

A TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED COMPREHENSION-BASED INPUT TASK FOCUSED ON THE SPANISH SUBJUNCTIVE

TAREA PEDAGÓGICA BASADA EN LA COMPRENSIÓN, ENFOCADA EN EL SUBJUNTIVO ESPAÑOL E IMPLANTADA EN UN ENTORNO VIRTUAL DE APRENDIZAJE

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Abstract

This article is from a study that deals with the effects of an online comprehension-based input task, focused on the Spanish subjunctive in a specific syntactic structure which is used to give directions, measuring the competence of the participants on the production of the subjunctive in the given structure. The task was administered via a Moodle platform, and the participants did not need the intervention of the instructor to perform it. To evaluate the effects of the task, the participants took a pre-test, a post-test, and a delayed post-test, one week after the post-test.

Keywords: task-based language teaching; focused tasks; comprehension-based input task; computer assisted language learning; Spanish subjunctive.

Resumen

Este artículo trata sobre un estudio acerca de los efectos de una tarea basada en la comprensión y focalizada en el subjuntivo español en una estructura sintáctica que se usa para dar indicaciones. Se tuvo en cuenta la competencia lingüística en la producción del subjuntivo de los participantes en la formación de frases con dicha estructura. La tarea, para la cual no se necesitaba la intervención del instructor, fue implantada en una plataforma Moodle. Para la recogida de datos, los participantes realizaron una prueba previa, una posterior, y una prueba final después de una semana.

Palabras clave: español como lengua extranjera; enfoque por tareas; comprensión; entorno virtual de aprendizaje; subjuntivo español.

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INTRODUCCIÓN

This study investigated an online comprehension-based input task which was designed to incidentally introduce preselected grammatical items of the Spanish subjunctive in a specific syntactic structure focused on within the task. The main activity consisted of a read-and-do task implemented in an automatic virtual learning environment (VLE). This topic is important because the use of the Spanish subjunctive is difficult to acquire, requiring high proficiency levels, and there are no previous studies devoted to comprehension-based input tasks focused on the Spanish subjunctive, without the use of explicit instruction. Implementing the task in a VLE – which does not need the intervention of the teacher – is also novel. In fact, tasks carried out in second language acquisition (SLA) courses are usually production-based.

The aim of this research study was to find out to what extent comprehension-based input tasks, based on the Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach and implemented in an online VLE, can be used as stand-alone tools to present new linguistic forms without explicit instruction in a specific context. The study considered both the extent of the receptive acquisition of these new forms and the acquisition of their use in the production of a specific syntactic structure.

As a result, this piece of research can be considered a study where the data collected and the analyses carried out may lead to further studies in which comprehension-based input tasks can be part of larger pedagogical designs to introduce new forms via online VLEs without the teacher monitoring the classroom sessions, and before their production and use in conversations for specific pragmatic purposes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Task-based language teaching

Task-based language teaching is a communicative, meaning-focused, analytic, and learner-centred pedagogical approach to second language acquisition. As TBLT is a communicative approach, language itself is not seen as a set of linguistic systems and, therefore, teaching phonology, vocabulary and grammar is not the main goal in TBLT syllabi. Instead, meaning is the main focus, with pedagogical activities mainly directed to language use rather than language rules. Thus, pedagogical activities are designed to elicit learners to use the form they need for a particular non-linguistic purpose. However, this does not mean that the linguistic form is not considered; rather, instead of being at the core of syllabus design as a unit of analysis, this comes precisely from identifying the language needs of the pedagogical activities which, "(...) TBLT starts with a task-based needs analysis to identify the target tasks for a particular group of learners — what they need to be able to do in the new language." (Long, 2015, p. 6).

According to Rod Ellis (2017), a task must have four main characteristics:

- A task primarily focuses on meaning.
- A task has a gap of information, reasoning, or opinion.
- The participants choose the linguistic resources to perform the task.
- A task has a clear non-linguistic outcome.

A task, within TBLT, is a goal-oriented activity, which means that the learners have a specific objective. Therefore, the emphasis is on understanding and conveying meanings to complete the task (Willis, 1996), fulfilling the goal by filling the information gaps throughout the transaction. This necessarily implies the use of the target language (TL), materialized as an outcome, which would be evidence of fulfilling the goal.

Task-based lesson structure

To efficiently implement TBLT, some activities should be added to the performance of the task. Jane Willis propounds a framework within which the tasks should be implemented and which is advocated by many other scholars. According to this framework (Willis, 1996), the activities are divided into three stages:

- Pre-task: Introduction to topic and task.
- Task cycle: Task, planning and report.
- Post-task (language focus): Analysis and practice.

Most scholars and educators who support TBLT agree with the structure of the lesson proposed above. However, some others propose different frameworks; for example, David Nunan propounds a framework of six components, and he places the language focus before the task cycle. Most scholars and educators agree, however, that even though only the task-cycle stage is compulsory (Ellis, 2009), it is best to include some activities in the design of the lesson in addition to those that belong to the task cycle, in order to introduce the task and deal with a language focus, thereby optimizing learning. Although grammar is not the basis of syllabus design in TBLT, explaining the working of certain linguistic forms that are useful for the performance of the task can play an important role in their acquisition outside the task-cycle stage.

Comprehension-based instruction

Traditionally, SLA has emphasized production over comprehension, and production-based instruction (PBI) remains dominant (Shintani et al., 2013). However, comprehension-based instruction (CBI) has also been acknowledged to play an important role in language instruction by many scholars in the SLA field, such as Krashen (1985), Smith (1993), Ellis (2003), Shintani (2012), Shintani et al. (2013), VanPatten (2014), for instance, because, in fact, "(...) an integral part of language acquisition is making form–meaning connections during comprehension." (VanPatten, 2014, p. 114). With regard to TBLT, research has mainly concerned production-based tasks, i.e., speaking and writing tasks, although the definition of task also acknowledges comprehension, given that TBLT can involve any language skill (Ellis, 2003) whether listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Moreover, Shintani (2012) advocates comprehension-based input tasks for teaching specific linguistic forms which learners are not familiar with.

The essential difference between PBI and CBI is that while the former requires production, the latter does not (Shintani et al., 2013). Instead, CBI aims to teach the target features by embedding them in input which learners have to comprehend, and which drives their attention to specific forms meaningfully (Shintani et al., 2013). For example, the presence of both the perfect and the imperfect simple past tenses in Spanish, should drive the attention of the learners to their different uses (finished and unfinished actions, respectively). Furthermore, as CBI requires comprehension, some evidence of comprehension by learners should also be required in the design of the activities for the instruction. For example, instructions which the learners have to complete can provide evidence that they have understood the input if the actions they perform correspond to the correct execution of those instructions.

Some scholars advocate comprehension as the most relevant way to acquire a second language. Krashen (1985), with the Input Hypothesis, claims that learners acquire a language only by receiving comprehensible input. The success of Canadian school immersion programs, in which French-speaking students are taught most subjects in English and English-speaking students are taught most subjects in French, is an example of how comprehensible input leads to language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Another example of the success of CBI are the bilingual programs, in the USA, in which non-English speaking students are taught some subjects in English at school (Krashen, 1985). VanPatten (2014) also suggests that acquisition is a by-product of learners' attempts

to comprehend input when their primary focus is on meaning and its connection with form, and that this is due to the dependency of the input process on comprehension, i.e., “learners actively engaged in getting meaning from what they hear or read” (p. 127). He concludes that meaning competes with form in eliciting the attention of learners, but that only if the learners understand the input easily (only if it is comprehensible to them), they will be able to attend to meaning.

There are two other differences between CBI and PBI, which represent an advantage for CBI. The first arises from the fact that CBI does not require production, as PBI does, and therefore CBI does not create potentially stressful situations for learners (Shintani, 2012). Production always requires a degree of ‘exposure’ for students who will be listened to or whose work will be read, and this is likely to cause some negative effect on acquisition as it produces stress in some learners. This is especially true in activities where language forms are encountered for the first time or in the case of learners with low levels of proficiency. The second difference can be found especially in classrooms with a large number of students, since all the students can read or listen to the same input simultaneously, but they cannot produce the same written or, above all, spoken output at the same time. Thus, CBI is more efficient than PBI in these conditions because it is easier for the instructor to monitor (Shintani, 2012).

However, SLA has traditionally put more emphasis on PBI, even at beginner levels, since

(...) course materials in language textbooks tend to emphasize PBI—even at the beginning level. Perhaps then, course designers and materials writers might give greater emphasis to the use of CBI in the future, especially when introducing new grammatical features, and especially for beginner-level learners. (Shintani *et al.*, 2013, p. 323)

Even though CBI does not require production. A study conducted by Natsuko Shintani, Shaofeng Li and Rod Ellis (Shintani *et al.*, 2013) concludes that CBI not only has an effect on receptive knowledge, but also on productive knowledge. The study is a meta-analysis of 35 research projects, in which 30 studies which were published between 1991 and 2010 are analysed. These 30 studies featured direct comparisons between PBI and CBI. The results show that when a connection between meaning and form is established, receptive learning is significantly greater with CBI than with PBI, and there is no difference between the two in productive learning. In the same way, VanPatten (2014, p. 113) argues that comprehension is crucial in SLA because “(...) acquisition cannot happen if comprehension does not occur” and, although “(...) comprehension cannot guarantee acquisition (...)”, “(...) a good deal of acquisition is dependant upon learners making appropriate form-meaning connections during the act of comprehension.”

Input-based tasks

Input-based tasks are a subcategory of tasks which direct the attention of learners to the input through listening and reading (Shintani, 2012), and that do not necessarily require production, which is particularly beneficial when the aim of the tasks is introducing new forms. In contrast, tasks which require production usually require a certain degree of knowledge of the linguistic features which their performance demands.

Comprehension-based input tasks

Simply exposing learners to L2 input does not guarantee them comprehending it. VanPatten (2014, p. 130), however, suggests that “(...) learners’ initial orientation toward input is to process it for meaning (...)”. In this regard, within the subcategory of input-based tasks, comprehension-based input tasks are another subtype. The main feature of comprehension-based input tasks is the fact that the learners – to succeed in reaching the goal and achieving the outcome of the task – need to understand the input. In contrast to other input-based tasks which, despite being designed for form focus, do not require comprehension of the input to achieve the outcome, a comprehension-based input task not only exposes learners to the input but also requires some evidence that the processing

of this input has successfully taken place (Shintani, 2012); the evidence of that comprehension should be in the outcome of the task. To return to the example given above (See 2.2) of learners having to carry out instructions, the outcome would be the result of actions taken by correctly following those instructions.

Since “‘Exposure’ does not necessarily entail comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985, p. 7), tasks should be designed in a way that makes the input comprehensible to learners, and there are certain techniques for this purpose. Smith (1993) distinguishes consciousness-raising techniques (those which successfully draw the attention of learners to target linguistic forms) from input enhancement techniques, which (successfully or not) simply expose learners to those forms.

Extra-linguistic contextual information is a key element in making input comprehensible. In the case of pedagogical tasks, giving information which contextualizes the input makes it comprehensible so that the opportunities for language acquisition increase, in particular for listeners with low language proficiency, since they are more likely to rely on contextual clues (Ellis, 2003). Teachers can provide contextual information using visual support (e.g., videos, pictures...) or by making reference to the situation to which the input is related (e.g., by explaining where the text is from, or where the utterances take place and their pragmatic intention).

Apart from contextual information, teachers often also use simplified input when they address their learners in the TL to make input comprehensible because “many utterances to which the learner is exposed may contain elements that pass by the learner.” (Smith, 1993, p. 167). Since learners do not process all the input that they are exposed to (Smith, 1993), simplifying the input provided in pedagogic tasks to make it comprehensible increases the opportunities for language acquisition.

Input can be also modified to make a specific linguistic target feature more salient (especially in the case of focused tasks, see 2.3) because comprehension-based input tasks can be used to give the learners input enriched with specific target features previously selected by teachers and researchers. (Ellis, 2003). An example of a language modification technique is ‘input flooding’, which consists of exposing learners to an increased number of target forms.

Focused task

Focused tasks are those which incidentally lead learners to focus on some specific linguistic features (input enhancement) while they are mainly required to pay attention to meaning. As Ellis (2017b) puts it, they are “designed to elicit the processing of specific, predetermined linguistic domains” (p. 4), unlike unfocused tasks, which are those “involving general samples of language.” (Ellis, 2017b, p. 4).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that focused tasks are different from situational grammar exercises, which give context to the explicit practice of a linguistic feature. In the case of focused tasks, learners are not given the linguistic forms which they are expected to use to perform the tasks, so they pay primary attention to meaning. In the case of situational grammar exercises, learners intentionally pay special attention to the specific linguistic features (Ellis, 2003). To put it another way, “a focused communication task, in contrast, does result in some linguistic feature being made prominent, although not in a way that causes the learner to pay more attention to form than to meaning.” (Nobuyoshi and Ellis, 1993, p. 204). Ellis (2009) also suggests that focused tasks have superior pedagogical value than situational grammar exercises, as focused tasks require syllabi with task content – according to the TBLT approach – to be completed, while situational grammar exercises require structural syllabi which typically involve PPP.

In SLA research, focused tasks are particularly suitable, as they can be used to study the effects of the instruction of specific linguistic forms on the ability of learners to use those forms during the performance of the tasks.

Tasks have served as one of the main ways of researching L2 acquisition. Focused tasks, for example, have been widely employed in form-focused instruction studies to see whether instruction directed at a specific target feature has any effect on learners’ ability to use that feature spontaneously

in communication. It is not an overstatement to say that much of what we currently know about L2 acquisition has been obtained through the analysis of data collected by means of tasks of various kinds. (Ellis, 2017, p. 117)

By introducing new linguistic material and through research, it is possible to pay special attention to focused tasks which are also input-based tasks (See 2.3). Such tasks (with this combination of features) require learners to focus on the meaning of the texts (or utterances), but also elicit attention to specific linguistic features in the message. Furthermore, comprehension-based tasks must be more effective than production-based tasks in directing the attention of learners to a specific linguistic feature since, in the case of the former, they cannot avoid the target feature as it is present within the input provided (Ellis, 2003).

Technology-mediated tblt

A language activity implemented in a virtual learning environment (VLE) which can be accessed online can be performed by a large number of students anywhere, simply with access to a computer (or tablet, or smartphone) and connection to the internet. In addition, some online activities, which do not need a teacher or the whole classroom to be doing the activity altogether, can be performed anytime, whatever the time zone in any part of the world. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) nowadays allows for the automatization of certain tasks which teachers have traditionally done manually, such as working out the grades of a quiz or a course, providing feedback from the activities, etc. In addition, online classrooms provide more flexibility, so students can learn at their own pace (Li, 2021). Furthermore, automatization allows individualized syllabi and, in this respect, Borges (2014) recommends to “Individualize instruction to match learner’s needs, interests, and learning styles” (p. 66). In fact, to have specific syllabi for each learner is the most appropriate way to implement TBLT, as it is a learner-centred approach, although the demands of such an approach require a level of pedagogical resources that make it difficult to implement in traditional classrooms (Baralt et al., 2014). In addition, CBI is more suitable to be implemented in VLEs than PBI because comprehension activities can more easily be transferred to an online format. With production activities, the outcomes are so variable and they can lead to such unexpected mistakes, making it far more difficult to automatize them. Furthermore, González-Lloret (2020) points out that research, in general, “suggests that technology reduces learner’s anxiety, it is a strong motivator and provides to input, negotiation and feedback in ways impossible in a traditional classroom (p. 70).

However, CALL does not work the same way as SLA in classrooms, and it presents its own challenges. That is the reason why online language courses cannot simply involve the direct transfer of traditional languages course online, or “mere translations or extensions of exercises and activities of various kinds into computer platforms” (González-Lloret and Ortega, 2014, p.5); it is a way of teaching with its own particular resources, characteristics and challenges. With regard to TBLT, implementing tasks in a VLE is, obviously, different from implementing them in classroom environments, as “(...) tasks and task-based methodology do not work in the same way online that they do in traditional, face-to-face classrooms.” (Baralt & Morcillo Gómez, 2017, p. 34), and tasks that work well in person do not always work well online (Baralt et al., 2014). That is the reason why more research devoted to technology-mediated TBLT should be carried out, as González-Lloret (2020) recommends. For example, González-Lloret (2020) points out that the principles of the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2011), which apply to the sequencing of tasks in traditional classrooms, and which has its own research literature – Baralt, Gilabert, Robinson, Lemos, Thompson, Kim, Payant, Werfelli, Levkina, and Malicka (Baralt et al., 2014) to name a few – does not apply to the sequencing of technology-mediated tasks.

From this perspective, the implementation of tasks in a VLE should be preceded by content curation, i.e., gathering the relevant resources and information (Asiri et al., 2021) for learners to perform the tasks, in particular, the technologies needed to facilitate accomplishing the task, keeping in mind the technological capacities and access of the learners (González-Lloret, 2020). In relation

to learners' technological capacities, González-Lloret (2020) distinguishes technology tasks (those which, apart from having language acquisition components, mainly furnish learners with technological literacy) from language tasks (which mainly use technology for language acquisition), and suggests that syllabi should be designed by sequencing them one type after the other.

Furthermore, comprehension-based input tasks seem to be suitable for VLEs because as they are input-based tasks, the learners do not necessarily have to be so involved in production (See 1.2). Comprehension activities are more easily managed in VLEs than production activities since the latter needs to consider far more variables introduced by the learner than the former.

METHODOLOGY

A comprehension-based input task should be grounded in task-based language teaching and should meet the conditions of comprehension-based instruction. In the case of this study, the most common framework for TBLT was chosen (Willis, 1996) (See 2.1) except for the last stage, which was skipped so as not to include any explicit instruction. Comprehension was included in the form of a read-and-do task, in which subjects had to read and comprehend directions which they had to follow to get to specific places (in an established sequence, following a route) in the city of Girona using Google Street View (goals). The subjects had to answer a question (outcomes) to prove that they had really got to the chosen location.

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although the language instruction design of this study is based on comprehension, the focus is on its impact on the participants' language production. The first research question focuses on the correct use of the subjunctive mood in the production of the target structure of the task, whereas the second research question focuses on attempts to use the subjunctive in the production of target structure, whether the participants were successful in these attempts.

Research question 1: Does the online performance of a comprehension-based input task focused on a syntactic structure where the Spanish subjunctive mood is needed help learners improve their competence in using the subjunctive mood in the target syntactic structure?

Research question 2: Does the performance of a comprehension-based input task focused on a syntactic structure where the Spanish subjunctive mood is needed make learners aware of the need to use the subjunctive mood in the target syntactic structure?

Pedagogical model

A communicative pedagogical model was used to design the task, as the texts which the subjects had to read were all meaningful messages (i.e., messages that have to be understood to achieve particular goals) (Van Den Branden, 2016) and, more concretely, it was task-based language teaching, with the activities designed to accomplish the conditions of comprehension-based instruction, making the task a comprehension-based input task (See 1.2). Moreover, the task of this study was a real-life task since Google Street View emulates the streets of the city of Girona. Performing real-life communicative tasks is considered the most effective way to implement TBLT in such a way as to facilitate L2 acquisition, as noted by many scholars such as Rod Ellis, Michael Long and Peter Skehan, to name a few (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015; Skehan, 1998).

The real-life task was a read-and-do task, in which the participants had to read a sequence of directions, as if they had asked a local in a city how to get somewhere and had to follow the directions given by the local. The participants had to follow the directions one by one and answer a question for every place they got to, as if they were checking where they were after any movement they had made.

The sequence of the activities in the task was that proposed in the framework of Jane Willis (See 2.1), although it differed slightly from the same by not including post-task activities, since this study was designed not to give subjects any explicit instruction. Furthermore, the participants did not

have to report what they had done during the task cycle since the task was designed to be performed alone, nor did they have time to plan what they were to do because the directions were sequenced one after the other and the participants did not know the directions they would have to follow beforehand.

The task was focused on a particular syntactic structure (See 2.4). To make the target form more salient for the learners, input flooding was used throughout the task (pre-task and task-cycle activities) as a consciousness-raising technique, which consists of giving the learners an increased amount of input of the target linguistic features. For this reason, the target structure was repeated in every direction given, so the participants had to read and understand this structure several times.

Participants

The participants of the study, all volunteers, had different backgrounds and might have different levels of Spanish proficiency. Two participants were German, who had a C1 level of Spanish proficiency, and students from the Spanish Studies degree course at the University of Girona, where they were part of the Erasmus exchange programme for students. There were also three participants from Brazil, with a B2 level, who were studying at the University of Girona for one course. Among them, one was in the final year of a Master's in Tourism Management at the University of Girona, and the other two were in an exchange programme at the University of Girona, studying one course of a degree on engineering. Three participants were from Romania, with a B1 level, and were studying the Degree on Advertisement and Public Relations at the University of Girona within the Erasmus programme. The other participant of the total nine was an Italian judge, with an A2 level, who had travelled all around Spain.

Since the participants might have different levels of linguistic competence in using the forms which the task is focused on, the presentation of these forms can be considered either an introduction or a revision. Moreover, since the appropriate use of the subjunctive in Spanish corresponds to a native-like linguistic competence, it was expected that the participants might improve their competence in the use of the subjunctive forms within the target syntactic structure presented to them in this study.

Design

The participants received a comprehension-based input task in one lesson, which consisted of two pre-tasks and the task itself (i.e., the task cycle) The task was designed for participants to learn not only how to follow directions in Spanish to get to a specific place, but above all how to give them in Spanish too. The task and the pre-tasks were all implemented in a Moodle virtual learning environment.

Activities

The task consisted of following a route within the Google Street View environment (embedded in Moodle) by following the directions given. The directions were given in a quiz format, in which every stage had directions to follow and a multiple-choice question which was only possible to answer if the directions had been followed correctly. The directions were given by using the target syntactic structure, allowing participants to be aided by the extra-linguistic context in which the new linguistic items were embedded (Van Den Branden, 2016) since listeners, and particularly those with limited language proficiency, are likely to rely on contextual clues (See 2.2).

The target forms which the task was focused on have the following syntactic structure: CUANDO [+2nd person, +singular, +subjunctive, ±perfective] [±Object] [±Complement], [+2nd person, +singular, +present, +imperative] [±Object] [±Complement]. This syntactic structure corresponds to an adverbial clause of time, where the verb is in the subjunctive mood, which sets a condition for the second person, the learner in this case, to do something which is expressed in the

main clause, where the verb is in the imperative mood. In the following example, the participants are given directions to get to a traffic light, where they have to answer a related question, and only if they arrive at the traffic light indicated by the directions, they get the information they need to answer the question.

Cuando estés de frente a Jaume I, sigue recto hasta el primer semáforo. Cuando llegues al semáforo, dime de qué color está.

Verde Ámbar Rojo.

In this example, the aspect of all the verbs is imperfective, whereas, in the following example, the first verb (*hayas llegado*) has a perfective aspect.

Cuando hayas respondido a la pregunta, sigue hasta el final de la calle. Cuando llegues al final de la calle, gira a la izquierda. Si sigues recto, ¿qué encuentras?

Una curva a la derecha. Una curva a la izquierda. Una tienda de mascotas.

The task was a read-and-do task because it required learners reading and showing their understanding by performing actions, thereby teaching them new linguistic forms embedded in the input.

Before the performance of the task, the participants had to do a pre-task activity which consisted of watching a video (visit <<https://youtu.be/z9RxjqbEsLM>>) where a foreign man, in the University of Girona, is asking a native-speaker woman for directions to get to the cathedral. The woman gives him the directions using the target structure. In the video, the man gets lost twice, so the situation elicits input flooding of the target structure, since the woman has to repeat the directions twice (three times in total). For example, in a short excerpt of the dialogue which follows, the target structure (See 2.4) is repeated four times.

Jonny: Quiero ir a la catedral. ¿Podría ayudarme?

Irene: Ve recto hacia aquel edificio. **Cuando llegues, giras a la izquierda.**

Verás que hay un hotel. **Cuando llegues al hotel, gira hacia la derecha.**

Sigue recto y verás, al fondo, la catedral. **Cuando llegues, gira hacia la izquierda, baja por esa calle y a la derecha están las escaleras de la catedral.**

Jonny: Vale, entonces está muy cerca. Muchas gracias.

In the second pre-task, the learners had to type, in the required assignment, three places that can be found on the way from the university to the cathedral, by following the directions that the woman gives to the man in the video of the first pre-task. So, this pre-task was related to the other in that the learners had to understand the directions that were given in the video. These two activities can also be considered one listen-and-do activity (or even a listen-and-do task) by which "(...) the purpose for listening is determined by the text itself" (Ellis, 2003), and the participants "(...) will probably listen carefully to a set of directions to try to understand them fully" (Ellis, 2003).

For this study, the learners did not have to do a post-task because post-task activities are typically oriented to language focus explicitly rather than incidentally. Here, the target morphological forms and syntactic structures, which were the object of study and which the task was focused on, were presented throughout the pre-tasks and the task cycle in a non-explicit way. Due to the features of comprehension-based input tasks, it might be hypothesized that using specific linguistic forms in the target syntactic structure would be enough to improve the linguistic competence of the learners. This is what the study aimed to prove.

Hypothesis 1

Table 1 shows the number of correct forms in the subjunctive which each participant (Pi) produced in the sentences with the target syntax in the first test (T1) and the second test (T2), the differences between the two tests and the average (T2-T1), out of the seven possible sentences in each test that had the target syntactic structure.

Table 1. Number of correct subjunctive forms per participant, Test 1 vs. Test 2

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Average
T1	0	0	0	1	4	4	7	0	4	2,22
T2	0	2	2	0	4	7	7	4	7	3,67
T2-T1	0	2	2	-1	0	3	1	4	3	1,56

Degrees of freedom: $(9+9)-2=16$

Confidence interval $\geq 95\%$ certainty $\rightarrow P(|T2 > T1|) - \text{Value} = 0,05 \rightarrow |T2-T1| \geq 0,6901$

$|T2-T1| = 1,1209 > 0,6901 \rightarrow$ The difference between the results of T1 and T2 is significant enough with at least 95% certainty. \rightarrow Hypothesis 1 is accepted.

The participants produced more correct subjunctive forms, in the sentences with the target structure, in the second test than in the first test. Moreover, the results show that the probability of the participants to produce more correct forms immediately after the task than before the task is higher than 95%.

Hypothesis 2

Table 2 shows the number of correct subjunctive forms that which participant produced in the sentences with the target syntax in the first test (T1) and the final test (T3), the differences between the two tests and the average, out of the seven possible sentences in each test that had the target syntactic structure.

Table 2. Number of correct subjunctive forms per participant, Test 1 vs. Test 3

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Average
T1	0	0	0	1	4	4	7	0	4	2,22
T3	0	3	1	1	5	7	5	1	6	3,22
T3-T1	0	2	2	0	0	3	-2	1	2	0,89

Degrees of freedom: $(9+9)-2=16$

Confidence interval $\geq 95\%$ of certainty $\rightarrow P(|T3 > T1|) - \text{Value} = 0,05 \rightarrow |T3-T1| \geq 0,6901$

$|T3-T1| = 0,8199 > 0,6901 \rightarrow$ The difference between the results of T1 and T3 is significant enough with at least 95% certainty. \rightarrow Hypothesis 2 is accepted.

The participants produced more correct subjunctive forms, in the sentences with the target structure, in the final test than in the first test. Again, the results show that the probability of the participants to produce more correct forms one week after the task than before the task is higher than 95%.

Hypothesis 3

The answers which were incorrect but indicated an attempt to use the subjunctive were of the following types:

- The participant uses an incorrect form which is similar to the subjunctive in the L1. Example:

A Romanian participant wrote *VEZ instead of *veas* (verb *verb*, “to see”), while in Romanian is *vezi*.

- The participant uses a subjunctive form but not the suitable tense to the target syntax. Example: The use of *pretérito imperfecto* instead of present.
- The participant does not use an irregular form due to misanalysis. Example: *HABES instead of *hayas* (*haber*, “to have”, as an auxiliary verb)
- The participant uses a subjunctive form but in the formal second person when the informal is the suitable form in the sentence. Example: A Brazilian wrote HAYA instead of *hayas*. This is common in the Brazilian variety of Portuguese.
- The participant uses a subjunctive form with spelling mistakes. Example: *TENGAIS instead of *tengáis* (verb *tener*, “to have”)

Regarding the sentences with the target syntax in the first test vs. the second test, the forms (correct or not) which were considered attempts by each participant to use the subjunctive have been analysed. Table 3 corresponds to these results.

Table 3. Number of attempts to use the subjunctive per participant, Test 1 vs. Test 2

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Average
T1	1	1	1	3	6	5	7	0	4	3,11
T2	0	4	3	0	5	7	7	6	7	4,33
T2-T1	-1	3	2	-3	-1	2	0	6	3	1,22

Degrees of freedom: $(9+9)-2=16$

Confidence interval $\geq 95\%$ certainty $\rightarrow P(|T2>T1|) - \text{Value} = 0,05 \rightarrow |T2-T1| \geq 0,6901$

$|T2-T1| = 0,9676 > 0,6901 \rightarrow$ The difference between the results of T1 and T2 is significant enough with at least 95% certainty. \rightarrow Hypothesis 3 is accepted.

The participants made more attempts to produce subjunctive forms, in the sentences with the target structure, in the second test than in the first test. Moreover, the results show that the probability of the participants to attempt to produce more forms immediately after the task than before the task is higher than 95%.

Hypothesis 4

Regarding the same sentences with the target syntax in the first test vs. the final test, the forms (correct or not) which were considered attempts by each participant to use the subjunctive have also been analysed. Table 4 corresponds to these results.

Table 4. Number of attempts to use the subjunctive per participant, Test 1 vs. Test 3

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Average
T1	1	1	1	3	6	5	7	0	4	3,11
T3	0	7	5	1	6	7	7	1	6	4,44
T3-T1	-1	6	4	-2	0	2	0	1	2	1,33

Degrees of freedom: $(9+9)-2=16$

Confidence interval $\geq 95\%$ certainty $\rightarrow P(|T3>T1|) - \text{Value} = 0,05 \rightarrow |T3-T1| \geq 0,6901$

$|T3-T1| = 1,0366 > 0,6901 \rightarrow$ The difference between the results of T1 and T3 is significant enough with at least 95% certainty. \rightarrow Hypothesis 4 is accepted.

The participants made more attempts to produce subjunctive forms, in the sentences with the target structure, in the final test than in the first test. Moreover, the results show that the probability of the participants attempting to produce more subjunctive forms one week after the task than before the task is higher than 95%.

CONCLUSIONS

This study had both theoretical and practical motivations in the context of SLA. Theoretically, the interest was mainly to shed some light on whether incidental CBI, standing alone, could introduce new linguistic forms. From a practical standpoint, however, the interest was in whether instruction could be implemented in a VLE and following TBLT criteria.

In particular, the objective of this study was to analyze the impact of a comprehension-based input task focused on a specific syntactic structure, implemented in a VLE, without any explicit linguistic form-focus instruction. The hypotheses suggested that the impact of the task would be that the participants would use the subjunctive, in sentences with a syntactic structure where it is required, more often and accurately after the performance of the task than before, and that more often they would at least identify the target syntactic structure associated with use of the subjunctive. The proficiency of the students in using the subjunctive in the given syntactic structure, and their awareness of the requirement of subjunctive use in the sentences, was tested before, right after, and one week after the performance of the task.

The results indicate that the hypotheses should be accepted and the experiment showed that, in general, the task significantly improved the proficiency of the participants in using the subjunctive for the given syntactic structure and their awareness of its need. Moreover, the participants not only had significantly better results for the tests right after the performance of the task, but also for those which they took one week later. Thus, generally speaking, incidental CBI standing alone (with neither explicit instruction nor the intervention of the instructor) can be useful for SLA or, more precisely, a comprehension-based input task focused on a specific form, and implemented in a VLE without the intervention of the teacher during the performance of the tasks, can be useful for the acquisition of this form.

However, the participants who had low scores in the first test did not score significantly higher enough in the second and the third test to conclude that this comprehension-based input task properly introduced the use of the Spanish subjunctive to those participants with very little initial proficiency. Thus, for those who have a considerably low proficiency in using the forms which the task is focused on, CBI standing alone is probably not enough, and they would need some complementary explicit instruction to introduce and teach those forms. This suggests that the task might need a grammar focus activity (e.g., a post-task), as most scholars devoted to TBLT suggest should be the case, or, on the contrary, the task should be complementary to activities which introduce the new forms explicitly. Put another way, to present new material, comprehension-based input tasks should be taught either along with some explicit form-focused activities, or with this kind of activities within the task itself.

Inevitably, the relatively small sample size in this study limits the extent to which the findings from this study can be generalized. However, the study represents a step in a series of studies which should be conducted to investigate to what extent incidental CBI can be useful to introduce new material, and this piece of research serves to set how further research on comprehension-based input tasks should be.

Some other research on technology-mediated comprehension activities has been carried out. Saeidi and Yusefi (2012) compared a group of 20 Iranian participants who were taught English as a second language by reading comprehension activities in a technology-mediated environment with reading support to a control group of other 20 Iranian participants who were taught with traditional printed readings. Regarding learner's and teacher's perception, Chong & Reinders (2020) synthesized the affordances and limitations of 16 qualitative studies on technology-mediated TBLT both from

learner's and teacher's points of view. Finally, López Vera (2022) examined the effects of an online TBLT module on the acquisition of the Spanish direct and indirect object pronouns in a pilot study of 9 participants.

Further studies on online comprehension-based input tasks should be conducted, especially for read-and-do tasks focused on and introducing specific linguistic forms, research should be designed by combining these tasks with explicit form-focused activities and by including them in pedagogical units or language courses.

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