Task-Based Language Teaching for Beginner-Level Learners of L2 French: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: This study investigated the effect of input-based tasks on the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar by beginner-level learners of L2 French and reported the introduction of task-based teaching as an innovation in a state secondary school. The experimental group (n = 19) completed a series of focused input-based language tasks, taught by their teacher, over two lessons. These tasks drew students' attention to markers of plurality in French. Students did not receive any explicit explanation of these features. Tests established that they acquired receptive knowledge of new vocabulary and target structures in comparison with a control group (n = 15) that completed the tests only. The teacher successfully implemented the tasks and considered the materials effective but also suggested improvements.

Keywords: attention, beginner-level learners, input-based tasks, task-based language teaching

Résumé : Les auteurs s'intéressent aux répercussions de tâches basées sur les intrants sur l'acquisition du vocabulaire et de la grammaire chez les apprenants néophytes du français langue seconde, et ils rendent compte de la mise en application novatrice de l'enseignement basé sur la tâche dans une école secondaire nationale. Le groupe expérimental (n = 19) est appelé par l'enseignant à exécuter une série de tâches linguistiques précises, basées sur des intrants, qui s'étendent sur deux cours. Ces tâches attirent l'attention des étudiants sur les marqueurs de la pluralité en français. Aucun éclaircissement n'est fourni aux étudiants à ce sujet. Les contrôles auxquels ils sont soumis par la suite révèlent que les étudiants de ce groupe acquièrent une connaissance réceptive de nouveau vocabulaire et de structures cibles, comparativement aux étudiants d'un groupe témoin (n = 15) qui sont soumis aux contrôles seulement. L'intégration de ces tâches au programme est fructueuse, et l'enseignant les estime efficaces tout en proposant qu'y soient apportées certaines améliorations.

Mots clés : attention, apprenants néophytes, tâches basées sur les intrants, enseignement de langue basé sur la tâche

This study was motivated in part by an ongoing teacher development program for school teachers of foreign languages in New

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Zealand that aims to equip them with the skills they need to implement a task-based approach. Given that teachers often express doubts about the viability of such an approach with beginner-level learners, we hoped to demonstrate that it was possible and to provide examples of the kinds of tasks needed. The study was also motivated by theoretical considerations. We drew on theoretical accounts of second language acquisition that view receptive knowledge as the initial stage and the basis for the subsequent development of productive knowledge and also on theories that emphasize the role of attention. We sought evidence that when tasks create a functional need for learners to attend to specific words and grammatical structures in the input, they can acquire them incidentally.

Pedagogical background

In his state-of-the art review of task-based teaching (TBLT), Bygate (2015, pp.1–2) noted that although it is well established that tasks have an impact both on learners' use of language and on learning, there remain areas of uncertainty:

> (a) The range of ways in which TBLT can be effectively implemented in the classroom, in different contexts and with learners of different abilities and levels of proficiency, (b) what kinds of outcomes TBLT can achieve, and (c) whether TBLT is more or less efficient than other approaches in terms of what it achieves.

The study we report was designed to address (a) and (b). It is one of the few studies that has investigated TBLT with beginner-level learners (exceptions are Shintani, 2011, 2013, 2015; Shintani & Ellis, 2010), and it sheds light on how performing tasks can lead to learning. Much of the research investigating tasks has not been conducted in real classrooms, and many studies that have done so did not make use of the classroom's usual teacher. In our study, we aimed for ecological validity both by investigating TBLT in a real classroom and by recruiting the services of the students' usual teacher.

The tasks we used were input based. A common misunderstanding of TBLT is that tasks must involve production (R. Ellis, 2009). This misunderstanding has arisen because in both pedagogical accounts of TBLT and the relevant research, the tasks have typically been production based. Such tasks, however, are not viable in the case of beginners, who lack knowledge of the language and therefore cannot be expected to engage in free production. Input-based tasks, in contrast, are viable as long as they are designed in such a way as to provide contextual clues to enable learners to understand the input. Input-based tasks

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constitute a form of comprehension-based teaching (Winitz, 1981). They are premised on two assumptions: (a) Learners are able to comprehend the input the tasks expose them to and (b) they can pick up specific linguistic features embedded in the input – that is, they acquire them without deliberately trying to learn them. A good input-based task is designed with these assumptions in mind. We should note, however, that although input-based tasks do not require production, learners may still opt to use the target language (or their first language).

The tasks were also focused (R. Ellis, 2003). An unfocused task is not designed with a view to facilitating the acquisition of specific, predetermined language, whereas a focused task is. In the case of a production-based task, a focused task is designed to elicit production of the target language. In the case of an input-based task, it is designed to attract the learners' attention to the target features. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) pointed out that it is very difficult to design production tasks that make use of the target language essential (or even useful) because learners can always resort to communication strategies to express what they want to say, thus avoiding the use of features targeted by the task. It is, however, much easier to design comprehension-based tasks that cannot be successfully performed unless the learners process the target language. For example, if the task requires learners to listen to sentences such as *Les chats sont sous la table* (The cats are under the table) and then to choose which of two pictures is correct – one showing a single cat under the table and the other two cats –learners will be able to correctly respond only if they have processed one of the plural markers in the sentences. Another advantage of input-based focused tasks is that they make it easy for the teacher to assess whether the learners have succeeded in processing the target language and whether feedback is needed.

Focused input-based tasks must still meet the criteria for tasks in general. That is, they must be designed to ensure that (a) there is a primary focus on meaning, (b) there is a gap of some kind, (c) the learners have to rely on their own resources (both linguistic and nonlinguistic) to complete the task, and (d) there is a clearly defined communicative outcome (R. Ellis & Shintani, 2014). In short, a task aims to encourage learners to treat language as a tool for communicating rather than as an object of study. We drew on these criteria in designing the tasks for this study.

Theoretical background

We also drew on several key theoretical constructs in second language acquisition in framing the study: (a) Receptive knowledge of new

linguistic features precedes the ability to produce them, (b) acquisition involves attention to linguistic forms and the meanings they convey (i.e., it involves form–function mapping), and (c) default processing strategies may prevent learners from attending to, and thereby acquiring, grammatical features they are exposed to in input.

Receptive knowledge precedes production

Lightbown (2016, p.193), summarizing her lifelong work in classroom language learning, commented, "It would be hard to find anyone who would argue that 'comprehension' is not the first requirement for second language learning." Her view of the importance of prioritizing comprehension derived from her experience evaluating a comprehension-based program for young learners in a New Brunswick school. She found that after two years the learners were both better at understanding English than those in a comparison group that received production-based instruction and also better at producing spoken language (Lightbown, 1992). A follow-up study (Lightbown, Halter, White, & Horst, 2002) showed limitations of the comprehension-based approach at later stages, but it was clearly effective for the beginner-level learners. A comprehension-based approach takes cognizance of the fact that receptive knowledge (i.e., the ability to understand the meaning of a linguistic item when listening or reading) precedes productive knowledge (i.e., the ability to produce the item in speech or writing) and, more important, that receptive knowledge serves as the basis for the development of productive knowledge.

Vocabulary studies (see Nation, 2001) have shown conclusively that receptive knowledge outstrips productive knowledge and that receptive knowledge of new words is established before productive knowledge. Nation (2001, p.28) reviewed explanations for this, suggesting that "productive learning is more difficult because it requires extra learning of new spoken or written output patterns." He also cited N. Ellis and Beaton's (1993) explanation, namely that receptive access is easier than productive access because it generally involves only a simple link to an equivalent L1 item, whereas the productive link involves competing paths of access. An input-based approach to teaching, then, is, arguably, more compatible with how initial knowledge of new words is established.[1] However, learners can also develop productive knowledge of new words without having experienced producing them. Thus, an input-based approach can potentially facilitate productive as well as receptive knowledge of new vocabulary.

In comparison with vocabulary, research on grammar has paid little attention to the acquisition of receptive knowledge. Arguments abound as to whether receptive and productive grammatical knowledge share

the same or different processing mechanisms (Buyl & Housen, 2015). However, irrespective of whether processing mechanisms are different or shared, it is generally accepted that receptive knowledge of grammar must precede productive knowledge. As Buyl (2009, p.8) noted, "With regard to L1 and L2 acquisition in general, scholars note that it has long been thought – both in folk wisdom and in scholarly opinion – that comprehension always precedes production." He cited Keenan and MacWhinney's (1987, p.149) view that "comprehension is the primary source of learning to produce language." Learning morphological features such as markers of plurality – the targets of our study – does not commence with the production of these forms but with attending to them in the input and understanding their meanings (R. Ellis, 2015). If the mechanisms of comprehension and production are shared, as claimed, for example, by Van Patten's (1996) input processing theory, then, once receptive knowledge of a target grammatical form has been established, learners may also be able to produce it.

Necessity of attention

Schmidt (2001, p.16) claimed that "the orthodox position in psychology is that there is little if any learning without attention." He saw attention as constrained by working memory, which is limited in capacity, arguing that attention needs to be allocated strategically, is subject to voluntary control, and, crucially, is conscious. His noticing hypothesis claims that learners need to focus their attention on specific linguistic forms for learning to occur and that this is accompanied by a subjective feeling of awareness (i.e., consciousness). Schmidt acknowledged that learners may be able to perceive elements in the input without conscious attention but argued that they will not be able to process this information for storage in long-term memory unless they consciously attend to it. Tomlin and Villa (1994), however, suggested that what they called "detection" need not involve consciousness. In their theory, although attention is still necessary for learning, it need not involve a subjective state of awareness, that is, consciousness.

Underlying these two views of the role of attention is the distinction between implicit and incidental learning. Implicit learning is generally defined as learning that occurs without intention and without consciousness. That is, although attention is still involved, learners are not conscious of what they have attended to when learning takes place. Incidental acquisition occurs when learners pick up linguistic features from input. Thus, as with implicit learning, it involves an absence of intention to learn but, unlike implicit learning, conscious attention to linguistic form may occur. In short, implicit learning can

be characterized as [– intention/–consciousness] and incidental acquisition as [– intention/+ consciousness]. Implicit learning is compatible with Tomlin and Villa's (1994) view of attention, and incidental learning is more compatible with Schmidt's (2001) noticing hypothesis.

Focused input tasks of the kind we designed expose learners to multiple exemplars of the target language. In this way they cater to detection in Tomlin and Villa's (1994) sense of this term and to frequency-driven implicit learning (N. Ellis, 2002). However, such tasks potentially do more than this. They create a functional need for learners to process the target features because learners will only be able to complete the task successfully if they attend to the target features. From a pedagogical perspective, however, whether performing tasks results in noticing (i.e., conscious attention to linguistic form) or detection (i.e., attention without consciousness) is arguably not important; it does not matter whether the learning is implicit or incidental. What is important is that form–meaning mapping takes place, that is, learners attend to a specific form and record the meaning that the form conveys in the context in which it was experienced.

Overcoming default processing strategies

Attending to form when performing a task is not easy for learners. A task by definition requires a primary focus on meaning. Learning, however, also requires attention to form. Beginner-level learners are likely to experience difficulty in shifting their attention from meaning to form if they are focused on achieving the outcome of the task. Learners are also naturally predisposed to attend to those aspects of language that can be processed most easily and that pay the greatest dividends in enabling them to comprehend. Thus, for example, learners are unlikely to attend to the plural markers in a sentence such as *Les deux chats sont sous la table* (The two cats are under the table) because *deux* signals that more than one cat is being referred to, removing the need to process the plural markers. VanPatten (1996, 2007) codified this tendency of learners to rely on default processing strategies by proposing a series of input-processing principles that determine how learners allocate attention during online processing. The first of these principles is "Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form." For example, they process lexical items before grammatical items and also more meaningful morphology before less or non-meaningful morphology. For grammar learning to take place, learners must overcome these default processing strategies.

Processing instruction (VanPatten, 1996) is a type of grammar instruction designed to help learners attend to grammatical features that they are likely to ignore. A key component of processing instruction

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is structured input, that is, activities that have been designed to force attention to key grammatical features and the meanings they convey. TBLT similarly aims to attract attention to linguistic form by means of focus on form, defined as an approach that "overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991, pp.45–46). However, there are some fundamental differences between processing instruction and TBLT. Processing instruction has typically involved explicit instruction before structured input activities and thus encourages intentional rather than incidental acquisition. In task-based instruction (as we have implemented it in our study), however, there is no explicit instruction, and the aim is to facilitate incidental acquisition. Furthermore, processing instruction involves activities that are more like exercises than tasks because there is no communicative outcome.

Previous research

Previous research has focused on production-based tasks and, by and large, on how task design and implementation variables affect the performance of a task rather than on the learning that results (see R. Ellis, 2015). Also, relatively few studies have investigated input-based tasks. One of the advantages of such tasks is that they make it easier to investigate the acquisition of specific linguistic features (lexical and grammatical) that results from performing the tasks. Teachers can control the input that students are exposed to, which is not easy in the case of production-based tasks.

Several early task-based studies (R. Ellis & He, 1999; R. Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994; Loschky, 1994) investigated learners' comprehension and the acquisition of new words embedded in the input of the tasks. They showed that performing the tasks helped the learners acquire new words. However, all these studies involved post-beginner learners. More recently, Shintani (2011, 2013, 2015; Shintani & Ellis, 2010) investigated the effects of performing input-based tasks on the acquisition of both vocabulary and grammar by complete beginners. This research, then, is more directly relevant to our own study. It is also of interest because it investigated both receptive and productive knowledge of the target items. Shintani reported that the learners successfully acquired receptive knowledge of the target words and that some also demonstrated productive knowledge of them. They also acquired one of the two grammatical structures that were the focus of her study. English plural *s* was acquired – again primarily receptively; however, copula *be* was not. The explanation for this difference lies in the fact that the input-based tasks made the processing of plural *s* necessary to achieve

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the task outcomes, whereas, because copula *be* is redundant (i.e., it adds nothing to the meaning of a sentence), it was not possible to create task-induced contexts that made attention to this feature functionally necessary. Shintani's research, then, suggests that input-based tasks may work for grammar acquisition only if they succeed in helping students create a form–meaning mapping.

These studies all used listen-and-do tasks that require learners to listen to directions or descriptions and then demonstrate their understanding non-verbally (e.g., by selecting the correct picture or by performing an action). Such tasks involve structured input designed to focus attention on the target linguistic features. The studies demonstrated that input-based tasks can be effective in helping learners incidentally acquire new words and at least some grammatical structures. In the study we now report, we also used listen-and-do tasks, contributing to previous research by investigating French as a foreign language rather than English.

Research questions

The focus of the study was beginner-level learners' acquisition of a set of words (mainly nouns) that had been embedded in the input of the tasks and also their acquisition of French markers of plurality. To this end, we formulated the following research questions:

1. Will the learners acquire receptive knowledge of the target words as a result of performing the input-based tasks?
2. Will the learners acquire (a) receptive and (b) productive knowledge of the French markers of plurality as a result of performing the tasks?

Acquisition of receptive knowledge was measured by testing whether the learners could demonstrate understanding of the meaning of target words and markers of plurality while listening. Acquisition of productive knowledge was measured by tests that required learners to demonstrate that they had understood stimuli containing markers of plurality and could also produce them orally.

In addition, we were interested in the teacher's subjective experience of TBLT with beginner-level learners:

3. What views will the teacher express about the experience of TBLT with beginner-level learners?

Participants

The study took place in a girls' school in one of New Zealand's major cities. The participants (N = 34; aged approximately 13 years) were in

Table 1. Background Information for Participants

Group	Started learning French			Spoke a language other than English at home	
	In Yr 9	In Yr 7 or 8 (mostly for 20 wk only)	Before Yr 7	Yes	No
Experimental (n = 18)	3	12	3	3 (1 Dutch, 2 Croatian	15
Control (n = 14)	4	9	1	2 (1 Croatian, 1 Afrikaans)	12

Note: Information was not available for one participant in each group.

Year 9, the first year of secondary school education. Two separate Year 9 classes were involved, one of which was chosen as the experimental group (n = 19) because the teacher of this class had volunteered to do the teaching for the study. The teacher of the other class agreed to allow his class to participate as the control group (n = 15); this class therefore took part in testing only. The school operates on a 10-day timetable and students in Year 9 have five French lessons over each 10-day period, each lasting one hour.

Background information about the participants is presented in Table 1. Information was available for all but one of the participants in each group. Most students spoke English as their first language. The majority had studied French in the previous two years in accordance with a policy of giving students exposure to several languages to allow them to make an informed choice about which language they would like to commit to studying in Year 9 or 10. However, they had only 20 weeks of exposure to French in three one-hour lessons per week in these "taster" courses.[2] Some of the students had no exposure to French for nearly 18 months before beginning Year 9, and others had completed their taster course in the 6-month period before beginning Year 9. In effect, then, they were still at the beginner level.

Research methods

The experimental group completed the pre-test, followed by approximately 1.5 hours of teaching spread out over two lessons on two separate days. The post-test was administered the next day and the delayed post-test on the first day after a two-week holiday break. The control group completed all tests (pre-test, post-test, delayed post-test) but otherwise received their normal class instruction. A small group of students (n = 6 in the experimental group, n = 5 in the control group) agreed to take the Elicited Imitation Test (a test of oral language

Table 2. Schedule of Teaching and Testing.

Event	Experimental group	Control group
Pre-testing:	June 23	
Vocabulary listening		
Grammar listening		
Elicited imitation (experimental group, *n* = 6; control group, *n* = 5)		
Lesson 1 (approx. 50 min)	June 26	X
Lesson 2 (approx. 30 min)	June 29	X
Post-testing:	June 29	
Grammar listening		
Elicited imitation (Experimental group, *n* = 3; control group, *n* = 5)		
Post-testing: vocabulary listening	X	June 29
Post-testing continued:	July 3	X
Vocabulary listening		
Elicited imitation (*n* = 3)		
2-wk school holiday break		
Delayed post-testing:	July 21	
Vocabulary listening		
Grammar listening		
Background questionnaire		

Note: *X*s indicate that the test was not used for that group.

production described in further detail later in the article). Ethics requirements necessitated that signed consent be obtained from both parents and students for participation in this test, which was administered one on one outside of the class; this, along with limits on the amount of time the researcher could have access to students, resulted in less-than-ideal participant numbers. The schedule of teaching and testing is displayed in detail in Table 2. The scheduling of testing varied slightly for each group according to timetable constraints.

Each teacher administered all tests after instruction from the researcher (except for the Elicited Imitation Test, which was administered one on one by the researcher). The researcher was present in the class to ensure that all tests were administered as planned.

Target structure

The target structure was markers of plurality in L2 French. Plurality in French is marked on determiners (e.g., *les* and *des*), nouns, adjectives, and verbs. However, marking on nouns and adjectives and on regular verbs for plurality is not always aurally salient. Because the instruction was entirely oral, the study focused on plural marking on determiners (both the definite article *les* and the partitive article *des*) and the common irregular verb *sont* (from *être*), for example, "Je voudrais

des pommes (I would like *some* apples)" and "*Les* pommes *sont* rouges" (*The* apples *are* red).

Instructional treatments

A variety of input-based tasks were designed by the researchers and given to the experimental group teacher, who agreed that they were suitable for use with her students. One of the researchers subsequently met with this teacher and went over in detail how each task was to be taught. The researcher emphasized that the teacher could repeat the stimuli as much as she liked to help comprehension, but that she was not to give any explicit or rule explanations about the target grammatical structure.

Both teachers agreed to avoid explicit focus on the target structures (plural definite or partitive articles and the verb *sont*) during the study. In the experimental group, this restriction was verified by an attending researcher who audio-recorded all French lessons during this period. The control group teacher guaranteed that this was the case for his class, too.

Table 3 shows the tasks that were used in the study in the order in which students worked at them. The tasks that students completed are explained in greater detail below.

Pre-task

Students listened to descriptions of the clothes belonging to three adolescents; they heard 22 statements in all. For each statement, they saw two pictures and chose the picture that best matched the statement. In so doing, they made a choice that showed whether they had understood whether a statement was singular or plural. For example, for the statement "1. J'ai *des* jeans (I have several pair of jeans)," they chose between pictures of (a) one pair of jeans and (b) two pair of jeans. After they had made their choices, students were given the correct answer. However, they were given no grammatical explanation.

Task 1a: bingo game

Each student had a board with nine squares that contained pictures of clothes. There were three different versions of this board. Each version had at least two pairs of the same object pictured as both a single item and a plural item (e.g., *une* jupe/*des* jupes [a skirt/skirts]).

The teacher read out a clothing item (e.g., "*un* pyjama"), and students drew a cross (*X*) over the corresponding item. The items were sequenced to encourage students to notice the singular–plural difference; for example, "un pyjama" was followed by "des pyjamas." The first student to cross out all pictures correctly was the winner. The

Table 3. Tasks completed during instructional treatments

Tasks completed	Aim	Researcher comments from class observation
Lesson 1		
Pre-task	Exposure to vocabulary and target structures	
Task 1a: bingo game	Encourage form–meaning mappings (*des* = plural, as contrasted with *un/une* = singular)	At times, the teacher indicated to individual students as she walked around the classroom what the correct answer was, by pointing at the correct picture.
Task 1a (repeated): bingo game (different version for each student)	As above	
Task 2a: shopping task	As above	The teacher needed to be reminded to tell students what the aim was – that is, to find out who spent the most. The teacher again indicated to some students who were having difficulty what the correct picture was in relation to the sentence in French that they had heard.
Task 3: cool or not	Encourage form–meaning mappings (*les* = plural, *sont* = plural as contrasted with *le/la* = singular and *est* = sing)	There was some initial confusion about what to put in the box. Some students asked, in French, for stimuli to be repeated, which the teacher then did.
Task 1a (repeated): bingo game	As for Task 1	
Lesson 2		
Task 1a (repeated): bingo	As for Task 1	
Task 1b: Bingo moche	As for Task 3	
Task 1b (repeated): bingo moche (different version for each student)	As for Task 3	
Task 2b: des soldes	As for Task 1	

teacher knew exactly when it was possible for someone to have won the game according to the stimuli she had read out.

Task 1b: bingo moche

Students worked with the same boards used in Task 1a. This time they heard phrases such as "*les* casquettes *sont* moches" (the caps are ugly) and they drew a in the square that depicted casquettes and also crossed off this picture. They also heard phrases such as "*les* pulls *sont* cools" (the pullovers are cool) and they drew a in the square that

depicted pullovers. The winner had all pictures on his or her board crossed off and a line of "cool" faces ().

Task 2a: shopping task

Students were shown a table of clothing items. They listened to sentences describing what each person bought and entered their purchases in a table (on a worksheet) according to who made the purchase. There were 15 items to be entered in this table (see the Appendix).

The sentences that they heard were juxtaposed to help them distinguish singular and plural forms. For example, the sentence "Yves achete *un* pull" (Yves bought a pullover)was followed immediately by "Julie achete *des* pulls" (Julie bought some pullovers). When the students had entered all items in the table on their worksheets, they then worked out who had spent the most money on clothes.

Task 2b: des soldes (sales)

Task 2a was repeated with new shoppers. The same items were also all reduced in price. At the end of the task, when students had entered items in the table on their worksheet, they had to work out who had saved the most money.

Task 3: cool or not?

Students referred to the same table of clothing items as in Task 2a. For each item, they were asked in French to decide whether it was cool or moche. The questions juxtaposed singular and plural items to help them make form–meaning mappings (as in Task 2a). As they made a decision about each item, students placed the corresponding letter in a table that had three columns: moche (ugly), ni moche ni cool (so-so), and cool. There was no correct answer to this task; it functioned much as one of VanPatten's (1996) affective structured input activities. At the end, the teacher took a poll about certain clothes to find out what the class consensus on opinion was.

Satisfying the criteria for a task

All tasks were designed to satisfy the task criteria in R. Ellis and Shintani (2014). For example, Task 2a, the shopping task, had a primary focus on meaning. Students had to listen to information about the purchases of the French adolescents they had been introduced to earlier in the pre-task. In listening, they discovered what each bought (the gap was no prior knowledge of this), and they had to rely on their own knowledge of clothes vocabulary and plurality markers to make correct choices for each stimulus (as they entered information about

purchases into a table). The outcome was the discovery of who had spent the most money shopping.

Feedback in relation to task completion

For each of the 22 statements in the pre-task, students were given immediate feedback by the teacher as to whether their picture choice, in relation to the singular or plural stimulus that they had heard, was correct or not. For all other tasks, students did not receive immediate feedback in relation to their performance. However, as noted already, the teacher indicated to some individual students who made errors as they played the bingo game what the correct answer was. For all, success in achieving the task outcome (e.g., winning the bingo game, establishing who had spent the most money on clothes in Task 2a) afforded feedback about their learning.

Testing instruments

Vocabulary Listening Test

This test aimed to assess receptive learning of vocabulary. Students listened as 12 vocabulary items were read out one by one. They selected, in each case from a choice of three, the picture that best matched the word they had heard. Ten of the items were articles of clothing, and two were adjectives (*moche, vieux*). For each item, the students heard the vocabulary item twice.[3]

Grammar Listening Test

This test was designed to assess students' receptive knowledge of markers of plurality. Students listened to 30 statements and then selected, from a choice of two, the picture that matched each statement. See Figure 1 for a sample item. Of the 30 stimuli in the test, six assessed understanding of each of the following plural forms: *sont, des,* and *les*, and four assessed understanding for each of the following singular forms or form groupings: *est, un* or *une,* and *le* or *la*. For each item, students heard the stimulus once only, at slightly slower than normal speed.

Students heard (but did not see written) the stimulus "Je voudrais *des* tomates" (I would like some tomatoes) and had to circle the picture that they considered to best match this statement.

Reliability for this test, as calculated using Cronbach's α on the post-test scores of the experimental group, was lower than desirable ($\alpha = 0.570$). It is hypothesized that this could be because students had, for each item, a 50% chance of getting it correct. It is difficult to see how this could have been avoided, given that in each case a binary choice had to be made – that is, between a singular or plural form.

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Figure 1: . Item 6 of the Grammar Listening TestSources: (a) CC0 1.0 via PIVISO; (b) CC by SA 2.0, photo by Vladimir Morozov.

(a)  (b) 

Sources: (a) CC0 1.0 via PIVISO; (b) CC by SA 2.0, photo by Vladimir Morozov.

Elicited Imitation Test

This test was designed to assess the learners' productive knowledge of markers of plurality. It consisted of 24 statements. Students heard each statement only once and then had to select the picture (out of two) that best corresponded to the statement they had heard. The pictures were designed to test their understanding of singular and plural forms. After they had made their picture choice, they repeated the statement in French. Students were given four statements to practice before beginning the test. Some statements contained more than one plural marker, and in all the test had 33 items testing for plural markers. Nine of these tested for *sont*, seven tested for *les,* and six tested for *des.* With respect to the singular forms, five assessed *est,* and three assessed each of the groupings *un–une* and *le–la,* respectively. As explained previously, this test was administered to a smaller group of students (experimental group, $n = 6$; control group, $n = 5$) as a pre-test and post-test only.

Only items for which students demonstrated receptive knowledge were scored. In other words, students had to make the correct picture choice for an item for their repetition of the statement to be scored. This was to eliminate the likelihood that students were just repeating verbatim what they had heard and to increase the possibility that the Elicited Imitation Test was reconstructive; that is, it required students to process the stimulus before they repeated it (Erlam, 2006). Scoring was in reference to the correct or incorrect repetition of the target item in each case. See an example statement from this test in Figure 2.

Students heard (but did not see) the statement "*Les* ballons *sont* jaunes" (the balloons are yellow). After students had made their picture choice by circling one of the two pictures, they repeated this statement. Students who had correctly chosen Picture (b) were scored for their repetition of *les* and *sont.* They scored two marks if they repeated

Figure 2: . Item 24 of the Elicited Imitation Test24.

(a)  (b) 

Sources: (a) CC by SA 2.0 photo by russellstreet; (b) CC by 2.0, photo by LongitudeLatitude.

both stimuli correctly. Those who chose Picture (a) received no marks, even though they may have repeated *les* and *sont* correctly.

Interview

The teacher was interviewed after the study had been completed to ascertain her views on and experience with using the task-based materials and her thoughts about TBLT in general. One of the researchers conducted the interview, audio-recorded it, and transcribed the teacher's responses.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for both groups on all tests. Tests of normality were conducted on descriptive statistics, and if assumptions of normality were not violated, parametric tests (i.e., independent-samples *t* tests) were computed to compare the experimental and control groups' scores. Where assumptions of normality were violated, non-parametric independent-samples Mann–Whitney U tests were used. The α level for statistical significance was set at 0.05. Effect sizes were also calculated to establish between-groups differences or within-group differences over time. The effect sizes were interpreted as small ($d > 0.2$), medium ($d > 0.5$), or large ($d > 0.8$; Cohen, 1988).

Results

Vocabulary Listening Test

The high scores on this test were due to the fact that several items of vocabulary tested were cognates (e.g., *un pyjama*). Tests of normality were violated for this test; therefore non-parametric tests were performed on gain scores to test for statistical significance. Independent-samples Mann–Whitney U tests established that the experimental group made gains that were statistically greater than those of the control group from pre- to post-test ($p = 0.004$) and from pre- to delayed

post-test (p = 0.004). The effect sizes were as follows: pre- to post-test, d = 1.150, pre- to delayed post-test, d = 1.293.

Grammar Listening Test

Independent-samples t tests showed a nearly significant difference between the experimental and control groups on the pre-test, t (32) = 1.919, p = 0.064; therefore, t tests were performed using gain scores instead. Gain scores were normally distributed.

Independent-samples t tests showed that the experimental group made statistically significant gains over the control group from pre- to post-test, t(29.053) = 4.000, p < .001, d = 1.392. The difference in gains between the two groups from pre- to delayed post-tests was not statistically significant, t(31) = 1.732, p = .093, d = 0.621.

Elicited Imitation Test

A small subset of students in each group (experimental group, n = 6; control group, n = 5) took this test.

Tests of normality were not violated for these data. Independent-samples t tests showed no significant difference between groups on either the pre-test, t(5.020) = 1.006, p = 0.360, or the post-test, t (9) = 0.179, p = 0.862. Effect sizes were calculated to establish gains from pre- to post-test for each group. For the experimental group, the effect size was d = 3.176; for the control group, d = 0.502.

Teacher interview

The teacher indicated that although she had taught tasks in the classroom before, she had not used input-based tasks. She stated, "Generally I try and get them to be producing the language." She thought that it would be a good idea to follow up the input-based tasks with tasks that required the students to produce the target structure. However, she also acknowledged that using only production-based tasks would not have been successful because the students did not have the knowledge to produce the target structures. The teacher thought that these tasks were effective because "[they were] very specific and ...

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for the Vocabulary Listening Test

Test (max. score = 12)	Experimental group			Control group		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Pre-test	9.58	1.12	19	9.00	1.07	15
Post-test 1	11.11	0.57	19	9.33	1.18	15
Post-test 2	11.06	0.73	18	9.40	1.24	15

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Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for the Grammar Listening Test

Test (max. score = 30)	Experimental group			Control group		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Pre-test	15.79	2.39	19	17.60	3.11	15
Post-test 1	19.37	3.70	19	17.40	3.62	15
Post-test 2	18.06	3.06	18	17.73	3.79	15

really made them focus ... it was very clear and easy to understand some of the things."

However, she also said that they were rather teacher based and quite repetitive and did not provide the fun and element of competition that the students were used to. When asked whether she usually provided grammatical explanations about new grammatical structures, she said that she did not normally do this: "I think it puts them off. I think they need to just enjoy communicating and playing fun games and getting some confidence and opening their mouths." She did say that with Year 9, "By midway through the year I start to ... a little bit more." However, this viewpoint did not correspond to her earlier claim that to use production tasks with these students, it would be necessary to give them instruction "on what plurals and singulars were."

When asked whether she would like to make any comments about task-based language teaching, she said that thinking of new tasks was not easy for her, nor was finding the time to plan and design the materials:

> I think that the biggest issue for me is having the time to plan the task properly and to think of new tasks ... it is hard to come up with something that is relevant and teaches them something and which is fun as well.

Discussion

The study was designed with two purposes in mind. The first was to investigate whether input-based tasks were effective in enabling lear-

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Gain Scores on the Grammar Listening Test

Gain	Experimental group			Control group		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Pre–post 1	3.79	3.69	19	0.20	2.04	15
Pre–post 2	2.22	3.87	18	0.13	2.85	15

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for the Elicited Imitation Test

Test (max. score = 33)	Experimental group			Control group		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Pre-test	10.17	1.99	6	12.60	5.09	5
Post-test 1	14.66	4.00	6	14.10	6.45	5

ners to acquire receptive knowledge of new vocabulary and both receptive and productive knowledge of a grammatical feature (markers of plurality). The second was to examine the teacher's views about input-based tasks and TBLT in general.

The results of the post-tests indicate that the students were able to acquire receptive knowledge of the target vocabulary and that the gains were maintained over time. The effect sizes for gains from pre-test to the immediate and delayed post-tests were both large (*d*s = 1.150 and 1.293, respectively), and the comparison with the control group was statistically significant at both times ($p = 0.004$). The mean gains from pre- to post-tests for the experimental groups were small (i.e., only 1.53 and 1.48). This is because the pre-test scores were high (probably because many of the items were cognates), allowing little room for improvement. However, previous studies of incidental vocabulary learning (e.g., R. Ellis & He, 1999; R. Ellis et al., 1994), in which the length of instruction was also limited, reported similar low gain levels. Shintani's (2011) study reported much higher gain levels from pre- to post-test (e.g., 17.2 on a multiple-choice test), but her study involved a much longer period of instruction. In the current study, as in the other studies, gains were maintained over time.

The results also show that the learners were successful in acquiring receptive knowledge of the target structure. The experimental group outperformed the control group on the Grammar Listening Test ($p < .001$), and the effect size for the gain from pre- to immediate post-test was again large ($d = 1.392$). This was, in fact, much larger than the effect size for implicit instruction ($d = 0.54$) and similar to that for explicit instruction ($d = 1.13$) reported in Norris and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis of form-focused instruction studies. Given only 1.5 hours of instruction, an average gain of 3.58 points from pre- to immediate post-test is encouraging. However, this gain was not maintained from pre- to delayed post-test, although the effect size ($d = 0.621$) was considerable. A longer period of instruction may be needed to ensure better maintenance over time.

Shintani, Li, and Ellis's (2013) meta-analysis of comprehension and production-based studies reported that input-based instruction

contributes not only to the development of receptive knowledge of grammatical features, but also to productive knowledge. We examined whether 11 of the students in our study acquired productive knowledge of the plural markers by means of the Elicited Imitation Test. The effect size for the experimental group's gain from pre- to post-test was large (d = 3.176), much larger than that for the control group (d = .502), but, given the small sample size, the difference between the experimental and control groups did not reach statistical significance. The small number of students taking part in this test is a limitation of this study.

Overall, then, the study gives further support to the effectiveness of input-based tasks for beginner-level learners. Such tasks cater to the incidental acquisition of both vocabulary and grammar by creating a functional need for learners to attend to target features, consciously or subconsciously, in a context in which they are primarily focused on meaning and achieving task outcomes. The study shows that acquisition can take place without any explicit presentation of target items. Input-based tasks of the kind used in this study create an acquisition-rich classroom that exposes learners to input that they have to process in real time and, thus, potentially fosters their ability to use what they have learned in communication.

The second purpose of the study was to examine the teacher's experience of using input-based tasks in her own classroom. We also hoped that, as teacher educators, we could learn from conducting the study. The teacher reported that she had not used input-based tasks of this kind previously, but could see their value with beginner-level learners and would like to make fuller use of them in her teaching. Our observations of her classes showed that she was able to execute the tasks as intended and without difficulty. Her comments, however, also led us to see ways in which we could improve the tasks, for example, by introducing a competitive element into them. She also pointed to a difficulty she experienced with TBLT in general, namely the lack of existing materials and the time-consuming work involved in developing her own tasks. This is a crucial point that has been mentioned elsewhere (Erlam, 2015). We see, therefore, a need to build a bank of tasks, both input based and output based, that teachers can draw on.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale study. It was conducted in a real classroom and involved the students' normal teacher, so in some respects it may have a greater claim to ecological validity than much of the experimental research on TBLT. A limitation to this study, however, was the

presence of the researcher in the experimental group classroom, which might have had some effect on the results obtained.

As with previous studies, the results demonstrate that when input-based tasks are designed that create a functional need for learners to attend to target items, incidental acquisition takes place. The study also shows that a teacher with no prior experience with such tasks can execute them skillfully. The materials and results of the study will now figure in future teacher development courses to provoke reflection on how best to introduce TBLT for beginner-level learners.

Some of the obvious limitations have already been acknowledged, for example, the small number of students taking part in the Elicited Imitation Test. In accordance with what Long (2015) has called "pure" TBLT, we did not investigate whether providing learners with explicit instruction before the performance of the tasks would enhance learning of the target items. (See Li, Ellis, & Zhu, 2016, for a study that did investigate this question.) It was interesting that, although the teacher did not feel explicit instruction was necessary, she did indicate that explicit instruction may be needed to enable learners to produce the grammatical targets. The most obvious limitation was the short period of instruction. Clearly, incidental acquisition requires extensive exposure to input. We also became aware of a limitation in how the input-based tasks were implemented (our fault, not the teacher's). We failed to point out the need to provide instant feedback on students' responses to each stimulus. Feedback arguably plays a crucial role in helping learners pay attention to the key features in the input and, in the case of grammar, make the necessary form–meaning mappings.

Future improvements for a follow-up study include, first, a longer period of instruction to see whether there are greater gains that are sustained over time. This will necessitate, of course, the design of more input-based tasks. Another improvement will be to incorporate suggestions that the teacher made by designing tasks that involve competition. Using a research assistant to assist with the one-on-one testing required for the Elicited Imitation Test may allow for more students to be tested and thus give a better indication of whether the instruction leads to gains in language production. Finally, as mentioned earlier, the provision of feedback may help students make stronger connections between the language forms and their meaning.

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Notes

1 Webb (2005) reported a study that suggested that production-based practice is more effective than reception-based practice for acquiring new words. However, Webb's study examined intentional learning. Our concern is entirely with task-based instruction that caters to incidental acquisition.
2 This taster approach is not uncommon in New Zealand schools during Years 7–9.
3 The difference in the number of times that students heard the test stimuli (twice for the Vocabulary Listening Test, once for the Grammar Listening Test) was because the teacher accidentally read the stimuli for the Vocabulary Listening Test twice in the pre-test, making it necessary to also do so in the subsequent administrations of this test.

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Appendix: Faire du Shopping

(a)  $15	(b)  $45	(c)  $60
(d)  $80	(e)  $60	(f)  $20
(g)  $25	(h)  $20	(i)  $15
(j)  $40	(k)  $25	(l)  $80
etc.		

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Faire du Shopping

1) Julie, Yves, et Sophie font du shopping. Qui achète quoi?

		Qu'est-ce qu'ils achètent?			
Julie	**$**	**Sophie**	**$**	**Yves**	**$**
Total	$		$		$

2) Qui a dépensé le plus ?