar rules, forms, and usage)
14-15	70 -79%	Good	Demonstrate fair grammatical competence (grammar rules, forms, and usage)
12-13	60 -69%	Average	Demonstrate minor lack of grammatical competence (grammar rules, forms, and usage)
10-11	50 -59 %	Poor	Demonstrate weak grammatical competence (grammar rules, forms, and usage)
0-9	0 -49 %	Very poor	Demonstrate lack of proper grammatical competence grammar rules, forms, and usage)

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Formative Grammar Assessments I & II

        The main purposes of assessments were checking and taking records of the students' on-going improvement and ability upon the grammatical competency. The creative task types used in the formative assessments I and II are the adaptation of one of the six task-types proposed by Willies (1996).

        The formative assessment I was conducted after the class had finished 14 hours of task-based grammar teaching. The tasks required students to write up a piece of advice for an advice column. The formative assessment II was conducted after the class had finished 28 hours of instruction. The tasks required students to write a screenplay after watching an example a video clip. The written outputs of the students were assessed for grammatical competence in both assessments. Sentence structure, punctuation and spelling errors, and sentence parts were the main criteria for assessing the students' grammatical competence. Table 2 presents the rubric for assessing formative grammar assessment I & II.

Table 2 Rubric for formative grammar assessment I & II

Score	Sentence structure	Punctuation & spelling error	Sentence parts
5	Demonstrates mastery of structure, no run-on sentences, sentence fragments	No errors in capitalization/ punctuation/spelling	No sub-verb agreement errors/ no tenses errors
4	Minor problems in structure with some run-on sentences, sentence fragments	Minor errors in capitalization, punctuation/spelling	Minor sub-verb agreement errors, minor tenses errors
3	Several errors in structure, several run-on sentences,	Severe errors in capitalization, punctuation	Several sub-verb agreement errors

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		spelling	
2	Major problems in structure, a lot of run-on sentence	Major errors in capitalization, punctuation/spelling	Major sub-verb agreement errors, incorrect use of verb forms,
1	No mastery of sentence construction	No mastery of capitalization, punctuation/spelling	No mastery of sentence parts

Interval rate (Mean): 1.01 – 1.80 = Very Poor (0), 1.81 – 2.60= Poor, 2.61 – 3.40 = Average, 3.41– 4.20 = Good, 4.21 – 5.00 = Excellent

Findings from Pre-test & Post-test

Grammar pre-test was conducted before implementing the task-based grammar teaching using a task-based grammar syllabus. Twenty discrete items were consisted in the pre-test. The target tense were four tenses, which would appear in the task-based grammar teaching. Table 3 presents the results of the grammar pre-test.

Table 3 Scores and interpretations of mean scores (Grammar Pre-test)

Students	Scores	Full	Percentage	Interpretation
S 1	11	20	55%	Poor
S 2	12	20	60%	Average
S 3	10	20	50%	Poor
S 4	9	20	45%	Very poor
S 5	8	20	40%	Very poor
S 6	11	20	55%	Poor
S 7	10	20	50%	Poor
S 8	7	20	35%	Very poor
S 9	8	20	40%	Very poor
S 10	9	20	45%	Very poor
Overall			**48 %**	**Very poor**

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As it can be seen in the Table 3, the students scored ranging from 35% , and interpreted as "Very poor" to 60%, interpreted as "Average". For the whole population, it was 48% and interpreted as "Very poor".

A grammar post-test was conducted after implementing the task-based grammar teaching for 32 hours. The format of the grammar post-test, the test items, and the difficulty level of the test were the same as those appeared in grammar pre-test. Table 4 presents the results of grammar post-test

Table 4 Scores and interpretations of mean scores (Grammar Post-test)

Student	Scores	Full	Percentage	Interpretation
S 1	18	20	90%	Excellent
S 2	18	20	90%	Excellent
S 3	15	20	75%	Good
S 4	15	20	75%	Good
S 5	14	20	70%	Good
S 6	15	20	75%	Good
S 7	15	20	75%	Good
S 8	12	20	60%	Average
S 9	13	20	65%	Average
S 10	15	20	75%	Good
Overall			**75%**	**Good**

According to the results presented in Table 4, the students obtained scores in grammar post-test ranged from 60%, and interpreted as "Average" to 90%, interpreted as "Excellent". The mean score for the whole population was 75%, interpreted as "Good". The following table presents the comparison of the results of grammar pre-test and grammar post-test. Table 5 compares students' grammatical competence before the course began and after the course implementation period finished.

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Table 5 Comparing the results of Grammar Pre-test and Grammar Post-test

Tests	No of Students	Full	Overall	Interpretation
Grammar pre-test	10	100%	**48 %**	**Very poor**
Grammar post-test	10	100%	**75%**	**Good**

Based on the comparison of the results from pre-test and post-test seen in Table 5, the means from grammar pre-test and grammar post-test were different. The scores in post-test were higher than the scores from pre-test. According to the interpretation of the scores, the students improved from "Very poor" to "Good". Therefore, it is concluded that task-based grammar enhanced the students' grammatical competence.

Findings from Formative Grammar Assessments I & II

The first formative grammar assessment was conducted after students received simple present and simple past lessons from the task-based grammar teaching syllabus. The task was performed in groups. The students were divided in groups. The grammar was assessed through the written forms. The task required the students to write a piece of advice for an advice column. The following Table 6 presents the result of the formative grammar assessment I.

Table 6 Descriptive Statistics of Scores from Formative Grammar Assessment I

Students	Sentence structure	Punctuation and Spelling errors	Sentence parts	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
S 1	3	4	3	3.33	0.57	Average
S 2	3	4	3	3.33	0.57	Average
S 3	3	4	3	3.33	0.57	Average
S 4	3	4	3	3.33	0.57	Average
S 5	3	4	3	3.33	0.57	Average
S 6	4	4	3	3.66	0.57	Good

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Students				Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
S 7	4	4	3	3.66	0.57	Good
S 8	3	4	3	3.33	0.57	Average
S 9	3	4	3	3.33	0.57	Average
S 10	4	4	3	3.66	0.57	Good
Overall				3.44	0.57	Good

As shown in Table 6, the results in Punctuation and Spelling Errors was scored the highest as 4.00. Sentence parts (no sub-verb agreement errors/ no tenses errors) was scored 3.00. Overall score was 3.44 and interpreted as "Good".

Formative grammar assessment II was conducted after Lesson Plan 4 was finished. The assessment was based on the students' written paragraph. The tasks required students to work in groups. The same group members as formative assessment I wrote for individual groups. The researcher graded the performance using the same rubric used in the formative assessment I. The following table presents the result of formative grammar assessment II.

Table 7 Descriptive Statistics of Scores from Formative Grammar Assessment I

Students	Sentence structure	Punctuation and Spelling errors	Sentence parts	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
S 1	5	5	4	4.66	0.57	Excellent
S 2	4	4	4	4.00	0.00	Good
S 3	4	4	4	4.00	0.00	Good
S 4	5	5	4	4.66	0.57	Excellent
S 5	5	5	4	4.66	0.57	Excellent
S 6	4	5	4	4.33	0.57	Excellent
S 7	4	5	4	4.33	0.57	Excellent
S 8	4	4	4	4.00	0.00	Good

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S 9	5	5	4	4.66	0.57	Excellent
S 10	4	5	4	4.66	0.57	Excellent
Overall				**4.33**		**Excellent**

As it can be seen in Table 7, the students' grammatical competence was interpreted as Good for 3 students, and the rest resulted as Excellent. The overall result was Excellent. Then, in Table 8, the results from formative assessments I and II were compared to see the improvement during the implementation period.

Table 8 Comparing the Result of Formative Grammar Assessments I & II

Assessment	Students	Full Score	Mean	S.D	Interpretation
Formative Assessment I	10	5	**3.44**	0.19	**Good**
Formative Assessment II	10	5	**4.33**	0.33	**Excellent**

<u>Interval rate (Mean)</u> : 1.01 – 1.80 = Very Poor (0), 1.81 – 2.60= Poor, 2.61 – 3.40 = Average, 3.41– 4.20 = Good, 4.21 – 5.00 = Excellent

According to the comparison between the formative assessments I and II, the students' grammatical competence was improved. In formative assessment I, the mean score was 3.44, interpreted as "Good". In formative assessment II, the mean score was 4.33, interpreted as "Excellent". Therefore, the students' grammatical competency was improved.

The overall results from grammar pre-test, grammar post-test, formative grammar assessment I, formative grammar assessment II on task-based grammar teaching indicated that the students' grammatical competence was improved after receiving the task-based grammar teaching.

Discussion of the Results

Based on the research question "To what extent does the task-based grammar teaching improve students' grammatical competence?, the findings from two different resources proved

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that the task-based grammar teaching enhanced the students' grammatical competence. Firstly, the mean score in grammar pre-test was interpreted as "Very poor". After receiving the treatment, the mean score in grammar post-test was interpreted as "Good". Secondly, the result from formative grammar assessment I was interpreted as "Good" and result from the formative grammar assessment II was interpreted as "Excellent". The researcher found the following factors to be related with improvement of the students' grammatical competence. They are task frame of "weak task-based approach", task types used in the lessons, and supplementary grammar exercises provided in language focus stage were discussed as follows.

As Skehan (1996) defines that "weaker" task-based teaching approach, where tasks are preceded by focused instruction, spends a large amount of time in language focus where students focused on language form. In this study, student had more time proportion for "language focus or post-task" consisting language analysis and language practice where they established strong grammatical rule-based competence. Students had sufficient time to strengthen their grammatical competence. Therefore, this study using "weak" task-based approach received good results in students' grammatical competence.

Tasks used in this study are "Focused tasks" which are also called closed tasks and pedagogical tasks. As it can seen the definition of "Focus tasks" by Nunan (2004), tasks in which particular structure is required in order for a task to be completed. The use of predetermined particular grammatical form facilitated the completion of the task. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) supports using "Closed tasks" in task-based approach for grammar classes. They mention that "Closed tasks" promote negotiation of meaning and thus are likely to facilitate comprehension, and promote focus on the form of utterances in input and output, therefore, closed tasks are better suited for use in teaching grammar. Closed tasks can be designed as grammatically encoded information which is essential to task success. Task types used in this study helped students improved their grammatical competence. In addition, in formative grammar assessment II, the students got the result "Excellent" even though the formative grammar assessment II was more challenging compared to the task appeared in the formative

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grammar assessment I. It seems students became familiar with performing and completing the tasks due to the tasks they encountered in the lessons.

A large number of grammar exercises were consisted at language focus phase/post-task phase in the task-based grammar lesson plans in this study. According to Nunan (2004) language exercises, that have primary grammatical focus and communicative activities integrating explanations support students with understanding how the language works and developing explicit knowledge. The process of employing the authentic situation facilitates the process of authentic communication. In addition, Ellis (2003, 2009) also agrees with production-practice exercises such as grammar focused exercises used in the lesson plans of this study. Those exercises help learners to automatize forms that they began to use on their own accord but have not yet gained full control.

Conclusion

In this study, four verb tenses were focused in language analysis and language practice phases. Passive forms were not introduced in language analysis sections of the lessons. Therefore, giving some space and time for passive forms are recommended in the future studies.

In this study, only 6 task types modeled by Willies (1996) were used. The other task-types such as information gap and reasoning were not used in this study. Using a wide ranges of task-types will motivate the students' interest. Therefore, using more varied task types is also recommended for future studies.

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Kaw Mai, M.A. in TESOL
kawmai.nding@gmail.com

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