

TBLT and the grammar-discourse interface: Teaching passives and left dislocation in L2 Italian

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1. Introduction

Many foreigners living in Italy learn to use Italian grammar without attending a language course. At the same time, those who study Italian as a foreign language often do not learn to use the grammatical structures taught to them. Why does this happen?

Firstly, foreigners learning the language informally (“spontaneous learning”) are often readily exposed to the L2, while at school—whether at university or in a private language course—exposure is reduced to a limited number of hours. Secondly, informal learners are highly motivated during every interaction because they need to understand and be understood in order to survive, while in school the motivation to communicate is artificial: it must be created by the teacher. Thirdly, informal learners generally employ language purposefully in diverse contexts and with various interlocutors who tend to be quite collaborative: when comprehension becomes difficult, they request clarification, encourage reformulation and self-correction, offer useful words and phrases, and thus contribute toward restructuring the linguistic knowledge of the non-native speaker. At school, however, the communicative context is almost always one of lessons during which the student interacts primarily with the teacher, saying things that are, in most cases, already known to the teacher and therefore rarely subject to negotiation.

These considerations should not lead us to think that instruction does not lead to learning grammar; indeed, many studies have demonstrated the usefulness of second language instruction, especially in terms of acquisition speed and level of accuracy (see Long 1983; Norris and Ortega 2000; Doughty 2003; Doughty and Williams 1998; Ellis 2001; 2006). These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that L2 acquisition requires learners to have an opportunity to notice form-function mappings in the input (see Schmidt’s *Noticing Hypothesis*, 2001). In the context of spontaneous acquisition, the fact that learners are not always in a position to do so depends upon several factors, including the lack of perceptual salience of the structures, their infrequency, their irrelevance to the message transmission goal, and their conceptual distance from the L1. This makes instructional intervention, which can prevent or reduce the risk of stabilization, not only useful but necessary (Long 2003).

Spontaneous acquisition and guided learning² thus present advantages and disadvantages dependent upon the degree to which either instructional method benefits from certain favorable learning conditions. What can we do in class in order to combine effectively the advantages of spontaneous acquisition and guided learning, minimizing

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² Here we have knowingly made an extreme distinction, which in reality is much more gradated in the sense that language learning is rarely totally spontaneous nor totally guided; to give two general examples: the Ukrainian caregiver receives occasional language “lessons” from the elderly man she cares for, and the ESL student watches an English-language film outside of class.

the disadvantages of each? One possible solution is offered by task-based language teaching (see, among others, Ellis 2003; Nunan 2004; Willis and Willis 2007; Samuda and Bygate 2008; Adams 2009).

2. Task-based teaching

To illustrate this teaching approach, we begin by presenting its primary building block: the task. This is a communicative activity that encourages the learner to use language to achieve an extralinguistic goal. Let us consider in particular what distinguishes a task from a textbook exercise, using the five-part definition for task-based teaching proposed by Skehan (1998). In a task:

- *meaning is primary*: the activity is organized so as to encourage learners to focus on what they have to say (or write) rather than on how they have to say it;
- *learners should not repeat the words of others, but rather express their own ideas or opinions*: learners are invited to achieve an objective using the linguistic forms at their disposal, without those being offered, as they are in textbook exercises, models or grammar repetition examples;
- *the role at hand imitates real-world activities*: to carry out tasks, learners must, for example, sort, classify or compare items, tell, describe, plan or make decisions; classic completion or transformation exercises instead present activities that are not performed outside of a language classroom;
- *completing successfully the task is a priority*: the main goal of the activity is to complete the task and not, as in exercises, to demonstrate knowledge of how to use a certain grammatical structure correctly;
- *evaluation is based on the final outcome*: the teacher assesses students on their ability to complete the task and not, as in textbook exercises, with respect to their ability to use accurately the target grammatical structures.

When the task is proposed to learners, their goal is to carry out the task in the allotted time, without any indication as to the linguistic forms to use: they are free to make use of the structures available to them in their interlanguage. During the task, learners are inevitably and naturally inclined to focus on linguistic aspects: for example, they may ask themselves, “What is the best way to express this idea?” or “How do you say X?” or “Are there other ways to say Y?”—and so on. Reflection upon language, then, already makes an appearance within the course of the activity, and is generated by the student’s need to convey a certain message. Later, the teacher guides learners through activities aimed at developing accuracy, pointing attention to those particular structures key to carrying out the task more effectively, and encouraging them to reuse the structures they have just noticed. But let us consider in more detail the stages of a task-based lesson.

At the start, students prepare for the task with the aid of the teacher. Instructions for the task are introduced and students perform activities that allow them to recall vocabulary useful in completing the task. This stage has a variable duration: each time the teacher assesses how much preparation the students need.

Next comes the task cycle. Learners, in pairs or small groups, perform the task, which, as mentioned previously, consists of an assignment requiring the use of language to achieve an extralinguistic goal. The task may be accomplished orally or in writing, and might consist of various activities, such as comparing, classifying, arranging in

order, organizing, expressing opinions, etc. While students are engaged in the task, the teacher moves from group to group, observes their work, and provides assistance when necessary. Having completed the task, each group gets ready to report the outcome of their work to the others, preparing the report and selecting a spokesperson. The teacher continues offering support during this stage, if necessary, then organizes a round of presentations, and comments along with the class about each group's report.

The task cycle is followed by linguistic focus. This is the stage in which learners actually “study grammar.” At first the teacher guides learners in analyzing what they have produced during the task, primarily drawing attention to grammar and vocabulary that are useful in carrying out the particular task. Practice activities are therefore recommended—at first guided and then increasingly freeform—leading students to exercise the structures and phrases they have focused on during the previous analysis. These activities consist of traditional practice exercises: cloze tests, sentence rewriting, guided dialogues, etc. At this stage the teacher may provide learners with metalinguistic information, for instance inviting students as a group to reconstruct one or more grammatical rules using inductive reasoning, or guiding them through the use of a grammar textbook.

2.1 Peculiarities of task-based teaching

In the traditional PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) model the teacher first presents a linguistic structure in a context that helps clarify its meaning, then invites students to use the structure that has just been presented in a few exercises, and finally leads them to produce it autonomously in more open-ended communicative contexts. Task-based teaching upends the order of these stages: teaching instead begins with Production before moving into Presentation and Practice during the linguistic focus stage. This rearrangement allows classroom teaching to incorporate some of the positive aspects that we have seen are characteristic of spontaneous acquisition, while still ensuring the advantages of guided learning. Let us briefly consider how and why.

Having to produce language to reach a real communicative goal (the performance of the task) and without requiring the use of predetermined grammatical structures, students endeavor to use all the linguistic resources available to them, just like spontaneous learners who want, above all, to convey a message, irrespective of the forms used or level of accuracy. Moreover, since much of the task is conducted in groups, the opportunity to use language is far greater than when communication takes place predominantly among a great number of students and a single teacher. The usage contexts also vary significantly: depending upon the type of task proposed, it will be necessary for students to attempt to use language to complete widely varying activities.

On the other hand, the focus on language that follows the task cycle ensures attention to forms which, absent or nearly so during spontaneous acquisition, encourage the development of accuracy. This comes with a twofold advantage over the traditional PPP model: firstly, learners reflect upon the grammatical forms after using them (or having tried to use them) during the task, hence with more attention than students usually reserve for the presentation of a new structure in a PPP context; secondly, the linguistic focus is concentrated upon structures that learners are prepared for in terms of interlanguage development, as they are selected in relation to task need and students' level of competence.

3. Tasks and Italian grammar: an applied example

The following paragraphs illustrate an applied example of task-based teaching for L2 Italian, presenting an experimentation conducted among a group of six learners at the advanced level. This instructional intervention was accomplished within the additional L2 class at a professional institute in the province of Bologna, Italy. The grammar module was conducted weekly in five sessions lasting two hours each.

In previous sections we have emphasized that a task is a communicative activity that allows the learner to use language for an extralinguistic goal without requiring the use of structures chosen in advance by the teacher, who subsequently guides the student to observe the lack of certain structures necessary or useful for carrying out the task, and thus reflect upon the formal aspects of these structures after having “forced” the very linguistic abilities to use them. In fact, the communicative functions of language are the starting point of task-based teaching, and only then are necessary grammatical structures chosen upon which to work. Even within this general framework, there are situations in which it is necessary to exercise specific grammatical structures. In these cases, it is possible to use focused tasks, meaning ones requiring the use of specific grammatical structures previously selected by the teacher.

In our case, the grammar module was designed after systematic observation of the learners' language competence. Thanks to the close cooperation between the school, the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, and the University of Verona, in the three years preceding the experimentation, copious samples of semi-spontaneous speech produced by students in different communicative contexts were recorded and analyzed under the project that created the VIP (*Variabilità nell'interlingua Parlata*) corpus (*Variability in Spoken Interlanguage*, see Pallotti et al. in press). Through this analysis, it was observed that the six learners, although appearing to have reached an advanced stage of language development since the first study (see Pallotti and Ferrari 2008; Bettoni et al. 2009; Ferrari 2009a; 2009b; Nuzzo 2009a; 2009b), showed difficulties in the use of certain structures and, in the span of three years, mainstream school immersion on its own had not led to significant improvements in those areas of their Italian language abilities (see Bettoni and Nuzzo, in press). Hence, the decision to create a task-based instructional intervention to teach grammar with the goal of focusing the students' attention on these structures through communicative activities. Among the structures taught, we selected here the passive and object left dislocation, which, as we will see in the next section, involve complex linguistic phenomena situated at the interface between syntactic organization and pragmatic choices, and are therefore particularly difficult for non-native Italian speakers.

3.1 Grammatical structures taught

In every language the same propositional content may be expressed from different perspectives based on pragmatic choices. Many of these choices, which are reflected in sentence structure, serve to guide the listener's attention and aid in the representation of meaning, making communication more effective. As a language with free constituent order, Italian is very sensitive to pragmatic changes in the distribution of information.

Among the structures affected by phenomena situated at the interface between syntactic organization and pragmatic choices, we will consider passive verb forms and object left dislocation for the instructional intervention we intend to recount here. Both of these constructions allow the speaker to place elements in topic position that would otherwise be in comment position for an active voice and syntactically unmarked sentence (Schwarze 2009). While the passive is suitable for formal contexts, dislocation is preferable when adopting a more colloquial register (D'Achille 2006). In terms of Lexical Functional Grammar (Bresnan 2001), these are constructions that involve a non-canonical correspondence between the argument structure (A-structure, or thematic roles), the constituent structure (C-structure, or word order) and the functional structure (F-structure, or the designation of grammatical functions). A-structure describes who does what in a sentence, and is based upon the universal hierarchy of argument roles illustrated in (1), (Keenan and Comrie 1977; Hopper and Thompson 1980).

(1) agent > beneficiary > experiencer/goal > instrument > patient/theme > locative

C-structure describes the parts of the sentence, or better, its constituents. F-structure describes the grammatical functions of the arguments and of the constituents. Also C-structure and F-structure are hierarchically organized: for C-structure, there is linear order (first position, second, etc.); for F-structure, the subject represents a more prominent role than the object, which in turn precedes indirect complements.

These three representational levels are mapped canonically in Italian declarative, active, and pragmatically neutral sentences when the subject coincides with the agent and with the constituent located in first position, as illustrated in (2).

(2)

	un serpente	ha morso	il leone
	(a snake)	(bit)	(the lion)
<i>A-structure</i>	<i>agent</i>		<i>patient</i>
<i>F-structure</i>	<i>subject</i>		<i>object</i>
<i>C-structure</i>	<i>first</i>		<i>second</i>
	<i>position</i>		<i>position</i>

For an utterance in passive form, however, the correspondence between two of the three levels is marked because A-structure and F-structure are not aligned (3): the agent, in fact, does not coincide with the subject, but rather with the adjunct (agent complement).

(3)

	il leone (the lion)	è stato morso (was bitten)	da un serpente (by a snake)
<i>A-structure</i>	<i>patient</i>		<i>agent</i>
<i>F-structure</i>	<i>subject</i>		<i>adjunct</i>
<i>C-structure</i>	<i>first position</i>		<i>second position</i>

Without going further into the details of grammatical formalism, it suffices to say here that the non-canonical correspondence between levels entails greater effort from the speaker, who would naturally be led to interpret the subject as the agent, according to canonical order. As a consequence, a learner will learn to decode and to produce utterances like (2) more easily than utterances like (3).

Let us consider now object left dislocation, still using the formalism offered by Lexical Functional Grammar.

(4)

	il leone (the lion)	lo ha morso ([him] bit)	un serpente (a snake)
<i>A-structure</i>	<i>patient</i>		<i>agent</i>
<i>F-structure</i>	<i>object</i>		<i>subject</i>
<i>C-structure</i>	<i>first position</i>		<i>second position</i>

While A-structure aligns with F-structure because the agent has the role of subject and the patient has the role of object, C-structure does not because the first constituent is not the subject but rather the object. Cases of object left dislocation, then, require greater effort on the part of the speaker (and especially the learner), who naturally would be led to attribute the role of subject to the first constituent.

Besides the difficulties mentioned above, object left dislocation entails the need to master the clitic system, which for the learner is notoriously among the last achievements of the nominal system (Berretta 1990; 1992; Chini, Ferraris 2003; Giannini 2008). In fact, if the clitic is omitted in (4), the phrase in first position would be interpreted as the subject.

3.2 Tasks used in the instructional program



In this section we illustrate two of the teaching units proposed during the instructional program. In both cases, when presenting task stages and related activities, we use the outline proposed by Willis (1996). Table 1 shows the unit called “Interesting television news report” on the use of passive forms, and Table 2 shows the unit “The birthday party” on the use of object dislocation.

Table 1. *The passive*

Interesting television news report	
Pre-task	
<p>The teacher introduces the topic and goes over the directions.</p> <p>The students prepare themselves for the task.</p>	<p>Instructions</p> <p>Today we have the task of reconstructing an interesting television news report. We'll listen together to the news recording several times. Working in pairs, you must attempt to reconstruct the text as accurately as possible following each listening.</p>
Task cycle	
<p>Students perform the task in pairs, taking notes and referring to the instructor.</p> <p>The teacher supervises the work in groups and helps the students.</p>	<p>Task</p> <p><i>Interesting television news report</i></p> <p><i>First Listening</i></p> <p>Students listen to the news recording and identify key information: who is involved, what is happening, where and when does the narrated event take place, why is the event described “newsworthy.”</p> <p><i>Second Listening (repeat twice)</i></p> <p>Students listen once again to the report and reconstruct the text in writing as accurately as possible.</p>
Linguistic focus 1	
Analysis	
<p>Students perform functional linguistic structure identification and analysis activities for the task.</p> <p>The teacher supervises the task and guides students in the activity.</p>	<p>Fill in the blanks</p> <p>The teacher hands out a partial transcript of the news report in which the passive has been removed. Students complete the text and check their answers by listening again to the audio. The teacher helps the students analyze sentences and deduce the rule. Finally, the class reviews the grammar textbook.</p>
Linguistic focus 2	
Practice	
<p>Students engage in an activity that reviews the target structure, taking notes in their notebook.</p>	<p>Rewrite your text</p> <p>Students go back to the text produced during the task and try to rewrite as</p>

<p>The teacher guides students in practicing the targeted structure.</p>	<p>many sentences as possible using the passive.</p> <p>Reconstruct the text The teacher hands out a news summary in which the passive has been removed. Students complete the text and then compare it with the answer key.</p>
<p>TASK REPETITION</p>	
<p>News in brief</p>	
<p>Students perform a similar task with some added element of complexity.</p> <p>The teacher supervises the task and guides students in the activity.</p>	<p>Task <i>News in brief: what just happened?</i></p> <p>You will now watch some short film clips. You must come up with one sentence to describe what happened, as if you were a journalist. Answer the question: “What happened?” beginning with the word you see appear on the screen before each clip. Write your sentences down on a sheet of paper and be prepared to present them to the instructor.</p>

Table 2. Object dislocation

The birthday party	
Pre-task	
<p>The teacher introduces the topic and goes over the directions.</p> <p>The students prepare themselves for the task.</p>	<p>Instructions We are organizing a birthday party for Stefania. Each participant will bring something. In pairs, using these cards, decide who brings what. Always make your choice starting from the information on the first card. For example:</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;">   </div> <p><i>I cioccolatini li porta Marianna</i> (The chocolates [them] brings Marianna)</p> <p>Write down your answers on a sheet of paper and be prepared to present them to the teacher.</p>
Task cycle	
<p>Students perform the task in pairs, taking notes and referring to the instructor.</p> <p>The teacher supervises the work in groups and helps the students.</p>	<p>Task <i>Let's plan Stefania's birthday party: who brings what?</i></p>
Linguistic focus 1	
Analysis	
<p>Students perform functional linguistic structure identification and analysis activities for the task.</p> <p>The teacher supervises the task and guides students in the activity.</p>	<p>Newspaper clippings The teacher hands out a collage of newspaper clippings. Students look for examples of object dislocation and write them down on a sheet of paper. The teacher helps students analyze sentences and elicits the rule. Finally, the class reviews the grammar textbook.</p> <p>Catch the mistakes The teacher hands out a collection of sentences containing errors produced by the students during the task. In pairs, students identify errors and suggest the correct answers.</p>

Linguistic focus 2	
Practice	
<p>Students engage in an activity that reviews the target structure, taking notes in their notebook.</p> <p>The teacher guides students in practicing the targeted structure.</p>	<p>Reconstructing sentences The teacher hands out slips of paper containing sentence fragments given out of order. Students put the fragments in order and compare their answers with the correct ones.</p> <p>Sentence completion The teacher provides a handout containing the transcription of the task <i>Stefania's party</i> completed by a native speaker. The transcript includes deleted clitic pronouns or verbs. Students first complete the sentences individually, and then check their answers one by one, listening to the complete recording.</p>
TASK REPETITION	
Trip to the mountains	
<p>Students perform a similar task with some added element of complexity.</p> <p>The teacher supervises the task and guides students in the activity.</p>	<p>Task <i>Trip to the mountains: who brought what?</i></p> <p>Your class has organized a trip to the mountains. It is the day of departure and you are all ready to board the bus. Before leaving, check to see if all the participants have brought the items requested. In pairs, use these cards to confirm who brought what. Always form your sentences starting from the first card. Write your answers down and be prepared to present them.</p>

4. Conclusions

In this paper we have shown, using a concrete example of instructional application, how even certain complex aspects of Italian grammar may be taught using TBLT. The advantage of task-based teaching compared with other communicative approaches is essentially that the focus on grammatical form is presented to students after they have attempted to use the linguistic resources at their disposal to achieve an extralinguistic goal. The presentation of forms necessary or useful toward carrying out the task, and related exercises, therefore responds to a “need” felt by learners, with encouraging promise that students may effectively retain the targeted linguistic phenomena.

The two activities presented here were successfully tested with a small group of advanced Italian L2 learners, who, after the instructional program, showed encouraging

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progress in the ability to use the structures taught. However, without having the benefit of a control group in which the same structures were presented with a non-task-based approach, we cannot say with certainty that the success of the instructional intervention was determined solely by the teaching method. We therefore hope in the future to perform instructional experimentations in which the task-based approach is compared with other types of instruction in order to fully assess its effectiveness.

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