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Research Article

What is a Task: Using Register Analysis to Inform Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

This study sought to further inform the notion of “task” in Task-Based Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Assessment by performing a Register Analysis using lexical bundles on description, negotiation, and narration tasks found in the NICT-JLE Corpus. While the CAF framework is often used in TBLT studies, it has not provided much information on the specific language used in tasks. By using an RA methodology, it was found that each task type has different lexico-grammatical patterns that differ significantly from other tasks. For example, description tasks contain more prepositional phrases (e.g., in the box) than narration tasks, which include more verb phrases (e.g., I would like, I want to). Such specific descriptions of tasks can help educators evaluate student performance on task-based exams and give insights into task design and implementation.

この研究は、タスク中心の言語教育(TBLT)と評価における「タスク」の概念を明確化し、異なるタスクで使われる文法や語彙を比較します。従来のTBLT研究では、複雑性、正確性、流暢性(CAF)の枠組みが主に使用されましたが、文法や語彙との関連は十分に検討されていません。本研究では、コーパス言語学のレジスター分析を用いて、NICT-JLEコーパスに基づく記述、交渉、ナレーションタスクにおける学習者のパフォーマンスを分析しました。その結果、記述タスクにはナレーションタスクより多くの前置詞句(例: in the box)が含まれ、ナレーションタスクにはより多くの動詞句(例: I would like, I want to)が含まれていることが判明し、各タスクタイプに特定の文法構造の特徴があり、これがコミュニケーションの目的と直接関連していることが明らかになりました。タスクごとに特定の文法構造が存在することが伺え、教育評価に有益であることが示されました。

Task-Based Language Teaching has become one of the most widespread approaches to language teaching today (Jackson, 2022). Long and Ahmadian (2022, p. xxvi) argue that this is because of its relevance to real-world situations and use. Students gain a “functional command” of the L2, not just learn about it. Proficiency in the context of TBLT involves more than knowledge of specific structures but also the ability to meet the demands of the task (Bygate et al., 2022, p. 27). This extends to Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA), in which students are evaluated on the extent to which they can perform a task.

Research on tasks within the TBLT tradition primarily uses the Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency (CAF) framework to evaluate student performance and proficiency (Jackson, 2022). However, this framework has come under criticism for two main reasons. The first is that, despite the emphasis on communication and meaning in the TBLT approach, the CAF framework provides no measurement of communicative success in any of its constructs (Pallotti, 2009). The second reason is that the CAF framework relies on holistic, omnibus measures to gather data (e.g. AS-Units, T-Units, etc.). This has been criticized for treating all syntactical features as the same and thus being unable to provide a description of how specific features are used in communication (Biber et al., 2020). Bygate (2020) has likewise criticized the framework for failing to provide teachers with specific information on the syntactical features to be used in a task.

As an alternative to the CAF framework, this study will perform a Register Analysis (RA) in order to investigate how specific grammatical structures function within a specific task. RA investigates how language is used differently in different registers, with register being defined as a “variety of language associated with a particular situation of use” (Biber & Conrad, 2019:6). Crawford and Zhang (2021) first proposed introducing RA into TBLT research because both research traditions emphasize context and functional uses of the language. The value of doing an RA over using CAF is that it can find specific grammatical features and then link these specific features to the overall objective of the register. This is something that CAF, with its reliance on holistic measures and its absence of a communicative dimension, cannot do.

Literature Review

This study will first define and explain TBLT before detailing more about the RA methodology to be used. Task-Based Language Teaching is, of course, centered around tasks. A central focus of a task is attaining an objective

through the use of language (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001). As such, there is an emphasis on meaning, rather than form. This interpretation of a task does not involve learning about a particular piece of grammar without then using it in a meaningful way, nor does it entail any kind of mechanical use, for example, by memorizing dialogues (Jackson, 2022).

There are, of course, a variety of different types of objectives a task can have, and thus many different types of tasks. While “there are as many different task types as there are people who have written on task-based language teaching” (Nunan, 2010), this study will examine the typology provided by Pica et al. (1993) as this typology shows how specific tasks are related to language learning. Only task types related to the tasks in the study below will be considered in the interest of space. First, information gap tasks will be considered. These tasks require the exchange of some kind of message or information. This can be a one-way exchange, in which one person asks for information and the other gives it, or it can be a two-way exchange if two people alternate roles. This task also has the potential to draw attention to the form of the language. Learners have to make sure that the information is accurate and understood, and in doing so, they must pay special attention to the form of the information (Pica et al., 2006).

Another type of task is a problem-solving task. Here, two or more people interact to resolve a problem. In this instance, information should flow in two directions to achieve the same outcome. However, Pica et al. (2006) note that these tasks could pose problems if one or the other learner lacks the required confidence or skill to offer solutions.

Of course, students must use language to complete the task, and to break things down further, certain syntactic forms are better suited than others to complete a specific task. The exact forms used by the students in another important dimension of task design. While students could theoretically use any form they wanted to to complete the task goal, it could be argued that certain forms are more essential than others in a specific context. Loschky and Bley-Vronman (1993) argue that a form could be considered essential, useful, or natural in regard to task completion.

Ortega (2007) argues that certain tasks will elicit certain grammatical features that are essential for that task. Teachers then can then plan a lesson with a specific task in order to practice the essential forms necessary to complete the task, all in the context of meaningful communication. For example, Schleppegrell (1998) found that describing animals requires using expanded complements (e.g., *the tiger's fur*). Tarone and Parrish (1988) found that narrative and interview tasks made different linguistic demands on students. Narrative tasks produced more definite articles while interviews required both definite and indefinite articles. In this instance, a teacher who would like to have students practice definite and indefinite articles would be better suited to have students perform interview tasks than description tasks. This kind of “form-function mappings” to tasks used in the classroom can help teachers design lessons to target specific forms (p. 186).

There is a lack of studies that have used large corpora in order to define the essential language of a task. This study will attempt to determine these form-function mappings on the task types described above. This will be done by using lexical bundles for a Register Analysis, which are defined here as strings of three or more words that appear frequently in a given discourse (Biber et al., 1990). These are a relatively under-researched though accessible way to perform an RA (Crawford and Zhang, 2021).

Biber et al. (2004) established the standard framework for performing an RA with lexical bundles. The study used the TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language Corpus (T2K-SWAL Corpus) based on university life in the United States. It includes samples from classroom teaching, textbooks, study groups, etc. Four-word lexical bundles were used. The study categorized the lexical bundles from this research into two different taxonomies: structural and functional. The structural taxonomy includes the main grammatical features of lexical bundles: verb phrase (VP), dependent clause (DC), and noun phrase / prepositional phrase (NP/PP) fragments. These main categories can be broken down into smaller categories, e.g., 1st person + VP fragments. The functional taxonomy corresponds to how a specific bundle was used. The main categories in the study were stance expressions, discourse organizers, and referential expressions. This was determined qualitatively by assessing the main communicative goals of the task.

One of the study's main findings was that specific categories were more common in some registers than in others. Speaking registers, such as classroom teaching and office hours, were dominated by VP bundles, whereas written registers were far more likely to contain NP/PP bundles. It was found that there was a close correlation between the structural category of a bundle and the functional category, with many bundles having “a primary function” (384). For example, 1st person + VP bundles were used primarily for stance expressions (e.g., I think it was, I don't want to).

These studies indicate that certain structural and functional fragments are more characteristic of some registers than others. The above study had a broad definition of register as either written or spoken. This study will refine the notion of register to the language spoken in a specific speaking task type. There is a lack of studies that have performed an RA on such a specific sub-register. By doing so, the essential task language can be extracted from each task.

This study had two main questions under investigation. The first was an analysis of the essential lexico-grammatical forms associated with description, negotiation, and narration tasks and how these forms differed from each other depending on the task. What are the essential forms associated with description tasks, negotiation tasks, and narration tasks? The second question concerned how these lexico-grammatical forms were related to the specific communicative goals of their respective tasks.

Methodology

NICT-JLE Corpus

The corpus used in this study was the NICT-JLE Corpus (Tono, 2007). It was funded and led by the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology (NICT) in Japan in 2001. It contains texts from 1,281 Japanese speakers of various ages and occupations and contains 1.2 million words. There is a total of nine different proficiency levels.

The test is structured as a one-on-one interview and lasts for fifteen minutes. There are five stages. This research will focus on stages two, three, and four and the corresponding task types since the first and the last stages are not tasks but consist of simple conversations. Task 2 is a description task type in which students are asked to describe a picture to the interviewer. Task 3 is a negotiation task type, in which students interact with the interviewer to get something. Examples include shopping, asking the landlord to fix something in the apartment, or returning something at the store. Task 4 is a narration task type in which students look at a series of pictures and create a story based on them.

Sub-Corpus

A sub-corpus was created for each task type. The bundles for each sub-corpus were categorized into structural and functional taxonomies. Biber et al.'s (2004) structural taxonomy was used since the structures found in this corpus were nearly identical. However, due to the differences in registers in Biber et al. (2004), a separate functional taxonomy was created. This was done by determining each task's communicative goals, identifying the task's most salient structural features, and then interpreting the concordance lines of the various structures in the task to understand how those structures functioned.

Each proficiency level is represented in each task; however, in this study, they were not marked. This is because the goal of this study is to first give an idea of all the possible linguistic choices a speaker can make in the task, and then to generalize from these the most common choices. The most common bundles can be inferred to be essential to the completion of the task. While advanced learners may be able to use complex grammar to complete a task objective, it is not necessary for them to do so. Instead, the focus here is on finding the essential task language. All the interviewer's words were manually deleted, and only the students' words were studied.

Bundle Extraction

Four-word lexical bundles were chosen for ease of comparison with the above studies. AntConc (Anthony, 2020) was used to extract bundles. The token numbers for tasks 2, 3, and 4 are 376,867, 603,081, and 454,842, respectively (Table 1). The cut-off frequency, which determines how many bundles are to be included in the analysis, was set to 20 times per million words, as this is often used in studies of large corpora, such as Biber et al. (2004). Another criterion is the dispersion threshold or the extent to which a bundle appears in multiple texts. Including a dispersion threshold can help to avoid including a speaker's idiosyncratic style in the analysis. It was set to three texts in this study. Bundles that were grammatically incorrect were not counted. This was done to get a description of the accurate, standardized language needed to complete a task.

Bundle Coding

Structural categories were coded according to the dominant grammatical form in the bundle. Functional categories were decided by examining how bundles functioned in the context of the task. This involved considering the overall goal of the task type, as defined above, and then interpreting how the structural bundles achieved the goal of the task type. Concordance lines were examined when bundles were ambiguous.

Table 1

Token Number, Dispersion Threshold, and Cut-Off Frequency for Task Types

Criteria	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
Token Number	376,867	603,081	454,842
Dispersion Threshold	3	3	3
Cut-Off Frequency	8	12	9

Results

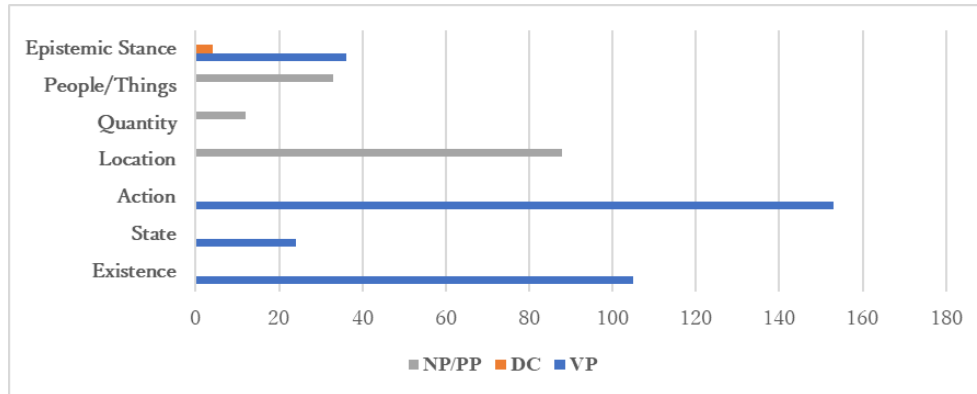
The first task to be examined was a description task in which students described a picture containing various people doing various things. As an information gap task, the overarching goal of the task is to communicate the various objects in the picture to the listener. After looking up concordance lines when needed, seven functional categories

were determined: 1. Epistemic Stance; 2. People/Things; 3. Quantity; 4. Location 5. Action; 6. State; 7. Existence. All the bundles within this task were determined to fit into one of these seven functions.

Figure 1 shows the structural bundles sorted into the functional category in which they are used. VP fragments are the most common structural category, and Action is the most common functional category in this task. Each structural bundle also seems to fit nicely into a single functional category. Verb phrases were used to describe existence (*there is a girl*), states (*It is a sunny day*), and actions (*a man is running*). Noun phrases and prepositional phrases are used to describe people/things (*the boy next to her*), quantity (*a lot of people*), and location (*in a big house*). Only one category, epistemic stance, used two structural bundles: dependent clause (*I don't know what*) and verb phrases (*I think I see*).

Figure 1

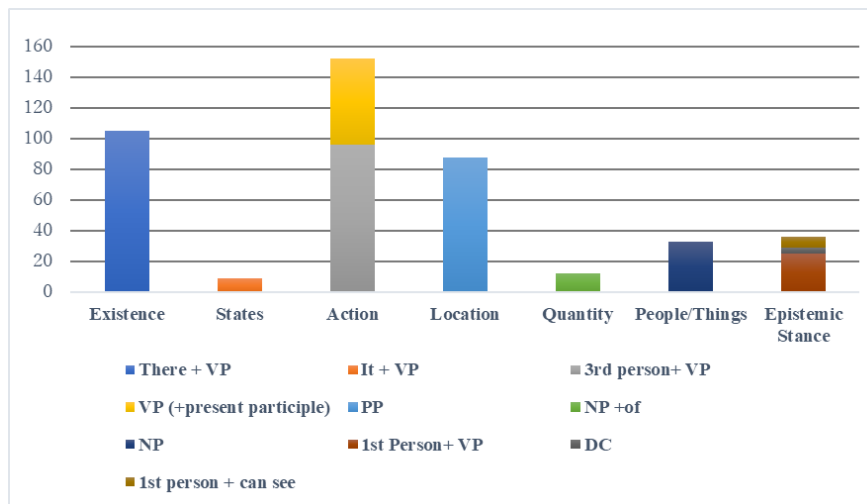
Structural Distribution of Task 2 Description



In addition, Figure 1 also shows a general look at the structural distribution. It is possible to examine the structural categories further, as seen in Figure 2. For example, the structural bundle *There + VP* is the most used to describe existence. Likewise, *NP + of* is the most common structural bundle for describing quantity: e.g., *most of the students*. Figure 2 shows a more fine-grained picture of the data, showing each category's most common structural bundle. The category of action had two common structures, so both were included. A complete breakdown of the distribution of structures based on their functional category can be seen in Table 2 (Appendix A).

Figure 2

Specific Bundles Used in Task 2 Description



It can still be seen that all functional categories, except Epistemic Stance and Action, comprise one type of structural bundle. The category of Action contained many present participles (*playing with a ball*) in addition to 3rd person pronoun + VP (*She was walking to*). PP phrases also figured prominently to describe location (*in front of the*).

Task 3: Negotiation

In this task, students negotiate with someone to get something, such as a refund for a pair of jeans at a clothing store. The functional requirements for this task were determined to be: 1. Expressing one's desire; 2. Asking

questions; 3. Explaining the reason for the negotiation; 4. Epistemic stance. There is a wider structural variety for each function. For example, the functional category explanation includes six different types of structural bundle.

Figure 3

Structural Distribution of Task 3 Negotiation

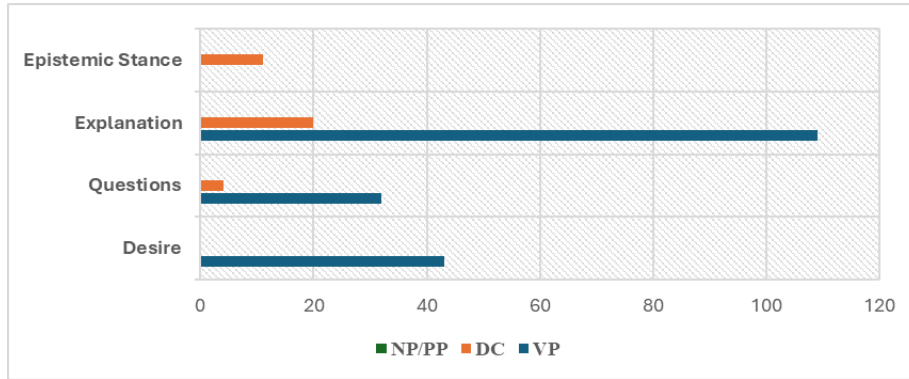
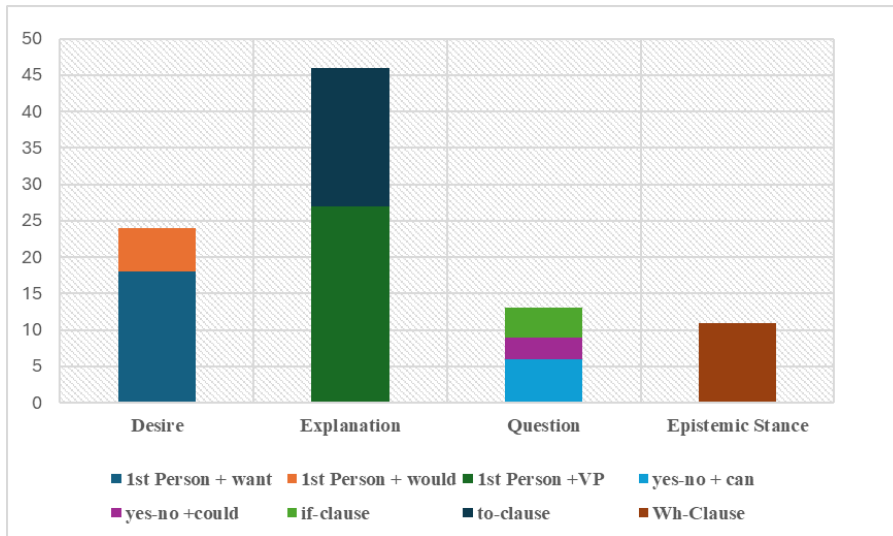


Figure 3 shows the breakdown of structural bundles into their functional categories. While there are a lot of VP fragments in this task, there is also a fair amount of DC fragments, which are primarily used for explaining one’s reason during the negotiation. For example, when attempting to get a refund, a speaker used an adverbial phrase to explain why they wanted it, e.g., *when I took it home, it didn’t fit*. Desire is primarily expressed using the bundle I + want to, e.g., *I want to buy, I want to return*. This is also expressed through the conjunction of I and would, e.g. *I’d like to buy*. Figure 4 shows a more fine-grained analysis; a complete analysis for this task can be found in Table 3 (Appendix B).

Figure 4

Specific Bundles Used in Task 3 Negotiation



Here, it can be seen that there is a greater variety of bundles for each functional category. A fair number of if-clauses are used in the Functional Category of “Question”. A closer examination of the concordance lines reveals that these questions are often used to propose a solution or proposition to the conversation partner: *if it is possible; if I can exchange*. However, in contrast to task 2 above, NP/PP fragments are noticeably absent and appear to have not been needed for this task.

Task 4: Narration

The following functional categories were determined for the narration tasks: 1. Epistemic stance; 2. Time/ Location/Direction; 3. Quantity; 4. Desire; Action; Existence. While VP fragments are once again the dominant structural category, there are also a fair amount of NP/PP fragments, which are most often used to describe time (*and at that time*), location (*in my house and*), and direction (*back to the home*).

It can be seen (Figure 5) that while various bundles are used, NP/PP fragments are quite dominant and essential in the narration task, as describing the time, place, and direction is a vital communicative goal of any such

task. There are very few bundles for the existence category, and most VP fragments are used to describe Action with a 3rd person pronoun (Figure 6). The complete breakdown of the task can be found in Table 4 (Appendix C).

Figure 5

Structural Distribution of Task 4 Narration

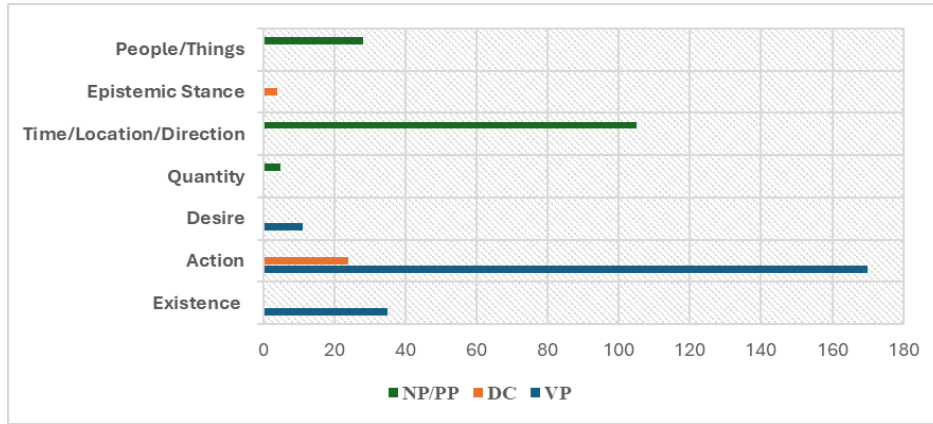
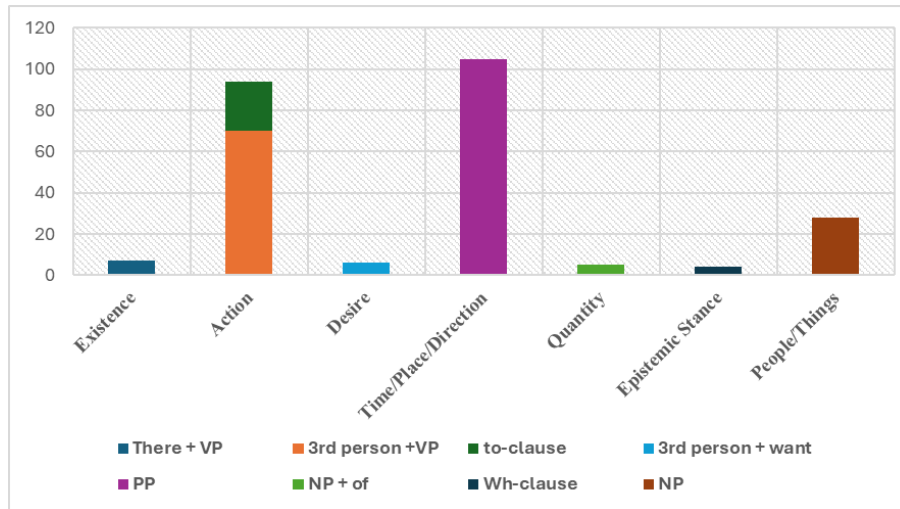


Figure 6 shows that most structural categories in the task perform one specific function, with the exception of the functional category Action, which includes both 3rd person + VP (she bought it and) and to-clauses (to take care of). The distribution of bundles in task 4 is more similar to task 2, with both tasks containing more NP/PP phrases than task 3. The functional categories are also similar, which may be the reason for the similar distribution of structural bundles.

Figure 6

Specific Bundles Used in Task 4 Narration



Discussion

The first research question asked which forms were essential to each task type. This can be inferred from the most common categories of lexical bundles from each task. For description based tasks, based on the data, it can be argued that the essential language in this task is the use of There + VP and 3rd person + VP, as these are the most common structural categories. Prepositional phrases are also widely used and can be deemed essential as well.

The second research question asked about the function of these structures, or simply why they were used here. The main goal of an information gap task is for information to be communicated from one person to the other, in this case the learner is communicating information about a picture to the interviewer. How specific structures in this task were used can be inferred from how the structural categories mapped onto the functional categories, which can be seen in Figure 2. There + VP was needed to communicate the existence of various objects and people. 3rd person + VP was needed to communicate what these objects were doing in the picture. Finally, prepositional phrases were needed to describe how these objects were located in space. These forms can be inferred to be essential to the task.

Next, the negotiation task will be considered. As seen in Figure 3, the most common structure was 1st person + VP, with the VP often involving the word “want”. Another important structure were questions, the most popular

being “yes-no” questions, but if-clauses were also often used. In contrast to the description task above, prepositional phrases were notably absent.

The main goal of a negotiation task is to solve a problem with the communication partner by coming up with a solution. A large part of this is communicating one’s own desire as well as explaining the situation one is in. According to this data, this was often done using 1st person + VP structures, especially with the verb *want*, as it can be used to communicate one’s desire in a situation. Questions and question verbs were used to offer potential solutions to the problem in the task.

Finally, narration tasks are quite similar to description tasks in that they are both information gap tasks and have the same goal of communicating information from the learner to the interviewer. As seen in Figure 6, structurally, they are similar as well, containing many 3rd person + VP structures in addition to PP-based bundles. However, *There* + VP-based bundles are used much less frequently than picture description tasks. So infrequently that they can be inferred to be non-essential to this particular task.

The differences between the two can be further elucidated by considering the overall goal of the task as well as the functional categories. As an information gap task, the goal is to communicate information, however a narrative involves communicating far more action in order to progress the story. This entails the use of 3rd person + VP, though *There* + VP is far less important, as this does not move the action forward. Furthermore, PP-based fragments were used to describe not simply location but also time, place, and direction, which are elements needed to progress a story. It can be seen then that even within the same task type, there are important structural and functional differences in tasks, which influence which structures can be considered essential.

As a final note, all tasks did include the category of epistemic stance, which was used to indicate that the learner was unsure of how to say something. However, this is still a minor category, and unlikely to be absolutely essential to the completion of any task.

Conclusion

This study performed an RA with lexical bundles as a framework for measuring and defining proficiency in TBLT and TBLA research. The TBLT approach places a great deal of emphasis on the student’s functional command of the L2, and the framework used in this study could provide information on how specific lexico-grammatical structures could lead to a functional command of the language in a specific task. It was found that by treating a task type as a specific register, structural and functional taxonomies could be created, which provided detailed information about specific grammatical structures used while giving them a functional interpretation. This level of structural detail would be missing in a CAF study that utilized holistic measures. The data found in this study can inform task design by providing teachers with specific information about the essential language appropriate for the examined task types.

This study was not without its limitations. Many of the tasks, including the picture description in Task 2 and the narration in Task 4, are not very indicative of tasks that a learner could encounter outside of the classroom. Future research can examine a corpus of tasks with more situational authenticity, such as those coming out of a Needs Analysis, as Long (2015) recommends.

This research also only included grammatically accurate bundles, leaving out descriptions of non-standard structures a learner might use. Future research could include an investigation of the different kinds of lexical bundles learners use at different proficiency levels. Such an investigation could provide insights into developmental progress within the context of a particular task. For example, it was found that 3rd person + VP was a common, and an inferred essential, structure in description tasks. Variations in how an advanced learner uses this structure (e.g. *He seems to be sleeping*) as opposed to a beginner learner (e.g. *He is sleep*) can show which specific grammatical structures are characteristic of higher proficiency levels. This linguistic description of proficiency levels can further inform the notion of proficiency in regards to specific tasks.

On the whole, however, an RA with lexical bundles was able to provide detailed lexico-grammatical information about student performance. Importantly, this information is still within the context of the task’s functional goals. Bygate (2020) claimed this was precisely what was missing in current TBLT research, as the CAF framework’s emphasis on general measures could not provide specific information on grammar. Certain interpretations of TBLT, such as Long (2015), claim that TBLT should not be taught alongside a grammar syllabus. However, by using an RA approach, this study was able to provide information on the essential language associated with a particular task type and task, and then tie the use of that language to a particular task objective. Teachers who wish to focus on meaning based communication can use this information to teach specific structures as well.

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Appendix A

Table 2: Distribution of Structures According to Functional Category in Task 2 (Description Task)

Functional Category	Amount	Structural Bundle	Distribution
1. Existence	105	a. There + VP: there is a girl	105
2. States	24	a. It + present tense copula: It is a sunny day	9
		b. It + looks like	1
		c. present tense copula + noun/adjective: is a big house,	14
3. Action	153	a. 3rd person + present tense VP: a man is	96
		b. present tense VP (+past participle): is	23
		c. past participle + Prepositional Phrase:	33
		d. Other	1
4. Location	88	a. Prepositional Phrase: in a big house, in front of the	88
5. Quantity	12	a. Noun Phrase + of: a lot of people	12
6. Epistemic Stance	36	a. 1st person + think / VP think	18
		b. 1st person / we + can see	7
		c. Seems to be	2
		d. I don 't know + WH clause	4
		e. Other expressions	5
7. People/Things	33	a. Noun + and	33

Appendix B

Table 3: Distribution of Structures According to Functional Category in Task 3 (Negotiation Task)

Functional Category	Amount	Structural Bundle	Distribution
1. Desire	43	a. There + VP: there is a girl	18
		b. 1st person + would: I'd like to buy	6
		c. Other 1st person + VP: I'll take this one	4
		d. would/want/like VP: want to return it, like to return it	15

Functional Category	Amount	Structural Bundle	Distribution
2. Questions	40		
		a. yes-no questions with can: can I buy it	6
		b. yes-no questions with do: do you have that	5
		c. yes-no question with could: could you talk to	3
		d. yes-no questions with would: would it be	1
		e. other yes-no questions: is it possible to	5
		f. WH-Questions: how much is it	16
		g. If-clause: if it is possible	4
3. Explanation	129		
		a. 1st person + past tense VP: I didn't use this	17
		b. 1st person + present tense VP: I don't like this	10
		e. 1st person + VP: I change my mind	53
		f. VP: go to movie with	29
		h. Adverbial Clause: when I bought this	1
		j. to-phrase: to buy a ticket	19
4. Epistemic	11		
		a. Wh-Clause: I don't know why	11

Appendix C

Table 4: Distribution of Structures According to Functional Category in Task 4 Narration Task

Functional Category	Amount	Structural Bundle	Distribution
1. Existence	7		
		a. There + copula: There was a cat	7
2. Action	194		
		a. 1st person + VP: I went to the	26
		b. 3rd person + past tense VP: she bought it and	70
		c. VP with past participle: were walking on the	6
		d. past participle + pp: walking on the street	5
		e. VP: pick up the cat	63
		f. To-clause fragment: to take care of	24
3. Desire	11		
		a. 3rd person pronoun + want: she wanted to take	6
		b. Want(ed) to VP: wanted to take care	5
4. Time/Place/Direction	105		
		a. PP: in the car and	105
5. People/Things	28		
		a. NP: my father's birthday present	28
6. Quantity	5		
		a. A lot of + Noun	5
7. Epistemic Stance	6		
		a. I don't know + WH-clause	4
		b. Other expressions	2